

1936: Poached Egg Testing Labels 'A Great Britain Stamp Sensation'

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'Target Design' is the term mainly used by the GPO to describe this label. Few collectors gave it this terminology, though, as 'Poached Eggs' gained almost universal acceptance after the initial plethora of names, so is the term used within this article. The GPO did, eventually, succumb to the collector term and talked of poached eggs in official documentation.



The so-called "Stamp Sensation"

'Great Britain Stamp Sensation' ran the heading of an article in *Stamp Collecting Weekly* (6 March 1937) about the so-called poached egg labels used by the British Post Office to test stamp vending machines. Few philatelic items have aroused so much interest and correspondence in the stamp and lay press as these humble little labels. The law of supply and demand saw prices soar to very high levels and drop right back again as the market became flooded with them, both on and off cover!

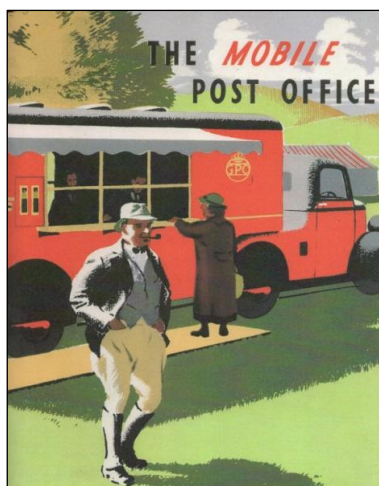
Background

Post Office vending machine services gradually became more widespread by the 1930s as the consumer expected round-the clock facilities for the purchasing of postage stamps. Technology was the answer and the Post Office was at the forefront then, as now with the newly introduced *Post & Go* units, in meeting the needs of its customers.

Machinery, however good, requires a certain amount of attention and testing to ensure its smooth running and these labels were designed to enable Post Office engineers to simulate a live environment. There was never any intention that they should become collectors' items.

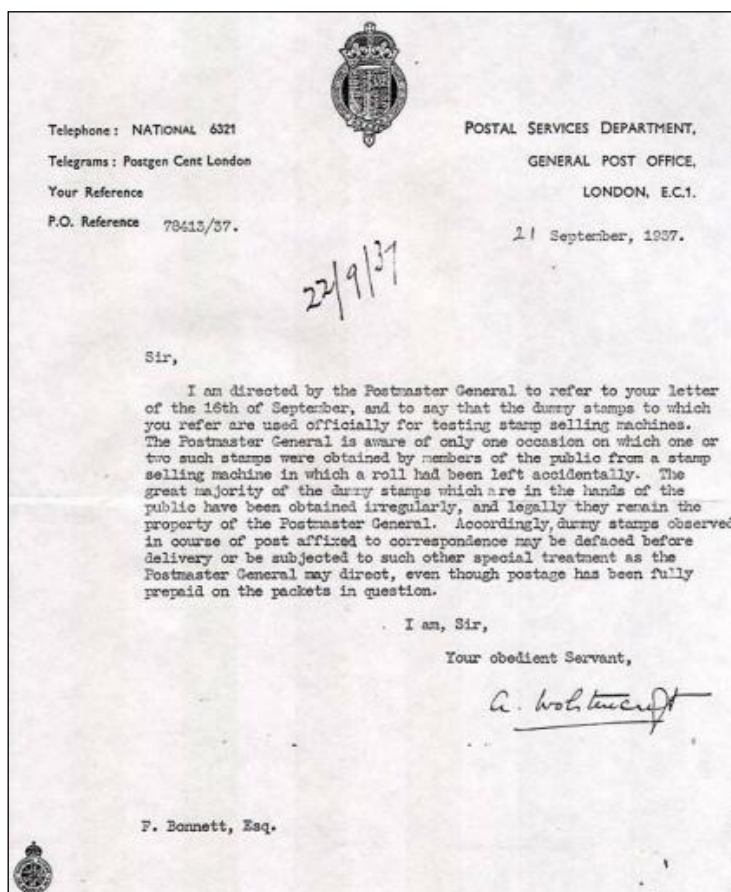
Poached eggs is the name that has stuck when describing these labels due to their design, but at the time they were also referred to as 'shadow stamps', 'green blobs', 'target stamps' (the official GPO term), 'mystery stamps', 'eclipse stamps', 'dummy stamps', etc.

