

Changing attitudes

In the conclusion of his series, Richard

WHILE the 'wind of change' was sweeping across the Post Office in terms of the services provided for stamp collectors, notably regarding first day covers, not all who worked for the organisation were clearly comfortable with the more liberal arrangements. As previously mentioned, maximum cards were certainly a contentious issue; I wonder how many of the 'rules' introduced were aimed more at the cards than the covers. Consequently it became a requirement that a full set of any new stamps was required to receive a 'First Day of Issue' marking. Later this was softened: provided at least the first class rate of postage had effectively been paid, a 'first day' or indeed any applicable handstamp would be applied (re-laxed if a set includes a 2nd class value).

There was the question of the 'embarrassing item', meaning that any design had to be confined to the left-hand half of the cover, leaving the right-hand half blank for stamps and address. Certainly all items had to be addressed. Today, as we are aware, first day cover designers can be far more ambitious, creating a startling juxtaposition between cover, cancellation and stamps – although the address remains a requirement.

At one time covers could only receive one cancellation. So if covers linked similar occasions (such as the 80th, 90th and 100th birthdays of the Queen Mother) it would not have been possible to have just a single cover, bearing the appropriate stamps and cancelled on their respective days of issue. Again, attitudes have now softened, and more than one cancellation is permitted on a cover, referred to as 'dual postmarking'. Furthermore, it is now acceptable to have stamps and cancellations from more than one stamp-issuing authority (not to be confused with the 'combination covers' which form a fascinating aspect of postal history).

It has also become easier to obtain examples of postmarks. Items can be sent for re-posting, as long as the outer envelope is posted by the day the required postmark is in use. One advantage has been that, even if a private organisation has designed and sponsored a handstamp, probably

to use on its own covers, all collectors have been able to secure an example. Plus, of course, we now have the Special Handstamp Centres, dedicated offices where a cancellation will be applied to a standard required of the collector, even if this means a delay in the item being delivered.

Even the dreaded maximum cards are permitted, provided a stamped, addressed envelope is provided for their return after cancellation.

Sadly for some postmark collectors, the general availability of postmarks has recently been broken for the Commonwealth Games: however, Royal Mail realises that for postmark collectors this is not acceptable, and hopefully such a restriction will not re-occur.

All this is probably enough to send shivers down the spine of a purist collector. The thought that first day covers are not actually processed on the actual day of issue is totally wrong to some. What would such collectors make of covers serviced by the Philatelic Bureau, where every process is automated, from the sheets of stamps being 'burst' into single stamps, stamps affixed to the covers, to the postmark virtually 'printed' to ensure the perfect product.

Even worse is the thought that posting boxes remain open well after the day of issue, so that covers can continue to be posted for the first day cancellation. This has occurred several times: when an issue has been released without much advance warning (such as the memorial set for the Queen Mother), or where the date of issue has had to be changed at a late stage. There is, of course, the classic example of the release of the low value decimal definitives, as recorded last time, where the stamps were issued on February 15, but the boxes remained open until nearly a month later.

The answer for those who like to feel their covers are truly 'first day' is not to bother with any of the special handstamps, but to opt instead for a purely operational marking. It depends on how you view a first day cover: is the special handstamp part of the cover being created, rather than simply a statement of a time, date and place

West recalls how the present day first day cover has evolved



A cover with an example of 'dual postmarking': for the Aircraft issue of 1997, also stamped and cancelled with an Isle of Man Spitfire stamp.

of posting? Even back to the days of Shakespeare Festival, demand for first day covers was such that cancelling took many days to complete. The Handstamping Centres make the actual place of posting irrelevant – first day covers now receive the same pictorial handstamp irrespective of where each philatelic posting box is located.

