

gentleman
On Stamps



THE DAVID GENTLEMAN ALBUM

PERHAPS the greatest influence on British stamp design was the Album of experimental designs commissioned by Tony Benn as Postmaster General from David Gentleman in 1965. In that, Gentleman vastly expanded the choice of possible subject matter and created a new shape for pictorial stamps. He also suggested that the Queen's head might be replaced by the royal coat of arms or a crown, but this was not accepted. However, Gentleman then created a small cameo head of the Queen instead of the awkward Wilding portrait, and this became standard. These revolutionary designs were to influence British stamp design for over 20 years.

Background

TONY Benn was appointed Postmaster General in October 1964. One of his first aims was to broaden the British Post Office's criteria for issuing stamps which, at the time, was very conservative. Until then, only 20 commemorative issues had been made in the 12 years of Queen Elizabeth's reign, of which 11 had been in the previous two years. Almost all designs had been graphic and symbolic and there had been an outcry when an image of Shakespeare, a commoner but long dead, had appeared beside the living Queen. No living person, other than the monarch, was to be shown.

The existing policy had been summed up only a few months before:

"The policy of the Post Office is to confine [stamp issues] to marking outstanding national or international events and Royal and postal anniversaries."

This was justified as a means to limit the number of stamp issues:

"This policy does from time to time oblige us to refuse what could otherwise be eminently 'stamp-worthy' events. The history of Great Britain is however so rich in great occasions and outstanding persons that if we were to

attempt to depart from our policy we should either have a great increase in the number of special issues or, alternatively, be faced with the invidious task of discriminating between the many important historical events and notable personalities."

Benn proceeded to sweep this old-fashioned thinking aside. He announced, first to astonished postal officials, and then to the House of Commons, dramatically new criteria:

"to celebrate events of national or international importance, to commemorate appropriate anniversaries and occasions, to reflect Britain's unique contribution to the arts and world affairs, to extend public patronage of the arts by promoting philately and to raise revenue."



Tony Benn as Postmaster General, 1964

He made this announcement in a written reply to a parliamentary question on 15 December and, referring to forthcoming 1965 issues, invited MPs and the public to submit suggestions to him as quickly as possible.

The Queen's Head

UNDoubtedly, the most important suggestion resulting from Benn's public invitation came with a letter from David Gentleman, who already had a number of accepted stamp designs to his credit.

Gentleman wrote to Benn on 21 January 1965.

“I am convinced that the main single drawback to the realisation of unified modern designs is the Monarch’s head: not merely the unsatisfactory angle of the present photograph, but the traditional inclusion of the head at all.

This tradition, linked with the omission of a title, grew from single-size definitives – such as the incomparable Penny Black – where the Monarch’s head was the sole important element. It is the inclusion of the Queen’s portrait on larger size special issues, where it is reduced to a competing element in a much more complex design, which I feel is unworkable.

The problem is only in part one of insufficient space: it is essentially a problem of reconciling two conflicting elements and conventions within one design. In practice, the stamp design has to be split into two parts: the head and the rest. This can be managed with ingenuity, but, although interesting results are possible, they will always remain at best adequate and increasingly repetitive solutions to the same problem.....

... the alternative could be a title, such as UNITED KINGDOM, UK or GREAT BRITAIN.



*David Gentleman
c. 1966*

This provided Benn (a republican) with a great opportunity - to remove the Queen’s head for design reasons, rather than political as he had wished. At the time the portrait of the Queen used on stamps was a three-

quarter photograph by Dorothy Wilding which all designers found difficult to use with other images. What they wanted was a profile head.

Dismissing the official, predictably negative, draft reply Benn telephoned Gentleman and asked him to come and see him. Winston Churchill had just died and Gentleman had already been asked to provide designs for memorial stamps. So it was that when he came to see Benn on 15 February Gentleman had a Churchill stamp ready (as recorded by Benn in his diary) “with a tiny Queen’s head on Churchill’s massive shoulder and asked whether he could have the stamp reprinted without the Queen’s head to see what it looked like. I said I could see no objection to this and that it would go before the Stamp Advisory Committee.” The SAC met the next day and Benn was furious to discover that Gentleman’s design without the Queen’s head had not been shown to them.



Subsequently, at his insistence, essays were printed in this format with the legend “Great Britain”.

Churchill essay without the Queen’s head

At the same time Gentleman was working on designs for stamps for the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. For this Gentleman produced a large number of designs without the Queen’s head but the inscription “U.K. Postage”. Not only did they not have the Queen’s head but he suggested the printing of several stamps in a se-tenant block. When the SAC viewed these designs they were told that Gentleman had exceeded his brief. Nevertheless, they chose three of his designs and returned them to him for inclusion of the Queen’s head.

Shortly afterwards Benn had an audience of the Queen and he took the Battle of Britain designs with him. He raised the question of the use of her head on stamps and the Queen indicated that she knew that in some Commonwealth countries the head had been removed or a crown substituted. Benn said that all he wanted was the right to submit stamps of all kinds to her. Then she said that she had never seen any of these stamps and would be interested. The scene which followed was famously described in Benn’s diaries:

“The Queen wanted me to leave the new designs with her but I explained the difficulties and she agreed to see them on the spot.

This was exactly what I had hoped would happen so I unlocked my bag and spread out on the floor twelve huge design models of the stamps provided by Gentleman and also brought out his album of foreign stamps. I then knelt on the floor and one after the other passed up to the Queen the Battle of Britain stamps bearing the words ‘Great Britain’ and no royal head on them. It was a most hilarious scene because I had my papers all over the place and she was peering at something that had obviously never been shown to her or even thought about at the Palace before.”

transmission for Her Majesty’s consideration and approval in the normal way.

