

Scottish Experimental Cartons

Glenn H. Morgan examines the experimental stamp and lettercard cartons that were produced in 1977-78.

Packs, books, sachets, boxes or cartons – call them what you will, no-one who was collecting at the time can deny the excitement that the experimental series produced in 1977-78 generated among informed philatelists, for they were quite different to anything that had gone before in Britain and remain unique to Scotland. Despite this, many collectors are still unaware of their existence because the idea never really caught on.

The background to the introduction of these cartons is an interesting one, as revealed within the single file [reference POST 52/1047] that had been transferred to BPMA by the Hemel Hempstead Stamp Depot back in June 1995. This file passed its 30-year ‘closed’ period in 2006 and has now been examined to reveal the development behind this trial.

Background

Until this trial, stamps had been sold via the Post Office network from counter sheets, stitched or folded booklets, or in coils. These were all sold either by a postal clerk or via a stamp vending machine, for sales from non-Post Office branches had yet to be introduced.

These cartons were a departure from the norm because they dispensed loose stamps taken from counter sheets in cardboard cartons measuring approximately 2½ins by 3ins by ¼in that were sealed with a white self-adhesive label printed in a single colour with details of contents.

Someone in the Scottish Postal Board (SPB) conceived the initial idea of the cartons and put together a paper on the suggestion that was considered by interested parties and eventually adopted (it took around nine months to implement). The idea was discontinued within the year.

Initial proposal

On June 2, 1976, Mr Coleman, a Marketing Manager at the Scottish Postal Board, wrote to K. T. Fisher, Franking Machine and Stamp Vending Group, about his Board’s idea. It appears that Mr Fisher had previously agreed that it would be feasible for trials to be undertaken in Scotland with two machines which ‘seem to offer improved facilities for our customers’, according to Mr Coleman.

The first proposal was to sell so-called ‘pre-packs’ of stamped stationery and postage stamps in values from 10p to £1.90. A machine had already ‘been inspected by our Regional Engineer and his technical staff who agree that a trial of the unmodified machine would be well worthwhile’.

The second plan related to a postcard vending machine, of which more later.

The consideration

London did not appear to be impressed by those pesky



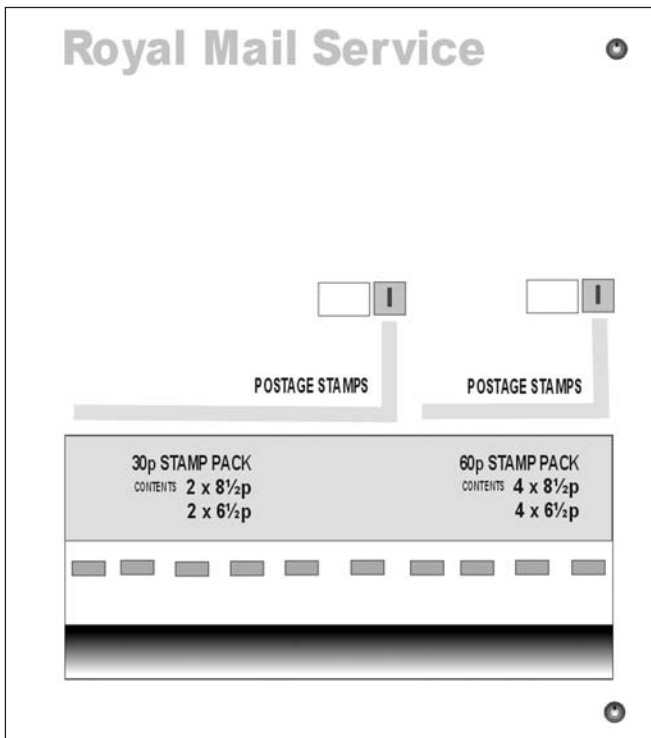
One of the two Libra book-making machines, as located at Harrison & Sons, High Wycombe.

