

1957: Poached Eggs at the Scout Jamboree, and later

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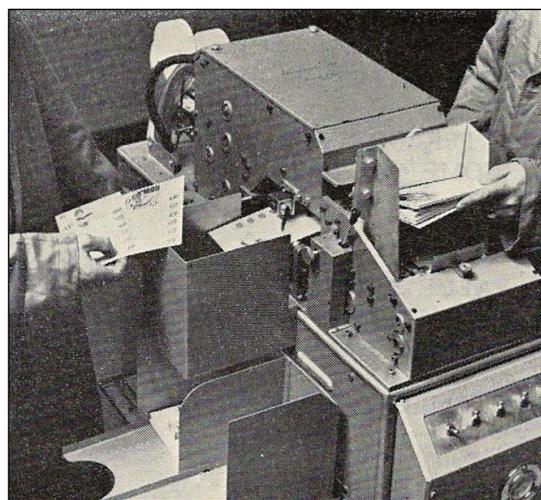
If the title of this paper takes you back to breakfast around the campfire as a child, then snap out of it and concentrate - this is a philatelic publication! It actually relates to the earliest attempts by the British Post Office to provide a First Day Cover (FDC) service at celebrations in Sutton Coldfield for the centenary of the birth of Lord Baden Powell and the way that the GPO tested the special machinery used to process covers of the new Scout stamps.

First Day Cover Servicing Equipment

"The 2 1/2d, 4d and 1s3d commemorative stamps for the Jubilee Jamboree of the Boy Scout Movement, announced by the Postmaster General in the House of Commons on June 13th last, will be placed on sale at post offices throughout the United Kingdom on August 1st next"

It had been agreed at high level within the Post Office and government that a set of stamps would be issued to celebrate the 1957 Scout Jubilee Jamboree and that massive amounts of First Day Covers would be ordered by current and former Scouts and by the public at large.

The Post Office searched in vain worldwide for a machine that would be capable of affixing stamps to covers and was finally forced into commissioning one to be designed from scratch. The two machines that resulted were made by Vacuumatic Limited of Harwich, England, and cost £2,650 including all development and subsequent refinements. These were able to service 120 covers per minute with the set of three Scout commemorative stamps. Despite saving untold hours of Post Office staff time, just 60,632 covers were serviced compared with initial estimates of two (some say three or even six) million covers.



These photographs were taken at the premises of Vacuumatic and show the machine before it was completely functioning. Publicity shots were urgently required by the GPO and these were considered acceptable.

The machines, sited at the Sutton Park Station depot, were fed by hand with a stack of covers into a feed hopper, where vacuum "fingers" moved the envelope to a suitable position for the stamps to be affixed. Fine jets of water were then sprayed onto the envelope and one of each stamp value was advanced from the rolls by claws engaging in the perforations where a guillotine detached them from the coils. The stamps were then pressed onto the envelope and

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ejected into a collecting bin, where a physical examination of each cover was made by hand. Any rejects were replaced. Once they had dried they passed through a stamp cancelling machine and were then bundled-up for delivery worldwide.

