

International Security Printers Ltd

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On 30 October 2014, Glenn was the only philatelic writer present at the royal opening of the new premises of British stamp printer International Security Printers Ltd (ISP).

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 stamp printing. WSP purchased Courvoisier of Switzerland in 2001, transferring production into Walsall. In 2004 it acquired Cartor Security Printing of France, relocating Courvoisier production there before retiring the brand.

ISP was established in 2004 to head-up these trading companies, offering the services and combined resources of both plants, while continuing to use the Walsall and Cartor brands to this day. In 2008 Paul White and Ian Brigham (now joint managing directors) undertook a management buy-out.

Stylish new premises

In 2012 a decision was taken to move from the West Midlands town of Walsall, its home for 120 years, as existing space was tight and access difficult. ISP's new home at i54, a business park near Wolverhampton and under 20 minutes from Walsall, ensured retention of the 80 highly-skilled employees. The new factory is both impressive and stylish, comprising 70,000ft² with capacity for expansion by a further 30,000ft².

The royal visit

Access to the opening was restricted, as Her Majesty The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh had been invited to attend. Guests from some of the 180 administrations that ISP has printed stamps for were also present along with those involved in making the move happen, such as bankers, architects, builders and project managers, not to overlook key managerial staff from Cartor.

While guests enjoyed a drinks reception, the royal guests arrived amid cheering and waving from those invited to witness events from the grounds. Once inside, key guests were presented to the party, who then had a tour of manufacturing facilities, followed by an opening ceremony, where Her Majesty unveiled a commemorative plaque, signed the visitor's book, was given a unique gift, and the young daughter of a staff member presented a flower posy. The cheerful royal party then departed amid more flag waving.

Guests tour factory

It was now the guests' chance to see where more of the \$12.2 million investment across the four production areas had gone.

1) The print room. A new \$3 million Cerutti R981 gravure press, capable of handling reels up to 31.5 inches wide, runs at up to 1,150 feet per minute. Two-sided self-adhesive stamp booklets were on-press, with production of 1.5 million per hour achievable, containing some 18 million stamps. This 10-unit press offers 100% quality control and inspection and can slit the reel ready for subsequent die cutting and finishing. The Cerutti is joined by the existing 10-unit Müller Martini A52 offset press with kiss-cutting, UV drying and sheeting.

2) Die-cutting. Die-cutters slice through the surface of the stamp paper, without going through the backing paper, and then 'matrix strip' (i.e. remove) the waste area around each stamp. Two camera systems detect missing stamps accidentally lifted by the stripper, diverting spoiled from good stock without human intervention. Booklets are separated into singles, folded, counted into 50s, cello-wrapped and bar-coded before check-weighing, boxing into 1,000s, labelling and re-weighing.

3a) Philatelic bureau. Products are created for growing numbers of administrations. Stamps destined for FDCs are affixed by machine and cancelled, while 'packs' of all kinds are created on-site by equipment that lifts the carrier strip and inserts each stamp automatically.

3a) Fulfilment. ISPs bureau now processes data for collector orders for PostNL and Dutch retailers, using picking and packing lists, with ordered items taken from stock. Packing and prompt despatching of thousands of daily orders ensures next day delivery in Holland.

4) Finishing and inspection. Manual checking is still employed, but ISP now primarily uses an automated inspection system using software developed with Apollo Systems USA. Powerful computers work in tandem with software algorithms to spot differences, pixel by pixel, between entire press sheets at printing resolutions up to 1200 line screen and speeds of 10,000 sheets an hour.

A number of manually inspected perfectly printed and clean sheets are 'learnt' by the software and become the master from which differences will be matched on inspection. Cameras then check for problems within pre-programmed tolerances. With full audit trails, this kit, which is unique to ISP, rapidly became indispensable.

...and finally

Following a sumptuous luncheon, it was time for us to depart, but not before thanking Paul and Ian for allowing me to be a part of their special day.

With more than 70% of ISPs total stamp output destined for overseas, including key stamp contracts in Europe and Japan, the company is already a major export success and clearly has a bright future.

(790 words)