

# International Security Printers Relocates to i54

By Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

On 30 October 2014, Glenn Morgan was privileged to be the only philatelic writer present at the royal opening of the new premises of International Security Printers Ltd; what follows is an exclusive report of the day and the background to the factory move.



An external view of the new premises

Founded as Walsall Lithographic in 1894, its first stamps appeared in 1963. Walsall Security Printers (WSP) was created as a separate company in 1966 to concentrate on the specialist skills required for stamp printing. WSP purchased Courvoisier of Switzerland in 2001, transferring production into Walsall. In 2004 it acquired Cartor Security Printing (CSP) of La Loupe, France, from where it still trades, subsequently moving Courvoisier production to France before later retiring the brand name.

A new company, International Security Printers Ltd (ISP), was established in 2004 to head-up these trading companies, offering the services and combined resources of both manufacturing plants to its clients. Incidentally, there is a misconception among some in philately that ISP no longer intends using the Walsall and Cartor brand names, but this is not currently the case.

When the opportunity arose in 2008 for Paul White and Ian Brigham (now joint managing directors) to undertake a management buy-out of ISP they were the ideal choices, as they have spent most of their careers in the security printing industry.

In 2012 the bold decision was taken to move from Walsall, its home for 120 years, as space was tight and access difficult. For Paul and Ian to have made this financial commitment during such tough economic times is proof that they see stamps as a part of daily life for years to come, despite some collectors talking of the imminent demise of stamps due to the internet.

## Stylish premises

i54 Business Park is an Advanced Manufacturing Site alongside the M54 three miles from Wolverhampton and is already home to Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), MOOG and Eurofins. The old premises are under 20 minutes away, ensuring that ISP would retain its 80 highly skilled and motivated employees, one of whom has worked there for a staggering 45 years.

Speaking at the time of purchasing the new premises, Paul said: *'This is a major investment and key strategic acquisition for the company. The new manufacturing premises on the prestigious i54 site, coupled with an ambitious programme of investment in state of the art printing technologies will provide us with a firm foundation from which to expand our business operations.'*



The royal party arrive and are welcomed by Paul White, with Ian Brigham and their respective wives waiting to be introduced



The extent of the new factory is impressive and initially comprises 70,000sq ft. What's more, ISP has future-proofed the site by having purchased five acres of land, giving it capacity for expansion by a further 30,000sq ft when expected increased production levels materialise. Already more than 70 per cent of total stamp output is produced for overseas markets, including key contracts for postal administrations in Europe and Japan, making ISP a major export success.

The distinctive low profile building has an aluminium rain screen system designed to represent colour build-up, while a louvered 'brise-soleil' feature at the entrance canopy imitates the stacking of stamp sheets. The use of wooden textures and pebbles with water features allude to the raw materials used in the printing process. All are subtle touches indicative of the great care and attention taken by the architects and builders.

The climate controlled print works, which also incorporates testing and quality control facilities, is protected by the latest security features that monitor the premises, staff and visitors constantly.

And so to the opening day...

## By invitation only

Access to the event was restricted to a small number of guests, it is a security printers after all, with Her Majesty The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh being guests of honour. Security at i54 was understandably high with a strong police presence, but security checks were never intrusive and always good humoured.



The Queen has only visited one other printer specialising in stamp production during her long reign and that was when she went to Harrison and Sons, so a visit to ISP was long overdue and a richly deserved honour.

The company has royal associations dating back to the first Tongan gold foil stamps that had rolled off the presses at Walsall Lithographic in 1963. It entertained its first royal dignitary in 1972 and again in 1981 when Tongan King Tāufa'āhau Tupou IV (1918–2006) visited. A further royal connection is that 2014 marked 25 years of printing stamps for Royal Mail, hundreds of millions of which continue to depict the Arnold Machin sculpted image of Her Majesty.

Guests from some of the 180 administrations that ISP has printed stamps for were present, including far-away Japan Post. Other post offices based closer to home included Royal Mail, PostNL (Netherlands), Jersey Post, Luxembourg Post and La Poste (France).

There were also attendees from those involved in making the move happen, including the all-important bankers: Allied Irish Bank (UK), architects: Tweedale, builders: A&H Construction and project managers MacMullen Associates.

It was also good to be able to re-acquaint myself with three of the managerial team from Cartor, Bruno Delmer, Fabrice Pennec and Karine Zaworski, all of whom had looked after me royally on my last visit to Meauce.