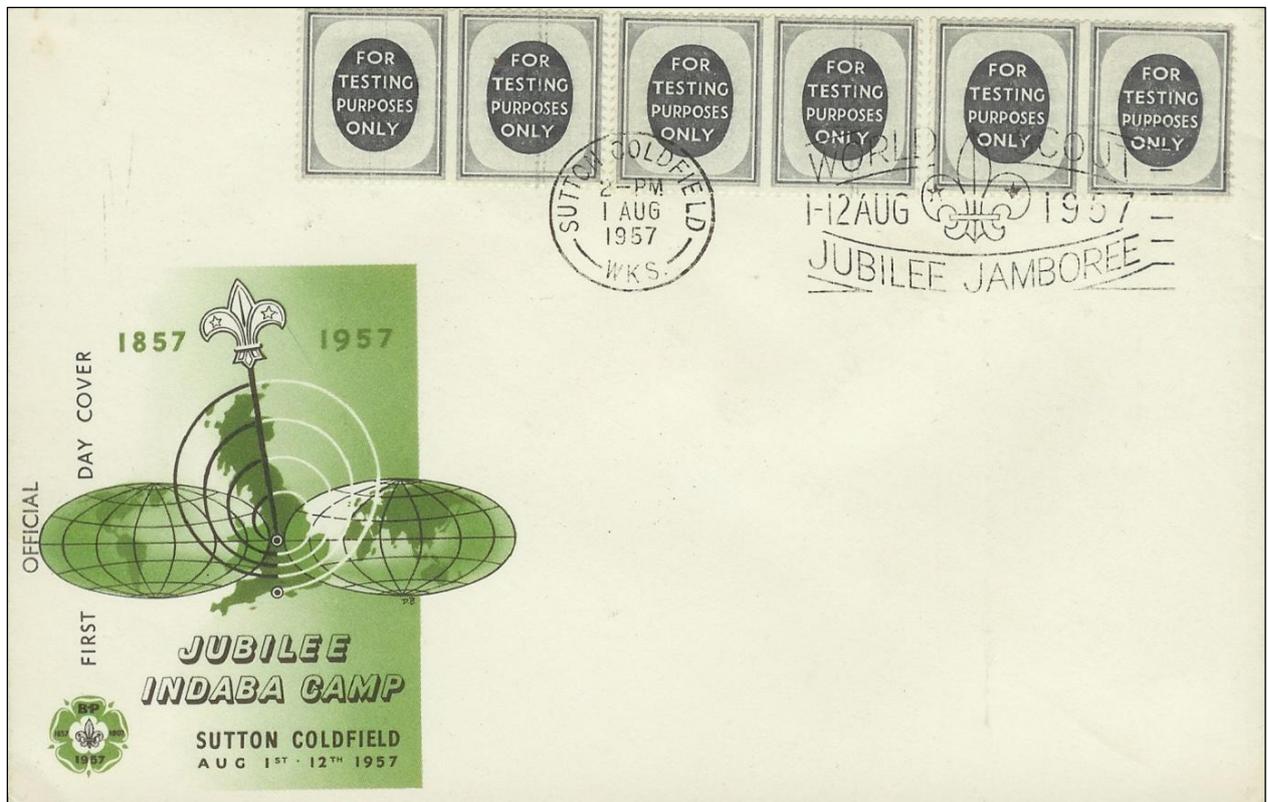
This was the only time in British philatelic history, prior to self-adhesive stamps, that special coils of commemorative stamps for FDC servicing were produced, although in 1989 Harrison created a coil from Greetings stamp books for a Sunday Times promotion – the subject of another in this series of papers.

Special Commemorative-Sized Testing Labels

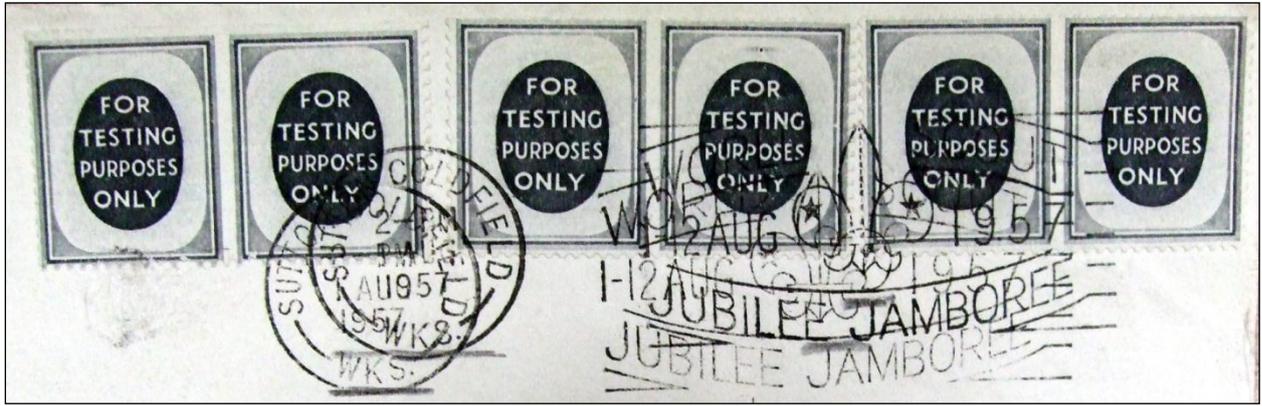
It was soon realised that it would be necessary for much preparatory work to be undertaken before a satisfactory result would allow the machines to be let loose on actual covers paid for by customers.

