

PRESTIGE STAMP BOOKS

Manufacturing Process and Check List

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1969 saw the introduction of a new kind of stamp product known as Prestige Stamp Book(let)s, internally abbreviated by Royal Mail to PSBs. The recent availability of an album to hold these books (available now from Tallents House at £15.50 [order code PA707], with extra continuation leaves at £4.50 [order code PA708], plus handling charge), seems an appropriate time to focus on this fascinating range of collectables.

These were first introduced by the British Post Office and the idea has subsequently spread around the world with many countries now producing a similar product as part of its philatelic stamp programme, with issues appearing either frequently or occasionally.

A novel and currently unique twist to this type of book came from Australia last year when it produced the first PSBs personalised with your photograph on-site at the *Pacific Explorer* world stamp exhibition in Sydney under the product name "Snapshot!". This was repeated when Melbourne played host to the Commonwealth Games this year and, as with the first issue, was also available in a generic version for sale during and after the event.

Prestige stamp books normally comprise four or five unique panes of stamps in combinations or by printing processes often not encountered elsewhere. The earlier books contained definitive stamps only, but since 1990 commemorative stamps have also invariably appeared within. The books, which also have several pages of text and illustrations, can relate to virtually any legitimate subject, company or event that the post office or sponsor requires.

With effect from the third book in the series, they have all been produced to an enlarged standard page size that allows for all 'outside edge' stamps to have an unprinted selvedge. This change eliminated the blunt perforations that so spoilt the initial two books, caused so many headaches for stamp dealers and resulted in overly-high spoilage rates for the stamp printer.

The first book was sold for £1 and new issues are now approaching £8 each. All have been sold at the face value of the stamps contained within, although Royal Mail did flirt with the idea of charging more than face for the *Beatrix Potter* issue, going to the extent of printing an inflated price on the front cover, but it relented before the issue date following collector and dealer objections, as I understand it.

There has been almost 40 Prestige stamp books issued in Britain since the first *Stamps for Cooks* book and they show no sign of losing their

popularity with collectors, and generally two, or sometimes three, new versions continue to be issued annually.

I acquired an uncut pair of the second *Story of Wedgwood* publicity edition book recently and it set me thinking about how they were produced. Following extensive enquiries, the remainder of this article is the outcome of those researches, followed by a listing of all PSBs to date.

It is feasible that some tasks are undertaken 'in tandem', or in a different order depending on the printer (seven companies have been used down the years), but this is the general production process applied to each new Prestige stamp book that appears.

PRE-PRODUCTION

Design The first stages after deciding on a theme is to commission a designer or creative agency, get a writer for the text pages, select the stamp designs to be used (often these have already been issued previously in a different format), design any labels to be included (frequently used at the centre of the definitive page), choose supporting imagery and select the binding tape colour. Once this has been done, it is time for the designer to produce the initial page layouts for the book.

Approvals Mock-ups will then be circulated for initial comments, followed by revisions and final approvals, and then the printers' artwork can be created to very exacting standards. Clearances will be obtained for any copyrighted images and texts used within and appropriate fees paid.

Contracts Following a competitive tender process, the printer(s) will be decided upon by Royal Mail's Purchasing Department in consultation with the Philatelic area and production contracts are then placed.

Finally, with everything approved both internally and with the book sponsor, if appropriate, Royal Mail is ready to have the artwork transmitted to the printer and the production stage can be started.

PRODUCTION AND FINISHING

Pre-Press The printer will check-over the artwork upon receipt, ensuring that such things as the images are 'right way round' viewing, that there are no spelling mistakes, that images designed to 'bleed' off the edge of the page have enough overlap for this to happen and that everything is to the correct size and expected pagination.

Once these and other checks are confirmed as being correct, the artwork will be prepared by the 'repro' section for proofing. These proofs will be circulated to Royal Mail and possibly after a couple of sets of

amendments, final approval to go to print will be given. Any changes from this point onwards are expensive, as ink is about to be put on paper.

Printing There is nothing particularly unusual or special about the printing of the stamp panes or the text and cover pages. Lithography is generally, but not exclusively, used, as the relatively low print volumes do not always warrant gravure. Stamp and text panes tend to be printed in large primary sheets, individual pages of which are spaced very accurately - essential for the next stage of the production process.