One aspect over which the Post Office has long held its ground has been the question of 'hand-back'. This has been particularly pertinent at international stamp exhibitions held in London. At overseas exhibitions it is common practice for covers to be handstamped and handed straight back to the collector. Many of the visitors have come from afar, and do not wish to have covers (souvenirs of the exhibition) potentially spoiled by having to pass through the postal services of more than one country. When we pay the postage, we are paying for a service. Might that service involve simply handstamping a cover and handing it back?

Nevertheless, it has taken much to persuade the Post Office to provide a 'hand back' service, even at international events – equally, not all collectors are convinced such a service is right.

Many overseas Post Offices keep fully serviced first day covers on sale for some considerable time after the day of issue. In Great Britain, as

we know, you cannot generally buy serviced first day covers over the counter, and certainly not after the day of issue. (This can of course vary with some post offices, who might make separate arrangements with a first day cover supplier.) The exception, surprisingly, comes with PNCs, the relatively new concept of the Philatelic Numismatic Cover, which combine stamps with a coin or a medal: these remain available, certainly through the Philatelic Bureau, apparently until the supply is exhausted. As these are produced in conjunction with the Royal Mint, presumably different criteria apply.

Creating your own Following the great rise in popularity of the first day cover in the 1960s, many companies starting offering unstamped pictorial envelopes appropriate for each new issue. Gradually their numbers have declined, and today are few. There remain, however, the envelopes provided by Royal Mail for each issue. These have an advantage: clearly they are created with the designs of the stamps in mind.

For a time Royal Mail not only provided the envelopes as 'first day covers', but also as 'commemorative covers' which could be used after the day of issue, but clearly would not as such receive a 'first day' cancellation.



PNC for the Berlin Airlift pane; a Royal Mail commemorative cover for the Village Churches issue; a TPO marking on the 1975 Railways issue; a Royal Mail Concorde souvenir cover; and four covers for the 2001 Weather stamps.

The whole area of commemorative covers is, of course, huge, with many events being marked by a souvenir cover and a special cancellation (see above centre, Concorde's first commercial flight to Washington). Often such covers bear an appropriate stamp. Frequently these are, albeit incorrectly, referred to as 'first day covers'. From time to time Royal Mail has itself issued commemorative covers, to mark special occasions.

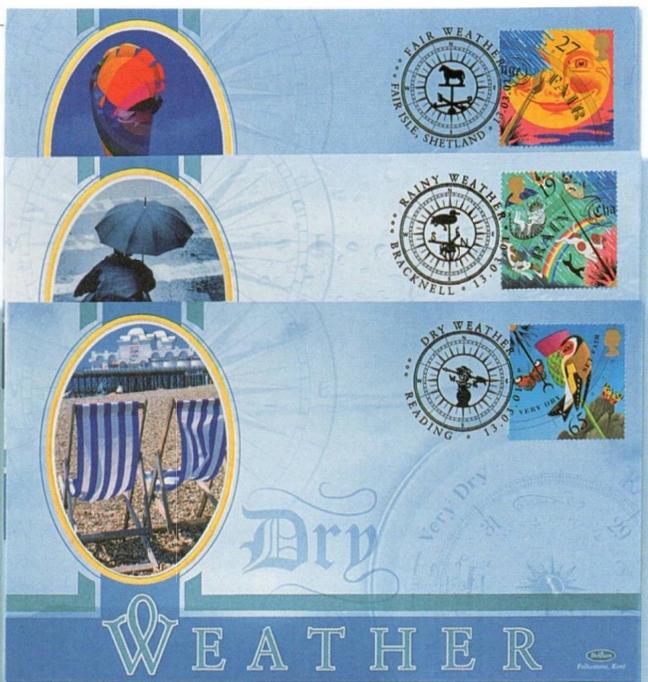
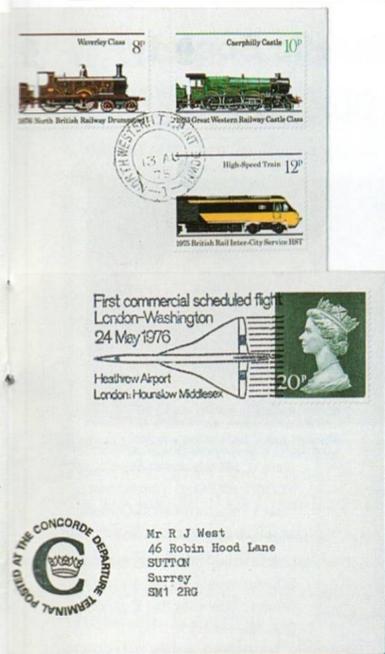
Operational markings There are many collectors who still prefer to have an operation mark on their covers, whether it be a circular datestamp applied over the post office counter (for a service such as 'Special Delivery') or a machine cancellation. There can be added interest if the place chosen has a connection with the theme of the stamps.