A great deal of excitement was generated at the time of their discovery and rumours abounded about the way they had been sold from stamp vending machines in exchange for a halfpenny coin. Nobody, however, was able to prove conclusively that they had been sold and any examples on cover came from supplies obtained by collectors and dealers either illicitly (i.e. via the Post Office 'back door') or from the newly fitted-out Mobile Post Office designed to serve at agricultural shows and the like.



The first Mobile PO, with SVMs visible at left
(Image courtesy BPMA)

During 1936 this vehicle was being taken on demonstration tours and the labels were freely available to members of the public and press at each of the stops made, but never were they provided in exchange for money. However, a letter sold on eBay some time ago is shown below as this implies that there was an occasion when the labels were sold in error.



The fact that supplies were subsequently affixed in all imaginable combinations to envelopes and postcards and then dropped in letter boxes or, if registered, handed over a counter where they received a cancellation, is not proof of their validity. It merely shows that the Post Office employees demonstrated a lack of care when exercising their duties.

Technical Details

The labels were printed by photogravure in green ink in the same colour as the then current halfpenny definitive stamp and the amount of ink was intended to be exactly the same as on the definitive to best simulate one, possibly following problems with the previous St Andrew's Cross design.



GvR watermark
(Image courtesy Graham Eyre)

They were printed on normal stock paper during 1936, i.e. on GVR watermarked paper utilising triple row comb perforation. Delivery was by vertical coils, i.e. each label was joined to the next at the top and bottom rather than by both sides (which is known as horizontal delivery).

Their designer is not recorded, but a subsequent FTPO grey-black issue, the design of which was largely based on that of the first issue, was by a Mr Dell of the GPO, so it is reasonable to assume that he might have been responsible for the issue in question. Printing was by Harrison and Sons Limited.



An almost complete roll of 960 poached eggs,
but sadly missing its unprinted leader

What the Press Said

Much philatelic reporting followed the issue of the labels and the benefit of hindsight makes some of the comments laughable today.

- **March 1937:** "...as to the value, we can only draw comparison with the 'Prussian blue' (1935 Silver Jubilee) variety which is listed at, say, £30 mint, £40 used. The shadow stamp would seem to be much scarcer..."

"Secure specimens before prices eclipse even a 'Post Office Mauritius' or 'Bermuda Postmaster'."

April 1937: "The greatest rarity known to philately of recent times", "Will demand a really high price in the future", "Don't expect them to be a gilt edged investment" – perhaps, finally, the voice of reason!

Yours - at a Price

Investors who bought-up stocks in the early days had their fingers burnt and the final quotation in "What the press said", above, was the best advice as it turned out, for the current prices of the 'Prussian Blue', 'Post Office Mauritius' and 'Bermuda Postmaster' stamps run into many thousands of pounds, whereas the 'Poached Egg' is still available for as little as 20p unused!

By March 1937, the philatelic trade had started to latch on to the demand for the labels and mint copies were being sold 'at the best offer received'. By the following month supplies had improved and ten shillings (50p) seemed to be the going rate. During May prices were varying between 2s 3d to 7s 6d (11p to 37.5p) but by September they were on offer at a mere 6d (2.5p) each on a 'positively last chance' basis.

During May of 1937 dealers started producing philatelic covers in earnest in an attempt at satisfying the demand that they themselves had created. Various combinations of cover were produced as the following items taken from various advertisements of that month show: 'Halfpenny stamp and poached egg on postcard 10/- (50p)'; 'Poached egg and 1d KGVI stamp used first day 25/- (£1.25)'; '3 poached eggs joined together on cover 98/- (£4.90)'; 'Poached egg used on Registered cover £2'; '2 poached eggs with a halfpenny KGVI used first day 50/- (£2.50)'.

These covers have proved to be a better buy than the mint labels, but could not be termed an investment by any stretch of the imagination.

Trafficking Made Illegal

In August 1937 several stamp dealers were visited by members of the GPO Special Investigations Branch. It was claimed that they were dealing in property stolen from the Post Office and an undertaking had to be given by them not to trade in the labels any more.

However, by February 1938, following the issue of the grey-black testing labels, trading on the philatelic market was once more permitted by the postal authorities. The short but active life of the 'Great Britain Stamp Sensation' had drawn to a close.