Guillotining The mass (or stack) of collated primary sheets, which comprises one of each page required for the final book – covers, text and stamp panes – is then cut down into vertical gangs (or columns) of usually four books.

Trimming The module then cuts each book into singles and is designed to remove a thin gutter between each vertical book of 5mm.

Stapling *[This term is not generally used in the print industry, which refers instead to 'stitching', although to a collector this term tends to mean 'thread sewing'. As this is a collector publication, the term 'stapling' has been used here.]*

The production of the *Stamps for Cooks* book presented Harrison's with difficulties from the outset and so with delivery dates looming and to speed things up, around 11,000 copies were produced by stapling the masses together. These have become desirable items with dealers' buying prices currently set at £135 and with a retail price of around £185.

This method of production has not been used since, which is surprising as the thread sewing of books was discontinued in 1976 for other British book types following the introduction of folded machine and counter versions. Slowness of production and high manufacturing costs had been cited at the time as two of the main reasons for this change of production method away from thread sewing.

Thread Sewing A special heavy-duty 'sewing machine' module stitches each of the component sheets of the Prestige stamp book together.

Binding Tape To hide the unattractive stitching, or stapling if this was used, and to give a more finished look, a coloured binding tape is applied to the spine of each book. This has been used in a variety of colours down the years and is chosen to help complement the cover artwork design.

The self-adhesive tape is supplied in large rolls the width of which is that of the height of each finished book. The book is held in a track that stops in front of the module and the tape is automatically cut, wrapped around the spine and then advances along a conveyor belt, where batches

are collected by a machine minder. Any that is missed by the operator for whatever reason drop into a large hopper where they are recovered later.

Rouletting Nowadays, a vertical line of rouletting is applied close to the spine edge and alongside the stamps in each pane to enable them to be removed more easily by collectors and small dealers wanting to service First Day Covers.

Major stamp dealers with Royal Mail 'key' accounts can obtain pre-issue packs of panes that have never been made-up into books and these are clearly identifiable by the lack of rouletting and stitching holes in the margin. 'Overs' not used on covers are occasionally offered for sale in unmounted mint condition in dealers' stocks, although Royal Mail stipulate that they should only be used on covers, so uncancelled panes should not even exist. Prior to availability of loose panes, it was necessary to unstitch each book, resulting in unsightly stitch holes being visible on the FDCs.

Packing Once the books have been bound, they are counted into the required number. Early on these were held within paper wrapper bands, just like their smaller format cousins, and several were then wrapped in brown paper packs with a contents label affixed. Nowadays shrink-wrapping has superseded this method.

ANCILLARY WORK

Every new Prestige stamp book also requires the design and production of a first day of issue envelope and special postmarks, publicity posters for each Post OfficeTM branch, press releases have to be written, imagery for the media has to be scanned and emailed to them and sometimes advertisements for the philatelic and national press prepared.

The list of things to do before issue continues with agreeing label wording for the bulk packs of books with the printer and assigning a barcode and product stock number. Distribution of stocks to each major Post OfficeTM is arranged and smaller offices need to be invited to procure stocks. The overseas agents for Royal Mail must be made aware of the issue in order to obtain appropriate stocks for their philatelic wholesalers in advance of issue date.

Private producers of FDCs require panes of stamps to affix to their covers and unstitched versions are specially guillotined and packed for them by the printer as a separate Royal Mail requisition.

There are probably other functions that go on that I have not come across in my researches, but this hopefully gives an extensive, if not exhaustive, idea of the work involved in issuing a Prestige stamp book.

The House of Questa equipment once used for Prestige stamp book production at Camberwell was transferred to De La Rue at High Wycombe when they acquired the company. This kit was moved once

again to Byfleet when the Wycombe plant was closed and all except the thread-sewing module (which has gone with DLR to Dunstable) was sold back to the manufacturer of the equipment when Byfleet also closed.

The equipment was refurbished and subsequently sold to an Essex-based mailing-house company who currently use it to assemble personalised holiday travel booklets for customers of a leading British travel company. This is the largest application of its type in the world and it is interesting to see how similar to Prestige stamp books in concept the holiday product is – right down to the binding tape. It is good to see that this custom-made paper handling equipment is set to continue doing yeoman service for many years to come.

