

## **MACHIN DUMMY STAMP BOOKS**

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Collecting British stamp books is a popular pastime among philatelists and it is a branch of the hobby that enables individuals to form a basic collection, conceivably just of machine-vended books, or a specialised collection perhaps comprising plating studies and inclusion of ephemeral items such as wrapper bands and scanning tags.

I only collect one type of book and that is what is generically referred to as 'dummy' books. Many readers will probably have come across the odd copy in dealers stocks or may even own some, as several types are commonly available. Others are so rare in private hands that as few as one copy may be known – that does not mean that others are not also out there, but they have not been recorded and are not owned by the small group of specialists who derive such pleasure and interest from these unusual items. Many types rarely appear on the open market, so when offered for sale they will often command very high prices due to their scarcity.

My collection of dummies started, like so many, as a mere sideline. I saw a copy for sale at my first BPE stamp show about 35 years ago at 10s (50p), purchased it and others followed until I suddenly realised that I had amassed rather a lot! Redundancy from my employer last year gave me the opportunity of making the accumulation into a collection and enabled me to prepare a display for Autumn Stampex 2005. This exhibit comprised the Machin-era portion of a collection that traces the history of British postal vending, including coils, stationery, postal orders, stamp packs and postage printed on-site (such as the Frama's). Emphasis was placed on the trial and testing objects, ensuring that material was displayed in context alongside the issued item where appropriate.

So, what are 'dummy' stamp books? I define them as a book that outwardly resembles an issued or proposed product in format, but contains material within that is unsuitable for use in the postal system.

The covers may be unprinted, bear explanatory text (such as FOR TESTING PURPOSES ONLY), or comprise left-over stocks of an issued book cover. The 'stamps' within may consist of real stamps obliterated in some way to prevent use, blank unprinted labels, have explanatory text, bear a publicity or trial design or utilise some other form of defacement. The content may be gummed or ungummed, be imperforate, perforated accurately, or even grossly mis-perforated.

These items are never intended to be seen by members of the public, so with the exception of promotional books produced by the stamp printers for their own publicity purposes, the quality does not matter greatly, provided they can accurately mimic a real book in a production or operational environment, like within a vending machine for example.

There are six main areas of use for 'dummy' books:

- **Testing** of new/modified vending machines.
- **Assessment** of revised or new book formats.
- **Perfecting** stamp book production methods.
- **Training** of postal engineers and other staff.
- **Prevention** of theft at retailers' point of sale.
- **Promotion** by security printers or sponsors.

Each of these uses will be written about in the nine sections that follow, which describe the books within their more usual collectable categories.

### **1. Machine Vended and Counter Stitched Books**

Machin head definitive stamps appeared in traditional vending books for the first time in 1968. Despite similar make-up to earlier Wilding head stamps, dummy books utilising the same interleaving and back covers as issued books were produced to help top-up engineers' dwindling stocks. These comprised imperforate and unprinted gummed panes within old-gold coloured covers.

Also in 1968, Harrison's printed dummy counter sheets of 200 labels in blue, yellow and orange for the Post Office's advertising contractors to break-down and incorporate into books given to advertisers (AVCs – Advertisers' Voucher Copies). Blocks of four without selvedge were stuck into books to simulate stamp panes.

Perhaps around decimalisation, a dummy counter book comprising a pane of six For Testing Purposes Only labels appears to have been produced by Harrison's. This is the only time that a 'two rows of three' format has been recorded for this label ('three rows of two' are commonplace). It was possibly used for a book vending trial, but this is conjecture. Counter sheets of these labels are unknown, so a book continues to be the most likely source, especially as the perforations down the right hand vertical edge are guillotined, rather than torn.

Towards the end of 1971, the Post Office introduced new dummy stamp books for use by its field engineers. The covers used-up obsolete grey card stock from before decimalisation and incorporated interleaves from the October 1971 edition of the 10p book. 1971 also saw trials designed to test the maximum bulk-handling of future F type books, but the dummies with six interleaves, four blank label panes and thick covers was never translated into issued books. 1972 to 1975 saw the production of more dummy books for engineer's use and at the nationwide training schools.

With the planned introduction of Swedish folded books, the stitched books era had finally come to an end, except for the Prestige range, which continues to this day.

### **2. Prestige Stitched Books**

This series was started back in 1969 with the £1 *Stamps for Cooks* book that featured recipes. A limited number of issued books had the stamps overprinted SPECIMEN by hand, one stamp at a time, and only ten complete books are believed to still be extant, with the individual stamps from broken-up books being more liberally available.

