ENCAPSULATED STAMP CARDS
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Ever since the Penny Black was first issued there has been a dilemma within the Post Office as to how it should best publicise its new issues in the media in advance without running the risk of the stamps being misused by the recipient. This problem was largely overcome early-on by overprinting stamps SPECIMEN or CANCELLED, followed in more recent years by the provision of black and white or, later, colour photographic images. Today, high-resolution digital scans are made available to Editors instead of the photographs.

Starting in the late 1960s when it became a Corporation, the Post Office altered its policy by allowing unissued stamps to be provided pre-release to news Editors in mint condition at the press conferences held for each new issue. However, there was no risk of the stamps being postally used, as they were mounted on a grey or black descriptive card that had been encapsulated in plastic on both sides (except the first card, where the stamps were placed without a backing board behind, but with a small descriptive sheet at foot). The initial two 1969 cards both state 'Stamps issued [date]', but from 1970 all cards read 'Stamps to be issued [date]', reflecting more accurately the pre-release status of each item.

It is not clear how many issues were treated in this fashion, but two dozen card versions have so far been recorded, all of which have been seen by me. Readers will note that there appear to be gaps in the listing of sets, but until copies are seen it must be assumed that not every commemorative stamp issue within the seven year period of use was produced in an encapsulated edition. This theory appears to be accurate, as an Editor friend with a long-term career in philatelic publishing cannot recall them appearing each time, but if readers have details of any additional cards, then reports would be welcomed, please by emailing glennmorgan@hotmail.com

Encapsulated stamp cards are extremely difficult to obtain because very few are believed to have been produced, they were intended to be ephemeral and were only handed out on a selective basis. It is understood that by the end of 1973 regulations were relaxing still further and unmounted mint stamps were handed-out to favoured Editors pre-release and so the need for the cards had diminished. One theory is that they were possibly only given-out to overseas newspaper Editors at the end, but this remains conjecture.

 The cards generally command a minimum of £35 per copy, with the 'To Pay' labels, Royalty themes, Churchill and 1973 Christmas being the most expensive at up to £75 each card. The 24 cards listed below would at this time cost around £900 to acquire.

Readers will undoubtedly be aware that Royal Mail is once again producing encapsulated cards but for a different purpose, invariably held on a chain at the till and known as 'scanning tags'. These relatively new items contain colour reproductions of stamp book covers together with a barcode, which is swiped by retailers at the point of sale. They are an anti-theft item introduced initially at Woolworth's request due to the number of stamp books that were being stolen by shoppers when books were on open shelves. These interesting items are outside the scope of this article, but have a strong following and are regularly featured in *The Bookmark.*

CATALOGUE LISTING

1969   Post Office Technology
Christmas
1970   Literary Anniversaries
Decimal Currency 'To Pay' Labels 10p-£1
IXth British Commonwealth Games
Philympia International Philatelic Exhibition
Christmas
1971   Literary Anniversaries
General Anniversaries
Modern University Buildings
Christmas
1972   Old Village Churches
BBC and Broadcasting History
Christmas
Royal Silver Wedding
1973   European Economic Community
British Trees – The Oak
British Explorers
County Cricket Centenary
British Painters
Royal Wedding
Christmas
1974   Churchill Centenary
1975   62nd Inter-Parliamentary Conference

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