Scots at SPB going it alone without involving Postal Headquarters (PHQ) from the outset. Mr Burn of the Counter and Stamp Marketing Division at PHQ, commenting that: ‘...we should not move away from books ... it seems sensible to have one production system for what is after all the most expensive way of selling stamps’.

Perhaps more scathingly Mr Burn noted in his letter to Mr Hutton, the Manager of the Supplies Depot at Hemel Hempstead: ‘I am concerned (as I know that you are) that we did not know that this work [making-up the cartons] was being undertaken by your depot in Edinburgh. I would be grateful if you could make it clear to the officer in charge that P&SD should deal with postal regions through PHQ on all matters of policy and not take instructions directly.’

Having got that off his chest, Mr Burn sought to study ‘the implications of such a system being adopted on the way we do things now, particularly the effect on the usage of the two Libra book-making machines’. This was potentially a serious matter, for Harrison had two machines in operation that could, using a double-day shift, produce around 70 million stamp booklets per annum. Usage of booklets at the time was around 46 million, so there was already a great over-capacity and to introduce yet another way of selling stamps would be difficult to justify.

The cost of cartons versus the cost of stamp booklets was revealed in a letter from Mr Hutton to Mr Burn. Counter books of ten stamps apparently cost around £7.93 per thousand booklets, while the smaller SVM booklets of six stamps came in at around £8.67 per thousand. The proposed Scottish cartons would be £140 per thousand due to the making-up by hand and, although this would reduce if packed by machine, the capital costs of the new



The Autonomis 'Vendador' machine. Styling variations exist, depending on where located.

equipment to undertake this task would be considerable. Mr Hutton further wrote: 'It seems crystal clear, therefore, that, having already acquired the Libra machines, there is no case financially for the introduction of the proposed vending machines on a large scale.'

Possibly not wishing to come across as totally negative in his letter, Mr Hutton concluded: 'I can see, however, that the small scale use at exhibitions, conference, etc might be justified on the grounds of customer convenience if a range of items is offered for sale.'

Machines and locations

As is often the case with philately, there is much misinformation out there. On several occasions I have read that the machines used were converted from contraceptive vending machines. The BPMA file reveals the truth and the Post Office purchased machines that were originally designed to sell cigarettes, thus requiring minimal adapting.

The machines were supplied by Autonomis Ltd and this company is still manufacturing equipment from its base in Tetbury, Gloucestershire (see www.autonomis.co.uk). Established in 1965, it is a privately owned light engineering company supplying dispensing and vending equipment to major brand owners and employing around 200 people.

A primitive photocopy of the sales leaflet included within the BPMA file, together with a couple of poor black and white images seen of the SVMs in-situ, has enabled Graham Eyre to produce the line drawing of the face of the machine shown here.

The basic Vendador cigarette machines were able to accept 50p and 10p coins offering a maximum vend of £1.90, or 10p and 5p with a maximum vend of 55p. It is apparent that the former coin acceptance mechanism was utilised in

the SVMs, as cartons cost either 30p or 60p.

It was initially intended that five locations would be chosen from a potential 15 sites, four offering 24-hour access, two internally located and the rest unspecified. In the end, the first machine was installed on March 7, 1977 in the Head Post Office at Dundee. Subsequently Aberdeen and Paisley (March 9), Kilmarnock (March 10) and Edinburgh (April 15) joined in with the experiment.

Glasgow Airport appears not to have gone live, despite earlier intentions to additionally dispense packs of lettercards as part of this trial from the airport site. Rebuilding of the Post Office at the time may have contributed to the abandonment of the idea.

Only Aberdeen was not on the original list of suggested sites, while the proposal that exhibitions and displays could have facilities to sell the cartons appears not to have been acted on.

An end to the trial

Within a year of implementing the trial the experiment was ended. There is no record on file that indicates officially why the idea failed, although the early fears about the under-utilisation of the Libra book-making equipment and possibly a lack of use by the public potentially both played a part, as must the high cost of producing the cartons when compared with stamp booklets.