## The royal party arrives

With guests enjoying a drinks reception with ISP directors and staff in the viewing gallery, there was growing excitement as the time for arrival of the royal party drew ever nearer. At 11.15a.m., Her Majesty (dressed in a teal coloured dress and coat with matching hat) and Prince Philip (wearing a navy suit) arrived in a cavalcade of three Range Rovers and a large police escort, having arrived in the city of Wolverhampton some 15 minutes previously on the Royal Train. There was much cheering and waving from friends and family of the company who had been especially invited to witness the event from the grounds.

Just outside the building's main reception, Her Majesty and Prince Philip, together with Her Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Staffordshire Mr Ian Dudson and his wife, were welcomed by Paul and Ian and their respective wives. Once escorted inside to the main office suites 12 key guests, including Andrew Hammond of Royal Mail, MD of Royal Mail Stamps, and Michel Sefi, Keeper of the Royal Philatelic Collection, were presented to the royal party, who then had a personal tour of the manufacturing facilities.

Observing the factory floor from the viewing gallery, it was clear to me that The Queen and Duke were enjoying their time at ISP, indeed the local *Western Daily Press* newspaper reported that on seeing the



The royal party in discussion



The Duke of Edinburgh with ISP Managing Director, Ian Brigham



Her Majesty officially opens the new premises



Her Majesty signs the visitor's book

new Italian gravure press, the Duke joked: 'Have you learned to speak Italian, or have you taught it to speak English?'

The tour was followed by the official opening ceremony, where Her Majesty unveiled a commemorative plaque, signed the visitor's book and was given a unique gift comprising of a specially framed engraving of the new premises superimposed with a large 1st Class Machin head and commemorative wording. The formal proceedings were concluded when a staff member's young daughter, Miss Amelia Hughes aged 5, presented the Queen with a flower posy.

At 12.05p.m. the royal party departed for their next duty of the day at JLRs engine plant amid more flag waving and clapping as they left. Paul and Ian were finally able to breathe a sigh of relief that many months of intense preparation had all gone to plan.

## Guests tour the manufacturing facility

With the opening formalities over, it was the guests' opportunity to tour the stamp factory and to see where more of the £8 million total investment had gone. I was in the group led by Paul and for the next 47 minutes was totally immersed in stamp production, my favourite aspect of philately.

There are four temperature and humidity controlled areas: (1) the print room, offering gravure and litho production; (2) a die-cutting area for self-adhesive stamps; (3) a philatelic bureau and fulfilment area preparing collector and retailer items, and (4) a finishing and inspection area.



### 1) The Print Room.

A newly installed £2 million gravure press made by Cerutti of Italy comprises its high-speed model R981, equipped with quick change-over trolleys and dedicated to printing stamps. Handling reels of up to 800mm wide, it runs at up to 350 metres per minute, but it was purposely slowed down to 60m.p.m. for our visit. Two-sided self-adhesive stamp booklets were on-press, with production of an amazing 1.5 million of them per hour being achievable, that's some 18 million stamps.

The Cerutti offers 100 per cent quality control and 100 per cent inspection across the whole web front and back and can slit the reel to suit the finishing machine intended for use ready for die cutting and finishing at a later time.

This ten-unit press was directly installed into a dedicated print room at the new premises. An early practical completion of the press room some three months earlier was factored into the build schedule so that the press could be fully constructed and be operational by the end of September which would then coincide with the rest of the plant being relocated from Walsall. Its first production job was a multimillion product run of Horizon labels which are the large gold self-adhesive Machin Head labels used by Royal Mail to affix to parcels.

The two nine-unit Chesnut gravure presses did not move across as they were not required following the Cerutti purchase and were, in any event, nearing the end of their useful lives. The Cerutti is however joined by an existing press from Midland Road, namely the ten-unit German Müller Martini A52 offset press with kiss-cutting, UV drying and sheeting. On the opening day, the A52 was printing presentation packs for a forthcoming stamp issue rather than stamps.

### 2) Die-cutting.

This area has machinery with die-cutting plates (think pastry cutters) that cut through the surface of the stamp paper, while not going through the backing paper, matrix stripping the waste around each stamp. Two camera systems, front and back, detect if there is a missing stamp accidentally lifted by the stripper and highlights any other problem, diverting the spoils away from the good stock without human intervention.

In the case of stamp booklets, they are then separated into singles, folded and slit into their individual books. 50 copies are then counted by machine, cello-wrapped and bar-coded before being check-weighted, boxed into 1000s, labelled and re-weighed to ensure accuracy.

