

GENESIS OF THE MACHIN DESIGN

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On a cold, wet evening last November, the Postal Heritage Trust held its third lecture of the season. Douglas N Muir, Curator, Philately at Royal Mail Archives treated a large audience to a detailed history of the pre-production stages of the Machin definitive design.

Now in its 38th year, this iconic image by the late Arnold Machin (1911-1999) is believed to have been reproduced more than any other image in history. Around 170,000 million individual stamps are thought to have been printed so far and there is no reason why they will not continue to be produced in the coming years of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Admittedly Her Majesty no longer looks like the image created almost 40 years ago, but it is instantly recognisable, therefore continuing to serve its purpose.

Douglas started by recounting the story behind the One Penny Black of 1840 - a project completed in a mere five months and probably still the best stamp design ever in his opinion. The replacement to the Wilding definitive series took around 18 months to produce and went through many stages of development. The full story would take-up all of this *Bulletin* and more, so only edited highlights are feasible here.

It was interesting to learn how the Penny Black and the Machin stamps share several similarities. The dimensions have lasted 165 years, both stamps utilise the same diadem and the Monarch continues to face left. Also, both initial stamps were of a similar colour (the 4d Machin colour was chosen by Her Majesty to intentionally mimic the Penny Black) and both stamps were replaced by a red version due to operational problems.

Three routes were taken in the creation of the new design. Firstly, the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) commissioned five artists in 1965 to produce renderings of the Queen's head in profile from photographs by Snowdon. These were the official preliminary designs, of which Machin produced well over 70 drawings. Tony Benn and David Gentleman were also essaying, apparently without SAC's knowledge. Finally, the Fellowship of Miniscule Design employed artist Andrew Restall to generate yet more unofficial essays.

At this point in the lecture a section of the GPO film *Picture to Post* was screened. We learned that the film had been reconstructed and shot after the stamps had been issued, so was a fake!

Early in 1966 Machin was officially commissioned by the Post Office to develop his designs in sculptured relief. From this point onwards, frequent re-sculpting, plaster cast production, photography sessions and essaying was undertaken. This work included the gradual elimination of all ornamentation, use of a diadem instead of tiara and the removal of the words 'Postage' and 'Revenue', leaving just the simplified portrait and value against a solid ground.

Her Majesty was shown various essays and expressed a preference for a corsage.

Once this had been incorporated, a large number of fresh essays were generated in different colours and shades with varying value positions. Following approval, production commenced at Harrison's and the first stamps appeared on 5 June 1967 to widespread acclaim.

By the early 1980s there was a view that a change was due and that the Machin head should be replaced, perhaps to tie-in with the Coronation anniversary of 1983. Jeffrey Matthews was invited to produce alternatives and Snowdon took a new range of full-face photographic images of Her Majesty. Rory Matthews (Jeffrey's son) produced drawn versions of the head in 1982 and these were all essayed. None of this work found favour, so four more artists were approached in 1983, but this work was also rejected.

Not prepared to let the matter rest, the following year saw SAC establish a working party and Jeffrey produced a range of new options, including landscape format.

Again,

essays were generated, but not progressed further and there the matter appears to have come to rest, for how does one beat such a timeless image as the Machin head?

At the end of the lecture, questions were responded to by Francis Machin (Arnold's son) and Jeffrey Matthews. These questions covered the origin of the surname Machin (French Huguenot, with most British Machin's now based in the Potteries district around Stoke on Trent) and there were several questions relating to colour (whether UPU colour standards should have been adhered to, one persons dislike of the gold coloured Machin and the use of the Matthew's colour palette).

We also learned that the Queen's head cameo used on commemorative issues from around 1968 was especially created by Machin, as the standard head did not reduce down to such a tiny size. Incidentally, production issues also existed when it came to replacing the Castles high values, as the relief needed highlighting more, so a new head was sculpted.

Visitors were given an excellent six-page A4 hand-out in colour which was written by Douglas. Entitled *The Machin Head of The Queen*, it gives a detailed analysis of events. It illustrates several developmental designs, several photographs of Her Majesty and records the genesis in depth. It made a fine souvenir of a fascinating evening.

(854 words)