

## **‘Boots’ Greeting Card Sheets**

*An innovative approach to retailing – Part One*

Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

‘Greeting card sheets/labels’, ‘stamp labels’ or ‘stamp attachments’, as variously referred to by Royal Mail, were introduced by the long-established Boots the Chemist of Nottingham in its nationwide chain of health and beauty shops back in 1994, following extensive research into the best approach. This was a new stamp product concept that has yet to be replicated by any other stamp issuing country.

The background design brief to this idea was that Boots wanted to be able to promote sales and increase revenue from its own-brand greeting cards and to offer postage at the same time as the card was purchased. These were both to be made available in an attractive and innovative package instead of selling them separately, as had been the case until then. Internal trials of cards with stamps inserted, pre-paid stamped envelopes – an idea later to be used by Marks and Spencer for a short time – and stamps in glassine bags attached to cards were each considered and subsequently rejected at meetings with Royal Mail.

Adopting production technology that was already being used by greeting card manufacturers created the so-called ‘Boots Label’, as collectors were to refer to them as. This equipment would wrap a piece of printed paper around the top right-hand corner of a card at an angle prior to shrink-wrapping and was used extensively at the time. These days however, this method of production has almost fallen into disuse in the cards industry in favour of self-adhesive labels or text printed directly on to the cellophane wrappers.

Once the format was decided upon and following discussions with suppliers, contracts were placed initially with the House of Questa for stamp printing and with Boots’ card manufacturer (rumoured to be Hallmark), their packaging company and internal store distribution network.

Maintaining secrecy, and therefore competitive advantage, was key to this project and on 17 August 1994, Boots placed on sale this product for the first time at 200 out of its roughly 1500 outlets. There were 90 different card designs available initially in three series of 30 cards, identifiable by the code on the reverse – M for Male, F for Female and C for Cute and the envelope colour (yellow, pink and beige respectively). These were all heavily promoted at the time and cards were sold from display racks in an eye-catching manner that made it difficult to pass by without noticing them.

'Boots Labels' went through reprints before later appearing without its branding on them, the text and brand was instead printed on the cellophane wrapping in the area where the label was placed. According to official sources, the brand removal was to enable the sheets to be used by any greeting card manufacturer/retailer or high-street store.

Woolworth's, Comet, MVC, B&Q and Superdrug (all then part of the Kingfisher Group of stores) and possibly others did subsequently use the unbranded sheets with their gift vouchers at Christmas time in later years (believed to be 1997-2000). They created a pack that included, say, a £10 denominated gift voucher, the first class stamp sheet and a Christmas card in a cellophane wrapper that sold for an economical £9.99.

The concept fell into eventual disuse at Boots after around five years and they sold-off the remaining cards on their shelves very cheaply to eager customers who could buy a card and a first class stamp for less than 50p. The unsold stock was finally removed and destroyed on instruction from Head Office. These comprised the less popular artwork designs or commemoration, such as 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and Ruby wedding anniversary cards, where demand was understandably lower.

Many stamp collectors loved the labels and mourned their demise, for the sheets exist from different printings and printers, they had differences in fluorescence and elliptical perforations and could be examined at leisure by the thousand prior to purchase simply by visiting a Boots store. It is in this way that certain discoveries were made that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. (I recall the excitement of purchasing the rarer fluor versions and two sheets that had been misperforated at my local store.)

The British Postal Museum and Archive holds the Questa uncut first reprint primary sheet of the Boots branded version and a part of this was illustrated in an article by Don Staddon in the *National Postal Museum Review* of 1994. It is interesting to note how the labels were finished because after printing and perforating, the primary sheet was simultaneously rouletted and the vertical sides of the labels were sliced almost through (i.e. not guillotined). The top and bottom of each row would then be guillotined horizontally across the sheet, using pre-printed marginal lines as a guide, resulting in piles of individual labels. If this operation was not accurately done, a label with a pair of whole or part perforations at the top was the result. Similarly, if the primary sheet was cut too low (i.e. below the vertical slices and with at least three whole vertical perforation holes left at the foot of the label instead of the two intended), then a small piece of the label paper remains beyond the vertical edge. Labels demonstrating these features are

unlikely to attract much of a premium, but are an interesting addition to an album page, helping, as they do, to tell the production story.

