

1966 and all that Richard West remembers a defining year

FEW WOULD DENY that the 1960s was a defining decade for British stamps. It began modestly, with the first two-colour special issue in 1960, but collectors still seemingly came way down the pecking order as far as the Post Office was concerned.

The seeds of change came in 1963 with a dramatic rise in the number of special issues, often printed in full colour. Printing techniques had not been perfected, so missing or misplaced colours were rife, meaning one could, if lucky, pick up an error over the post office counter. The same year brought us the Philatelic Bureau, the *Bulletin* and 'first day of issue' postmarks. In 1964 we had the first commoner (Shakespeare) on a British stamp, and more significantly, on 19 October Anthony Wedgwood (Tony) Benn became Postmaster General. He was not long in the office, but managed to send ripples along the corridors of Post Office Headquarters. He liberalised the criteria for new issues and, as is now well known, sought to omit the monarch's portrait. In 1965 he brought us the issue in memory of Churchill, whose portrait was more prominent than The Queen's, plus Britain's first se-tenant block, for The Battle of Britain.

However, in many respects 1966 was to prove the most significant year. It began with the Robert Burns issue: no anniversary, simply a set to honour one of Scotland's greatest writers. Although the stamps look fairly standard in their approach, even if Burns can't seem to decide on which side to part his hair, Benn had in fact given the invited artists a free hand. However, there was a limit to how much innovation could be tolerated.

The pair issued to mark the 600th anniversary of Westminster Abbey may not seem remarkable, but it was the last special issue to use the Wilding portrait (except for Jeffery Matthews' set for the 60th birthday). The Wilding portrait had never been popular with designers, who considered it restrictive. David Gentleman's replacement silhouette had its debut on the Landscapes issue of 2 May (see May *Bulletin* p275). Although here it was used fairly large, its advantage was that it could be reduced if required: it remained in use until the new Machin portrait came along.

In May, Benn announced that later in the year Britain's first Christmas stamps would be issued. These would be designed by children in a competition, with entries to be submitted by 20 June. Over 5000 were received, with the winning designs used for the two stamps and first day cover.

The Post Office Tower was officially opened in 1965, for which two stamps were issued, and on 19 May 1966 it was opened to the public. Items posted there received a special cancellation, while the stamps were sold in vending machines. However, they were not produced in rolls for this purpose, but contained in small envelopes with either a block of four of the 3d or a pair of the 1s3d.

As summer drew closer, expectations rose: the World Cup was being held in England, and three stamps were issued on 1 June to mark the occasion. While the nation was gripped by World Cup fever, Benn was undertaking one of his final acts as PMG. He held a seminar on 23 June to discuss concepts that David Gentleman had developed for British stamps, many of which would come to fruition. Seven days later, on 30 June, Benn was appointed Minister of Technology. However, most were more concerned about the football, the outcome, we are often reminded, being a win for England against West Germany on 30 July.

It was decided to celebrate by amending the 4d World Cup design, adding the inscription 'England Winners' (not an overprint as many still mistakenly believe), the new stamp being issued on 18 August. A shortage of time to print the new stamps, added to which Harrison and Sons were currently printing the British Technology set (it seems ironic that Benn had moved to Technology), meant it was possible to print only 12 million 'Winners' stamps. For a 4d value, this was very low, but for the number of sets of special issues usually sold, it was normal. But the Post Office made a mistake (or did it?), revealing the quantity in advance and starting a panic. A week before issue, the Philatelic Bureau announced that, as of midday on 12 August, it would take no further orders, having already received orders for over 12,000 sheets, or nearly 1.5 million stamps. ▶





At the time, the Bureau was located on the sixth floor of the Telegraph Building in St Martins-le-Grand. On the day of issue, the queue stretched down all six floors and around the outside of the building: soon customers were being restricted to a block of four. Across England there was news of customers fighting for the stamp, and it was even quoted on the Stock Exchange. At the time, I was working for a stamp wholesaler in Brighton. He had ordered 200 sheets, and I went to collect them from the Bureau. Not only was I able to bypass the queue, but I think that if those waiting, not necessarily patiently, had known I had 24,000 of the stamps, I might have been lynched!

Stamps were brought to the public's attention. At the time the post offices at King Edward Street and Trafalgar Square were open 24 hours a day, and new stamps went on sale at midnight. Huge crowds started to form well before 12am for the next issues, particularly for the Battle of Hastings set on 14 October, another British first with its seten strap to resemble the Bayeux Tapestry.

Meanwhile, another significant event occurred. On 2 April 1965 Benn, as PMG, had accepted on behalf of the nation the Great Britain collection formed by Reginald M Phillips. Phillips' idea was that his collection should form the basis for a new National Postal Museum. In a converted room in King Edward Building, where the London Chief Office was then located, a temporary museum was opened by Edward Short, the new PMG, on 12 September. The initial display was a survey of 19th century British stamps, and on the follow-

ing day, the first day of public admission, there were 543 visitors. The museum closed in 1968 in preparation for its official opening by The Queen, in expanded premises, in February 1969.

The Philatelic Bureau, not ideally positioned in London, was moved to Edinburgh, where it opened on 1 November at Waterloo Place. The first new issue handled from its new home was on 1 December, when the Christmas stamps Benn had instigated were put on sale, although the designs were not to everyone's taste.

Changes continued, and early in 1967 came the first postbus, while the summer of that year brought us the Machin definitives. In 1968 came the first set of 'Anniversaries' stamps and the first booklets with pictorial front covers. During 1969 the Post Office became a corporation, the change marked by four stamps printed in lithography, and the first 'Prestige' stamp book, the £1 *Stamps for Cooks* was issued. Nevertheless, there are many good reasons to suggest that 1966 was the most significant year of the decade! ●