Accordingly, Vacuumatic staff and Post Office engineers were given coils of testing labels (known to collectors as poached eggs due to their design, and hence the title of this paper) in a special format that would simulate the issued stamps. Many trials with dummy covers were made to adjust the flow of water reaching each envelope and to determine the correct envelope thickness using these labels.

Eventually they got it right and the first incursion by the Post Office into the highly lucrative FDC market could begin. Not that this first exercise was profitable, due to the low numbers of covers actually serviced! It is believed that the Scout movement also lost serious amounts of revenue by the lack of covers bought and needed to get the government to bail them out financially.



Dummy First Day Cover used as part of the commissioning trials for the Vacuumatic stamp affixing machines.



Stamp affixing and machine cancelling did not always go to plan during the commissioning stages! The stamps are crooked and the postal marking has been struck twice. (Image courtesy BPMA)

Technical Details

At one time, commemorative stamps were the width of two definitive stamps and so the existing *For Testing Purposes Only* label was prepared in horizontal pairs, imperforate between. Printing was in grey-black by the photogravure process of Harrison and Sons Limited on E2R St Edwards Crown watermarked paper so as to closely resemble the issued Scout stamps.



(Image courtesy Graham Eyre)

The Scout commemoratives appeared in rolls of 4,800 and it is thought that the testing labels might be of a similar number, as leaders are understood to remain unrecorded. Delivery was in vertical coils, i.e. each label was joined to the next at the top and bottom (known as vertical delivery), rather than by both sides (horizontal delivery). The labels are highly prized by collectors, especially when on the dummy covers as only a handful escaped destruction.

Test Roll Orders in BPMA Files

The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) maintains files relating to the ordering of the Scout dummy testing rolls for this FDC experiment under POST 69 and POST 122.



POST 69/64	Post Office Board 1958: Index, board papers, proceedings and progress reports <i>POB (58) 2nd 2 (p.1) notes the lack of success of the experiment of selling the special issue stamp for the Boy Scout Jubilee (first day covers) and agreement that the experiment should not be repeated.</i>	1958
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Nothing of relevance found relating to dummy Scout issue labels.



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POST 69/65	Post Office Board 1958: Index, board papers, proceedings and progress reports <i>Red bound volume containing an index to board papers, board papers POB (58) 1 - 68, agenda, copy minutes of Post Office Board meetings POB (58) 1st - 6th (6th February - 11th December) and progress reports presented to the board. Incomplete run.</i>	1958
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Nothing of relevance found relating to dummy Scout issue labels.

POST 122/918	First day cover service: World Scout Jubilee Jamboree, 1957 <i>No description.</i>	1957-1958
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<u>Order / Date</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Supplied to</u>	<u>Roll Cost</u>	<u>Order Value</u>
1. <i>Late 1956</i>	? rolls	PO Supplies Dept	? each	?

In preparation for a meeting that was due to be held between the Boy Scouts Association, the Mayflower Stamp Company and the Assistant Postmaster General on 24 October 1956, pre-meeting minutes between the first two organisations noted that there was a desirability for the stamps to be printed and issued in rolls. Also “to assist Vacuumatic Ltd in the design of a machine it will be requested that the Post Office either through themselves or their specialists should make available some dummy rolls of stamps of the precise size to be used for the stamps when printed.” This appears to be the first mention of the machines being suggested by non-Post Office people and that dummy rolls would be needed.

The Director General of the Post Office produced minutes of the above meeting stating: “**Dummy Rolls of Stamps for Experiment**.” Prima facie there should be no difficulty in supplying dummy rolls if the Vacuumatic machines can be designed in time and if it is agreed in principle that the Post Office should use these machines.”

On 20 December 1956, a file note from an unidentified postal official to S D Sargent recorded that: “...the firm are going ahead with the prototype machine; we are arranging for rolls of dummy stamps to be prepared so that the firm can have them for testing purposes.”

Production of the prototype machine was scheduled for 28 February, testing by manufacturer and Engineering Department was to be by 31 March, placing of orders by 15 April and delivery of machines by 15 May 1957. These dates incorporated a month’s contingency. On 1 May, the firm stated that the machine has been tested and is operating satisfactorily subject to “minor refinements”.

