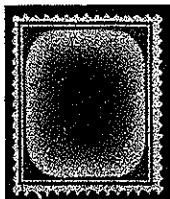


Is it a stamp? Then why will it not pre-pay postage?
Glenn Morgan describes an item which caused
a sensation when it first appeared.

Stamp Sensation

'Great Britain Stamp Sensation' ran the heading of an article in *Stamp Collecting* of March 6, 1937, about the so-called 'Poached Egg' labels used by the British Post Office to test vending machines.



The 'Poached Egg' label that caused all the excitement.

Few philatelic items have aroused so much interest and correspondence in the stamp and

lay press as these humble little labels. The law of supply and demand saw prices soar to very high levels and drop right back again as the market became flooded with them, both on and off cover. This article aims to tell the story of the original labels and the writer will leave the tale of the subsequent issues to another article. Incidentally, similar material is in use to this day.

Background

Post Office vending machine services gradually became more widespread by the 1930s as the consumer expected round-the-clock facilities for the purchasing of postage stamps. Technology was the answer and the Post Office

was at the forefront then, as now, in meeting the needs of its customers.

Machinery, however good, requires a certain amount of attention and testing to ensure its smooth running and these labels were designed to enable Post Office engineers to simulate a live environment. There was never any intention that they should become collectors' items.

'Poached Eggs' is the name that has stuck when describing these labels due to their design but at the time of the issue they were also referred to as 'shadow stamps', 'green blobs', 'target stamps', 'mystery stamps', 'eclipse stamps' and 'dummy stamps'.

A great deal of excitement was generated at the time of their 'discovery' and rumours abounded about the way they had been sold from stamp vending machines in exchange for a halfpenny coin. Nobody, however, was able to prove conclusively that they had been sold and any examples on cover came from supplies obtained by collectors and dealers either illicitly (ie, via the Post Office 'back door') or from the newly fitted-out Mobile Travelling Post Office designed to serve at agricultural shows and the like. During 1936 this vehicle was being taken on demonstration tours and the labels were freely available to members of the public and press at each of the stops made, but never were they provided in exchange for money.

The fact that supplies were subsequently affixed in all imaginable combinations to envelopes and postcards and then dropped in letter boxes or, if registered, handed over a counter where they received a cancellation is not proof of their validity. It merely proves that the Post Office employees demonstrated a lack of care when exercising their duties.

Technical details

The labels were printed by photogravure in green ink in the same colour as the then current halfpenny definitive stamp and the amount of ink is believed to be exactly the same as on the definitive. They were printed on normal stock paper during 1936 on GVR

watermarked paper utilising triple row comb perforation. Delivery was by vertical coils, ie each label was joined to the next at the top and bottom rather than by both sides (horizontal delivery).

Their designer is not recorded but a subsequent grey-black issue, the design of which was largely based on that of the first issue, was by a Mr Dell so it is reasonable to assume that he might have been responsible for the issue in question. Printing was by Harrison and Sons Limited.

What the press said

Much philatelic reporting followed the issue of the labels and the benefit of hindsight makes some of the comments laughable today.

March 1937: '... as to the value, we can only draw comparison with the "Prussian blue" (Silver Jubilee) variety which is listed at, say, £30 mint, £40 used. The shadow stamp would seem to be much scarcer...'

'Secure specimens before prices eclipse even a Post Office Mauritius or Bermuda "Postmaster"'

April 1937: 'The greatest rarity known to philately of recent times.'

'Will demand a really high price in the future.'

'Don't expect them to be a gilt-edged investment.'

Yours — at a price

Investors who bought-up stocks in the early days had their fingers burnt and the final quotation in 'What the press said' above was the best advice, as it turned out, for the current prices of the 'Prussian Blue', Post Office Mauritius and Bermuda Postmaster stamps run into the thousands of pounds whereas the poached egg is still available at 20p unused!

By March 1937 the philatelic trade had started to latch on to the demand for the labels and mint copies were being sold 'at the best offer received'. By the following month supplies had improved and ten shillings (50p) seemed to be the going rate. During May prices were varying between 2s 3d and 7s 6d (11p to 37.5p) but by September they were on offer at a mere 6d (2.5p) each on a 'positively last

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