

POACHED EGGS AT THE 1957 SCOUT JAMBOREE

Glenn H Morgan

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FDC SERVICING

The Post Office searched in vain around the world for a machine capable of affixing and cancelling stamps and was therefore forced into placing an order with a British company to design one from scratch.

The equipment that resulted was made by Vacuumatic Limited and was able to service 120 covers per minute with the set of three Scout commemorative stamps. It saved many hours of Post Office staff time and in all some 60,632 covers were serviced, despite initial estimates of two million.

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stamp value was advanced from the rolls by claws engaging in the perforations where a guillotine detached them from the coils. Yes - for the only time in British philatelic history (so far), special coils of commemoratives were produced. The stamps were then pressed onto the envelope and ejected into a collecting bin where a physical examination of each cover was made by hand. Any rejects were replaced. Once they had dried they passed through a stamp cancelling machine and were then bundled-up for delivery worldwide.

SPECIAL TESTING LABELS

It was necessary for much preparatory work to be undertaken before a satisfactory result could allow the machine to be let loose on actual covers paid for by customers. Accordingly, Post Office engineers were given coils of testing labels (known to collectors as "poached eggs" due to their design) in a special format to simulate the issued stamps. Many trials were made to adjust the flow of water reaching each cover and to determine the correct envelope thickness. Eventually they got it right and the first incursion by the Post Office into the highly lucrative FDC market could begin.

It is interesting to note that the Post Office Philatelic Bulletin supposedly gave away samples of the Scout Jubilee testing labels in its issue of September/October 1964. They were however, printed in red and there is no evidence that they were ever used for the purpose outlined. Indeed, the red examples bear a watermark not introduced until after the Jubilee had almost been forgotten.

TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE LABELS

They were prepared in horizontal pairs, imperforate between. Printing was in photogravure by Harrison and Sons Limited on Tudor watermarked paper (E2R surmounted by a crown). They were grey-black in colour and although the designer is not recorded it is fair to assume that a Mr Dell was responsible as he designed the original testing labels issued in green during 1936. The Scout commemoratives appeared in rolls of 4,800 and it is assumed that the testing labels were of a similar length. 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).

The labels are highly prized by collectors, especially when on the dummy covers as only a handful escaped destruction.

The Scout FDC exercise was never to be repeated in the same manner and several years elapsed before the Post Office officially serviced FDC's again. This was for the Shakespeare celebrations of 1964 and covers were manually prepared. These days, of course, FDC production is once more a fully automated process utilising machinery never even imagined back in the low-technology 1950's.

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