

A Royal Celebration

Glenn H. Morgan

It was a glorious Summer evening on 9 July 1997, when the Crown Agents Stamp Bureau and the British Library Philatelic Collections held a joint reception in the King's Library Gallery, part of the British Museum complex in London.

The evening celebrated two events, namely the forthcoming move of the Library to new premises, and the issuance of a commemorative 'omnibus' edition of stamps and souvenir sheets from 17 countries. The series was produced to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Wedding of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh.

A set of speeches started with John Ashford, Chairman of the Board of the British Library, who discussed the move of premises and thanked the Crown Agents for sponsoring the evening, describing them as "long and loyal supporters". David Beech, Head of the Philatelic Collections, then gave details about some of the thirty-six main collections acquired since 1891, including the Crown Agents Philatelic and Security Print Archive. David explained an interesting family connection between the Crown Agents and the British Library in the shape of Peter Berry, a member of the Tapling family and current Managing Director of the Crown Agents. Many readers will be aware that Tapling was responsible for establishing the Philatelic Collections when he donated his stamps to the Library. They have been on daily display since 1903 in the gallery where the reception was held.

The changing role of the Crown Agents was then explained by Keith White, Secretary to the recently established Crown Agents Foundation. The final speaker was Nigel Fordham, Head of the Crown Agents Stamp Bureau. Nigel talked about how the Crown Agents was founded in 1833 and how they are responsible for providing a whole range of services, including provision of drivers and vehicles for the United Nations peace keeping forces in Bosnia.

It was 1847 when the first indent was received by the Crown Agents to produce stamps. Exactly one hundred and fifty years later they are marking continuous service to the postal community, including production, marketing, sales and exhibition services to over sixty countries, as well as provision of training for postal officers. A charity cheque was then presented to the British Legion by Nigel followed by a loyal toast to The Queen, concluding the formal part of the evening. Guests were now able to return to the excellent food, drink and conversation.

It was good to be able to mingle with so many guests, including those from the Crown Agents, Royal Household and British Library, together with prominent philatelists, journalists, designers and printers. It was a particular pleasure for me to finally meet Jennifer Toombs, a stamp designer whose work I have long admired. I was also able to renew my friendship with Tony Theobald, another Crown Agents' designer with many fine works, especially in the field of aviation, behind him.

The stamps were designed by Derek Miller, who has been responsible for previous royal omnibus issues. They depict photographic montages of Royal family members, carriages and horses in se-tenant pairs, generally three pairs per country. Exceptions were St Helena, who elected to depict views taken at the time of Royal Visits to the island; whilst Norfolk Island and the Solomon Islands each decided to issue two pairs only. Each stamp has a blue band at the top inscribed 'Golden Wedding' and at the bottom the name of the country appears.

The miniature sheets were the work of Nick Shewring. The sheet margins share a common design, resembling wallpaper and are 'topped and tailed' by a blue band with gold edging to unite the miniature sheets and panes of stamps. A simple, yet stylish, means of bringing two different designers' work together. To the left of the single, centrally placed, rectangular stamp is an oval wedding day portrait of Her Majesty The Queen and to the right a similarly shaped portrait of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh. The designs for these stamps depict The Queen with The Duke in various open-top horse-drawn coaches across 16 sheets, Pitcairn deciding that a miniature sheet could not be justified.

Unfortunately, I never got to meet the two designers of this new omnibus issue, for the evening went by all too quickly. I regret being unable to compliment them on the skill of their designs and the fresh

approach that they were able to inject into this series. It must be difficult to produce something different when there have been so many issues of a royal nature over the past few years, although in fairness the designs and themes adopted by the Crown Agents have always been interesting and relatively conservative in number. It has tended to be other philatelic agencies that have brought the whole idea of the omnibus into disrepute. They have produced hundreds of basic stamps, miniature sheets, sheetlets and overprints for so many territories that I, for one, had become somewhat fed-up with the whole concept. This series has generated within me a renewed interest in such issues.

Most of the Golden Wedding stamps and sheets were issued the day after the reception, fifty years to the day that the wedding was announced to the world by Buckingham Palace. Some countries waited until later in the year before issuing their stamps for logistical reasons - Pitcairn and Tristan still being remote locations. These two sets appear on the date of the anniversary, i.e. 20 November. The Norfolk Island issue appeared on 12 August, Papua New Guinea's set came out on 25 June and that for the Bahamas was issued on the day before.

As each guest left the reception they were presented with a commemorative folder bearing the Crown Agents logo on the front. Inside was an example of the Golden Wedding miniature sheet with a suitably inscribed perforated label. These sheets were reserved exclusively for guests, so I am afraid that Bulletin readers will not be able to acquire copies. The gift was an unexpected bonus to what had been a most enjoyable evening.

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