

Harrison and Sons Photogravure
National Savings Stamps, 1921
Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) has more than a lifetime's-worth of files for examination and, every so often, reveals gems in a document that I would otherwise not have considered looking at. This is largely thanks to the Online Catalogue and its search engine to be found at www.postalheritage.org.uk that enables exploration of entries in the comfort of your own home, prior to visiting Freeling House.

I have been looking at the history of Harrison and Sons early days of stamp printing and the published literature states that it was in 1923, around the time when they had lost the contract for printing Great Britain definitive low value stamps to its rival Waterlow and Sons, that the company first produced stamps for Egypt by the relatively new rotary photogravure process.

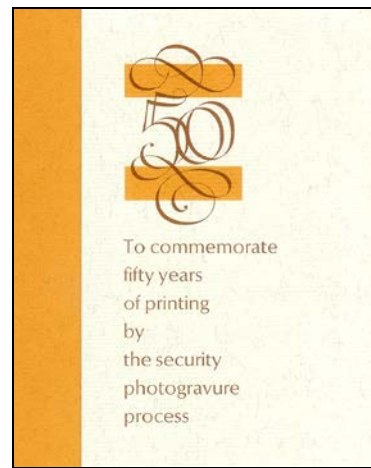
This was a classic case of one door closing as another opened, although the Egypt stamps had really come about by accident. It is on record (*Postage Stamps in the Making* by Fred J Melville and John Easton, 1949, and elsewhere) that it had originally been intended to print this issue by line-engraving, with the manufacturing of the printing plates being sub-contracted to Perkins Bacon by Harrison and Sons. Cairo demanded proofs before the plates could be created and so emergency proofs were hastily made by Harrison and Sons in photogravure from early line-engraved essays. Those approving these submitted proofs in Egypt preferred the photogravure examples and abandoned the idea of printing by line-engraving in favour of photogravure.



**An imperforate photogravure proof
for Egypt by Harrison and Sons**



**The first country to use photogravure for
stamps was Bavaria in 1914.**



Close-ups of a commemorative menu designed by Jeffery Matthews MBE that celebrated 50 years of photogravure printing by Harrison and Sons. It incorporated a mint example of one of the issued 1923 Egyptian stamps

Taking everything into consideration, it would seem reasonable to assume that Harrison and Sons did not have the capability to print stamps by photogravure before the Egypt issue, but File 17 in Post Class 52 reveals otherwise.

On 30 March 1921, the Stamp Section within Post Office Stores, London, placed an order under contract number 17054P for 25 million National Savings Stamps “by the photogravure process on watermarked paper...single colour... to be carried out at your works at Hayes, Middlesex...at the rate of 5 million stamps per week... at a price of 2 3/8d per 1000 stamps”.

The Tender (number A5736, dated 16 February 1921) that Harrison and Sons had been sent previously, clearly detailed what was expected of them, right down to the size of the perforation holes (.04 inch diameter) and the gum (pure Gum Arabic, free from any poisonous or deleterious substance). The inks were to be quick drying, free from lead and “of such character as to be absolutely secure against the successful removal, without material alteration to the colour of the stamps”.

