

The British High Value Stamps of the 20th Century

King Edward VII – the £1

The turn of the century saw the beginning of a new era in the British way of life. The accession of a new monarch signified the end of Victorian austerity and heralded some radical changes in the behaviour, dress and living standards of the British people.

The new King set the pace in his flamboyant enjoyment of entertainment and the gay life. Sophisticated musical shows developed from the Victorian music-hall, and 'wasp-waisted' actresses became the 'goddesses' of the theatre. There were revolutionary changes in transport with motor-cars and motor-buses gradually replacing the horse-drawn vehicles. For the first time since 1840 there was a change of portrait on our postage stamps, and the picture-postcard craze accounted for the sale of millions of the new Edwardian $\frac{1}{2}$ d stamps.

'Edward the Peacemaker' succeeded his mother, Queen Victoria, on 22 January 1901. The first Edwardian postage stamps were issued almost a year later – on New Year's Day, 1902, but, apart from the change of portrait, they were very much on the lines 'as before', most of them being simply adaptations of the late Queen's so-called 'Jubilee' stamps of 1887. Only the £1 stamp was given a much-needed face-lift in that the original design of the central portrait area of its Victorian predecessor was completely revised and improved. It appeared on 16 June 1902.

The stamp portrait was the King's dignified profile – looking left – which was to become almost hackneyed in its multifarious usage on stamps and on coins and medals. It was taken from the sculptured likeness created by the young Austrian sculptor, Emil Fuchs. The King himself selected the portrait and gave Fuchs a special sitting to enable him to finalise the details of the version to be used in printing the stamps, thus confounding the critics who resented the intrusion of a 'foreigner'. But Fuchs, a comparative newcomer to England, had already well established himself with a

highly successful exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1898.

The first issues of Edwardian stamps were typographed *en épargne* ('in relief') by Messrs De La Rue, while the same portrait of the King was used extensively, and almost exclusively, on stamps for the British Colonies.

The Edwardian 'one pound' differed from its companion stamps in its exceptionally long, horizontal format – the equivalent of three normal low-value stamps. A point of interest was that its watermark comprised *three* crowns to the smaller stamps' single crown, enabling the same unsurfaced paper to be used as that of some of the low-value issues, those on 'ordinary' as opposed to 'chalky' or coated paper.

In comparison with the Victorian 'pound', numerous differences in design, in addition to the change of the monarch's head, may be noted. Perhaps the most significant change was the introduction, for the first time, of a symbolic crown within the scrollwork above the King's head.

The inscription 'POSTAGE ONE POUND' in sans-serif capitals was embodied in a panel at the foot of the stamp, instead of being absurdly cramped into the oval border encompassing the late Queen's head. Also significant of the new era in stamp design was the abandonment of corner letters, indicating that the authorities no longer feared the malpractices of the forger. However, in this respect they were perhaps a little premature. For the handsome blue-green £1 stamp *was* forged and the story of the notorious 'Lowden' counterfeits is like an episode from a film script!

British high-value stamps were used for the payment of excise duty on packages of tobacco exported to England and other countries from the Channel Islands, and it was not unusual for dealers to be offered large accumulations of these stamps. The dealer who purchased such a parcel from the unscrupulous Mr Lowden had no reason



to suspect anything untoward that particular evening – the stamps looked normal in the rather gloomy gaslight of his shop.

Came the dawn and another day – also a dawning realisation in the mind of the dealer: the stamps did not look so good in the bright light of day, and a closer examination revealed the shattering truth: the stamps were all forgeries! The overall impressions were blurred and coarse, the lines of shading faint and irregular, the crown crudely drawn, the colour a sickly yellow-green. The ‘stamps’, all stuck on brown wrapping-paper, even bore forged ‘JERSEY’ postmarks.

Later, it was established that the imitation stamps had been photo-lithographed from a block of the genuine stamps, with a passable ‘watermark’ impressed in the paper. Lowden was apprehended, prosecuted and convicted, while most of the forgeries were destroyed, though a few survived. Thus the dealer, who had lost a large sum of money (which he was unable to recover), also failed to recoup his losses – for the ‘Lowden’ pound is now much scarcer and much more valuable than the genuine stamp!

De La Rue’s printing contract expired in 1911 (after the King’s death), and the printing-plates were handed over to other printers. Some of the low values were printed by Messrs Harrisons and Sons, the remainder of the series, including the £1, by the Government stamp-printing establishment at Somerset House; and it was the latter stamp, in a deep green colour, which was so crudely forged by Lowden. In watermark and perforation details, the new printings of the £1 were the same as before: there were, however, differences in the marginal plate-markings. Current catalogue valuations for the De La Rue and Somerset House Edward VII £1 stamps are £110 (each) unused.

Among the various issues overprinted for use by Government departments, only the Inland Revenue made use of the £1 stamp – the original blue-green printing, which was overprinted ‘I.R. OFFICIAL’ and issued on 20 April 1902. Though not quite as rare as the 10s stamp in the same series, the ‘I.R.’ £1 is priced at £1,200 unused in Gibbons’ Catalogue.

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