

# Barry Robinson: A Career in Design: Part 1

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The fourth and final Postal Heritage Trust lecture of 2004 was held last December at the Phoenix Centre in London where Barry Robinson, well known to many collectors, talked about his time at Royal Mail as its Head of Design.

Barry's career started at the Observer newspaper in 1965 from where he moved on to the ailing British Oxygen and implemented a unified corporate identity change across 23 countries. Next came ICL, the Bovis Group and P&O before he finally moved to Royal Mail in the Queen's Silver Jubilee year of 1977. He stayed until the Golden Jubilee, 25 years later. During this period, Barry reckons that he must have been responsible for 200 special stamp issues and, if ancillary products and the definitive range is included, probably over 1,000 stamp designs in total.

The culture that Barry entered had remained unchanged for many years. Promotion was generally from within, with few specialists employed. Senior management tended to have huge, sumptuous offices with drink cabinets and a Civil Service approach to the work ethic. A new scheme in 1970 by Banks and Miles had introduced different colours for the telephones, Giro and Postal businesses, red and yellow being the postal colours, with a new lettering font for the vehicle fleet and Post Office premises.

Design extended well beyond just stamps, as Barry was also responsible for vehicle liveries, signage, uniforms, pillar-boxes, sorting machinery and Mail Rail. He also established a test-bed for a new look Post Office, which was sited within the Crayford vehicle maintenance depot. There were 73 new components in this mock public office including rugs, barriers, screens, disabled counters, electronic scales, stamp dispensers and the like.

Stamps are what most Bulletin readers will be familiar with and so Barry proceeded to reminisce about his work in the field of minuscule art. The first stamp issue that he handled was the Charles and Diana issue of 1981, which was an unforeseen addition to that year's programme, followed by the Darwin set of 1982, which was in-plan. Explaining how his lecture has been given to many different audiences in many different formats, he had concluded that an A-Z of topics was most appropriate for such an august audience.

**Accuracy** – this was always the bedrock of his department. Flora and fauna were the subjects that gave them the biggest headaches down the years. A specialist at the Natural History Museum had queried the Trout fish design accuracy and the artist was therefore questioned. It transpires that the very fish was still in the freezer and was brought to show Barry. It had been correctly painted and there the matter rested!

**Brief** – there is a misconception that each designer is given a full written brief before design work is undertaken. This is rarely true unless specifics must be included, such as a design from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. A free hand is generally given, with discussions and pencil thumbnails initially being produced. It tends to be evolution, rather revolution.

**Criteria and Convention** – there is a definitive set of criteria for special stamps that includes portraying the British way of life, patronage to the arts, depiction of world

events, etc. Worryingly, a recent addition is that the programme must meet financial targets! Certain conventions must be complied with, such as avoiding controversy, no depiction of living people unless Royalty or a minor part of the overall image, maintaining balance and variety, etc.

**Design** – everyone has a view and all want to get involved with design, from Her Majesty down. As a result, many people get to see most stages of the design process.

**Essay** – at the time of the 1953 Coronation, around 70 essays were produced for that stamp issue. Nowadays, around two sets are created, as it is an expensive process.

**Future** – who can tell what the future will bring? At the time of the introduction of the telephone, it was believed that stamps would die. Clearly, the Internet, emails and text messaging are seen as a threat, but Barry believes that stamps have a bright future.

**Gravure** – this is probably the best process for printing stamps as it applies a thick layer of ink and offers bright colour rendition, although it is not as cheap as lithography. The 16p Sissinghurst Gardens design was trial printed by litho and gravure to provide comparisons between the processes. The text was better with litho, but the colours were washed out, while the opposite was true of the gravure version.

**Hidden Images** – Royal Mail has been playful with designs down the years. A Christmas umbrella design had snow shaped as land masses on a world map, the Mitchell Spitfire stamp had clouds disguised as Mitchell's face, the Cuneo trains set had his trademark mouse. There are others.

**Intaglio** – an expensive, slow process requiring upwards of ten tons of pressure to extract the ink from its recesses on the plate or cylinder and on to the stamp paper. Slania, Engraver to the Swedish Court, has been used wherever possible, as he is the acknowledged world leader.

**Joint Issues** – the Australia issue was the first instance of Royal Mail partaking in a joint stamp issue. This was followed by the Channel Tunnel, which Barry believes suffered from its overly large format. More such issues are planned, as they bring fresh design concepts to the annual special stamps programme.

**K (thousand)** – the Millennium set of 100 designs, all by different artists, was perhaps the most controversial and ambitious issue for years. People either loved it or loathed it, but Barry believes that in 50 years time, the public will finally understand what it was all about. To produce 48 stamps about the past, 48 for the present and 4 for the future was no small undertaking.