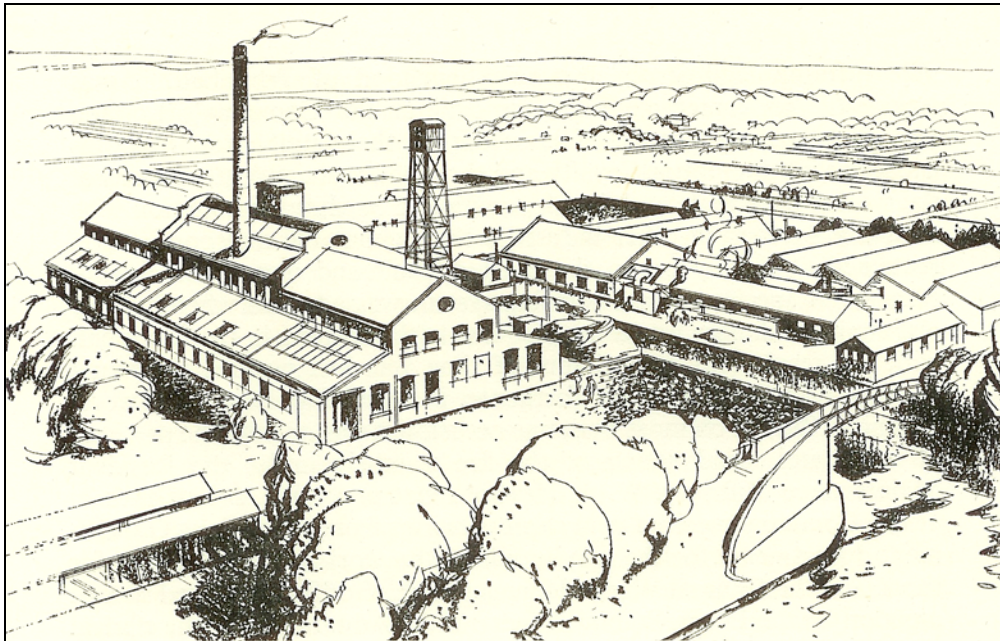
[Image here, once purchased from dealer!]

**The Harrison and Sons 1921
6d National Savings Stamp, the design of which
has been attributed to Sir Bertram Mackennal RA**

Clause six went on to record the methods to be adopted for the safe custody of negatives and cylinders, making this Post Office Tender potentially one of the first to allow for the particular requirements of the photogravure production process by mentioning the photographic negatives that were so integral to this printing method.

The publication *Harrison: A Family Imprint* (Harrison and Sons Ltd., London, 1950) was printed to commemorate the bicentenary of the company. There is a section

about the Hayes plant that states: “The Company were among the first printers to realize the possibilities of the new photogravure process and installed an initial press for this purpose. The first essay was for postage stamps for the reproduction of King Fuad’s portrait on the Egyptian issue which was required to replace the pictorial series, the contract for which was at that time being carried out at Hayes by the surface printed method.”



The extensive Hayes printing plant.
Taken from *Harrison: A Family Imprint*.

The book continues: “There were many difficulties to be overcome on account of the primitive means available at this early stage of photogravure development. Looking back one realises the skill and patient improvisation that was needed in order to achieve what was a creditable result of that day.”

The date when the initial photogravure press had been installed at Hayes is not revealed, but it is obvious that Harrison and Sons were ahead of the British competition in using this “new” printing process as early as 1921, so it is perhaps surprising that they make no mention in the book of what is probably their first stamp production run by this method, despite it being a savings, rather than postage, stamp.

There are certainly no files extant at BPMA indicating rejection by the GPO due to quality of any batch of National Savings stamps. However, Sir Kingsley Wood, Postmaster General, stated when considering a change of production method that letterpress “serves its purpose” but agreed that for an extra £2,500 per year the public would get “a better looking stamp” if photogravure was to be used. James Mackay wrote in *Gibbons Stamp Monthly*, September 1993, about how Sir Kingsley had added a rider that “so far as our experience of photogravure stamps goes – National Savings – there is considerable variation in the shade from stamp to stamp, even on the same sheet”.

Maybe the sentence in the Harrison and Sons bicentenary book that reads: “A high standard of output was aimed at and *finally* achieved” (my italics) holds the key, for perhaps the quality did not meet the very exacting standards that the company was set to become renowned for.

Readers will no doubt be aware that it was not until over a decade later, in 1934, that our own British definitive stamps first utilised the photogravure printing method. It remains the process of choice by Royal Mail to this day for its definitive range of stamps, albeit that the quality of offset lithography printing has caught-up with or,

some might even say, passed that of gravure and will conceivably one day totally supplant it.

Thanks are offered to the staff at The British Postal Museum & Archive, the National Philatelic Society Library, Royal Philatelic Society Library, Mike Holt and John F Harley for their assistance during research for this article.

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(1100 words)