Royal Mail sold several of the printings in packs of 100 labels, or singles, from the Bureau directly to collectors. They were still on sale for ages after they had been removed from individual sale in Boots shops, although the non-Boots version had previously sold out at the philatelic bureau in Edinburgh in April 1999, probably due to its philatelic overprinting use.

It seems that the idea of the pre-paid greeting card had failed to fully meet the needs of Boots, not least because the hoped-for increase in sales and therefore profit was not forthcoming. The world had moved on by the time of their withdrawal and stamps in books were freely available nationwide at around 55,000 outlets, including Boots. Most customers now have a stamp book in their purse or wallet and so the concept has not, and is unlikely to be, resurrected – especially as everybody did not necessarily need to utilise the first class service for their greetings (roughly 70% of all mail is second class, apparently).

These items remain an interesting chapter of modern British philately and one that can still be completed for a few pounds if basic sheets and a few examples of the privately overprinted sheets are obtained. A complete collection with all errors would set you back well over £2500, as the missing phosphor examples command a particularly high price.

## CATALOGUE LISTING

### Generic Label Information

**Stamp:** 1<sup>st</sup> class flame-red colour with a 25p initial selling price that rose as postage rates increased on the copies sold by Royal Mail to collectors.

**Pane size:** 85mm x 43mm first printing, 85mm x 42mm on subsequent printings.

**Gum:** Poly Vinyl Alcohol (PVA), creamy on first printing and whiter on subsequent.

**Phosphor:** two 4mm bands with fluor added (fluor type recorded below against each printing)

**Rouletting:** An inverted V-shaped set of rouletting slits appears on all sheets to facilitate folding. A standard style of cutter was used (short slits, longer ties) except for what is presumed to be the final *Questa* sheet (longer slits, shorter ties).

**Perforations:** 14.75 x 14.

**Ellipses:** Mention is made of two kinds of ellipse on the *Questa* printings. These are either type *R* (*Rugby ball-shaped* with pointed ends, or *Rounded sides*) or type *S* (*Straight sides* with blunted ends, or *Sausage-like*).

**Printing Process:** offset-lithography.

**Paper:** OFNP (non-fluorescent coated).

**Pack size:** 100 labels, which were then boxed in an unknown quantity of packs.

**Date of issue:** Where dates are shown in the listings they relate to the first day of availability.

## Boots Branded Sheets

**First Printing** Questa. 17th August 1994

**Fluor:** Yellow    **Ellipses:** R    **Warrant Number:** Q405

**Packing:** Shrink-wrapped with a pink-coloured self-adhesive label affixed worded THE HOUSE OF QUESTA/GREETING CARD/STAMP ATTACHMENTS/ WARRANT Q405, REEL NO 1002/1<sup>ST</sup> CLASS/QUANTITY 100\$. A pale lemon rouletted only unprinted sheet acted as a divider between every 100 sheets, effectively appearing as sheet 101 in the pack. Grey boards were placed at the front and back within each sealed unit.

**Notes:** Known with short bands at base and with inset left and right bands. At least one copy is known miscut resulting in the words 'up to 60g in UK' missing although the rouletting is in the correct position. The rouletting and vertical slices being done together, as explained in body of article, would explain this. Totally unprinted, but perforated and rouletted, copies are known.

**Second Printing** Questa. October 1994

**Fluor:** Yellow    **Ellipses:** S    **Warrant Number:** Q434

**Packing 1:** Shrink-wrapped with a pale green-coloured self-adhesive label affixed worded THE HOUSE OF QUESTA/GREETING CARD/STAMP ATTACHMENT/ WARRANT NUMBER Q434 REEL NO1110/1<sup>ST</sup> CLASS/100 LABELS 1 x 25p. A pale lemon rouletted only unprinted sheet acted as a divider between every 100 sheets, effectively appearing as sheet 101 in the pack. Grey boards were placed at the front and back within each sealed unit.

**Packing 2:** Almost as type one, but with the word NUMBER and NO (after REEL) omitted.

**Notes:** Known missing phosphor, or with short bands at top and with inset left and right bands. Also known on creamy gum instead of whiter, which was possibly left over from the first printing.