“Her Majesty has also consented to the use of a new profile photograph for use in the new definitive series”.

A letter came back the same day from the Queen’s private secretary, Sir Michael Adeane. At her “command” he was writing to say she was grateful to him for explaining the position.

“She has a considerable interest in this subject and certainly would not wish anyone to think that she is not prepared to consider new designs and ideas that may be suggested by the Stamp Advisory Committee and put forward by yourself from time to time.”



Gentleman’s Battle of Britain designs essayed with the Queen’s head on one stamp only

On his return to his office he wrote officially to the Queen. Dated 12 March, it was addressed in deferential terms. He was “delighted, and not at all surprised” to learn that there was no ban on submitting new ideas. He felt that the first step was to seek the views of designers themselves. New techniques and treatments could then be submitted to The Queen for consideration. He wanted to be able to announce this by a parliamentary answer in these terms:

“Her Majesty has graciously consented to consider for approval new designs, both traditional and non-traditional, for new definitive, commemorative and pictorial series. Designers will therefore, in future, be invited to submit any designs which they wish and these will go to the Stamp Advisory Committee for

The Queen agreed to the terms of Benn’s statement. However, there was a gentle, added warning which Benn was to misinterpret or ignore.

“She hopes that you – like [herself] – will keep an open mind as to whether her effigy should invariably appear on commemorative and pictorial stamps, in accordance with tradition, or whether it might

be more appropriate in some cases to replace it by an emblem of Sovereignty such as the Crown or her own Cipher. This question can, no doubt, be considered when the album of new designs is ready for inspection.”

The next day, Saturday 13 March, David Gentleman and his wife Rosalind Dease came to tea with Benn. He told them about his audience with The Queen and Gentleman agreed to prepare a sample album of stamps, showing what could be done with different treatments of the head, royal ciphers, and crowns. Gentleman was naturally delighted with the way things had gone. Benn commented (in his diary): “I just hope to God he is discreet.”

The matter of the Queen’s head was to continue rumbling in the background for the best part of the year.

Themes

An undated, initial list from Gentleman provided a myriad of ideas, from regional landscapes to transport, and plants and animals to the industrial revolution. There were some 15 major headings and dozens of sub-divisions. Included were famous men and women (with Cromwell listed as a statesman) and a series of “Most-interesting-looking Sovereigns”.

The full list reads (as originally typed):

Characteristic regional landscapes (NOT specific beauty spots)

Downland: with a white horse cut in chalk
Rocky coastland: Cumberland; Cornwall; Antrim
Moorland: Highlands; Dales; Dartmoor
Field pattern: Essex; East Anglia cornlands; Yorkshire stone walls
Lakes: Lake District; Scottish loch; East Anglian mere; Irish lough
Rivers: Severn estuary; Scottish burn; Wye valley
Cliffs and beaches: Dover;
Welsh sands; Chesil Bank; Mountains



Dover cliffs

Great Houses

Chatsworth; Hatfield; Knole; Blenheim

Churches

St Pauls; Westminster Abbey; Wells; Norwich;
Wren City church; East Anglian wool church (Lavenham); Welsh Methodist chapel

Domestic Architecture

Georgian terrace;
Cornish cottage;
half-timbered barn; Bath Circus; flint and stone cottage;
plaster and thatch



pargetting

Birds

Wild Animals

Fishes

Domestic and Agricultural Animals

Breeds of cows, dogs, horses, sheep

Trees

Wild Flowers

Transport

Sail and steam

The Golden Hind; Victory; Cutty Sark; Great Eastern; Ark Royal; Queen Elizabeth

Road and Rail

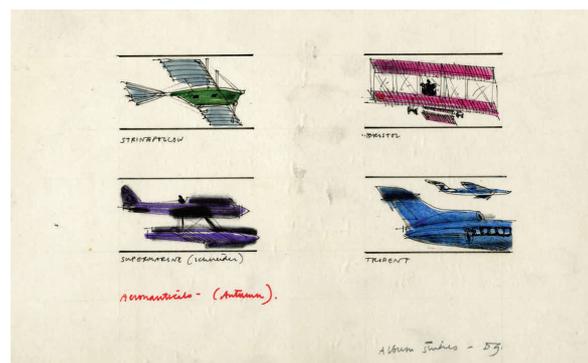
Locomotion; Puffing Billy; Rocket; Flying Scotsman; modern monster diesel electric;

Rolls-Royce; E type Jaguar; Bull-nosed Morris; Racing Bentley; Cobb's Railton special

Air

Bristol fighter; Stringfellow's aeroplane; Sopwith Camel; Vickers Vimy; Imperial Airways flying boat;

plane studies



Schneider trophy Supermarine seaplane; Spitfire; Mosquito; Comet; Viscount

Industrial Revolution and development of modern industry

Spinning jenny; early mines/ potteries/ shipyards/ pumping machinery; Liverpool and Manchester railway; Great Exhibition; Bessemer and Steel; Bailey bridge; Calder Hall



guillemot

British domestic life

London street cries (18th Cent.); Mayhew's London characters and London Poor; Hogarthian underworld; Rowlandson's aquatints; Morland's country scenes; Bewick wood engravings

Most-interesting-looking Sovereigns

Alfred the Great; William the Conqueror; Black Prince; Richard II; Henry V; Henry VIII; Elizabeth I; Charles II; Victoria

Famous men and women

(either portrait *or* achievement: e.g., either Telford *or* Menai Straits Bridge; Stephenson *or* Rocket)

Sailors

Nelson; Drake; Hawkins; Raleigh; Cook

Statesmen

Wolsey; Cromwell; Pitt; Fox; Disraeli

Architects

Wren; Hawksmoor; Gibbs; Nash; Adam; Paxton

Designers

Chippendale; Hepplewhite; Wedgwood

Philosophers

Hobbes; Locke; Hume



This list was later to be refined. However, many of the themes and specific images were to recur in Gentleman's designs for future stamp issues throughout the next four decades, and it is remarkable how many have since been featured on British stamps, in designs by Gentleman and others.