### 3) Philatelic Bureau and fulfilment.

Originally formed as a partnership with Dutch logistics company TNT NV (and now known as PostNL), the Philatelic Bureau was purchased outright in 2000 and goes from strength-to-strength under the management of Phil Egginton, the Bureau Commercial Manager. It is from here that philatelic items are created or assembled for an increasing number of worldwide postal administrations, including Royal Mail and PostNL.

First day covers can have water-activated



Base picture: Paul White discusses the Apollo inspection system (bottom right) with guests, while checking staff manually examine stock

stamps affixed by machine from hoppers that advance the stamps, dampen and lower them into position, while self-adhesive stamps are ideally supplied from coils that roll the stamp onto the cover. Envelopes are then cancelled, either by a self-finking date-stamp or by adapted platen presses using flexography.

'Packs' can now vary greatly in their style, with yearbooks or year packs, f.d.c. or miniature sheet packs or more traditional presentation packs, all created by Bureau staff on-site. Assembly equipment lifts the carrier strips and inserts each item from hoppers automatically.

Another operation is the creation of stamp carriers. Put simply, plain or pre-printed card on a reel is advanced, glue lines are applied and clear film is then placed on top, marrying the two substrates. Knives then slit through the film below each glue line and they are cut into single carriers.

The newest function of the bureau is its fulfilment area. ISP now processes orders for individual collectors of PostNL and for Dutch retailers. Picking and packing lists are created from daily data sent from Holland, with staff taking ordered items from stock printed or stored by ISP. Packing and despatch ensures next day delivery in Holland. The Bureau



presently processes several thousand orders per day, with some being quite large. Paul said: 'It's a bit like Amazon, but on a philatelic scale'.

#### 4) Finishing and Inspection.

Some staff were seen inspecting stock, sheet by sheet, while others were individually checking for marks on a gold foil item due to be mounted onto stamps for one of their clients. Perfection was expected, so manual checking was essential, in fact no machine could currently do this work.

One fascinating innovation that had not been installed when I last visited the company is the automated inspection system that is designed to prevent errors from escaping into the postal stream or stamp albums of the collector.

At one time, quality assurance checks would always have been undertaken manually and, due to something called 'persistence of vision' (the theory where an after-image is thought to persist for approximately one twenty-fifth of a second on the retina), would enable the slightest difference between sheets to be noticed by the checkers. Traditionally this operation would have been undertaken by women as it is thought that they possess this phenomenon in greater measure than men.

**Automating this checking process was for many years seen as an impossible dream, but eventually technology caught-up with the idea and manual checking was no longer deemed appropriate**

Automating this checking process was for many years seen as an impossible dream, but eventually technology caught-up with the idea and manual checking was no longer deemed appropriate, especially as it could now be done in-line as a part of production, thereby proving to be more economical and efficient, or offline after printing.

On the day of my visit, automated checking of stamps was being undertaken using software developed in-house over a two-year period in conjunction with Apollo Systems USA, manufacturers of the fastest and most accurate visual print inspection system available today. At the heart of this checking process are computers working with huge amounts of processing power. These work in tandem with complicated software algorithms that can spot differences, pixel by pixel, between entire press sheets and at printing resolutions of up to 1200 line screen and at speeds of 10,000 sheets an hour. The software can even compensate for sheets fed through, say, a couple of millimetres out of alignment.

A number of manually inspected perfectly printed and clean sheets are 'learnt' by the software, becoming the master from which differences will be matched on inspection. Cameras then check for potential problems such as colour drift, scratches, scum marks, hickies, missing or changed content, and more, within pre-programmed tolerances. What's more, the settings are able to be saved for the next time that the same stamp is put on press for reprinting, thus ensuring consistency between print runs. With full audit trails, this rapidly became an indispensable piece of kit, and is unique to ISP.

#### ...and finally

A sumptuous luncheon followed and all too soon afterwards our fascinating tour and exciting time spent with ISP had come to an end, with guests somewhat reluctantly going their separate ways.

I began collecting stamps in 1964, the year that Walsall had started printing its first self-adhesive postage stamps and I recall the excitement of acquiring a used example of its novel Sierra Leone free-form map stamp that same year. Never could I have imagined that exactly 50 years later I would not only still be collecting stamps (my aunt Jen was sure that it would be a fad!), but that I would also be a witness to the start of an exciting new era for the company that had printed that first ground-breaking issue.

It would be a number of years before self-adhesive stamps would become acceptable to many of the collecting fraternity, who had initially scorned such issues for being too gimmicky, but the company was in it for the long-haul and self-adhesive stamps are now a mainstay of its stamp production.

Congratulations to International Security Printers on the opening of its new headquarters building and special thanks to Ian Brigham and Paul White for inviting me to be a part of their special day of celebrations.