

# The GPO vends its first commemorative stamps



Fig 1: 'Wembley P.O. Exhibit North End'  
(BPMA accession number 2012-0052/1).

## Glenn H. Morgan recalls the outcome of looking at a tiny photograph.

When visiting the excellent exhibition held at the Guildhall Art Gallery, organised by the British Postal Museum & Archive as part of the London 2010 Festival of Stamps events, I glimpsed in a montage of images a minute photograph of what appeared to be the entrance area of the British Empire Exhibition in 1924 or 1925. It was just possible to make out a dark wooden cabinet containing a pair of stamp vending machines and I made a mental note to pursue. A similar, clearer image also appears in Douglas N. Muir's book *George V and the G.P.O. Stamps, Conflict & Creativity* published at the same time (page 211).

Moving forward to the Friends' visit to the *Post Office in Pictures* exhibition at Swindon held in October 2011, Martin Devereux gave a fascinating talk about BPMA's extensive photographic collections. On my next visit to BPMA, I vowed finally to ask him about the picture that had interested me the previous year and within seconds Martin was able to bring a low-resolution image of it onto

his computer screen. He then told me that his colleague, Emma Harper, was managing a project that was digitising and cataloguing the glass lantern slide collection, of which the image that interested me formed a part. I was promised a high-resolution scan of it once it had been digitised.

At the BPMA reception held in September 2011 to commemorate the centenary of the Aerial Post, guests were privileged to see glass lantern slides of that event being screened, probably for the first time in almost a century. Although 'my' slide was understandably not among them, it was very special to see the polished wood and brass equipment continuing to function so effectively into the 21st century – and not a computer chip to be seen!

True to her word, Emma was recently in a position to provide me with the newly scanned image, from which it can now clearly be seen that it is in fact not the entrance to the British Empire Exhibition, but the GPO display area (the picture is captioned as The Post Office Gallery in Douglas Muir's book). With the use of a magnifying glass, Emma was also able to reveal that it is the 1925 event that is depicted. More importantly for me, what I had assumed

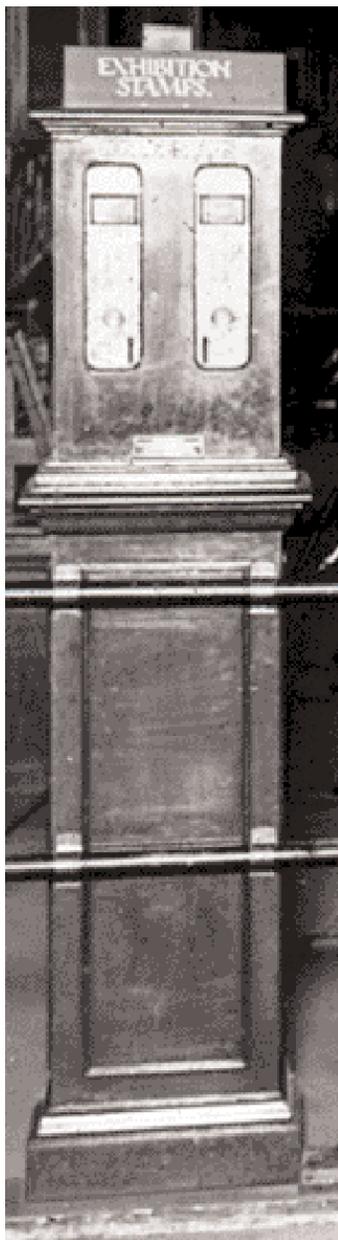


Fig 2: Enlargement of the stamp vending machine.

would read 'POSTAGE / STAMPS' above the twin machines (the usual wording for the period) actually reads 'EXHIBITION / STAMPS'. This is therefore probably the only image of the first time that stamp vending machines in the UK have dispensed commemorative-sized postage stamps from rolls directly to the public, albeit for two years running and with a change of date on the stamps in the interim.

With this additional information, the entry on BPMA's cataloguing database was able to be written as follows:

**'Wembley P.O. Exhibit North End'** black and white photographic lantern slide. Taken during the 1925 British Empire Exhibition in

Wembley, the image shows a group of people posing for a photograph standing in part of the exhibition space - the North End as indicated by the title. In the middle of the picture, pinned to a waist height cabinet is a 1925 poster titled 'The Storming of Zebbrugge'. On the right hand side, on the wall is a map of the Post Office London Railway. On the left of the image is a special vending machine for obtaining exhibition stamps.

So, three apparently unconnected BPMA events all came together to enable me to tell a minute, but no less important or fascinating, part of Post Office history and special thanks are offered to BPMA for enabling me to share the image with you on these pages.

Emma has added the following comment: 'The BPMA



Fig 3: Coil leader and strip of the 1d stamp of 1925, items from the Jean Alexander collection. The rolls of 1,200 stamps were made up from sheets joined at every tenth stamp.

is currently carrying out a collection review of the museum's photography collection including a large number of lantern slides. These lantern slides cover a range of subjects from images of postal operations around the world, many focussing on the architecture and interiors of postal buildings as well as specific events such as the British Empire Exhibition. These lantern slides are currently being catalogued and scanned with the help of a volunteer and will hopefully be available to view on the online catalogue over the next few months.'