In the meantime, the number of stamp issues and designs now proposed for 1965 had also caused chaos in the normally quiet Stamp Advisory Committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Clark and they demanded a meeting with

Benn, the same day as their next formal meeting (25 March). At this meeting Benn was careful to have minutes recorded on his side.

Members of the Council of Industrial Design (of which the Stamp Advisory Committee were a subsidiary) were met by Benn with sympathy. When they protested about the number of issues and late decisions Benn agreed that next year's programme would be decided much earlier and asked the Committee for suggestions. He then gave them the news that the Queen had agreed to new definitives but this was not urgent.

Then he announced that the Queen had also agreed to consider non-traditional designs:

“for example, pictorial series on regional landscapes, great houses, English Kings and

Medicine

Florence Nightingale; Jenner; Lister

Poetry

Chaucer; Milton; Pope; Keats

Literature

Dr Johnson; Swift; Fielding; Jane Austen; Dickens

Science

Newton; Boyle; Faraday; Humphrey Davy; Darwin

Music

Handel; Purcell; Arne; John Field; Byrd

Engineers

Telford; Brunel; Stephenson; Watt

Soldiers

Wellington; Marlborough

Early sketches for famous bridge builders

Queens, and other similar subjects. These could be printed in blocks comprising differing designs of one denomination: the stamps to be sold as a block or singly. Such series need not incorporate the traditional Monarch's head. They might incorporate the Crown or the Royal Cypher, and/or possibly some other indication of the country of origin, e.g. the letters "U.K." He suggested that an album of examples to show the possibilities opened by this policy should be prepared and shown to The Queen. It was agreed that the Postmaster General should commission David Gentleman to produce such an album."

A more lurid and not entirely accurate version was given by the SAC later:

"Other projects had then been discussed, in particular David Gentleman's idea that the GPO should publish whole sheets of stamps on one subject – birds, cars, etc. The PMG had put this idea to the Queen who had been delighted with it and had said that these stamps could be without her portrait. The letters UK were acceptable as indication of the country of origin. David Gentleman had been asked to prepare a number of sample sets to show to Her Majesty. Sir Kenneth [Clark] said that he did not think the Committee need concern itself with the idea at this stage. When the plan was further advanced we should, no doubt, hear about it again."

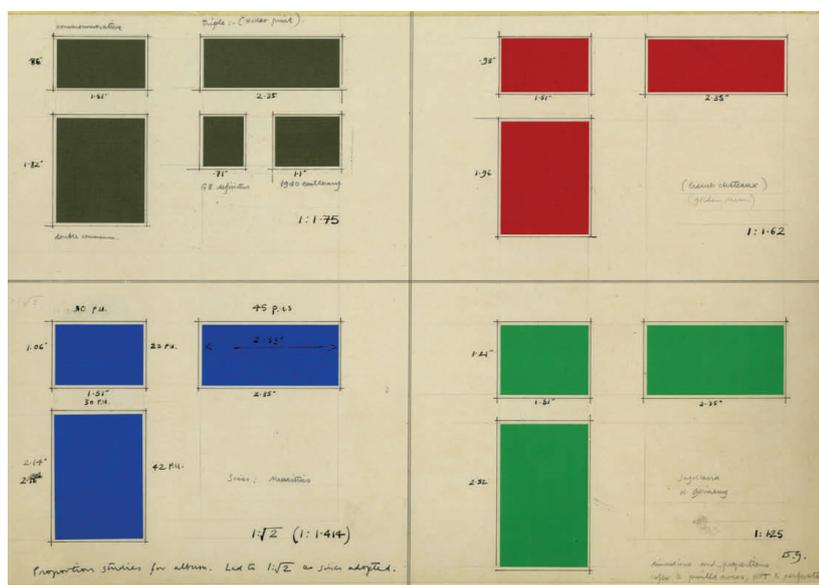
The Brief

Much to Benn's officials' dismay there was no formal letter of commission and it took some time for one to be forthcoming. A draft was discussed with Gentleman and various aspects changed at his request. The final commission was only dated 9 August, 1965 by which time a lot of the work had been done. Listed were requirements for definitive and commemorative stamps and then the experimental designs.

"Pictorial Stamps Sets of designs, three low values in each, are required on any typically British themes which allow the artist maximum

scope for effective design. As with the commemorative topics mentioned above, the stamps need not be of standard size. If designed without the Queen's head the legend "U.K. Postage" and the value should be prominently shown."

The original draft of this paragraph had more emphatic wording – "They should be designed without the Queen's head but with the legend 'U.K. Postage'". A fee of a total of 2,000 guineas was suggested, "to be supplemented by an additional 190 guineas for any design that might eventually be used." Copyright in all designs submitted was to become the absolute property of the Post Office.



