

# Management of Stamp Artworks at Harrison

A 1991 lecture by Harrison archivist John Harley

Recorded and transcribed by Glenn H Morgan

*This transcript is the result of your author finding an old dictation machine tape in his loft that he had recorded (with permission) at the time and that was subsequently thought lost. The date of the lecture is accurate, as John discussed the British Dogs set of stamps that had come out earlier that week. It is interesting to see how things have changed in the past quarter of a century, not least of course the sad demise of this once-great printing company, which unknown to John was a mere six years away.*

Thank you very much for inviting me down to Swindon Philatelic Society tonight. I hope that what I talk about will give you a different approach to stamp collecting from that which you've heard before.

Not only am I the Archivist, but I am also responsible for all the overseas stamp production for Harrison over the past 35 years and every overseas stamp produced in this period has been through my hands. You may think, "Ah, this is going to have nothing to do with British stamps" and to a degree you are correct.

Most of you will think of Harrison as only dealing with British stamps, but the overseas side runs pretty much parallel to it and mirrors the requirements of the British Post Office. The only real difference is that most of the overseas post office personnel don't know what they are talking about; whereas most of the British Post Office staff does know their subject very well – with certain exceptions!

At this point, perhaps I could give a small history of the company. We go back quite a long way, in fact to the First Elizabethan reign when two Harrison brothers got together in 1562 and down the reigns we have continuously printed.

Around 250 years ago we find the company in Reading, and it is here that we really trace our routes back to. However, we then moved to London and, prior to the Crimean War, we were involved in printing work to do with firearms and the *London Gazette*. After the Crimean War, when we had been working for the War Ministry, it was not too long before we approached other Government offices and towards the end of the reign of Queen Victoria we started printing revenue stamps.

In the early 1910s, we were awarded the contract to print postage stamps for the British Post Office. These were the final stamps for the reign of King Edward VII, but by the time they were ready, His Majesty had died! By 1934, we had been awarded the regular contract to print all British postage stamps and we have been printing stamps by photogravure for Britain ever since that date. Of late, the odd issue has been produced by new entrants into the market, namely Questa, who usually get one issue per year. We produce all Christmas and all Royalty issues

As far as foreign stamps go, we started off with the Egyptian stamps back in 1922. We were already using photogravure for commercial printing and King Fuad I (Ahmed Fuad Pasha) gently pushed us into using this process for stamps. He was a

collector and had first seen photogravure stamps from Bavaria in about 1907 and it was his intervention that resulted in us still using this process today.

I will now talk about the actual process involved in getting the stamp design underway from the time the PMG, Director of Posts, or whoever decides that they want a new issue, through to hand-over to the production team. The printing aspect is a major subject on its own and I can assure you that it is not an easy job!

We start off with possibly some ideas on paper, or possibly some artwork, it varies. Does anyone here collect Botswana? Good. Do you recall that about four years ago they issued a set of definitive stamps with animals on? Well, it came over to England as twenty pieces of artwork all depicting the animals and twenty separate sets of captions, all in their native language of Tswana. It was easy to identify the lion and the rhinoceros, but when you come to all the antelopes and deer where the only differentiation might be the antlers, it became impossible. Fortunately my wife is a zoologist, so I was able to take the entire artwork and captions home and tie them up. Unfortunately, though, the captions were all laid down using Letraset and because Botswana is such a hot country, the individual letters had started to peel off! We reconstructed everything and to this day are not entirely sure if we got it right.

We have to work with all kinds of materials and, continuing with the animal theme, what the postal administration might think their animal looks like and what we think it looks like are often two totally different things. The Kenyans recently had a series of birds designed by a young girl. Fortunately, she had included the English name for the birds, but when it is in Swahili it is a little more tricky and the Natural History Museum will become involved to ensure accuracy of the issued stamp.

Papua New Guinea issued a set a few years back for their new constitution and they wanted to include their national flower. When asked what it looked like, they said that they would fly an actual flower across. Well, twenty years ago air transport was not as efficient as it has become today and a dead flower arrived. We have also had dead birds arrive for us to work with as well.

We are not always supplied with colour photographs to work with and so we will make up the colours ourselves, as with Togo who sent some photographs of traditional dancers and they quite liked the made-up end result that we had created. Similarly, Zambia issued a set of stamps for their University and one of the stamps depicted the Graduation Ceremony. The gowns worn by the students baffled us, as we did not know the colours worn and the Post Office never responded to our request for clarification, so we went ahead and printed them and no one has complained that they were almost certainly wrong.

The Olympic Games present their own problems. The African nations invariably only realise that they want an issue just before the Games start, which we generally cope with. However, we have to regularly use artistic licence because they would not accept artwork where a European is beating the African, so we have to slightly re-arrange the order of the race winners.

