

## Walsall and its Philatelic Bureau

Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

Walsall Security Printers (WSP) has been printing stamps since 1963 when the Kingdom of Tonga required circular examples embossed on gold foil, which was a world first. The Government of Sierra Leone then ordered the world's first self-adhesive free-form stamps from the company the following year and Walsall still specialises in self-adhesive products, having become a major player in this particular field of stamp printing.

I was recently afforded the opportunity of seeing an element of WSPs production that is less well known to collectors, namely The Philatelic Bureau. It is from here that FDCs, packs, yearbooks and stamp carriers are created or assembled for an increasing number of postal administrations, including Royal Mail. My hosts were Heather Simmons, Sales/PR Manager, and John Lavender, Sales and Marketing Manager, both of whom have long-term careers in the stamp production industry.

To get to the Bureau it was necessary for us to first walk through the print facility, where self-adhesive stamp booklets were on press for two major customers. It still amazes me the speed with which these two-sided items are produced and the thousands of booklets that can be printed in minutes. The British product continues to get more technically complicated, but the recent addition of U-shaped cuts into the design and the application of the transparent text overprint have both been quickly assimilated into the process.

On reaching the Bureau, I was introduced to Phil Egginton, Bureau Commercial Manager, who has headed-up operations since its formation as a partnership with the Dutch Postal Service, TNT. It was purchased outright by Walsall in 2000, going from strength-to-strength.

Phil told me that the ultimate situation is when they can act as a one-stop shop for the postal administration and he said that he can see the day fast approaching when the Bureau mails directly to the philatelic customer, even when they have not printed the stamps. It is obvious that they have the capability and will to make this happen, for they have loyal staff who are clearly proud of what they do, resulting in a world-class reputation in both the postal and philatelic industries.

I was taken around each of the Bureau functions, as described below.

**FDCs** Stamps with water-activated gum are applied by affixing machines that hold stocks in cassettes, one per value to be applied. Vacuum cups pick-up each stamp, which are then advanced and have moisture applied before being positioned and affixed to the envelope. Once dry, they are cancelled, either by a self-inking datestamp, or by an adapted Heidelberg platen press using flexography.

Self-adhesive stamps are ideally supplied in vertical rolls and affixed to the envelope by machine, but with stamps being shipped to the Bureau from other printers this is not always able to be the case. Application by hand becomes necessary in these instances.

**Bursting of Stamps** The Bureau does not use bursting equipment to separate water-activated stamps into singles, but does it by hand. This is achieved either by lining-up one row of perforations of a few uncut sheets along the edge of a metal block and applying downward pressure to the stamps to enable them to separate, or simply by rocking each row back and forth to weaken the perforation ties (the bits of paper between each hole) and then tearing them apart. This is a skilled operation and staff can choose either of the two methods that suit them best and, perhaps surprisingly, few stamps ever become damaged during this process.

**Packs** Gone are the days when ‘packs’ would have solely comprised the familiar presentation pack, the likes of which Royal Mail has produced since the 1960s. Nowadays year books, year packs, half-year packs, FDC packs, collector packs, Commemorative Sheet packs (such as the recent Royal Mail ‘Big Ben’ issue) and Kids Smilers packs are all created by the Bureau staff.

Assembly equipment lifts the carrier strips and each stamp is inserted from hoppers one-by-one automatically until the card is filled with requirements. These are then collated with other cards and any promotional or information sheets and most will then be inserted into a sealed film sleeve produced in-line. FDC year / half-year packs can similarly be assembled, from hoppers that drop each cover onto a conveyor and collate as they move forward.

**Stamp Carriers** The newest operation within the Bureau is the creation of stamp carriers, as recorded in the feature within *Stamp Scene* for June. It was interesting to see them being produced and, put simply, black 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 requirement for these items is growing year-on-year, as virtually any format can be created in-house in any quantity, whether sold to post offices or to private collectors.

Visit [www.stampstore.uk.com](http://www.stampstore.uk.com) for more information and to order supplies of these useful carriers.

The range of sample material produced by the Bureau revealed just how creative and innovative the team are and I left with a far greater understanding of the processes involved. I had been surprised at just how much is automated, for I had previously assumed that most of the material was created by hand.

The final part of my visit was an unexpected bonus, as I met Paul White, the Managing Director of WSP, who gave me an in-depth understanding of the current position and future plans for the company.

Paul has worked in the security printing industry all his working life and so was the ideal person to buyout the company last year with Ian Brigham, who has a similar background and reputation. The Aspinall family, which had owned both WSP and Cartor, sought to sell the companies through a Management Buyout and Paul and Ian saw the opportunity to invest as too good an opportunity to pass by. So, with the co-operation of the banks, they acquired the Group businesses in December 2008. Perhaps the timing of the purchase could have been better, as the world was going through financial melt-down, but it all finally came together.

He sees new markets forming – the Post and Go type labels are an interesting development and a case in point (WSP prints the base stock used in the machinery) because it seems that where Royal Mail take the lead, other postal administrations respond. In fact, they are working with other Post Offices to create attractive designs for this type of product and see machine stamps as a new business opportunity.

The umbrella organisation known as International Security Printers (ISP) continues to exist and it is hoped they will be able to expand partnership agreements with state printers, some of whom are struggling to keep their order books going and costs under control in these difficult times. WSP considers itself to be very fortunate in always having full order books three or four months ahead and despite smaller print runs, there are more issues being produced helping to balance things out.

Paul has noticed a shift in thinking by its customers, who now put cost at the top of their list of priorities and invariably want a premium product without paying premium prices, which is where investment in equipment can help with competitiveness. Since the buyout,

there have been early signs of major investment. New printing machinery has gone into Cartor (WSPs French operation) and Walsall is having sophisticated new camera verification equipment installed to ensure more efficient manufacturing.

Until recently, work was allocated between plants on the basis of capacity, whereas now Cartor will undertake sheet-fed litho work (the smaller print runs), while WSP will undertake the web-fed gravure and web litho orders. A reallocation of presses reflects this strategic change within the Group.

Paul concluded by saying: “We are extremely pleased to have completed our buyout of International Security Printers Ltd. Despite the economic climate we have consistently been developing new business opportunities especially abroad. Innovation and consistently high levels of service offered to our clients along with a robust strategy for cost management has been the key to our success. We believe that both Walsall and Cartor already have an enviable reputation in the worldwide market and we are very excited at the prospect of expanding our services and products even further. We forecast a bright future for the Group with sustained growth and profitable performance.”

(1415 words)