**Third Printing** Questa. 25 September 1995

**Fluor:** Blue    **Ellipses:** S    **Warrant Number:** Unknown

**Packing:** Not available to collectors.

**Notes:** Issued sheets are only known in a folded condition, as they were not sold unfolded by Royal Mail in packs or singles to collectors. Known missing phosphor and with right band inset. Clearly this was a late printing, as the unbranded version had already been released before copies of this printing had been found.

## Unbranded Sheets

**First Printing** Questa. 11th September 1995

**Fluor:** Blue with long-wave afterglow    **Ellipses:** S    **Warrant Number:** Q486

**Packing 1:** Shrink-wrapped with a pale green-coloured self-adhesive label affixed worded THE HOUSE OF QUESTA/GREETING CARD LABEL/ WARRANT NO Q486/REEL NO 1166/1<sup>ST</sup> CLASS/100 LABELS 1 x 25p. A pale lemon rouletted only unprinted sheet acted as a divider between every 100 sheets, effectively appearing as sheet 101 in the pack. Grey boards were placed at the front and back within each sealed unit.

**Packing 2:** Almost as type one, but with S on end of word LABEL making it plural and NO after WARRANT omitted.

**Notes:** Cards were being sold in stores prior to the 11 September official launch date of the philatelically available copies from Royal Mail.

**Second Printing** Enschedé. 29 April 1997

**Fluor:** Very dull violet tinted blue    **Warrant Number:** Unknown

**Packing:** Shrink-wrapped with an unprinted Kraft paper sheet effectively appearing as sheet 101 in the pack. No printed label was used, hence lack of knowledge about warrant number.

**Notes:** A better quality, sharper printing than Questa's due to the use of computer-engraved cylinders. The <sup>ST</sup> of 1<sup>ST</sup> is thicker on this printing. In fact, when collectors and dealers first saw this sheet, they reported that it had been printed by photogravure. The first day of availability was given by Royal Mail as 29 April, although collectors had discovered copies in their local Boots stores from 20 February 1997, as recorded on covers posted that day. Known with short bands at top and base. This dull violet fluor version was available to collectors from Royal Mail in an unfolded condition in packs and singles.

**Third Printing** Enschedé. 1997

**Fluor:** Bright violet tinted blue **Warrant Number:** Unknown

**Packing:** Not available to collectors.

**Notes:** Sheets are only known in a folded condition, as they were not sold unfolded by Royal Mail in packs or singles to collectors.

**Fourth Printing** Questa. January 1998

**Fluor:** Blue with long-wave afterglow **Ellipses:** S **Warrant Number:** Unknown

**Packing:** Not available to collectors.

**Notes:** Sheets are only known in a folded condition, as they were not sold unfolded by Royal Mail in packs or singles to collectors.

**Fifth Printing** Questa. October 1998

**Fluor:** Blue with long-wave afterglow (Novaglo) **Ellipses:** S **Warrant Number:** Unknown

**Packing:** Not available to collectors.

**Notes:** Also known with mixed ellipses, namely S at left and R at right, probably the result of a single damaged elliptical perforation pin. This means that maybe only one copy in every 55 might exist, as the primary sheet size comprised five columns of 11 labels. (Enschedé's primary sheet comprised 40 labels (5x8)). Unfolded sheets are not known, as they were not made available by Royal Mail to collectors. The rouletting cuts are longer on this, the final (?), Questa printing.

**Sixth Printing** Enschedé. C1999/2000

**Fluor:** Bright blue, almost turquoise in colour **Warrant Number:** Unknown

**Packing:** Not available to collectors.

**Notes:** A limited availability late printing is known from Enschedé with a very bright turquoise tint to the fluor instead of violet, which was reported in the philatelic press as being available early in 2000 from Kingfisher Group stores in £9.99 gift voucher packs. Unfolded sheets are not known, as they were not made available by Royal Mail to collectors.

**Seventh and Eighth Printings** Printer unknown. Late 2000

**Fluor:** Type unknown **Ellipses:** type unknown **Warrant Numbers:** Unknown

**Packing:** Not available to collectors.

**Notes:** For provision with gift vouchers intended for sale in the lead-up to Christmas 2000, it is understood that an order was placed in October by the Kingfisher Group for a new printing of 200,000 sheets and for yet another 50,000 copies in that December. Whether these bear any distinguishing characteristics is unknown. Unfolded sheets are not known, as they were not made available by Royal Mail to collectors.

