

The 1965 Churchill Commemorative Stamps

Edited by Glenn H Morgan FRPSL from an original article by A G Rigo de Righi. First published in the Philatelic Bulletin in October 1974, it is reproduced here to commemorate the 40th anniversary year of the death of Sir Winston Churchill.

The idea of honouring Sir Winston Churchill's great achievements by a special issue of British postage stamps goes back to 1952 - indeed there was probably more widespread public demand for this issue than almost any other.

Since Sir Winston was a great Commonwealth and world figure it was perhaps appropriate that the first such suggestion on record was a letter from a Mr W Sharpe of Toronto, Canada in 1952. Between that date and Sir Winston's death in 1965 the Queen, the Postmaster General and the GPO received some forty letters on the subject. Admirers of 'the greatest living Englishman' wrote in from California, Wisconsin, Illinois, Nova Scotia and Geneva, as well as from all parts of Britain. Over 20 correspondents went to the length of enclosing rough design ideas for commemorative stamps while two (later) writers, from Bournemouth and Gloucester, both proposed that the suggested stamp or stamps should carry a charity surcharge, the proceeds of which should go to the Sir Winston Churchill Memorial Fund. By far the most professional and interesting of the privately-submitted designs for a Churchill issue was the Churchill Memorial design sent to the Post Office on 28 January 1965 by Robson Lowe, the internationally-known philatelist and postal historian. At the time there was no precedent for a British stamp issue commemorating any famous man or woman, not even former Kings or Queens; the fact that Sir Winston was still living would have meant an even greater innovation in stamp issuing policy. As the Director General of the Post Office put it (in a suggested draft reply by the PMG to a proposal for an issue to celebrate Churchill's 90th birthday): "I yield to no-one in my admiration for Sir Winston Churchill, but I believe it would be really undesirable to issue stamps to commemorate events in the lives of living people no matter how eminent they may be."

The death of Sir Winston Churchill on 25 January 1965 altered the situation dramatically. There was bound to be an enormous popular demand for a mourning or memorial issue, it was likely that many other countries, particularly the United States and members of the Commonwealth would issue such stamps. The British Post Office policy had moved a long way towards regarding a carefully limited number of selected special stamp issues each year as normal practice. On 27 January the Postmaster General announced that a special issue in honour of

Churchill would be put on sale on Commonwealth Day, 24 May 1965, and would consist of two values, 4d and 1s3d.

Preparing the Designs As it was likely that most designs submitted would include or be based on a portrait of Churchill himself an approach was made to Buckingham Palace to ascertain the Queen's own views. The fact that the bust of Shakespeare had appeared on the Shakespeare Festival issue of 1964 was not, in the view of the Post Office, a valid precedent. On 31 January the Queen signified her personal decision that the portrait of a subject might, in this case, be placed alongside her own in the proposed stamps.

The choice of which of the very many extant portrayals of Churchill should be used was quickly decided. The two shortlisted were the 1941 photograph taken by Karsh in the Houses of Parliament at Ottawa and (at the suggestion of Lady Churchill) a marble bust by Nemon commissioned by the Queen to mark Churchill's 82nd birthday. The Nemon bust, though an excellent likeness, had the drawback that such a bust tends to lose definition when reduced to stamp size, and so the Karsh photograph, known to millions the world over, was decided on.

Since time was very short, designs were commissioned only from David Gentleman (who worked jointly with Rosalind Dease), Abram Games (designer of the 3d Olympic Games and 2 1/2d Festival of Britain stamps) and the printers, Harrison and Sons.

The 'instructions to artists' sent to Gentleman and Games included the following specifications: the Queen's head should be on the right of the design and the Karsh portrait on the left; other design features could also be incorporated on the left hand side; the dates 1874-1965 had to be included, the use of the words 'Sir Winston Churchill' was optional; three or more basic colours might be used; white could be used for the background but not black, and the same design would be used for both values.

Harrison's instructions specified that they should prepare designs in normal (long) commemorative format for 3d (*sic.*) and 1s3d values featuring on the right replicas of the normal 3d and 1s3d Wilding definitives and, on the left, the Karsh portrait. The instructions regarding the wording of the inscriptions was as for the artists but Harrison's were requested to provide an essay without any wording (only the value) and also an additional essay using the 4d definitive.

The Designs and Essays David Gentleman and Rosalind Dease jointly submitted a total of ten designs for the two specified values, Abram Games one design for the 1s3d value and Harrison's three designs using the definitive stamps, or based on them. The Gentleman/Dease designs consisted firstly of a 'small' Karsh head with the Queen's effigy in the top right corner; one variant bore the 1874-1965 date along the left

margin, the other did not. In neither variant were the two heads separated by the vertical white line used in the Gentleman/Dease 'large head' design.

Harrison's designs involved exact reproductions of the 3d, 4d and 1s3d Wilding stamps paired up with large unframed or small framed Karsh portraits of Churchill on the left, though they did submit one design for a 3d value which was somewhat different.

The first essays were ready by mid-February. Six were of variants of the two basic Harrison designs; as well as differences of value and colour there were variations in the amount and placing of the inscriptions and in the absence or colour of the tonal bands separating the two halves of the design. Two essays were made of the Gentleman/Dease 'small head' design, one with and one without date and one of Abram Games' 1s3d 'Victory V' design.

David Gentleman expressed his preference for not using a white line to separate the two heads and the printers, Harrison's, said there would be difficulties in registration if the line were used, which might lead to up to 75% spoilage in bulk printing. However, in the Stamp Advisory Committee Sir John Wilson, the Keeper of the Queen's Collection, strongly supported the use of a line as otherwise the Queen would "be looking over Sir Winston's shoulder."

Further essays were then prepared for a 1s3d value of the Gentleman/Dease 'large head' and 'small head' designs, all with white line to meet Sir John's point.

After considering the various alternatives the PMG submitted two pairs of essays for the Queen's choice: the first pair, recommended by the Stamp Advisory Committee, was one of the Gentleman/Dease designs for the 4d value and Abram Games' 'Victory V' design for the 1s3d. Her Majesty selected the Committee's second choice, a variant of the 'small head' design for the 4d and the 'large head' for the 1s3d. Both designs (by Gentleman and Dease) were to incorporate the vertical white line and omit all inscriptions (including the dates). All four essays considered by the Queen had previously been shown to Lady Churchill as a special act of courtesy.

The print order was fixed at 154 million copies of the 4d value (inland letter rate) and 9 million of the 1s3d (airmail letter rate). Owing to an industrial dispute, the first day of issue was changed to 8 July 1965. A very few copies of both values were sold in error by some sub-post offices (including BFPO 1054 near Thetford) between the 5 and 7 July and some were postally (non-philatelically) used on letters. In accordance with standing Post Office instructions the date stamps on such items as could be intercepted were obliterated before they were delivered or forwarded.