

## Off with her head! The first part of a series



This three-part article (to be continued in May and June) is abridged from chapter 5 of Douglas Muir's book *A Timeless Classic: The Evolution of Machin's Icon*, which will be published shortly by the British Postal Museum & Archive.

It is ironic that the actions of a republican Postmaster General, intended to remove The Queen's head from stamps, should ultimately lead instead to the greatest regal icon of the 20th century. The revolution which took place in British stamp design and issuing policy in the mid 1960s resulted in the timeless sculpture of The Queen by Arnold Machin.

Tony Benn was appointed Postmaster General by Harold Wilson in the new Labour government of October 1964. He took up his post with definite and determined ideas about stamps, namely to try and remove The Queen's head from them, as well as widening their scope. He had not been in office a month when he informed his shocked senior officials that he wanted commemorative issues without The Queen's head, and informed a meeting of the Post Office Board on 25 November of new criteria for stamp issues: 'to celebrate events of national or international importance,

to commemorate appropriate anniversaries and occasions, to reflect Britain's unique contribution to the arts and world affairs, to extend public patronage of the arts by promoting philately and to raise revenue.'

Only 10 months before, the *Philatelic Bulletin* (the GPO's new information sheet for stamp collectors) had felt able to announce, loftily: 'we receive many suggestions for [special stamp] issues and to keep their number within reasonable limits the policy of the Post Office is to confine them to marking outstanding national or international events and Royal and postal anniversaries. We do not mark anniversaries other than Royal and Postal ones nor do we issue stamps to support charities or other good causes.'

The result had been stamp issues for various international congresses or festivals (Lifeboat, Red Cross, Geographical, Botanical and Shakespeare) which may have coincided with an anniversary, and National Productivity Year, Nature Week, etc, but they were distinctly few in number. So the change now was dramatic and sudden.

Benn made his announcement in a written reply to a parliamentary question on 15 December and, referring to forthcoming 1965 issues, invited MPs and the public to submit suggestions to him as quickly as possible.

Examples of special issues prior to the changes of 1965: 1963 National Nature Week, 1964 Geographical Congress and 1964 Botanical Congress.



## on the origins of the Machin, by Douglas Muir

Paul Reilly, of the Council of Industrial Design, and Sir Kenneth Clark, Chairman of the COID's Stamp Advisory Committee, had a meeting with Benn on 13 January 1965, when he informed them of the proposed 1965 programme and that he wanted to establish a Fellowship in Minuscule Design. It was at this meeting that a new profile head of the Queen on definitives was first proposed. Discussion then continued about the design of commemorative stamps. Benn suggested that designers might have more scope if the stamp were designed 'independently of the Queen's Head'.

**First contact with David Gentleman** Undoubtedly, the most important suggestion from Benn's public invitation came with a letter from David Gentleman, who already had a number of accepted stamp designs to his credit. Recently, Gentleman described what happened.

'By 1964 I'd already designed enough stamps to know what the problems were – mainly how to fit the Queen's head in alongside anything else – and had discovered ways of coping with them. But I had also found out how immovable the Post Office's rules and usages were, particularly about this very subject. It was by a happy chance that Benn – determined, energetic, imaginative and eager for change – arrived just as I had become certain what these changes ought to be. So when he asked for suggestions I wrote to him proposing more interesting subject-matter and no Queen's head. This last suggestion was prompted not by any conscious republican leanings but purely by considerations of what would work best as designs.'

In his original letter he wrote that he was convinced that 'the main single drawback to the realisation of unified modern designs is the Monarch's head: not merely the unsatisfactory angle of the present photograph, but the traditional inclusion of the head at all.' He continued: 'The problem is only in part one of insufficient space: it is essentially a problem of reconciling two conflicting elements and conventions within one design. In practice, the stamp design has to be split into two parts: the head and the rest. This can be managed with ingenuity, but, although interesting results are possible, they will always remain at best adequate and increasingly repetitive solutions to the same problem.'

The alternative could be a title, which would be adaptable and readily absorbed into the design 'without as at present destroying it.' Suggestions were UNITED KINGDOM, UK OR GREAT BRITAIN. This gave Benn a great opportunity – to deal with the Queen's head in terms of design, rather than politically. Dismissing the official, predictably negative, draft reply he telephoned Gentleman and asked him to come and see him. 'In contrast with my earlier talks with Post Office officials the meeting was taken up with discussion not about what would be feasible or popular or acceptable to the Committee or to the Palace, but what was necessary and right.'

Thus began a unique co-operation between PMG and designer, and a lasting personal friendship. Often of like mind, the one was to inspire the other over 18 months of fervent, creative endeavour. ►



Opposite page: official photograph of the new Postmaster General, Anthony Wedgwood Benn, 1964. Above: designer David Gentleman, c1966.



Top row, from left: essay by Harrisons combining Karsh's portrait of Churchill with the Wilding definitive; an essay of Abram Games' design, which was preferred by the SAC; and an essay of Gentleman's design without The Queen's portrait (replaced with 'Great Britain').

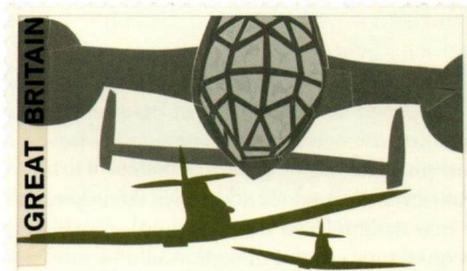
Bottom row: essays showing variations of accepted design by David Gentleman.

