

STAMP PRINTING AT WALSALL

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I was recently one of ten collectors given the rare opportunity of visiting Walsall Security Printers at its West Midlands factory.

The original company, Walsall Lithographic Company, was founded in 1894; while Walsall Security Printers Limited (WSP) was established in 1966 to concentrate on the specialist skills required for postage stamp printing.

Walsall as a town was renowned for its leather products in the 19th century and Walsall Litho was established to print catalogues for the harness and saddlers businesses. It was the purchase of a German letterpress 'seal' machine in 1913 that indirectly led to the first stamp contract for WSP fifty years later! The King of Tonga had a requirement for a set of stamps embossed on gold foil and De La Rue (DLR) recommended Walsall for the job.

Over a period, Sierra Leone, Bhutan, Sharjah and probably others joined Tonga in issuing through Walsall stamps that were die-cut and shaped as bananas, maps, coins, etc. It has taken almost forty years for this joint concept of self-adhesive and die-cutting to be generally accepted.

To this day, WSP specialise in self-adhesive stamps, with water-activated versions now only accounting for around five percent of its business. How times change, as cost was always one of the stumbling blocks to the mass introduction of self-adhesive products. Self-adhesive paper used to cost around twice that of water-activated paper; whereas now self-adhesive stock comes in at around half the cost of water-activated! I digress.

By 1969, the company was producing stamps for the Crown Agents and Inter-Governmental Philatelic Corporation. In 1987, they were first appointed as a supplier to the British Post Office. Expansion continued with the installation of a new Chesnut photogravure stamp printing press in 1997, largely to meet Royal Mail requirements.

As readers of this Bulletin will know, Royal Mail recently entrusted the production of the 'fruit and veg' interactive stamps to WSP. This new stamp issue has certainly lived-up to Royal Mail's strapline 'Stamps stimulate', causing much discussion among collectors as to the appropriateness of such an issue. Well, I like them!

Walsall Print Group (WPG) (the holding company of WSP), has recently been divided into three operating divisions that each focus on their key production capabilities, namely brand protection, commercial label production and, of course, security printing.

The group, which for a short period was known as the Millennium Print Group, is still a family-owned business run by brothers John and Adrian Aspinall. Not a large company as such, they are however a major employer in Walsall and have been for well over one hundred years.

Our host for the day was Brian Janes, a person well known to many of the ten visitors, as we had met him previously at Harrison and Sons and later at De La Rue before he was given the chance to work at WSP in a similar role.

We were initially given an introductory talk that ended-up as a question and answer session, such was our quest for knowledge. We were then taken to see the 'repro room', where the artwork, in whatever format it is provided in, is scanned into a computer, manipulated for colour, stepped into sheets, output to film and then printed from the cylinders. As Walsall use mini-webs, these cylinders are a far more manageable size than those used on the giant Harrison Jumelle press recently taken out of commission following the closure of the famous High Wycombe print plant.

On press at the time of our visit were the forthcoming Prince William birthday stamps and, when released, we shall all be looking out for corner blocks with an 11/03/03 print date as a souvenir of our visit. Also on press were the first class gold booklets, each reel of which contains 3,000 metres of stamps and there were dozens of these printed reels, all part of around 350 million books produced annually for Royal Mail.

Courvoisier is a brand and company that WPG purchased a while ago and we saw the gravure press that had been moved over from Switzerland and which is now used for production of short-run overseas orders. Built like a tank, this Chambon press is set to run-and-run and looks so sturdy compared with the modern Chesnut presses on site.

It is interesting at this juncture to compare WSP with DLR, as Walsall saw value in retaining and promoting the Courvoisier brand; whereas DLR has a long history of buying, then removing from the market place, all proof that their purchased companies had ever existed. Waterlow, Bradbury Wilkinson, Harrison and now Questa are all hallowed names that have met this sad fate. The phrase 'there's no sentiment in business' was never truer than when applied to DLR.

The contract for Royal Mail business sheets is now with Walsall and we witnessed the stripping of the matrix from the web – something that Enschedé appear to have struggled with – on the second class definitives. We then saw them trimmed to size, concertina folded, banded into fifties and packed into boxes and labelled ready for shipment to Royal Mail stores at Hemel Hempstead.

The finishing department was also trimming into singles, folding, counting and packaging into twenty-fives the first class booklets. These were then wrapped into clear film, undertaken on a machine initially designed to cello-wrap boxes of cigarettes. It had been suitably adapted to enable inkjetting of the production date, adding a barcode and the printer name. Each pack was then individually weighed to avoid any 'overs or unders' before being boxed, labelled and shipped out to stores.

A little-known aspect of WSPs capabilities is the philatelic bureau that they have established. Much of the enclosing into presentation packs and affixing and cancelling of stamps on first day covers is undertaken for the Dutch TPG and, increasingly, others, on-site.

The new Universal Machins from Royal Mail are an example from this bureau, where Walsall created coils for internal use from the web of booklets. These were then fed

into the applicator and directly affixed onto FDCs. Similarly, stamps from these same coils were die-punched into singles, giving the appearance of water-activated stamps, a process that they had perfected for the Dutch contract. It must be stressed that the coils used never left WSP and so are unavailable for purchase.

Depending on whether one or both columns of the original booklets were used, there are a maximum of four different backs to each Universal stamp that will be of possible collector interest to those who collect Machin singles. (Readers may recall that the definitive 'coil boxes' and the Christmas 2001 and 2002 self-adhesive issues contained in presentation packs had the backing paper visible around the stamp, giving a poor image to potential purchasers.)

Interestingly, the two Universal Machin booklets were printed side-by-side on the web, as this proved to be the most economical method of production, so shared colours and the paper stock (an Avery product) will be identical in books, FDCs and packs. Examination of the issued stamps will reveal whether the booklet and coil die-cutters used were identical or not, as we could not examine them together.

A commemorative set for an unknown European post office proved interesting from a volumes viewpoint. The top value had 50% of its print run destined for post office counters and the other 50% was reserved for philatelic sales. On that basis, collectors must at least cover the cost of stamp production and provide, I suspect, a healthy income as well. It was also surprising to learn how low a commemorative print run can be these days – in this instance a mere 200,000 sets.

Being a long-term, serious collector and scrupulously honest, I could never have betrayed the trust placed in me during our visit. I must admit though, that I did see some wonderful items that would have been star pieces in my collection. Items like the Machin stamps with either no value or '00p' value being used by the machine minders for colour matching purposes. Then there were the imperforate booklets and stamps awaiting die-cutting or perforating, plus the essays with obsolete face values and the 'approved for production' proofs. Still, I will always value my own reputation higher than that of my stamp collection...just!

Had I attempted to steal anything I was bound to be caught anyway because they are not called a security printer for nothing. There are hundreds of commercial printers in Britain that can print, but there are now only two Royal Mail approved stamp printers in the UK – and for a reason. WSP will have invested considerable sums of money on many overt and covert security features that effectively monitor the premises, staff and visitors constantly.

We had arrived at 10:30 and left after a sumptuous lunch over four hours later, having been treated royally – even our name badge had VIP on it! It is obvious that Walsall runs a slick, professional operation and has employees who clearly enjoy their respective roles. Staff at all levels were so keen to share their knowledge and to answer the many questions posed, referring first to their line manager if they were ever uncertain as to whether it was appropriate to answer or not. They were a credit to themselves and the company.

So, a big 'thank you' goes to the Friends of Postal Heritage for requesting the visit, to Royal Mail for sanctioning it and to WSP - Brian in particular - for giving us such an enjoyable and informative day.

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