

BRITISH 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 could 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 colour photographic images. Today, high-resolution digital scans are made available to editors usually instead of the photographs, which are still produced but in falling numbers.

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, the stamps could not be postally used, as they were mounted on a mushroom, grey or black descriptive card that was then encapsulated in plastic on both sides. The first card has three distinct versions, as described below in the catalogue listing. The initial two 1969 cards both stated "Stamps issued [date]", but from 1970 all cards read "Stamps to be issued [date]", reflecting more accurately the pre-release status.

It is not clear how many issues were treated in this fashion, but around two dozen cards have so far been recorded. Readers will note that there appear to be gaps in the listing, but until copies are seen it must be assumed that not every issue within the seven year period of use was produced in an encapsulated edition. This theory appears to be accurate as our Editor cannot recall them appearing each time, but if readers have details of additional cards then reports would be welcomed, please. Similar reports on what company might have been responsible for the encapsulation process would also be of interest. At one point, it had been suggested that Harrison and Sons might have done the work, but with two of the issues having been printed by De La Rue (the 1969 PO Technology and 1970 Commonwealth Games issues), this seems unlikely.

An interesting variant of the 1970 Philypia card is one issued by Ron Lee of the Philypia exhibition organising committee as an invitation to a press reception held on 16 September 1970 at the Swiss Centre Restaurant in central London. This card has only recently come to light and even a key-member of the organiser's publicity committee was unaware of its existence until a scan was shown to him.

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 and so the need for the cards had diminished, possibly only being given to overseas newspaper editors at the end.

The cards generally command an absolute minimum of £30 per copy, with the 'To Pay' labels, Royalty themes, Churchill and 1973 Christmas being the most expensive at £50+ each. The full range listed below would cost around £850/£900 to acquire. One dealer is currently offering to buy stocks and will pay up to £37.50 per card, depending on the issue.

These days Royal Mail is again producing encapsulated cards that are invariably held on a chain at the till and known as 'scanning tags'. These 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.

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CATALOGUE LISTING

- 1969 Post Office Technology.
Type 1 – The four stamps have a clear background to them, while the description area has a small infill sheet.
Type 2 – As *Type 1*, but the infill sheet covers 100% of the card.
Type 3 – As *Type 2*, but in the description area the 'Printed by Thomas de la Rue & Co. Ltd.' imprint is repositioned in the bottom right hand corner.
- Christmas.
- 1970 Literary Anniversaries.
Decimal Currency 'To Pay Labels 10p-£1.
IXth British Commonwealth Games.
Philympia International Philatelic Exhibition.
Type 1 – Normal card.
Type 2 – Philympia press reception invitation card.
- 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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