Test Roll Orders in BPMA Files

POST 52/952	Stamp Rolls - Dummy rolls for testing selling machines <i>This is a correspondence file with an index to the thirteen sections at the front. This whole file relates to dummy rolls, from request for, to reference to the contract, order, and supply of.</i>	1922-1954
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<u>Order / Date</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Supplied to</u>	<u>Roll Cost</u>	<u>Order Value</u>
1. December 1935	2,400 rolls	Stamp Section, Somerset House	17s 11d (89.5p) %*	£21.48
			* meaning "per hundred rolls"	

On 28 November 1935, in a note from the Stores Department to The Controller, the first mention appears on file of a desire on the part of engineers to have dummy labels that more closely resembled "real" stamps. This means that they must be by the same printing process, on the same watermarked paper and with the same amount of ink on them. The Engineering Department had explained that "there is a marked difference of behaviour between a roll of live stamps and a roll of dummy stamps in vending machines".

Quotes were obtained for the production of new labels and much correspondence discusses issues with cylinders and how they would be paid for over the various production runs of the labels. This was eventually resolved and on 12 December 1935 Harrison wrote to The Controller, PO Stores stating: "We beg to enclose roughout for the target design, which we believe will be suitable for the new Dummy Rolls, and, we think, will carry approximately the same amount of ink as the Postage Stamp."

On 23 December 1935, an internal GPO instruction was issued to commission Harrison to print 2,000 rolls on "watermarked (RCO) paper – print in 1/2d colour (green). These dummy stamps to be manufactured with the same care as 'live' rolls."

On 30 December 1935, The Controller got back to Harrison regarding the roughout design advising that: "the outline of the design is satisfactory, but it would be preferred if the centre oval were made slightly larger and the remaining surface made to consist of a gradation of dark to light, working from centre to edge. The corner spaces in the angles of the rectangle might be made slightly dark. The idea is to simulate a real stamp so far as quantity, quality and distribution of ink is concerned." Unfortunately, the roughout design is not accompanying the file.

The next item on file is an order dated 30 December 1935 to Harrison for 2,400 rolls. The first consignment was delivered on 22 January 1936 and comprised 240 rolls, followed by 760 rolls (23rd), 400 rolls (24th), 500 rolls (27th), with the final part of the "good" rolls being delivered on 30 January 1936 (308 rolls). This totalled 2,208 rolls and by the middle of March the balance of the order was completed in the form of 192 "waste" rolls.

There are then many items of correspondence on file relating to the escape of the poached eggs into the collector market and discussions as to how to resolve the problem, with a new design being considered the only solution. Correspondence with Hall Telephone Accessories (HTA), the SVM manufacturer, shows that they were supplied with the poached egg labels and could be a further source of the leak to the public and HTA was instructed to tighten-up procedures.

A Memorandum dated March 1937 indicates that there were two printings of the poached eggs, the first being for 2,208 rolls (order 1, as detailed above) and "after these had been tried and approved by the Engineering Department", order 2 (detailed below under POST 52/179) was placed comprising 10,918 rolls. It notes that: "of the total, about 6,400 have been issued to the Engineering Department and 6,700 remain in stock." The unused stock was worth £70 and may be a reason why they continued in use until replaced by the black FTPO design.



POST 52/1379	Watermarked paper-non value items <i>This file has one sheet of correspondence. In future, it says, watermarked paper will be supplied to the Engineering Department for testing stamp vending machines, in place of the plain rolls used hitherto.</i>	1936
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A letter dated 15 February 1936 from D Dell of the PO Stores Department to the Accountant General's Department recorded that watermarked paper would be used henceforth for the dummy testing rolls supplied to the Engineering Department "in lieu of the plain rolls used hitherto". "Plain" in this context probably relates to unwatermarked, rather than unprinted.



POST 52/179	Harrison and Sons Contract No. 72257 for Dummy Rolls for testing stamp selling machines <i>Based on Tender No. C. 1632 covering your letters WHR/DMS of 20 November and 10 December 1935 for 12,000 Rolls for testing stamp vending machines.</i>	1936
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<u>Order / Date</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Supplied to</u>	<u>Roll Cost</u>	<u>Order Value</u>
2. March 1936	12,000 rolls	Stamp Section, Somerset House	17s 11d (89.5p) %* * meaning "per hundred rolls"	£107.40

The Stamp Section wrote on 27 February 1936 to Contracts Section: "...Supplies are urgently required by the Engineering Department to replace their stocks which are being scrapped." What design was being scrapped? Could it be the light rectangle design? Or maybe they had still been using blank paper for some of the testing requirements, which now needed to be replaced by one with a design and ink to best replicate stamp vending conditions. We will probably never know!