**Churchill stamp** Sir Winston Churchill had died on Sunday, 24 January. By the next day, Benn had decided he wanted a commemorative stamp. On his behalf, the question of Churchill's head appearing beside that of The Queen was raised by Harold Wilson with The Queen at his next audience on 28 January. She approved, although Benn had already publicly announced that a stamp would be issued. At the same time postal officials had approached David Gentleman, and invited him to submit designs quickly. The famous Karsh portrait of Churchill was to be used together with The Queen's head.

So it was that when Gentleman came to see Benn on 15 February he had already provided designs to the Post Office. Benn recorded that Gentleman had a Churchill stamp 'with a tiny Queen's head on Churchill's massive shoulder, and asked whether he could have the stamp reprinted without the Queen's head to see what it looked like. I said I could see no objection to this and that it would go before the Stamp Advisory Committee.' The SAC met the next day, and Benn was furious to discover that Gentleman's design without The Queen's head had not been shown to them. Subsequently, at his insistence, essays were printed in this format.

In the accepted designs, detail about a white line dividing Queen from commoner, inserted in both of Gentleman's designs rather than just the one as supplied, caused arguments with the designer and difficulties for the printers. The final designs were sombre, but very effective, conveying Churchill's overwhelming contribution, and in so doing reducing the Queen's head to a small cameo in comparison.

**Battle of Britain stamps and the Stamp Advisory Committee** When David Gentleman wrote his radical letter to the Postmaster General on 21 January he was already at work on designs for proposed stamps marking the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. At his first meeting with Benn, as already noted, it was agreed that his Churchill design would be essayed without The Queen's head. Gentleman decided to use the Battle of Britain commission as an opportunity to experiment with these ideas: specifically the omission of The Queen's head from the outset, and the printing of stamp designs together in se-tenant blocks.



Perhaps significantly, there seem to be no minutes of the meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee at which the resulting designs were first shown. Gentleman provided a synopsis to go with the designs. In February he had been warned by the Post Office about the politics surrounding the issue. Preference would be given to designs which were not too controversial, as it was a time when the government wanted to be on good terms with the Germans in connection with possible entry to the EEC and The Queen's forthcoming visit. Tactful handling was required and 'flaming Heinkels etc' should be balanced by ack-ack batteries and fire over London with the familiar vapour trails of high-flying aircraft.

In his synopsis, Gentleman discussed at some length avoiding a controversial approach. He concentrated instead on the two types of plane most identified with the Battle of Britain – the Hurricane and the Spitfire. 'The familiar and acceptable convention of aircraft recognition silhouettes has therefore been developed purposely in these designs in order to tone down a too lurid or propaganda interpretation of what was, after all, the essential basis of the Battle of Britain – duels in the air.' ▶

9 March 1965: six of David Gentleman's original designs for the Battle of Britain issue, without The Queen's head. Refined versions of the lower four designs were eventually included in the issued stamp set, with The Queen's head replacing 'Great Britain'.

*'I said that the new Government saw stamps in an entirely new context, as part of the arts, and not just as adhesive money labels for postage purposes.'* Tony Benn

He said almost nothing about The Queen's head – merely noting that the designs were submitted without it. A sample repeat design indicated how the designs could be adapted. Detail was given about printing multiple designs in one sheet.

The Committee saw all the designs and it was explained to them that Gentleman had exceeded his brief. They selected three of his designs, to be returned to him for the inclusion of The Queen's head. They ignored the idea of se-tenant stamps.

The next morning Gentleman had breakfast with Benn, who was seeing The Queen that day. Benn was enthralled with the designs and took them with him. His trip to the Palace is described, with great gusto, in his diaries.

He had prepared his speech carefully. 'What I wanted to do was to talk about stamp design policy generally. I said that the new Government saw stamps in an entirely new context as part of the arts and not just as adhesive money labels for postage purposes. That was why we had set up a Fellowship in Minuscule Design and wanted to improve design generally.'

Specifically, he wanted to have new definitives with 'a more beautiful picture of the Queen on them'. On commemoratives, the criteria had been broadened and designers were keen to produce pictorial stamps – a most exciting field that had never been explored.

"However", I said, "this raised the whole question of the use of the head on the stamps." The Queen frowned and smiled. I said that there was a view held by many designers that the necessity of depicting the head on the stamp was restrictive and embarrassing.

"The Queen of course was extremely anxious not to give the impression that she was the obstacle to new design. I said that I foresaw a controversy developing about the heads on stamps which I thought would be most undesirable. I said the pressure to review this particular aspect of our stamp design policy was growing and at the same time there would be great opposition to taking the head off the stamp unless it were done with royal consent and approval. In these circumstances it seemed to me that the right thing to do was for us to establish that designers could put in any designs they liked, and that they could all be submitted to The Queen for approval.'

The Queen then indicated that she knew that in some Commonwealth countries the head had been removed, or a crown substituted. Benn said that all he wanted was the right to submit stamps of all kinds to her. Then she said she had never seen any of these stamps and would be interested.

I said, "Well, I've got some in my bag." The Queen wanted me to leave the new designs with her but I explained the difficulties and she agreed to see them on the spot, so I spread out on the floor twelve huge design models of the stamps provided by Gentleman and one after the other passed up to the Queen the Battle of Britain stamps bearing the words "Great Britain" and no royal head on them...'

At the end he declared himself delighted to hear he could submit things to her for her consideration •