



Diamond designer

Kate Stephens, the UK's most prolific female stamp designer, talked to *Bulletin* as she saw her Diamond Jubilee designs for the first time

AT THE RIVINGTON RESTAURANT, just round the corner from her London base in the heart of London's Shoreditch, Kate Stephens first held the Jubilee pictorial stamps. Finally. After considering hundreds of options, combing and re-combing archives and devoting many hundreds of hours of work, Kate looked quietly pleased with her creations.

The Diamond Jubilee of HM The Queen Elizabeth II pictorial special stamps have been a stand-out issue of 2012. And Kate Stephens already has an impressive track record designing Royal Mail stamps – 2004 Woodland Animals, 2005

Above: Kate Stephens with the Jubilee pictorial stamps, which William Doherty had rushed fresh from the printers just in time for lunch



Classic ITV, 2009 Kew Gardens Minia Sheet and 2011 Morris & Co stamps and PSB – as well as the 2005 Year Book and the 2009 RSA Presentation Pack. Her first commission was to produce special stamps featuring Henry VIII and his wives – The Great Tudor set of 1997. In 2002 Kate worked on the Golden Jubilee issue, designing a set of five black and white close-cropped portraits of The Queen for the Jubilee and ten for the 2003 Coronation anniversary, contrasting ceremonial pageantry with people celebrating in the streets. So Kate was a natural choice when it came to choosing a designer to show 60 years of The Queen ‘in action’.

‘Over the years I have looked at thousands of pictures of The Queen,’ Kate recalls. ‘For the Golden Jubilee designs I looked at painted portraits and handled the original prints of photographic portraits – a very tactile experience in comparison to modern digital prints. I became fascinated by them. A picture of her stepping off a plane at Heathrow in 1952, for example, speaks volumes. Waiting on the tarmac to greet the new Queen is a row of dignitaries. I was struck by someone so young and beautiful stepping into such inescapable limelight for a lifetime. You know this young woman’s father has just died and she is about to be thrust onto the throne – it is the human story, the real documentary element of the research, that I found so captivating. It was an enormous challenge to try to encapsulate in stamps ‘The Queen at Work’ over 60 years – her engaging in so much action with apparent confidence, no matter the public or personal difficulty.’

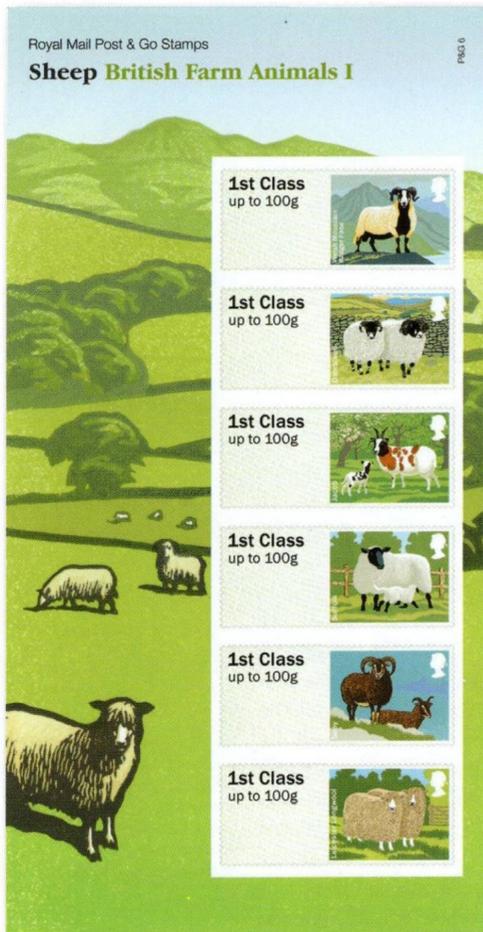
Design background Graduating from Brighton College of Art and Design in 1979, with a degree in Design Communication, Kate worked for many years in corporate identity, creating new identities for the 3i financial group, the London Borough of Sutton, Whitechapel Gallery and the Arts Council Collection. Her innovative approach involved commissioning artists to work on projects.

Returning to give a lecture at Brighton Art College, Kate made an impression on Jane Ryan, who went on to work as a designer in the philatelic team at Royal Mail. Jane had an idea to use an artist on Women of Achievement stamps and she thought of Kate to art direct. ‘She wanted a female designer,’ Kate recalls, ‘and the fact that I had worked with so many artists helped me get the job.’

Kate has worked on arts projects for many international galleries, artists and arts organisations including Tate, the Hayward, Royal Academy and the Whitechapel Gallery and the Association for the Business Sponsorship of the Arts, now called Arts in Business (ABSA). ‘For the ABSA annual report, previously a dry but essential dossier of “who-sponsored-who”, I said, “Why don’t we commission an artist?” And for over ten years we did. We had people like Antony Gormley before he won the Turner Prize, Cornelia Parker, Richard Wentworth, David Mach and Albert Irvin. The first was ▶



Above: Morris & Co Prestige Stamp Book of 2011. While studying William Morris’s design ethos for this issue, Kate also became interested in his life and socio-political writings



Above: pictorial Post & Go stamps challenged many philatelic traditions, but Kate has successfully incorporated Robert Gillmor's charming lino-cut illustrations to create two distinctive four-part series – Birds of Britain and British Farm Animals

Bruce McLean – he used to arrive at the studio in Shoreditch on his moped with his paintings rolled up under his arm. These were the days before art was a marketable tool.’ The ABSA reports won two D&AD (Design and Art Direction) Silver Awards and a Silver Nomination.