Wedgwood, the potters of Stoke-on-Trent, commissioned two Prestige stamp books from Royal Mail, initially in 1972 and again in 1980. Uniquely, publicity versions were produced that had a different front cover text (omitting the stamp content details and value) and also had the stamps removed prior to distribution to their favoured customers. Uncut vertical printers' pairs of these books also exist which are interesting due to the marginal markings that they contain (these are normally trimmed off).

The format of the British Prestige book has been adopted by many postal administrations around the world ever since, including Hong Kong SAR, Australia, Canada and many others. The style is chequebook-like in appearance and involves the bringing together of several text pages and stamp panes in addition to the cover

sections, which are collated and either stitched or stapled together with the binding edge usually covered in a tape.

It is a complex procedure and the manufacturer of one of the collation systems produced a series of four dummy book cover designs for use when testing each new installation and for later use as publicity dummies.

### **3. Machine Folded Books**

For decades, British stamps had been sold in hand-stitched books, but this method had become too expensive - and slow. Speed was becoming important, as the Post Office was keen to make its stamp book range more widely available to members of the general public. Sweden had long produced books with the stamps affixed by a margin to a folded cover. Trials of this construction type by Harrison's resulted in eventual implementation in the UK.

This section is the largest of the nine book types contained within this article and the dummy books that appeared over the next 25 years comprise some of the most difficult to assign and describe correctly. This was a period that saw frequent rises in inflation and postal rates, book production difficulties, frequent staff and departmental structure changes within Royal Mail and several problems within the actual vending machinery. Consequently there is a lot of material that can be purchased and it is inappropriate here to describe every subtle nuance that exists between the dummy books (many are very similar), as this is not a catalogue of available items, but a general article.

Broadly speaking, book covers were initially blue-green, then white in colour usually bearing obsolete postal rate information on them, then actual issued covers or unprinted covers were used. A large range was then created that bore text such as 50p / DUMMY BOOKLET / FOR TESTING PURPOSES ONLY in various coloured inks and the series ended-up with unprinted covers. The contents (in constantly varying numbers of 'stamps') initially bore the standard grey FOR TESTING PURPOSES ONLY labels, these then became unprinted, moved on to labels with inked phosphor bands and ended-up with the unprinted labels again.

On trial at selected sites from 10 March 1976, the first folded books offered increased machine capacity. Following successful field trials, the Post Office later adopted this style of book nationwide. A second type of book was produced with thinner covers, as the originals tended to jam in the vending machines. These new covers performed better and all later printings used them.

From the early days of stamp vending the machines had been allocated letters to identify them internally, starting with code A. By the time that the Machin head definitives were introduced, machine type F had been reached. These machines were frequently malfunctioning, which was caused by covers bowing in their stacks and so new dummy books were created that helped to overcome this problem, sometime between the period March 1976 and June 1977. A postal rate increase in June 1977 saw a deliberate change in the folding position of books in an attempt at overcoming the continuing problems of machines jamming whilst in operation. The new, narrower selvedge used was to become the standard width on subsequent folded books.

All F machines began to be converted to fifty pence operating during 1977 due to the ravages of inflation. The 10p machines were renamed type F1 and the 50p became type F2. Five of these converted F type machines had been successfully field-trialled since 26 April. F2 machine conversion trials continued, slower than had been planned, at the five London sites plus the Conference Centre in Brighton.

Meanwhile, a change of postal rates required another new dummy book that utilised a pane of eight labels, instead of the previous ten label panes.

A new type of machine, named type H by the Post Office, was trialled during August 1979. It was manufactured by Belling Production Techniques and its success meant that it was subsequently installed at suitable vending sites outside of Post Office premises nationwide. A further new machine, named type J, was trialled during November 1979. It was made by the Swedish firm of Sterners and is the only foreign-made traditional stamp vending machine used in Britain.

As with type H, it was also installed outside of Post Office premises nationwide. There was a postal rate increase during January 1981 that necessitated the production of new dummy testing books with six labels to the pane, instead of the previous eight.

It is believed that the book with a pane of 16 labels that was produced in 1981 was to ascertain the maximum 'multiples of four' stamps that could be accommodated into a vending stamp book. Ongoing problems with inflation and panes of six or ten stamps 'bowing' would have made this testing a very real necessity.