Studies in proportion

Gentleman had asked if he had to adhere to the standard size for his designs. As a result the commission was amended so that the question of size and format was left to him. He studied sizes and proportions of various stamps, both previous British issues and some from overseas (in particular Switzerland, Mauritius, West Germany and Yugoslavia). The "golden mean" or "golden ratio" of 1:1.62 was noted as being used by France for stamps showing French châteaux (though in fact it was used for most French commemoratives of the period). He subsequently created his designs in a new size, $1:\sqrt{2}$ (1: 1.414) where current British commemoratives were 1: 1.75. This had the effect of making the stamps the same width but deeper, allowing more freedom to the designer. Perforating tools had to be changed accordingly.

From examination of several of the early concepts by Gentleman it is clear that initial work concentrated on using the legend, rather than the Queen's head. This was later to change.



Early version of Bury's locomotive with UK postage

Palace intervention

WORK continued on the experimental designs over the summer but just before they were completed a letter arrived from the prime minister's private secretary, Derek Mitchell. It was written to the Postmaster General's private secretary after Mitchell had been to Balmoral with Harold Wilson at the beginning of October. He had taken the opportunity to discuss various matters with Sir Michael Adeane, The Queen's private secretary and one of them was the Post Office and stamps. Adeane had said that he was "a little apprehensive in case the Postmaster General persisted with his ideas about postage stamps not bearing a portrait of the Sovereign". When Mitchell enquired if The Queen's views had changed since March Adeane replied:

"the fact was that The Queen had pretty strong views on this, not from any personal amour propre but because she was against a departure from long-standing tradition. In her relations with her Ministers it was proper for her to keep an open mind but there was no doubt at all that she would greatly prefer not to be faced with an unpalatable decision and one in which she might feel bound to reject the advice offered to her."

Benn was furious. He pondered how best to respond, but in the end decided not to write to the Palace direct. His position had clearly weakened.

Immediately thereafter, he went to see David Gentleman and had first sight of the designs he had been producing. Benn regarded them as "superb" but they also seemed to resolve the problem of The Queen's head.

Gillick cameo head

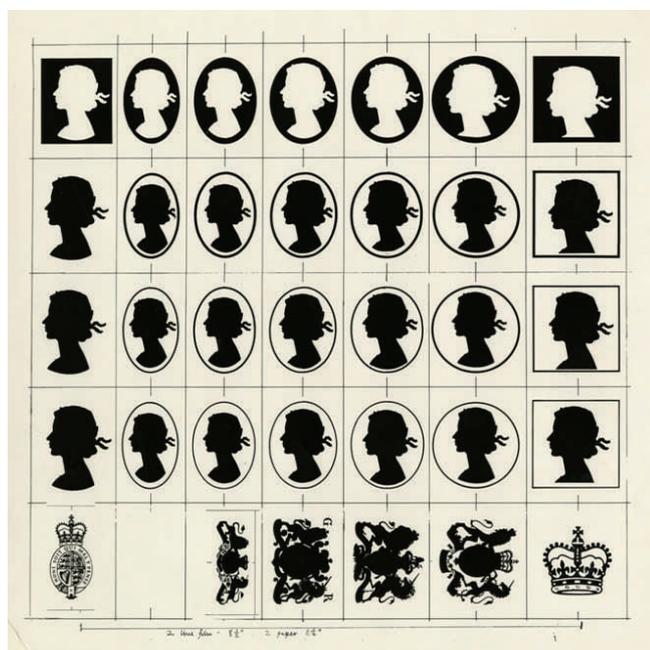
When the first photographs were taken of The Queen by Dorothy Wilding in 1952 Wilding was briefed beforehand by both Post Office and Royal Mint officials. For coinage the resulting photographs were then shown to the Royal Mint Advisory Committee to help artists as the basis of their designs. Four artists had personal sittings, among them Cecil Thomas and Mrs Mary Gillick in May 1952. The effigy chosen for use on British coinage was one by Gillick, uncrowned and facing right. After her sitting with The Queen Gillick exclaimed "I am now her devoted slave for ever!"



Gentleman's wood-engraving of Gillick's coinage head and a pull from it.

Looking for a new profile head in 1965 Gentleman now took Gillick's coinage head and reversed it so that it faced left into the envelope, as all monarchs' heads had done on stamps. The source was an actual coin rather than artwork or the original plaster cast. Gentleman had it photographed and then engraved a silhouette version of it 6½" deep, on a block of boxwood. Pulls (or proofs) were then taken from this block and reduced to the scale of the stamp design artwork. Changing the portrait from a three-quarter angle photograph to a flat

cameo, and further formalising it by reducing it to a silhouette without any internal detail or modelling, enabled the head to take its place within a wide range of stamp designs more appropriately and effectively than the three-quarter angle Wilding photograph, which had inevitably been at odds with



Variations of the Gillick cameo head with the royal coat of arms and crown as alternatives.

them. Gentleman also created a variety of different sizes and shapes – solid within an oval or frame, and reversed out of a colour, again in ovals or frames. One could be placed at the top right of his experimental designs.

That weekend, on Sunday 24 October, Gentleman brought his finished designs to Benn at home. In discussion they came back to alternative symbols to represent the country, other than the Queen's head. Ideas included the E II R cipher, the crown or the royal coat of arms. On the following Friday, Gentleman returned with a variety of symbols including the royal coat of arms in various formats.

To little avail. Benn took the designs to show Harold Wilson, the prime minister, whose support would be crucial. Wilson had discussed the matter with The Queen at his latest audience.