POST 122/8247	Postage stamps. Obliteration and sales to dealers etc.: World Scout Jubilee Jamboree. Special issue postage stamps and first day cover service. Suggestions from T J Roberts, Ludlow, Shropshire <i>File 26 of 28 files. Be aware that this is a massive box of information!</i>	1957
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Nothing of relevance found relating to dummy Scout issue labels.

Later Additional Stocks Ordered

Interestingly, and believed to be previously unreported in the philatelic literature, is the fact that the Post Office placed an order for the Scout-type dummy testing labels *after* the Sutton Coldfield event had finished for “further testing of experimental stamp affixing machines”. I had

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no previous knowledge of any later stamp affixing machine utilising commemorative sized stamps until the 1989 Sunday Times coil mentioned above.

The original Vacuumatic machine was not re-used, or so collectors are led to believe, but it is clear that some further refinements were made to the equipment after the Jamboree, as there had been identified a potential use for it in February 1958. Not only did this not come about, but the BPMA files fails to state what event might have resulted in the need to affix a single stamp to an envelope.

Collectors may care to check their double-sized labels for any differences that might indicate that they have both the Scout version and this subsequent printing, although no copies may have survived of course, especially with a mere 12 rolls printed.



POST 52/1271	Contracts-Harrison & Sons-Contract Number 81045 and Local Orders-Dummy Rolls for testing Stamp Selling Machines <i>A small correspondence file with details of tests. There is an index at the front to the 17 sections</i>	1936-1965
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<u>Order / Date</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Supplied to</u>	<u>Roll Cost</u>	<u>Order Value</u>
1. October 1957	12 rolls	PO Supplies Dept	9s 7d (48p) each	£5 15s 0d (£5.75)

An internal memorandum dated 31 October 1957 from a Mr Langfield to the Supplies Department stated: “Will you please arrange for the supply of 12 rolls , each comprising **1920** double-sized i.e. as for World Scout stamps adhesive test stamps (**not** the special larger rolls) to MBD/PMB as early as possible. The cost of manufacture should also be quoted. They are required in connexion with the further testing of experimental stamp affixing machines.” The order document for these dummy rolls stated that they should be “joined on the long edge, delivery lower end first. Similar in makeup to the Boy Scouts Jamboree rolls. To be printed with the design used on “Roll Test No. 1”.” These were supplied on 19 February 1958 “12 dummy rolls herewith. The cost was £5.15.0”.

Unfortunately, this file fails to mention the colour used to print the above labels. It can be assumed that they were grey-black, but might just conceivably have been red (but appears unlikely). The watermark type is also not recorded on the documentation, but as it is still within the time period that used the EIIR St Edward’s Crown watermarked paper it seems unlikely that the subsequent Multiple Crowns watermarked paper could have been utilised.



POST 122/918	First day cover service: World Scout Jubilee Jamboree, 1957 <i>No description.</i>	1957-1958
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In December 1957, E J Castellano of the Engineering Department approached Vacuumatic “...(a) to provide facilities to enable commitment in the immediate future to be undertaken on the lines of the Sutton Coldfield arrangements; (b) to provide means of feeding a single stamp re a possible requirement in 1958, and (c) the development of a prototype of a universal machine”. The universal machine was to have been capable of affixing three doubles-sized commemorative, or six single-sized definitives, or any combination at the rate of one envelope a second. The use of a new machine that could upgrade postal stationery at the time of a tariff change was considered desirable, as 11 million items required the addition of a postage stamp and this was time-consuming and expensive. However, due to the limited occasions when a tariff change occurred it was not felt justified to buy a machine.

In January 1958, a file note showed that consideration had been given to the setting up of a philatelic section within “PSD”, but that this had dwindled and the Post Office “...could not foresee any further first day cover schemes on the lines of the Boy Scouts Commemorative Issue being undertaken – at least not in the foreseeable future”.

Further work and expenditure on stamp affixing machines was not authorised and the project was closed. Nothing appears to be on record as to the fate of the two stamp affixing machines made by Vacuumatic.



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As predicted by the GPO, the 1957 Scout FDC exercise was not repeated in the same manner and several years elapsed before the Post Office officially serviced FDC's again. This was for the Shakespeare celebrations of 1964 and covers were manually prepared. These days, of course, FDC production is once more a fully automated process utilising machinery never even imagined back in the low-tech times of the 1950's.

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