The football World Cup is always good for our business. Some countries even celebrate their elimination from the tournament, as they realise that they will never get

very far in the championships. You all support Swindon Town FC, I guess, and probably know your team colours. Think now about Libreville FC. What colours do they play in? The Post Office will say “our national colours”, but are the socks green or yellow? Who knows, so we make it up and every one is happy.

Some of the African countries are very slow to request their orders and we know of instances where Easter issues have appeared in June and Christmas sets in April, but they are more keen to get the stamps issued than to bother about when they appear. One Christmas order was placed on 24 December, when the Post Office in question suddenly realised that Christmas Day was tomorrow. They are generally getting better, though.

Delays can also come about due to the finances of the Post Office and last year's planned football set is already printed and will be sent on to Zaire when they can afford to pay for them!

A few years ago, Britain never changed the clocks during the winter months and you may wonder what this fact has to do with stamps. Well, the Post Office out in Bermuda wanted an issue for their constitution and one stamp was to depict the Parliament Building in Hamilton and Big Ben in London. The plan was that both clocks bore the equivalent time allowing for the difference in time zones. The stamps were printed with Big Ben being one hour out and so they were reprinted. The lengths that we can go to for accuracy are unbelievable.

Languages are a constant effort and ensuring accuracy is truly difficult. French and Spanish is OK, as most of us have a smattering of these European languages, but try discussing the appearance of Arabic text over the telephone. There is a squiggle here and a couple of dots there and so each individual letter has to be hand-drawn by Harrison artists. Not only does this language have several plurals to deal with, the postal officials do not always know the right way of expressing their own language and we often need to correct them. Arabic text goes from right to left, but their numbers go from left to right and someone has to know this, making it doubly difficult.

Religion is a regular problem. Bhutan issued a stamp via its American agent a while back that was beautifully produced and shipped out to Bhutan. They went mad when they found out that it depicted Buddha, as they would not allow defacement by a postmark. However, Thailand is fine with cancelling a stamp depicting Buddha, so you must know your territory.

In Zambia, they were having a visit by the Pope and five weeks before the visit they decided that they wanted to commemorate this. When asked what they wanted on the stamp they were unsure. So, Harrison suggested that the Pope appears together with a map of Zambia and suitable designs were produced. Towards the end of this process, I asked whether the Pope had to approve stamps bearing his likeness and the Post Office had no idea, so they went ahead with production and there was no come-back from the Vatican.

Royalty issues do need to have approval if stamps depict Her Majesty or the Royal Cipher and the Palace has rejected at least two overseas issues in recent years,

Bangladesh being one of them. She will also reject issues from the British Post Office if they do not meet with her total approval, as she did with a recent issue.

There is the story that for one foreign issue – not printed by Harrison – a proof was sent over and it included a colour swatch at the foot of the design. When it was returned, it was minus the green colour and after the stamp appeared Her Majesty produced from a drawer the piece of green paper that she had removed from the proof, claiming that the colour on the issued stamp was not as approved by her. So, we have to be very careful with such matters.

When artwork arrives from a territory, it is invariably wrong in some way - usually that the size is wrong for the finished stamp. This is an essential aspect if the design is to sit comfortably within the perforated area and resizing is not at all uncommon, mainly due to the fact that overseas administrations work in millimetres, whereas Harrison's work in inches.

Taking a British standard stamp size as an example, they measure 1.6 x 1.1735 inches (or 29.5 x 40.64mm) perforation edge to perforation edge. We then remove 0.118 inches (3mm) for the unprinted area between the design and perforations and multiply the whole by four ('four-up') . We work to this size because this is a relatively easy size for an artist to work to, can include lots of detail (but not too much!), try to improve parts that might be lost when reduced down. Ideally, the edge of edge side should be the same colour to help with registration, although this is not always possible, of course. The British Churchill issue of 1965 is an example of how this can be difficult when artwork is not produced in a way that will help the printer, as the white line between the two colours used rarely was in correct alignment on the finished stamp. The Union Flag gives similar problems.

Some artworks received are huge and require some considerable work to get them in a usable state. The current Irish definitives (buildings) were designed life-size, as were some British issues, and these can still give problems, despite being beautifully drawn.

An overlay is then added containing text, which can often be mis-spelt or the value needs changing and it is much easier to change the overlay than repaint an entire artwork. This problem was highlighted on a Jordanian issue where the King noticed that English text was incorrect, but not before proofing had been undertaken. Once the artwork has been approved it is time to move into the factory area.

Harrison are high-security printers who no longer do any commercial print and everything that is produced has an actual value, including eurobonds and banknotes. As a result, no member of the public is allowed into the premises for visits and I am afraid that includes philatelists! Thank you.