
The Second Elizabethan Age



The death of a reigning monarch marks not just the end of an existing era, but the start of a new one. So it was in 1952 with the death of His Majesty, King George the Sixth and the beginning of 'the second Elizabethan age'. We are rarely prepared for death in our personal lives and it appears to be no different in public life. As a result, there was no sudden overnight change in postal arrangements, even within the Royal Household or the General Post Office (GPO), as it was then called.

The Royal Family went into immediate mourning and tradition dictated that this would be for a period of six months. From a collecting viewpoint, this manifested itself in the form of mourning stationery. Envelopes and letterheads were all framed with a black border as a mark of respect to the deceased King. Incidentally, the width of the border is always greater for a Monarch than for other members of the Royal Family.

Some government departments also used mourning stationery, both here and in overseas outposts of the Empire. Another obvious impact related to The King's Flight, which was, not surprisingly, renamed The Queen's Flight and the stationery required updating to reflect this.

The Royal Household must have been a hive of activity at this time. There was a funeral to prepare for, a new Monarch was on the throne and there was an eventual Coronation ceremony to enact. Like a well-oiled machine, they rose to the occasion by dusting down the 'How to...' manuals last used back in 1936 and set to it.

I will not dwell too much on the funeral aspects, as this is a Coronation anniversary issue of the Bulletin, suffice to say that there would have been invitations to send out, acceptances to process and letters of thanks in respect of the condolences expressed to despatch. These will all have created collectable items of postal history.

The Coronation gave Britain, indeed much of the world, something happy to celebrate following too many years of conflict and subsequent rebuilding. It was seen by many as an occasion that would wipe the slate clean and offer a new start to life.

Preparations for the Coronation will again have created many opportunities for

collectors to add to their albums. It must be remembered, though, that the interest in postal history collecting at that time was nowhere near as popular as it is today. That does not mean that there is not a lot of collectable material available, for then, as now, an item of mail from the Royal Household would very often have been saved and handed down through the generations, eventually reaching the philatelic market.

In 1954, the printing industry's Penrose Annual was published. This was produced to showcase portfolios of the best of print from the previous year. Not only was this volume the source of the black, perforated Coronation stamps from Harrison and Sons, it also contained a large selection of Coronation official stationery and ephemera. Much of this material will not have a direct philatelic link, but should be of interest to readers at this time, fifty years on from the event. It will be especially useful to collectors who have an interest in the recently formed philatelic discipline of social philately. This branch of the hobby positively encourages the incorporation of ephemeral items alongside traditional covers and stamps and is gaining in popularity every year.

The special markings used at the Royal residences were some time in gestation. I presume that it is simply not correct protocol to start preparations for the new Monarch until the previous one has died, even in cases when imminent death is expected. Indeed, the use of the certifying stamps of King George the Sixth continued from early February through to about the end of June, a period of almost five months.

The first postage stamps bearing Elizabeth's effigy took many months after Accession to appear, with the full set not being available until 195(4?).

The GPO also had many operational items to change beyond basic sheet printed stamps, such as forms and postal orders, coils and stamp booklets. There was also the range of pre-stamped stationery, including envelopes, letter-cards, wrappers, postcards and aerogrammes (including a Coronation souvenir edition) to print. These were all introduced over a considerable period of time, with existing King George the Sixth stocks being used up first. This was as much about being able to produce newly designed stocks quickly as it was about being economical. Indeed, it was not until March 1954 that the mixed reigns stamp booklet panes finally ceased production.

It is interesting at this point to consider how stamp-printing techniques have advanced in the past fifty years as work on the new definitives and Coronation issue took over a year. Compare this to the speed with which the issue mourning the tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales, was completed. The stamps were on press before her funeral had even taken place. (Readers will recall that the issuing of the stamps was subsequently delayed due to Spencer family concerns.) Royal Mail's 'fast-track' printing process is even quicker a mere five years on, such is the pace in printing technology.

Talking of printers, Harrison and Sons held the Royal Warrant for stamp printing and the new Queen paid them a visit to see Her forthcoming Coronation stamps on press. A commemorative presentation card was subsequently produced for publicity purposes. A wrap-round folder depicting photographs from the Royal visit accompanied it. Harrison's had previously produced a similar card with the 1 1/2d and 2 1/2d Wilding portrait definitives – the first of the new reign. Both items are available from auctioneers and dealers occasionally and make an interesting addition to a Royal or British collection.

This short survey of postal arrangements in the first few months after Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second, came to the throne reveals how long it took to effect change. Let us hope that it is many years hence before we learn how quickly the process could be acted on nowadays.

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