Mr Burn wrote in June 1976, while considering the efficacy of the trial: 'A variable denomination machine which sold counter-sized books containing stamps made from sheet cylinders would be the ideal from our (PMK3) point of view. I am sure the public would also prefer it as books go into wallets and handbags more easily than boxes, and also take-up more room in vending machines and so reduce the capacity and increase the empty time.'

Questionnaire forms

The preferred method of displaying these cartons in collections is unopened, a result of which being that many collectors are unaware that a select number of cartons had a questionnaire within seeking feedback about the trial. It is unusual to come across these forms and I have yet to discover one inside the many boxes that I have examined down the years.

During the life of the trial, first and second class postage rates were increased by ½p and the composition of the cartons required changing. This created two additional philatelic items, followed (accidentally) by two more due to a lack of understanding of the significance of phosphor bands, as explained later.

The initial two cartons contained Scottish Machin head stamps, but the revised postage rates saw the use of National definitives instead, due to a lack of availability of the new Scottish stamps which did not appear until January 1978.



Photocopy of one of the questionnaire forms, front and back.

1. When were the stamps bought?
DATE TIME

2. What value of stamps did you wish to buy?

3. Did the 30p or 60p pack meet this requirement?
YES NO

4. Did you have any difficulty using this machine?
YES NO

5. This machine could also sell stamped stationery. Would this be of use to you?
YES NO

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The blank unfolded cartons supplied to the Post Office for filling were produced by Bell Packaging and LR Industries, the latter being the producers of Durex contraceptives and possibly the erroneous source of the information about the type of machines employed.

The Edinburgh Supplies Department bundled the completed cartons in tens using elastic bands and boxed these in 100s, value £30 and £60 respectively. Stocks of the basic types were, in due course, made available for sale from the Philatelic Bureau.

Prices for the cartons vary hugely when sold by dealers, or collectors using the online auction sites. Some are put up for sale at large prices because the vendor has not seen the item before and assumes that it must be rare, while others offer them for sale very cheaply, possibly attaching no particular value to them. It should be possible to buy the basic set of four cartons for under £10 and, who knows, you may find that you have purchased one containing the scarce questionnaire form!

Picture Postcard Vending Machine

Something that appears to have remained unknown until the BPMA file was released for access was the intention also to offer members of the public the opportunity of purchasing picture postcards via an initial vending machine to be located as a trial in Edinburgh.

Coin-Age (Bristol) Ltd, who later produced many SVMs for Royal Mail, sold a product called The Automatic Postcard Shop. This machine could sell, via three columns and 18 compartments, picture postcards of the standard British Post Office Preferred (POP) sized cards, or the larger continental cards. From the BPMA file we learn that these machines were already in use within offices sited in



30p (SC1) and 60p (SC2).

the London Postal Region, although without formal permission having been sought centrally first.

There is nothing to indicate that any such machine entered service in Scotland, even briefly, but there is similarly nothing in the official file to state that it did not! If any reader is able to resolve this matter either way, then details would be welcomed via the editor. The fact that they were intended to sell picture postcards and not postage-paid stationery may simply mean that collectors expressed no interest in them at the time.

Lettercard Machine mystery

Mention has already been made of the intention to sell lettercards via a machine at Glasgow Airport, which came to nothing. What the BPMA file fails to mention is that Edinburgh Head Post Office did dispense these items.

There is a brief mention by Len Newbery in Stamp Collecting Weekly dated May 26, 1977 that two coin-in-the-slot machines vended a carton of five first-class lettercards for 50p from February 1977. Apparently, they were in the same basic format of the (later) cardboard stamp cartons, but with a black printed label advising contents.

Len was an acknowledged expert in this field, so I have no reason to doubt what he wrote, but it seems strange that they have not been seen or recorded elsewhere. Has any reader got an image of the machine used, or come across these cartons?

Mounting the cartons for display

Len Newbery recognised that mounting of these cartons would present collectors with a problem. He recommended heavyweight board for the album page and described how best to display the items.