“With regard to the Queen’s head, he said that he had spoken to the Queen personally about

it and that she didn’t want her head removed from the stamps. ‘She is a nice woman,’ he said to me, ‘and you absolutely charmed her into saying yes when she didn’t really mean it.’ He went on, ‘I don’t think you ought to go back and argue it out with her again because I’m sure you would win and she really wouldn’t be happy.’ ...there was no argument and I told him that it would create no problems as I could put a head on every stamp and showed him the cameos. He relaxed and realised that this would present no political difficulties for him.”

In practice this was the final decision though both Benn and Gentleman pressed on and when the album of experimental designs was eventually produced it contained alternative essays with the royal coat of arms in a variety of guises.

Benn now wrote to his officials to confirm the change of plan.

“I thought it would be helpful to report to you on my discussions with the Prime Minister about the new stamp policy and the attitude of the Queen to it.

You will recall that in March I had an Audience with the Queen as the result of which it was agreed that non-traditional designs could in future be submitted. The Queen’s Private Secretary confirmed this in a letter dated March 12th and suggested that the Royal Cipher might be used on certain stamps in place of the Queen’s head.

Following this the brief sent to designers was amended to take account of this decision, which had been announced in the House of Commons. As you know, a number of designs bearing different inscriptions and some with the Royal Cipher or a Crown were submitted.

Since then the Prime Minister has discussed the matter with the Queen. Arising from these discussions it has become plain that the Queen does now wish her head to appear on stamps, though she is content for this to be represented by silhouette.

It will therefore be necessary for the brief to designers to be amended accordingly and I should be grateful if you could let me have a copy of the current brief with a draft designed to take account of this change.

For the present no stamps should be shown at Press Conferences which do not contain the silhouette or portrait.”

This did not prevent an article by Fiona McCarthy appearing in *The Guardian* on 15 November entitled “Off with her head!”, though none of the proposed designs was shown.

Final Album designs

Of the designs handed over to Benn in October 1965 there were 17 themes,



including proposed definitives based on Snowdon photographs. These themes had been refined from the original listing and now consisted of:

1. set of 16 definitives (on one sheet) using new cameo profile showing alternative colours
2. series of 18 rulers of the United Kingdom (on one sheet) showing possible colour sequence for one value block sheet
3. series of period costumes showing 4 examples for one value block sheet
4. series of famous men: 2 versions shown of John Dalton 1766 and his atomic theory

*John Dalton
and atomic
theory*



5. series of famous events: 2 versions shown of Newton’s theory of gravitation 1666
6. series of butterflies: 1 example shown (and others on a separate sheet)
7. series of fungi (on one sheet) showing 4 examples
8. series of trees (Shown as 4 examples)
9. series of birds: 4 examples shown (and others on a separate sheet)
10. series of bridges: 5 examples shown including Severn Bridge 1966

*Severn Bridge during
construction*



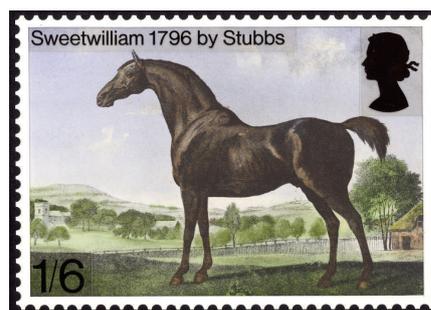
11. series of aeroplanes: 8 examples shown in different treatments of the subject
12. series of trains: 2 examples shown, and a set of 4 in a strip block of a complete train (and other examples on a separate sheet)

Rulers of the United Kingdom

*Stamp-size artwork
for fungi*



Ironbridge



*Sweet William
by Stubbs
(paintings)*

*Kestrel
(evaluation
vertical
lift-off)*



*Beaumaris Castle
(aerial view) -
regional
architecture*

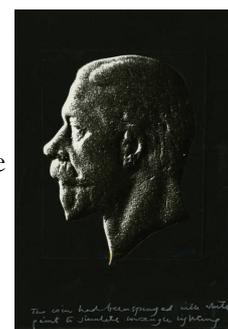
*Scottish
Highlands
in winter
- regional
landscapes*



13. series of regional architecture
14. series of regional landscapes: 8 examples shown (two from each region)
15. series of national coastlines: Operation Neptune 5 examples
16. series of famous events: Fire of London 1666 4 versions
17. series of nationally owned works of art (racehorses)

The last had been added as a deliberate sop to the Queen knowing her great interest in horseracing, which had amused Wilson greatly when he was told. Gentleman has described the task and how it took up most of his time for that year.

“Some of the designs were merely layout jobs reproducing existing originals like the beautiful drawings of nineteenth century ornithologists, or an engineer’s drawing of a Victorian railway locomotive whose funnel I had to crop to get it on the stamp. Other designs I cut in letrafilm (planes) or engraved on wood (a butterfly, Old London Bridge) or photographed on site (the then half-built Severn Bridge) or painted in water-colour (British landscapes). For some of the Rulers of Britain sheet I used old coins which were deep bronze in colour; on these I used white poster paint sprayed on almost horizontally to emphasise the modelling; another Ruler (Queen Anne) I engraved on wood; for yet another (James II) I photographed his statue outside the National Gallery. Cromwell, a Ruler if not a Monarch, was simply a photograph of the famous coin portrait.”



