

Inclusive Design Stamp Books

compiled by Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

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My thanks to Glenn for the words and John for the images.

Imagine having limited or no vision. It is unlikely that you would be enjoying this journal, indeed you would probably not be collecting stamps. Now imagine suffering with arthritis in the fingers. Manual dexterity would be impaired, possibly to the point where turning these pages would be difficult, frustrating and painful.

There are around 60 million people in Britain – 20 million of whom are aged over 50 and 10 million of them have a disability, according to RNIB. As most people use postal services, a large percentage of consumers would find improvements to the construction of stamp books beneficial. It is against this backdrop that Royal Mail decided to improve this aspect of its service. The introduction of self-adhesive paper and withdrawal of £1 and £2 books following vending rationalisation assisted the revamp process.

It is a while now since the new books were introduced and readers have probably purchased copies for their collections or for use on mail. It is difficult not to be impressed by them, as the level of detail that went into their design and production helped guarantee success for this increasingly popular item that is sold in vast quantities every year.

It is a sad fact, though, that many customers will not even have noticed the changes, although perhaps that is a part of the success of the project. So, dig out one of your stamp books now before reading on and take note of the improvements made.

- *The Matrix.*

No, not the film trilogy, but the surplus self-adhesive paper that surrounded the stamps of earlier books. Some countries have never had to contend with a matrix, for their stamps 'budded-up' to each other and did not have surplus paper. This is because the stamps often had wavy-edge separation that linked each item without a gap between, or had straight edges without perforations. However, Royal Mail specified that its self-adhesive stamps should resemble the traditionally perforated versions, requiring die-cutters that incorporated spaces between each stamp.

When the matrix is left on, it makes it extremely difficult to remove each stamp from its back cover, so this was first priority for the project team. Also, some customers had the anti-social habit of sticking the matrix to Post Office™ counters. There is, however, a thin vertical strip of the matrix left on each pane at the far right, providing a space for the printer to record the cylinder number. A further added benefit of removing the matrix is that it enables people with visual impairments to feel more easily how many stamps are left, ensuring that replacement stock is obtained prior to running out.



12 x 1st-class trial booklet and part of the opened book showing the stamp layout

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Books of six stamps also have an inside front cover that bears an unprinted label the full size of the cover. (Considering the security that used to surround the destruction of any surplus paper in the pre-self-adhesive era, it is perhaps surprising that this paper is not defaced in some way, or utilised for publicity purposes.) Books for overseas use incorporate airmail stickers that make use of the wasted paper and avoid the need for a customer to search for such a sticker – or worse still, not use one.

- *Cover colour.*

The covers are the colour of the stamps contained within, i.e. blue for second class and gold for first. This enables instant recognition of the contents by people with visual impairments without the need to open the book to view the stamps. However, with 7% of British males being red-green colour blind, it was important that colour alone was not used to clearly identify contents.

- *Inset covers.*

The front cover is shorter in width than the back cover. This enables easier access to the contents for people with arthritis and simply involved a different folding and creasing position of the spine by the printer.

- *Notches.*

One for first class and two for second class, notches allow visually impaired customers to 'feel' the value and are known as a tactile marking. They are located in the right hand vertical edge of the back cover towards the top.

Braille would have been inappropriate, as most blind people do not read this language. Notches also assist, visually impaired people with diabetes, for they often suffer from a loss of sensitivity in their fingertips and so they may be unable to read Braille.

- *Perforations.*

In accordance with Royal Mail's stamp security policy, the stamps bear an elliptical perforation on both vertical edges towards the bottom. This feature has the bonus of helping visually impaired customers to orientate the stamp correctly. Posting a letter with the Sovereign's head upside down may not seem to be of importance, but when did you last receive a letter from a sighted person showing disrespect to Her Majesty?

- *Font size.*

The number of stamps within the book and their face value is depicted in a font size of 60 point (bold for the value, non-bold for number of stamps).

- *Contact points.*

The outside back covers bear three customer helpline methods: telephone, web and textphone. These contact details ensure that all customers can pursue their enquiries with ease.

There is one further development that had been proposed at the time of the revamp that never came to fruition. It was clearly the most radical feature and would have resulted in a new definitive design for the first time in almost forty years.



12 x 2nd-class trial booklet and part of the opened book showing the stamp layout

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I recall overhearing in the coffee shop at Stampex a couple of years ago a journalist discussing a Royal Mail stamp briefing that he had just attended. It appears that they had been handed books of six stamps with a new design for the first and second class values. These dummy stamps comprised a very large 1 or 2, with the portrait of The Queen reduced to a tiny size in the top left-hand corner in the normal flame or blue colours of the time. Nothing further was overheard and I awaited their launch with interest. As you will know, no such stamps have yet appeared although the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) would surely approve.

The production of these prototype books set me thinking about why they had been created. I was later to ascertain that they had been used at a number of focus groups, in liaison with Royal Mail, with CDT Design (a leader in brand, corporate and environmental identities) who developed the stamps and stamp books, the RNIB at its London premises, and Arthritis Care at their London Headquarters.

A range of people with various levels of visual impairment and arthritis were invited to offer their observations on all the features proposed for the stamp books.

The RNIB forum comprised part of a nationwide volunteer evaluation network of 250 persons and included young and old, those in and out of work, blind and sighted people, i.e. a good cross-section of the British public. Their feedback was to prove invaluable to Royal Mail when deciding the final format. There were no user trials undertaken.

The less charitable reader may argue that Royal Mail was merely carrying out its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act, or DDA, of 1995 as introduced in 1998. However, it is clear that the organisation is determined to exceed what it must do. Aside from the provision of large print, Braille, CD-ROM and audio versions of key items of literature, it has also worked to improve access to its premises and introduced new, clearer, letterbox collection plates.

Other enhancements relate to, for example, the introduction of induction-loop hearing devices, low level counters, and the provision of 'helping hands' packs of supportive equipment to all Post Office™ directly managed branches and agents. These comprise pen grips, signature guides, clipboard and hand-held magnifier as well as improvements to the queuing systems in Post Offices. All of these enhancements help project the caring image of one of Britain's largest retailers.

Avril Hart, Royal Mail's Head of Disability Policy, and Barry Robinson, previously Design Director at Royal Mail Stamps and Collectibles, together with Paul Snee from RNIB's Sensory Design Services (SDS) who had been seconded to work with Royal Mail, championed the project in liaison with Mike Dempsey, a founding partner of CDT (Carroll, Dempsey and Thirkell) Design.

Avril and Paul are both passionate about their roles and can be justifiably proud of these major design improvements. In view of the benefits that the unadopted stamp designs would have brought to so many consumers, it is disappointing that they were not adopted. Perhaps the introduction of these stamps could be reconsidered?

Special thanks are due to Paul for the considerable background information that he provided during the course of writing this article. SDS is an RNIB 'inclusive design' consultancy based outside Peterborough. They offer their design services to manufacturers and service providers across a variety of sectors, helping them to make reasonable adjustments towards compliance with the DDA.

SDS's influence on the design of a product is crucial if it is to be accessible to all, i.e. not just the visually impaired or disabled but older people and non-disabled alike.

The BT 'Big Button' telephone (where its target of selling 64,000 units in 18 months was met in a mere three months) is another commercial example of why RNIB hopes that Royal Mail will continue to adopt inclusive design principles in other areas of its business.