The 10p F1 machine was phased-out early in 1981, the conversion to F2 50p operating having finally been completed, well behind schedule. However, this was not before a further round of postage rate increases necessitated another change to panes of four for these books.

Circa 1986, the Post Office Research Centre (PORC) in Swindon used new dummy books to test a fresh generation of electrical stamp vending machine that were then being developed for possible consideration. The success of these in-house trials resulted in production of type K. From 29 July 1986, these new electronic vending machines with a power source and made by the firm of Coinage were field-trialled at Brighton. The machines issued fifty pence (for the second class postage rate) and £1 (for first class rate) folded books of six stamps. It is assumed that the new loading and dispensing mechanism of these electronic machines did not cause the 'bowing' of books seen on earlier machine vending equipment. Otherwise, the Post Office had ignored the experience gained with its earlier vending trials!

In 1987, Hillday presented to Postal Headquarters. Six issued MCC design books were used to demonstrate their vending machines and Post Office staff handstamped each pane to avoid use. Police later took them from the dealer owner in error with evidence in *Operation Gum-Gum*, eventually returning them.

Type K became the standard vendor outside Post Offices, often ousting mechanical versions at sites close to electric supplies. These were subsequently joined by type L made by Sterners. New dummy books were produced by printing the phosphor B81 cylinder in black. However, K and L machine jams were a problem that the Post Office Research Centre was forced to again investigate during 1990. The cover material was believed to be the cause of the faults, and so internal laboratory trials were undertaken using four types of card, printed by Walsall. Eventually, Gemini 260gsm card stock was chosen for live field-tests outside Post Office premises, at sites not revealed to collectors until after the trials. This secrecy avoided the unwanted attention by philatelists, who could have distorted the testing results.

Further problems with K and L type machines occurred when non-multiples of four stamps were used (i.e. six or ten), as this once again gave uneven machine stacking. A 1981 ruling was reinforced that four or eight stamps should be used, effective from 1990 postal rate increase.

The Post Office had long recognised the benefits of postal vending by machine, as it offered personal customers a round-the-clock service and was cost-effective. Well, that was the view until fairly recently when all existing vending book machines were

withdrawn, thus ending a fascinating and complex series of books. In something of an about-face, a relatively few new machines have subsequently been re-introduced at key sites.

#### **4. Counter Folded Books**

This range of books comprised oversized versions of the machine book within thinner covers.

During 1988, dummy counter books comprising unprinted covers and labels were vended from a machine sited in the Post Office Research Centre laboratories. The experiment was not field-trialled as Post Office Counters decided against issuing them in favour of the new, bright 'Retail' books.

Also in 1988, counter books were vended from a ticketing machine sited within the factory of Meo Products Ltd. This supplier was provided with stocks of the issued 'National Gallery' books, with the stamps invalidated by felt-pen strokes by Royal Mail, but nothing came of these trials and in any event the use of this type of book was set to cease.

#### **5. Retail [Window] Books**

In 1987, Royal Mail in conjunction with Harrison and Sons worked on formats for a new range of retail stamp books. They were initially to become known in collector circles as 'window' books due to a laminated stamp-sized hole in the cover that revealed a stamp below – a short-lived production method, but the name stuck. Prototype books were produced with solid red laminated covers and blank perforated labels within, available as single books or in the form of uncut gangs of books.

Prior to the introduction of revised 14p and 19p postal rates in 1989, a consignment of dummy pre-production trial books was manufactured by Harrison's. They were produced in both four and ten stamp pane formats, but the first class value only appears to have been created. Interestingly, the covers are 4mm shorter than on the issued book equivalents, they bear no recommended price on the back cover and the barcode box is smaller. Very few were discovered.

Meo Products had developed in 1989 a machine that was capable of dispensing Royal Mail Retail stamp books and the manufacturer was supplied with dummy books by the Post Office that bore overprinted blank labels in flame red of the first class stamps, appearing as bars because the phosphor band cylinder had been used. The trial never resulted in an order being placed for the machine, but two copies of the book are known.

The following year, Harrison's, who until then had bundled and wrapped all of its stamp books by hand, sought automation for this labour intensive and costly process. A private company was commissioned to undertake packaging trials for them and unique dummy books were especially produced. Unfortunately, the trial failed as the Akebono paper tape strapping machine could not cope with the high-gloss covers used by the printers. The books shot everywhere when compressed and the experiment was aborted, but not before a visiting collector had rescued some of these trial items. Several versions of the books exist, all of which are overprinted using the phosphor band cylinder in maroon ink.