*George V from a
coin*

It was decided to have one example from each series essayed (an expensive process) with the others presented as colour prints at stamp size. Each of the designs to be essayed should be with the Gillick cameo head in one version and the royal coat of arms in another. All designs were in the new, larger size. Art-work was supplied to the printers with a variety of overlays – with the new Queen’s head or royal coat of arms.



*Puffin essay
(coat of arms)*

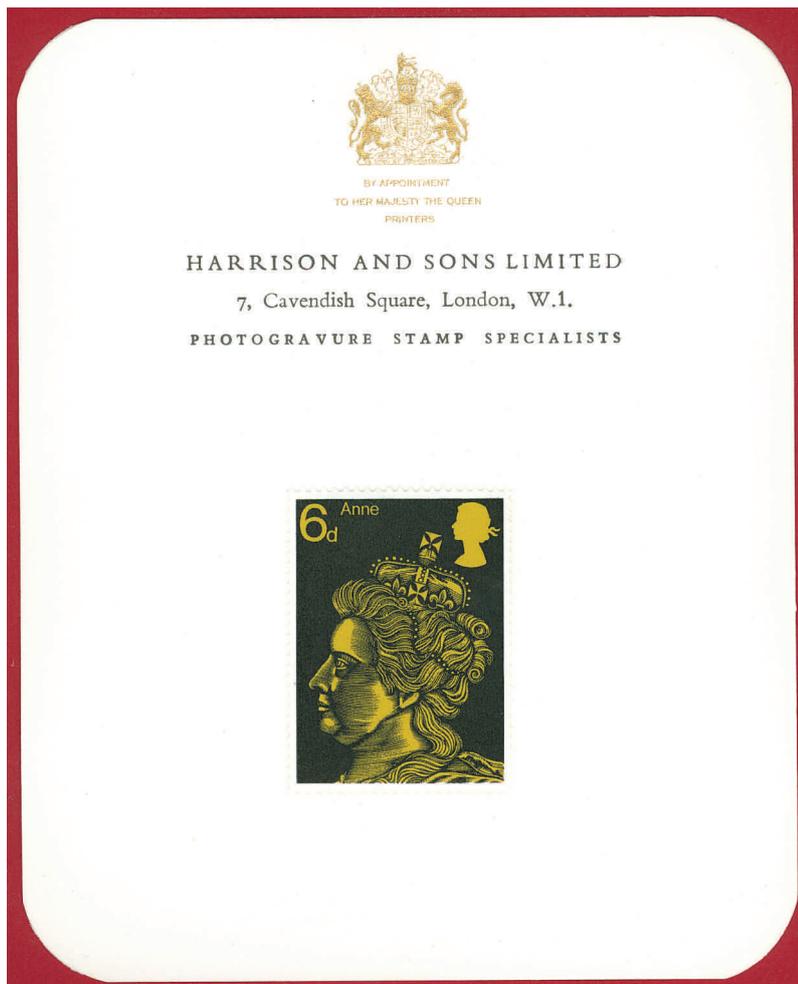
*Old London Bridge essay
(cameo head)*



All this took some time. Towards the end of January 1966 the first essays were proofed but it was not until February that the new perforating tool required was available. Then all chosen designs were essayed and sent to

*Elm tree essay
(royal coat of arms)*

National Coastlines essays (Operation Neptune) - Pembrokeshire, Antrim, Sussex, Hebridean



Queen Anne essay on presentation card from the printers

Benn, Gentleman and the Post Office from Harrisons, the printers. Various types of royal coats of arms were tried out, and also in one instance a crown, but all designs were also essayed with the Gillick cameo. Gentleman explained:

“When it became clear that the Palace and Harold Wilson between them were unwilling to remove the Queen’s head from any



Essays for Newton, Silver-washed fritillary butterfly and fly agaric toadstool.



commemoratives, I simply replaced the proposed alternatives - Great Britain, UK, the Royal Arms - with a silhouette version of the royal profile then used on the coinage.

This was used in the Album and on issued commemoratives until Machin's specially commissioned modelled portrait was ready: I merely had to replace one set of film positive overlays with another and sellotape them down."

On 25 February Benn wrote to the Queen's private secretary saying that the album of experimental designs was now ready.

"These are, of course, all samples and there is no question of the Post Office committing itself to accepting any of them for issue as stamps. They have been prepared solely to show what could be done and to encourage a more intelligent and widespread interest in British postage stamps."

Mention was also made of possible plans to show the designs at the national stamp exhibition Stampex in March which Benn was due to open. However, politics now put this on hold. A



general election was called and such controversial proposals were postponed. So, it was not until 5 April that the album of designs was sent

to the Queen with Benn emphasising their experimental nature but indicating that he would like to have a public seminar on stamp design at which these would be shown.

Martin Charteris, the Queen's Assistant Private Secretary, then took up the thorny subject of the experimental designs. He wrote to Benn a month later.

"I have had several telephone conversations with your Private Secretary about your letter to Adeane of 5th April and the album of experimental stamps which you sent with it. You will therefore know already that The Queen is quite agreeable to these experimental designs being made available for inspection by the Press and the Public.



"The Hero" racehorse painting, essayed only with the Queen's head

You do not ask in your letter for The Queen's approval to any or all of these designs and it is of course understood that Her Majesty's agreement to their display does not imply her approval for their use as postage stamps. Her Majesty has none the less examined them with the greatest interest, particularly the use of the cameo silhouette on many of the designs, and The

Queen’s preliminary view is that the cameo is perhaps too miniature to be significant as an indication that the stamps are British.

