

65. British Post Office Technology, 1969

The Post Office selected an opportune date, October 1st 1969 – ‘vesting day’ for the new Post Office Corporation – to issue the four special stamps marking some of its achievements in postal and telecommunications technology. All four stamps were designed by David Gentleman and printed by De La Rue in ‘Delacryl’ offset-lithography – the first British stamps to be printed by this method.

David’s designs were deliberately abstract and diagrammatic to suggest the Post Office’s ‘forward looking’ development in this scientific and technological age, and the stamps were ingeniously planned so that each of the four designs, though ‘self-contained’, formed a repeat pattern in the sheet of stamps.

The 5d. stamp featured the well-known ‘Arrow-G’ symbol of the National Giro, with associated circuitry supporting the conventional sign for a computer transistor. The leads from the transistor – heart of the computer which works out all Giro transactions – are seen to ‘follow through’ vertically from design to design, just as they would in an electronic diagram, forming complete inter-linking circuits. The National Giro Centre was opened at Bootle, Lancashire, in October 1968, the first to be based on one central computer complex. The 9d. showed the Globe with a segment of a stylised telephone dial in each corner, representing the world progress of international subscriber dialling. Seen in the sheet, every intersection of four stamps shows a complete dial with the Queen’s head and the denomination.

‘Pulse Code Modulation’, which enabled up to

24 telephone conversations to be made over one circuit simultaneously, was the subject of the 1s. stamp, the design of which, also ‘continuous’, stamp to stamp, represented the wave patterns of two voices travelling interleaved on one circuit, or ‘the transfer of speech waves into coded digital impulses’. No doubt modern techniques have increased the number of conversations which can be carried on a single circuit. The 1s. 6d. stamp featured the Post Office’s massive automation programme, and the design – three destination boxes in an electronic letter-sorting machine – was inspired by an actual machine sorting letters in the London W1 District Post Office. The postcode phosphor dots (panelled on the stamp), when ‘read’ electronically, activate hinges which rise to allow the letter to fall into its appropriate box. The gutter margins of the stamps represent the ‘pillars’ between boxes, so maintaining the structure of the machine across the sheet of stamps.

Bright colours with clean, hard edges and extreme clarity of fine line work are distinctive features of the ‘Delacryl’ process, and David chose solid colours without tonal variation for his stamps, to avoid the use of the half-tone screen, and he also planned for two colours, one overlapping the other, to produce richer tones. The stamps were issued in sheets of 120 (10 x 12) and the only recorded flaws are of the ‘phosphor omitted’ (5d. and 1s.) or ‘One broad band’ (all values) variety.

Quantities sold were: 5d. 72,405,720; 9d. 8,472,000; 1s. 10,296,120; 1s. 6d. 10,757,040; presentation packs, 104,230.

JAMES WATSON