'When opening the sachet to "explode" for display it has been found that if the white surfacing of the top flap be



30p (SC3 / 3a) and 60p (SC4 / 4a).

Basic catalogue listing

Issue date	Listing number	Carton cost	Label colour	Stamp composition
7 March 1977	SC1	30p	Red	2 x 6½p / 2 x 8½p Scottish Machin stamps.
	SC2	60p	Blue	4 x 6½p / 4 x 8½p Scottish Machin stamps.
13 June 1977	SC3	30p	Red	3 x 7p / 1 x 9p National Machin stamps (the 7p stamps initially had two phosphor bands*).
	SC3a	30p	Red	3 x 7p / 1 x 9p National Machin stamps (7p with corrected one phosphor band).
	SC4	60p	Blue	6 x 7p / 2 x 9p National Machin stamps (the 7p stamps initially bore two phosphor bands*).
	SC4a	60p	Blue	6 x 7p / 2 x 9p National Machin stamps (7p with corrected one phosphor band).

*Two phosphor banded 7p stamps had been left over from when 7p was the first class rate. The Scottish postal officials appeared to have been ignorant of the fact that the new cartons should have contained one phosphor banded 7p stamps to serve the new second class rate.

A collector apparently advised the staff of their error and eventually the significance sunk-in and the stamps were changed. The date of the changeover appears to have gone unrecorded. This error correction resulted in a sub-set comprising two extra cartons for those sufficiently interested in collecting such changes.

Cartons might contain stamps in singles or pairs (30p) or singles, pairs or blocks (60p) and there is no special significance in this, especially as a collector could artificially create a variation if they have access to stocks of the sheet printed stamps.

The cardboard carton and the adhesive labels exist with subtle variations in colouring, size, folding, corners or style, but this is outside of the scope of this article, being of interest only to the specialist collector. See the article by Jim Nicholson, as recorded under the Bibliography below, for an extended listing of types totalling 14 cartons.

cut with a sharp knife or razor blade along the sides of the sealing label the latter can easily be peeled to release the flap, the lower half of the intact label remaining attached to the lower flap.

‘When opened up, the shape can be secured to the mounting card by means of transparent photo corners.

‘A simple and effective method of mounting the sachet is first to secure a strip of cellophane about 4cm wide around the sachet and then insert a thin card the size of the sachet. This card can then be secured to the mounting card by means of transparent photo corners and the sachet held securely in position.’

References

BPMA File Online Catalogue Reference

P52/4/368 POST 52/1047

Stamp vending through cigarette machines - Proposed trial in Scotland

This correspondence file relates to the trial of cigarette vending machines adapted to sell boxes of stamps. It includes dummy cardboard outers believed to have been created by McCorquodale, suppliers at the time of postal stationery products such as airletter forms and stamped postcards.

Bibliography

Guidec: Scottish Stamp Packs by M. A. M. Imrie, British Decimal Stamps Study Circle [UK], May 1977.

‘GB Stamp Booklets: Scottish Sachet-Style Booklets’ by L. F. Newbery, *Stamp Collecting Weekly* [UK], 26 May 1977.

FIRST CLASS LETTER CARDS

50p	First Class	
5	Letter	
	Cards	50p

Text of the lettercard carton labels, exactly as laid-out by Len Newbery in his article, although some text may have been diagonally typeset, as with the stamp cartons.

‘Official Scottish Post Office Stamp Cartons’ by [uncredited], *The Bookmark* [UK], Volume 6, Number 5, June 1977.

‘GB Stamp Booklets: Scottish Experimental Machine Cartons’ by L. F. Newbery, *Stamp Collecting Weekly* [UK], 18 August 1977.

‘British Vending-Machine Cartons a 1970s Experiment’ by David Alderfer, *Linn’s Stamp News* [USA], 13 October 2003.

‘Scottish Experimental Stamp Packs’ by Jim Nicholson, *The GB Journal* [UK], Volume 42, Number 4, July/August 2004.

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