The use of the Royal Arms with the heads of past sovereigns has certainly produced some very interesting designs, but here again Her Majesty considers that very careful thought will have to be given to whether or not such designs are appropriate before they are adopted.”



Essay of 1843 Stringfellow “aeroplane”, the only one with a crown in place of the Queen’s head

By this time the 1966 Landscapes pictorial stamps had just been issued, the first non-commemorative special issue. These had caused another row between Benn and the Stamp Advisory Committee and a remarkable number of designs had been essayed. Most importantly, Benn had insisted that the new Gillick cameo be tried out as well as the traditional Wilding portrait. Equally, that all Gentleman’s larger regional landscapes designs intended for the album should also be essayed and considered. In the end the accepted Landscape designs (by Leonard Rosoman) were the first stamps issued which showed the Gillick cameo and The Queen had already approved the designs without any comment on the silhouette. The cameo there had been rather larger than as used on Gentleman’s experimental designs.

Reaction

BENN showed Gentleman’s Album to the Stamp Advisory Committee before the seminar. This was at a regular meeting on 15 June, towards the end of the period from which minutes seem to have survived.

“The Postmaster General stressed that the

surface had so far only been scratched and that there were many other possibilities – stamps on Road Safety or Public Health, for example. The page in the album showing stamps of British Monarchs suggested a very interesting issue.”

In his Diaries Benn records that then the criticism began. The phrase “cigarette cards” was used to describe some of the designs, this time by Abram Games. Others agreed. Benn then explained about the seminar where a quarter of the material to be shown would be from the Gentleman Album. The remainder would be accepted and unaccepted work by successful designers and some colonial issues where the Secretary of State for the Colonies had allowed the Royal crest or cypher to be used. From the archives came the proof sheet of the Penny Black with press criticism of that design at the time. Invited would be the design and art critics of newspapers and periodicals, and the philatelic press together with representatives of the stamp printers and a number of designers and of course all SAC members. Benn would take the chair.



Issued Landscape stamps of 1966 by Rosoman with first use of the cameo head (large)



“Mr Fitton stressed that it could be embarrassing to Committee members to have to give an opinion, for example, on the Gentleman album, as it was generally felt that in having laid down his own brief, Mr Gentleman had side-stepped the real problem of British stamp design, the integration of the Queen’s portrait with subject matter.”

It was agreed that the press would be asked not to attribute opinions to individuals or the Committee as a whole.

At the seminar a week later there were 12 frames of the Gentleman Album essays and original artwork. The successful and unsuccessful designs for the British Birds stamps, to be previewed that afternoon, were also on show as were the stamps and essays previously mentioned, and a selection of children's paintings submitted for the Christmas issue. A memorandum was provided giving a précis of what had happened in British stamp design over the preceding two years. This was almost the first indication the public had of what had been happening behind the scenes.

Benn took the chair and it was well attended by artists, philatelic journalists and members of the Stamp Advisory Committee. In the discussion which took place opinion was divided about whether too many stamps were being issued. When it came to the Queen's head stamp designers were always "disturbed" about the problem of integrating it into the design. Minutes record that:

"The Head must retain an element of permanency, a classic, ageless quality; yet every artist had his own way of working and there must therefore be a number of Heads from which he could choose or one basic Head from which a number of treatments could emerge. Whatever emerged must be easily recognisable and must not raise the same problems of integration as the Head."

There could be a classic design for definitives and an easily recognisable symbol or emblem for commemoratives. Then there was the problem of the U.P.U. stipulation that postage stamps must bear an indication of country of origin.

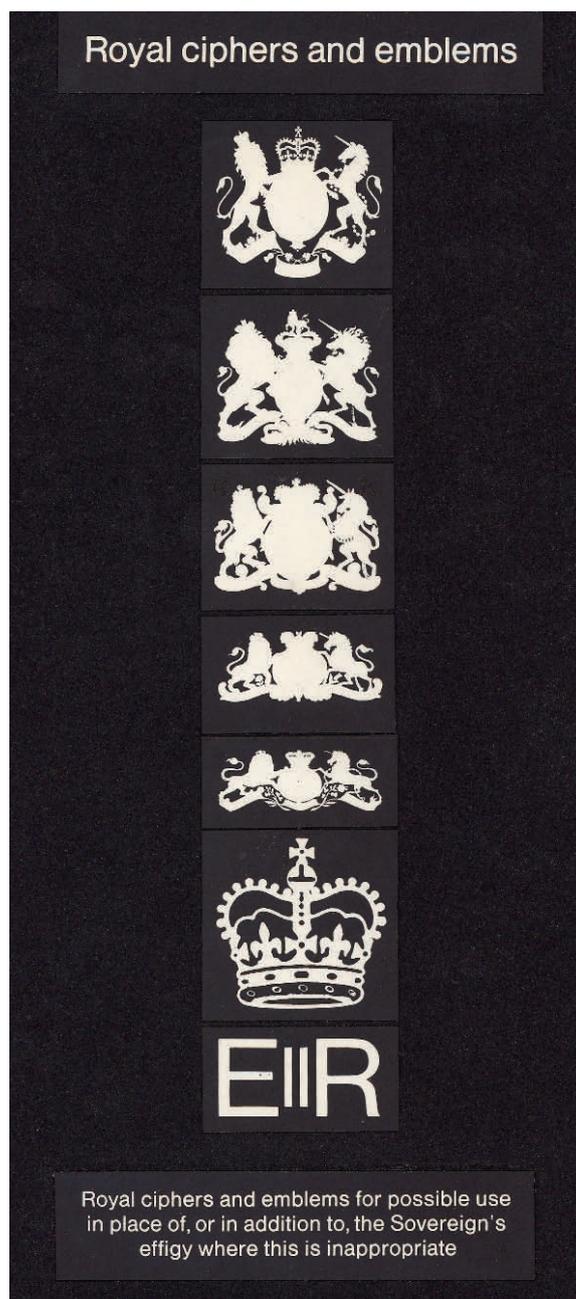
"The introduction of a variety of symbols/ciphers/Heads might lead to our being challenged on the fact that we were not conforming to U.P.U. Regulations."