The final item in the water-activated era comprises a book of ten 2<sup>nd</sup> class blue labels in exactly the same format as the issued book of the period (1997) and produced by House of Questa. Its precise use goes unrecorded, but was probably

either used for internal testing of the printing presses or of their bookmaking production equipment. All copies known have emanated from Canada, home to Ashton Potter, at the time a stamp printer owned by the MDC Group, then also owners of Questa, and it is thought that this is probably no coincidence.

## **6. Self-adhesive Books**

The self-adhesive era started in 1993, when Walsall produced an issued trial book using stamps in a horizontal instead of portrait format to identify them from the water-soluble stamps. No dummy items are believed to be in private hands for this or any of the subsequent issued books.

An exhibitor at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Britain Philatelic Society display to the Royal Philatelic Society last December enquired as to why dummy books were needed. This is a question that Royal Mail also appear to have asked themselves, for with effect from the mainstream introduction of self-adhesive stamps they now supply issued stamp books to, say, stamp vending machine manufacturers. It is cheaper to lose the face value of a few packs of books than to specially print dummy editions, so it seems unlikely that we will see many more dummy books surfacing. Not that I will stop looking, of course!

There is one interesting item that does fit into this section, though. Circa 2001 Royal Mail worked with disability charities to produce stamp books that would be helpful to its blind and arthritic customers. Trial books printed by House of Questa were shown to focus groups to gauge opinion, but this radical approach was not introduced.

The design included a small Queen's head and the main design component was the service indicator, either a large 1 or 2. A few first class stamps have entered into the public domain – but never the second class value for some unknown reason.

## **7. Dummy Retailer Books**

55,000 retailers sell stamps in books to their customers and from the early days these were frequently being stolen by shoppers in disturbingly large numbers. Royal Mail worked initially with Woolworth to overcome this form of anti-social behaviour by introducing a new range of dummy items.

The material produced has evolved over time to meet the changing needs of the retailer. Starting with actual stamp book covers without stamps, then flat cards, tent cards, bubble packs, until today when laminated barcode scanning tags illustrating the book cover are used. A future development will be Radio Frequency IDentifiers (RFIDs) which are set to increasingly take the place of barcodes and may even appear on actual stamp books in due course, not that Royal Mail has indicated this, but it is the way that the retail trade is heading and the Post Office cannot afford to be far behind.

Stamp books are now mainly kept in tills and theft is largely a thing of the past. Approaching 150 anti-theft items are known, with many hard to obtain. They form an essential chapter in the story of dummy stamp books with some even being produced by the stamp printers.

## **8. Promotional Books**

Promotional books exist that were produced either for self-publicity purposes by the security printers, for stamp tendering reasons, or for publicising services to the likes of Royal Mail.

Royal Joh. Enschedé Security Printing of the Netherlands has been a supplier of sheet printed stamps to Royal Mail since 1979, but never in book form. They therefore produced a series of four dummy books mimicking the small folded machine books, retail books, 'hang-sell' for use with euro-hooks and an ATM vendible version. None of these types of books were ever sold to Royal Mail, but the recent *Brunel* Prestige book has been an Enschedé production.

In the 1990s, Walsall installed fully automated book manufacturing equipment and created a trial book to demonstrate to customers the quality of output achievable. Panes were perforated using dies used for British retail books of four stamps and therefore panes have an imperforate-between section.

## **9. The Future of Books**

Books resembling sheetlets may be the way forward instead of the more established approach. From 2001, Christmas traditional style books have been replaced by self-adhesive stamps in folded book sheetlets of 12 x 1<sup>st</sup> or 24 x 2<sup>nd</sup> class following extensive trials by Royal Mail and De La Rue. A second class dummy book sheetlet of five panels containing 24 labels was produced in a format that was basically the same as that eventually introduced during the development stages of this new product.

This stamp sheet format is gaining in popularity with both businesses and householders alike and it may be set to eventually take-over from the current type of stamp book at sometime in the future.

With any luck, the next time you come across one of these dummy books in a dealer's junk box you will be able to recognise it for what it is and might even consider buying it and joining the ranks of interested collectors. If you are not a collector of British stamps, do not think that dummy books are exclusive to the UK. I also have these items from other countries around the world, including France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Vietnam and others, so join in the fun!

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