Stores Order dated 10 March 1936 states: "To be Continuous Rolls each containing 960 Gummed pieces of paper similar to a Unified stamp. To be wound on stiff cores similar to those used for Roll W. Each piece to be printed in photogravure in 1/2d green colour, with the design already approved and to be on Royal Cipher watermarked paper which will be supplied by the Department. The Rolls to be manufactured at the rate of 6,000 at the earliest possible moment and 1,000 per month thereafter. Price includes 11d (4.5p) per 100 Rolls towards liquidation of cost of two cylinders (one for the light rectangle design already made and one for fully inked design in photogravure now ordered) at £22 each, spread over a total requirement of 96,000 Rolls by 31 December 1943."

A handwritten, undated note records quantities supplied, which were 1000 "good" rolls in March 1936 and 9,918 in April 1936. An additional 1,082 "waste" rolls were also produced in April, totalling the 12,000 rolls ordered.

On 13 March 1937, "The Controller" wrote to Harrison advising that "...It seems unlikely that any further supplies of dummy rolls of the present *designs** will be required ...advise the unexpired value of the two printing cylinders. The cylinders will be taken over by the Department's Control Officer."

**my emboldened italics. Note use of plural word 'designs', i.e. the poached egg and St Andrew's Cross label cylinders.*



POST 33/5656	Stamp vending machines: extracts of minutes on dummy stamps <i>This file comprises extracts from Minutes of Stamp Selling Machine Committee Meetings.</i>	1936-1939
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9 December 1936

This meeting was shown an example of a letter bearing one of the poached egg labels used on a letter and extracts from stamp magazines were read out. "It was decided to change the design of the dummy stamps, and Mr Dell undertook to examine the possibility of printing them in black".

26 January 1937

"Mr Dell produced a design for new stamps which were to be printed in black."

16 March 1937

The question was raised as to whether a notice in the Post Office Circular was necessary regarding the treatment of letters bearing poached eggs. It was decided that London Postal Region should notify its offices, but that no further action was needed.

7 September 1937

A Colonel Reid suggested to the meeting that: "...he would recommend, as a temporary expedient, the provision of blank rolls of unwater-marked (*sic*) paper for ordinary testing purposes provided sufficient of the "poached egg" type were retained for specialised testing work". Mr Dell advised that this would not be a problem and would instruct the printer accordingly.

Later correspondence on file dated 6 October 1937 reveals that it would be no harder for Harrison to print labels bearing a design than to produce blank rolls and so the unprinted stock was not procured, especially as the new half-width press was almost ready to print the black FTPO design.

On 8 January 1938, Stores Department wrote to the Postal Services Department advising that stocks of the new FTPO label were now available. Instructions on how to destroy the now-obsolete poached egg design were included in this, and in later, correspondence. It here that we learn for sure that: "the bands* of the 'target' rolls are blank". **i.e. leaders or wrappers.*



This article is believed to be the first time that two separate printings of the poached egg labels have been identified as existing.

Collectors with several examples of the poached eggs would be well advised to check for any obvious differences between their labels, as there may be something that makes for two separate catalogue types.

A Problem with Damp in Stamp Selling Machines

Collector Les Wilkinson has produced an interesting web-based article about the problem of damp in SVMs and how attempts were made to overcome it by using dummy stamp rolls, including the poached egg and grey-black KGV FTPO labels.

As of July 2009, a visit to www.les-wilkinson.co.uk/article11.php would enable one to read his researches. Be aware that due to the transitory nature of the internet his website URL may no longer be available by the time you read this article.

Bibliography

The following contemporaneous stamp magazines contain references to the poached eggs. The respective issue dates are shown below together with page number(s) in brackets.

Stamp Collecting Weekly [GB]

1936: October 3 (63), November 21 (287).

1937: March 6 (837); March 13 (874); March 20 (920); March 27 (6, 10); April 3 (1, 51);
April 10 (81, 82, 93); April 17 (117); April 24 (40); May 1 (76, 180, 197);
May 29 (324); June 5 (369); August 21 (716); September 11 (829).

1938: February 26 (767); March 5 (811).

Philatelic Magazine [GB]

1937: April 16 (343); April 30 (388, 389); May 28 (515).

Articles published in later years add little to the story, indeed they tend to continue to reproduce factual inaccuracies of the early years.