In his Diaries Benn recorded that Fitton "intervened regularly and rather violently" As Chairman of the SAC he felt on the defensive, Benn thought.

"I am sure that the seminar justified itself up to the hilt in that the discussion from now on will be intelligent and informed."

Later that afternoon at the press conference for the Birds stamps he was challenged directly as to whether he would take the Queen's head off stamps. He replied:

"I cannot visualise the time ...' This was deliberately ambiguous and will not prevent us from submitting the Rulers of Great Britain series to the Palace for next February. I felt I was marginally betraying my cause, but things have to change slowly."



Possible replacements for the Queen's head—royal coat of arms, crown and cypher.

On 1 July Benn wrote to the Queen to inform her of the success of his seminar, mentioning the favourable comments and specifically ideas for the 1967 programme. Adeane's reply on the 4th referred to this:

“You mention specifically your 1967 programme and the ‘Rulers of Great Britain’ series from the Gentleman Album. The Queen has, of course, seen this already and we sent it back to Post Office Headquarters, but she would very much like to have another look at the block before considering the problem of whether the Royal Crest or the Gold profile should be used to identify these stamps. Could you very kindly have it sent round for Her Majesty to inspect again?”

However, it was not to be necessary, as Adeane would certainly have known when he wrote the letter. In the meantime Benn had been promoted to the Cabinet as Minister of Technology and so ceased to be Postmaster General. As a result nothing further was to happen with the contentious Rulers issue, nor royal crests or ciphers. The new Postmaster General was Edward Short, someone much less likely to promote a revolutionary climate.

Long-lasting Influence

NEVERTHELESS, the influence of Gentleman's Album of experimental designs was profound and long-lasting. Since 1966 there has been a profusion of stamp issues, itself a result of Benn's intervention and the resulting Album. Special issues on various themes divorced from any particular commemoration as before also became the norm. The form of the stamp was also changed for ever.

From January 1966 there had been a new member of the Stamp Advisory Committee, F H K Henrion, a poster and exhibition designer. In March he drew up a memorandum on the theoretical and practical problems of pictorial stamps based on a view of Gentleman's experimental designs. Henrion advocated the standardisation

of design elements. He identified two major problems, one being the relation of what he described as “the obligatory informative elements – emblem, denomination and title” to the pictorial element. The other was the use of different designers within the same set.

As far as the relationship of “emblem” and pictorial image he found the flexible solution in the designs in the Gentleman Album. The “emblem” had to be one which

“A. can be clearly and successfully over-printed in a single printing, or reversed out in white, on a very wide range of colours, tonal strength and textures ...
B. is clearly recognisable at a final size of 5/16 inch high.”

The only possibilities were a purely typographic treatment (the name of the country), “a very simple graphic device such as the royal cipher, crown or royal arms in silhouette”, or a profile head in pure silhouette – in other words exactly what Gentleman had created.

Gentleman's cameo head was used on commemorative or special stamps from 1966 till 1968 when it was replaced by a version of Arnold Machin's new effigy. The size of the head remained the same. Similarly, the new proportions for stamps were also generally adopted.



1973. Issued stamp by Gentleman featuring an oak

In terms of theme and imagery, most of Gentleman's ideas were to come to fruition on British stamps, though not always designed by him. Regional landscapes, churches, domestic architecture, birds, wild animals, fishes, domestic and agricultural animals, trees, wild flowers, transport, sail and steam, road and rail, air, industrial revolution, were all originally suggested by him and many aspects included as designs in the Album.



Many later stamp issues were immediately traceable back in origin to these ideas, the Social Reformers of 1976 being only one obvious example; the 1980 Liverpool & Manchester Railway being another, both designed by Gentleman. Understandably, many of his own designs for later issues which were not adopted also took their inspiration from these earlier ideas – those for the 1995 National Trust issue, the proposed 1994 Regional pictorial definitives and the England definitives of 2001 all derive from beliefs first expressed in the mid 1960s.

1980. Issued stamps (above) and artwork (right) by Gentleman for Liverpool & Manchester Railway



Much of this text was based on the relevant chapter of **Muir, Douglas N.** *A Timeless Classic: The evolution of Machin's icon* 2007.



1976. Issued stamp by Gentleman for Social Reformers

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For about a year from early in 1965, Gentleman had worked almost continuously on the Album. But although since then he has continued periodically to design stamps when invited to, his concentrated involvement with them was never repeated. Nor indeed would it have been needed, for the revolution he had advocated had been set firmly in train.

Douglas N. Muir
Curator, Philately
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1993. Issued stamp by Gentleman featuring a Mute Swan Cob & St Catherine's Monastery



2001. Unadopted designs by Gentleman for England definitives featuring landscapes

- POST 122/12338** Postage Stamps. Stamp Design Policy: New Look. Brief for experimental designs by David Gentleman
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gentleman

On Stamps

Royal ciphers