Readers will be aware that Royal Mail sells Prestige stamp books directly to its customer base and available items are recorded on its stock lists (shown with TH against price in the listing below, indicating current availability from Tallents House at face value). Maybe once you have bought some you will look at this product in a new light now that you know just how much work goes into their production.

To collect the whole series (without the items in the supplementary listing below) is still achievable for under £300 if you shop around carefully. This will result in you owning a fascinating complete run of these stamp books, and the couple of new additions every year will help maintain your interest, while not costing you a fortune. Why not place a standing order with Tallents House to ensure that you do not miss any?

PRESTIGE STAMP BOOKS LISTING

	Issued	Face Value ¹ and Book Description [printer names ²]	Price
1	01 Dec 1969	£1 Stamps for Cooks Recipes – stitched panes [H]	£7
2	24 May 1972	£1 The Story of Wedgwood ³ [H + JC ⁴]	£15
3	16 Apr 1980	£3 The Story of Wedgwood [H]	£4
4	19 May 1982	£4 The Story of Stanley Gibbons, stamp dealers [H]	£5
5	14 Sep 1983	£4 The Story of the Royal Mint [H]	£5
6	04 Sep 1984	£4 The Story of our Christian Heritage [H]	£15
7	08 Jan 1985	£5 The Story of The Times [H]	£9
8	18 Mar 1986	£5 The Steel Wheel on the Steel Rail: The Story of British Rail [H]	£11
9	03 Mar 1987	£5 The Story of P&O 1837-1987 [H]	£10
10	09 Feb 1988	£5 FT100: The Story of the Financial Times 1888-1988 [Q]	£15
11	21 Mar 1989	£5 The Scots Connection [Q]	£10
12	20 Mar 1990	£5 London Life [H]	£12
13	19 Mar 1991	£6 Alias Agatha Christie: A Detective Story [Q]	£9
14	25 Feb 1992	£6 Cymru - Wales [Q + H ⁵]	£9
15	27 Oct 1992	£6 Tolkien: The Centenary 1892-1992 [Q]	£9
16	10 Aug 1993	£5.64 The Story of Beatrix Potter [Q + H ⁵] (cover states £6 price in error)	£9
17	26 Jul 1994	£6.04 Northern Ireland [Q + H ⁵]	£10
18	25 Apr 1995	£6 The National Trust: One Hundred Years of Conservation [Q + H ⁵]	£10
19	14 May 1996	£6.48 European Football Championships [Q]	£9
20	23 Sep 1997	£6.15 BBC75: Celebrating 75 Years of the BBC [H]	£9
21	10 Mar 1998	£7.49 The Definitive Portrait: Her Majesty's Stamps Celebrated by Royal Mail Volume I [W]	£10
22	13 Oct 1998	£6.16 Breaking Barriers: A Century of British Speed Records [W]	£12
23	16 Feb 1999	£7.54 Profile on Print: Her Majesty's Stamps Celebrated by Royal Mail Volume II [D + E + H + Q + W ⁶]	£14
24	21 Sep 1999	£6.99 World Changers: A Tale of British Scientific Genius [Q]	£15
25	15 Feb 2000	£7.50 Special By Design: Her Majesty's Stamps Celebrated by Royal Mail Volume III [W]	£15
26	04 Aug 2000	£7.03 The Life of the Century: A Poem for HM Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother [Q]	£12
27	18 Sep 2000	£7 A Treasury of Trees [W]	£11
28	22 Oct 2001	£6.76 Unseen and Unheard: Centenary of the Royal Navy Submarine Service [Q]	£15
29	06 Feb 2002	£7.29 A Gracious Accession: The Golden Jubilee Volume I [E]	£12
30	24 Sep 2002	£6.83 Across the Universe: A Guide to Outer Space [Q]	£10
31	25 Feb 2003	£6.99 Microcosmos: A Guide to Inner Space [E]	£10
32	02 Jun 2003	£7.46 A Perfect Coronation: The Golden Jubilee Volume II [W]	£30
33	16 Mar 2004	£7.44 Letters By Night: A Tribute to the Travelling Post Office [D] (Order code YB023)	TH
34	25 May 2004	£7.23 The Glory of the Garden: A Celebration of the RHS [E]	£10
35	24 Feb 2005	£7.43 The Brontë Sisters: Jane Eyre [W] (Order code YB025)	TH
36	18 Oct 2005	£7.26 The Battle of Trafalgar: Death of Nelson [W + C ⁵] (Order code YB026)	TH
37	23 Feb 2006	£7.40 Isambard Kingdom Brunel 1806-2006 [E] (Order code YB027)	TH
38	21 Sep 2006	£0.00 The Victoria Cross Medal [printer?] (Order code YB028)	-