Other operational marks which have been applicable include those which were applied by the Travelling Post Offices. For any stamp issues with a 'railways' theme, these TPO marks proved particularly appropriate (see above, centre). Likewise the use of 'Paquebot' markings for issues which depicted ships.

Handstamps However, it is with pictorial handstamps that the greatest expansion has taken place. The fact that these are so easily sponsored has meant that their use has proliferated, notably for first days of issue, but also, as just mentioned, for other commemorative purposes.

The Post Office has helped: now each new issue has a pictorial handstamp available from Tallents House (Philatelic Bureau), and a separate design from a location appropriate to the theme of the stamps. This second handstamp is applied to covers posted in any of the philatelic posting boxes. A non-pictorial handstamp is also available.

When there was a widespread network of philatelic counters, each had its own pictorial handstamp – these no longer exist. For a time pictorial handstamps were also available from several key locations, such as the National Postal Museum, the London Chief Office, the post office at Trafalgar Square and at Windsor. Again these are no longer available. However, pictorial handstamps are still in use at a number of towns and cities around the UK, known as 'Permanent Philatelic Postmarks'. Examples can be obtained through the respective Special Handstamp Centres.



And today Today first day covers are a 'collectable' in their own right. There is a handful of suppliers who provide a complete package, doing their utmost to supply their collectors with a product which is different and attractive, even startling. There seems no end to the skill, ingenuity, and imagination of these producers. Often there are links with appropriate organisations, notably charities, offering the 'official' cover and cancellation. Autographs frequently form part of the equation. For some collectors, the resulting product is far removed from the simple requirement of proving when a stamp was first issued. These modern covers bring great pleasure to many collectors – can more be asked of a hobby?

Remember that the *British Postmark Bulletin* is available on annual subscription. Royal Mail also has available a booklet called *All About Postmarks*, which provides a guide to postmarking services (price £1.20).

Updates Thanks to readers, I can provide the following updates on information. Regarding Medical Mailing, Mr M. Tanner of Southampton reports the following:

- 4d Battle of Britain of 1965 with a machine 'first day of issue' cancellation for London sw1
- 4d Battle of Hastings of 1966 with a circular first day of issue handstamp for Battle in Sussex
- 4d Discovery of 1967 with a circular handstamp for London sw
- 3d Christmas issue of 1967 with both a machine 'first day of issue' cancellation and a circular handstamp, both for Bethlehem, Llandeilo.

He also has the 3d Botanical Congress with the machine slogan, but for Southampton.

Mr N Wood of Whitley Bay says he has a special cover from Tenorus Charities Wales, with the 5d Prince of Wales Investiture stamp with the machine slogan 'Investiture Day' in Welsh and English, but when he offered it on an Internet auction, no one seemed interested.

Finally, back to presentation packs, and British sets encapsulated in plastic. I wrote that the latest I had seen was for the 1974 Churchill set (see illustration in the April *Bulletin*, p239). Packs & Cards of Fleet in Hampshire report that they have seen one for the 1975 12p Inter-Parliamentary Conference stamp •

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