Creative beginnings From an early age, creativity was an important part of Kate’s life. ‘I was fortunate. My sister Jenny was eight years older than me and very creative. She taught me a lot. For colouring-in homework when I was four, she advised, “You have to do it neatly, in one direction and don’t scribble all over it!” So I did – and got gold stars. My sister and I were famous for our wacky party decorations. I also sewed. My mother used to read *Woman’s Own* magazine and I would cut out the figures, make clothes for them, make collages and compile fashion scrapbooks. My parents were not obviously artistic, although my mum did take up painting and drawing in her late seventies.’

As well as having a natural talent for art at school, Kate excelled academically, yet she was not pushed towards university: ‘I always said I wanted to go to art college, and my parents never disagreed. As a teenager I did ceramics on Saturday mornings and life-drawing on Friday nights – before going out!’

Kate did a foundation course at Plymouth Art College, where she ‘rather rebelled by making a film about the china clay works at Lea Moor, much to the annoyance of the life-drawing teacher. I used to duck his classes and go to the sculpture or film department instead. I knew I didn’t want to do fine art because I

like responding to a brief and found the idea of being totally self-motivated just not my cup of tea. In a way I was quite naïve – I wasn’t even aware of the extent of graphic design when I left Plymouth. Mostly people talked about advertising.

‘I took my film to show at the interview for Brighton Art College, and when I got a place I didn’t want to give up anything and specialise – I wanted to do it all. In the end they had to give me an illustration tutor as well as a graphics tutor.’

At the end of her degree course Kate met her partner, artist John Meadows. His presence and creative input have been a major influence: ‘He always set new creative boundaries. Rather annoyingly, the bar was always just out of my reach!’

Kate’s first job after leaving Brighton was at Wolff Olins, the brand consultancy. ‘I was there for about six years and worked with Michael Wolff on the 3i corporate identity. He has a truly creative and inspirational mind, he enables people to see things in a different way. And it is not just about design; it is about humanity – I have a lot of admiration for him.’

A new direction in her career was the design of an exhibition catalogue for

her artist partner. The curators, Julien Robson and Barry Barker, asked me to do more projects for the John Hansard Gallery and the catalogues became influential documents among artists in the mid-80s. In 1986 Barry Barker went on to create 'Falls the Shadow' for the Hayward Gallery with artist Jon Thompson and they asked me to design the catalogue. It turned out to be a seminal exhibition of conceptual contemporary art and the catalogue reflected this. I was approached by a number of galleries after this.

I was lucky; people would ring me up – Helen Chadwick for example said she wouldn't have a show at the Serpentine unless I did her catalogue for her. I developed close working relationships with many artists including Anish Kapoor and Anthony Caro. It was a memorable design moment in time and now, of course, there is a new moment in time.' The Kapoor catalogue for the British Council Venice Bienalle in 1990 was nominated for a Silver Award by D&AD and a Caro monograph was selected for the Annual in 1992.

Falling for stamps The Women of Achievement stamp changed brief and design company, but Kate got another call from Royal Mail about designing The Great Tudor – Henry VIII and his wives: 'That was my first stamp set and it involved selecting paintings, many by Holbein. I didn't know there were rules then, so I suggested we use one bigger stamp for Henry VIII. He looked small next to his wives when squeezed into the regular size.' Royal Mail agreed.

The popular Golden Jubilee set came next – tight crops of Cecil Beaton portraits, contemporary but classic portraits, black and white, with no borders around them. 'I was accused by some philatelists of dirty perforations! Sometimes the guillotine perforations can move slightly, so you get a bit of black on the white.'

Kate went on to design the Woodland Animals and William Morris issues. 'Woodland animals is probably my favourite set. I wanted them to have a kind of magic, like the children's song, "When you go down to the woods today ..." They were all found images and it takes a long time to make a set work together – I had to retouch the deer so it fitted with the earthy colour theme.'

For the Classic ITV set, Kate remembers, 'Sitting and watching *Rising Damp* and *The Avengers*, and taking thousands of snapshots on my Mac.'

When asked which stamp issue she has found most enjoyable to work on, the designer demurs: 'What I enjoy is the variety. You know me – I have always liked doing lots of different things. With William Morris, for example, I became fascinated by looking at images of him. I spoke to my father [a member of the Fabian Society and a historian] and he would tell me about Morris and his political writings. What I find interesting about stamps is the way you learn about things that you would never otherwise come to know about.'

'Catherine Lambert, the director of the Whitechapel Gallery, once said that one of the gifts I have – which I think comes from the work in corporate identity – is to be able to listen to people. I always listen carefully and then interpret what I hear. So I never impose my style on the artist, I am always a vehicle for them. That could be why film holds such a might-have-been appeal for me...'

Who knows? With Royal Mail 'intelligent' stamps now carrying links to film clips, we might one day see a Kate Stephens film accompanying a stamp set. But for the moment we look forward to many more of her striking stamp designs ●



Above: hundreds of hours of research led to Kate alternating black and white photographs with colour images to communicate a sense of history in the Diamond Jubilee pictorial stamps

Below: the roe deer, one of ten in the Woodland Animals set of 2004, and Henry VIII, whose portrayal demanded a larger sized stamp than those depicting his wives in The Great Tudor set of 1997