NOTES:

- ¹ Face values quoted are the initial selling prices. Following the introduction of NV1 stamps, the cost of books still on sale by Royal Mail rose whenever there was a postal rate increase. This was also the reason for no longer printing the book price on the front or back covers.
- ² [C] Cartor, [D] De La Rue, [E] Enschedé, [H] Harrison, [JC] Joseph Causton, [Q] Questa, [W] Walsall.
- ³ Expect to pay £35 for excellent perforations on the ½p sideband stamp.
- ⁴ Harrison's printed the stamp panes and assembled the books, while Joseph Causton & Sons Ltd (the only non-stamp printer used) produced the covers and interleaves.
- ⁵ The first named company was responsible for book assembly, cover and interleaf printing, plus the definitive stamp pane(s). The second named printer produced the special stamp pane(s).
- ⁶ This is a complicated issue, as five stamp printers were involved. All stamps within were 1st class definitives printed by different processes. Questa was responsible for book assembly, cover and interleaf printing, plus the lithographic stamp pane. De La Rue produced the gravure pane, Walsall manufactured the embossed and lithographic self-adhesive stamp pane, Enschedé printed the recess pane, while Harrison produced the typographic pane of stamps.

The following books are additional to the main issued items listed above and would generally only be purchased by specialist collectors due to either having privately applied overprints to the cover, rarity value and/or probable exclusion from most listings in worldwide stamp catalogues.

	Year	Face Value and Book Description	Price
A	1969	£1 Stamps for Cooks – stapled panes (circa 11,000 issued). Some copies of this book had each stamp hand-cancelled SPECIMEN and fewer than ten copies are believed to exist, so it is extremely rare.	£185
B	1972	£1 Wedgwood – publicity version without stamps and different cover (circa 25,000 issued)	£75
C	1980	£3 Wedgwood – publicity version without stamps and different cover (a “quantity” were issued)	£15
D	1983	£4 Royal Mint – cover overprinted AUSIPEX 84, Australia	£15
E	1984	£4 Christian Heritage – cover overprinted AUSIPEX 84, Australia	£20
F	1986	£5 British Rail – cover overprinted STAMPEX 86, Australia	£20
G	1987	£5 P&O – cover overprinted CAPEX, Canada	£20
H	1987	£5 P&O – cover overprinted HAFNIA, Denmark	£20
I	1988	£5 Financial Times – cover overprinted FINLANDIA 88, Finland	£20
J	1990	£5 London Life – cover handstamped STAMP WORLD, England	£25
K	1993	£5.64 Beatrix Potter – cover overprinted HONG KONG 94, Hong Kong	£20
L	2000	Presentation book with black card covers printed in gold and with gold thread fixing method containing the three volumes celebrating Her Majesty's Stamps (books 21 , 23 and 25 above) within clear plastic pockets. The book also contains the £1 Coronation MS hand cancelled on a commemorative card. This item was primarily presented to VIPs and volunteer helpers at The Stamp Show 2000 as a 'thank you' gift from exhibition organisers Royal Mail, but was also sold at the show on the Royal Mail stand and from at least one sub-Post Office (Harpenden).	£85

NOTE: All prices shown are averages and are based on items sold by stamp dealers and on auction websites. Higher and lower prices are to be expected.

Recently, a number of the issued book designs have appeared on the philatelic market each printed totally in black and white, stapled and containing Norwegian text within. The stamps are also printed in monochrome, are imperforate and are, of course, not valid for postage. It is understood that these were produced by Royal Mail's philatelic agent in Norway (Nordfrim) for sales publicity purposes. They command either a couple of pounds each, or as much as £30 on web auction sites. They are an interesting addition to a specialised collection if obtained at the lower-end of the price structure and a couple of examples make for an attractive album page.

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