It is feasible, indeed probable, that other print runs were produced along the way that have simply passed the collector by, as Royal Mail invariably does

not publish or make available such information on these privately ordered product types.

*Next month in part two of this article Glenn Morgan will deal with the privately overprinted versions briefly mentioned above.*

## **‘Boots’ Greeting Card Sheets**

*An innovative approach to retailing – Part two*

Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

*Last month, Glenn Morgan recorded the history of the ‘Boots Labels’. This month he concludes by providing a listing of the privately overprinted versions.*

One major British stamp dealer in particular had quickly realised that the white space surrounding the stamp on the ‘Boots’ labels could be used to create souvenir definitive miniature sheets by applying text and/or logos. More to the point, collectors would pay good money for them, especially if they related to the major philatelic exhibitions held around the world.

These overprinted sheets became extremely popular, despite being totally philatelic in their creation and even the original Boots logo version label was used for some of these overprinted sheets, including the first. Dealers must still hold substantial bulk stocks in store, as new overprinted versions continue to appear for sale to this day.

Prices vary greatly, but are generally in the region of £3 to £9. The National Philatelic Society sheet is believed to be the only one given away (as a centenary year gift to its members) and not sold.

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### **Privately Overprinted Sheets**

This listing records sheets seen or known to exist by the compiler with privately applied overprints. Reports of other versions are welcomed via the Editor, please.

The year shown relates to the commemoration and not necessarily the year of issue. The correct order of issue within year is not feasible, as first day of availability dates were generally not provided for these philatelic concoctions.

The Type codes stand for Boots branded version (code B), or Unbranded version (code U).

### **Stamp Show Overprints**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Commemoration</b>	<b>Type</b>
1995	Singapore '95 (Singapore)	B
	-Do- error sheet with overprint on reverse gum	B
1996	Bangkok '96 (Thailand) 1500 copies	U
	Stamp '96 (UK)	U
	Hongpex '96 (Hong Kong)	U
	Taipei '96 (Taiwan) – blue overprint	U
	-Do- colour trial with red overprint. 100 copies	U
1997	Hong Kong '97 (Hong Kong SAR)	U
`	Pacific '97 (USA) – Type 1 ‘Boots’	B
`	Pacific '97 (USA) – Type 2 Unbranded	U

	Moscow '97 (Russia)	U
	Bangkok '97 (Thailand)	U
1998	Stamp '98 (UK)	U
	Israel '98 (Israel)	U
	Ilsapex '98 (South Africa)	U
	Singpex '98 (Singapore)	U
1999	World Stamp Expo '99 (Australia)	B
	IBRA '99 (Germany)	B
	Philexfrance '99 (France)	B
2000	PhilEuro '00 (Belgium)	U
	The Stamp Show 2000 (UK) – black overprint	U
	The Stamp Show 2000 (UK) – blue overprint	U
	WIPA 2000 (Austria)	B
	World Stamp Expo '00 (USA)	B
	Indonesia '00 (Indonesia)	B
2001	Hong Kong '01 (Hong Kong SAR)	B
	Stamp '01 (UK)	B
	Belgica '01 (Belgium)	B
	Philanippon '01 (Japan)	B
	Hafnia '01 (Denmark)	B
2002	Philakorea '02 (South Korea)	B
	Munich International Stamp Day '02 (Germany)	B
	PhilEuro '02 (Belgium)	B
2003	AmeriStamp Expo '03 (USA)	B
2004	HongKong '04 (Hong Kong SAR)	U
	Essen '04 (Germany)	U
	Singapore World Stamp Championships '04 (Singapore)	U
2005	Naposta '05 (Germany)	U
2006	Washington '06 (USA)	U

### **Publicity Overprints**

19xx	North East Philatelic Weekend	U
1998	Rushstamps 40 <sup>th</sup> anniversary logo	U
	Grimby Philatelic Society 75 <sup>th</sup> anniversary	U
1999	National Philatelic Society centenary	U
C.2000	Rushstamps 1d black Collect British Stamps	U
	Rushstamps 2d blue Collect British Stamps	U
2005	DEC Tsunami earthquake appeal – India	U
	DEC Tsunami earthquake appeal – Indonesia	U
	DEC Tsunami earthquake appeal – Sri Lanka	U
	DEC Tsunami earthquake appeal – Thailand	U

(2925 words)