

SPECIAL STAMP ISSUE

Opening of the Post Office Tower

Date of issue: 8 OCTOBER 1965



In late June 1961 work started on a 580 foot tower at the Museum Telephone Exchange in central London. Initially referred to as the Museum Tower, the Post Office Tower, as it became known, was on completion London's tallest building. The Tower provided microwave links for telephone and television relays; however, public observation galleries and a revolving restaurant 520 foot above the ground ensured the Tower became one of London's leading attractions. It was hoped that the Tower would be completed by mid-1964.

On 19 November 1962, A H Ridge, the Director of Clerical Mechanisation and Buildings at the Post Office, wrote to the Director of Postal Services, Brigadier K S Holmes, suggesting that the Post Office Tower and the similar Birmingham Tower might be considered for commemorative stamps in 1964. As Brigadier Holmes was in Germany for a meeting of the Conference of European Postal and Telecommunications, it was T P Hornsey of Postal Services who replied on 29 November. Hornsey made known his department's view that all Post Office occasions be considered and as the Post Office Tower would generate interest from the general public, it should certainly be proposed for a stamp issue. The programme for 1964 would be discussed sometime in early 1963.

No action appears to have been taken until 1 October 1963 when a memorandum signed by D H Beaumont confirms the latest date for the operational opening of the Post Office Tower as late 1964. Two weeks later a letter from L T Andrews of the Clerical Mechanisation and Buildings Department (CMBD) responsible for the Tower arrived at Postal Services asking about a stamp. Andrews mentioned that the operational and public facilities at the Tower would not be ready at the same time and so it was planned to hold two opening ceremonies.

The first would mark the opening of operational facilities, anticipated for the autumn of 1964, while the public galleries would not be open until late 1965 at the earliest.

Internal discussions at Postal Services between T P Hornsey and K Hind on 10 October 1963 led to a minute to CMBD in reply to Andrew's query. While generally sympathetic to a stamp issue, Postal Services felt that having two opening dates placed them in an awkward position regarding issue dates. If stamps were issued to mark the operational opening, of minimal public interest, questions might be asked about the delay in opening the public areas. On the other hand while the opening of the public facilities would generate great interest, it would be of little importance to the Post Office. It was therefore decided to defer any decision until such time as CMBD was in a position to provide further information regarding the opening of the Tower.

Delays in construction led to the Post Office Tower being omitted from the stamp programme for 1964, although the matter was not abandoned. On 9 July 1964 D H Beaumont again wrote to CMBD to ask for possible opening dates. It was made clear that unless a stamp could be readily linked to one of the openings in the near future, the idea would be abandoned. Despite this, little progress was made at this time as further problems delayed the construction timetable. It is clear though that the Post Office Tower was, operational difficulties aside, still being considered for a special stamp in mid-1964.

The General Election of October 1964 resulted in a new Labour government and Postmaster General (PMG), Anthony Wedgwood Benn. At a meeting of the Post Office Board on 25 November a stamp to mark the opening of the Post Office Tower was included in the programme for 1965. A confidential minute from D H Beaumont of 30 November relayed this to CMBD and again requested a date for the operational opening. Beaumont was informed that the Public Relations Department, co-ordinating the opening, had three options in mind. The first involved an operational opening after the end of April 1965. Second, a high-level inspection tour in October was a possibility, followed by the opening of the public galleries and restaurant in December. No decision had been taken as to exact dates. Eventually, in December 1964, Postal Services officially informed CMBD that the PMG had decided to mark the operational opening of the Tower with a special stamp. As soon as the opening date was confirmed, Postal Services wished to be notified.

An announcement of the programme for 1965 was made by the PMG in the House of Commons on 1 February 1965, including the Post Office Tower but with no date of issue. Again delays in construction appear to have prevented the finalisation of any plans. On 23 March, A Mead of Postal Services received confirmation from Mr Smale of CMBD that the Prime Minister would officially open the Post Office Tower for operational purposes only on 8 October 1965. When the PMG announced a revised timetable for the 1965 stamp

programme in Parliament on 21 June, he advised that the Post Office Tower stamps would be issued on 8 October.

COMMISSIONING DESIGNS

Invitations to submit designs for the Post Office Tower stamps were sent to the following on 23 June: Derek Birdsall, Denis Bailey, Andrew Restall, Clive Abbott, and the stamp printing firms of Harrison and Sons and Bradbury Wilkinson. The 'Instructions to Artists' called for two designs of 3d and 1s 3d. Despite instructions from the PMG to the contrary, it was stated that the designs must include the Queen's head 'as a dominant feature'. The 3d was to include a full-length illustration of the Tower which implied that the design should be vertical. It was suggested that the 1s 3d might show a panoramic view of London with the Tower as a dominant feature. For the first time the names of the designer and the printers would be shown on the gutter of each stamp, although at this stage the artists were not required to include these in their artwork as they would appear outside the design area of the stamp. Finished artwork was to be delivered to D H Beaumont by 14 July, allowing less than a month for completion. This was unfortunate but necessary because of the lack of time before the official opening on 8 October. Various photographs of the Tower in construction and a drawing of the completed Tower were supplied for reference.

All the artists submitted designs on 14 July in time for the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) to view them at its meeting of 21 July.

A Restall

- 1 – 3d (vertical): purple, grey, brown
- 2 – 1s 3d (horizontal): grey

C Abbott

- 3 – 3d (vertical): dark blue
- 4 – 3d (vertical): light blue
- 5 – 1s 3d (horizontal): green
- 6 – 1s 3d (horizontal): orange

Bradbury, Wilkinson artists:

W S Matthews

- 7 – 3d (vertical): purple, black;

J M Stibbe

- 8 – 1s 3d (vertical): red, grey, EIRR background.

D Birdsall

9 – 3d (horizontal): photograph with trees

9a – 3d: as design 9 with pink tint

10 – 1s 3d (horizontal): photograph of sections of Tower

10a – 1s 3d: as design 10 with green tint

D Bailey

11 – 3d (vertical): black and white rough

11a – 3d: final version of 11 - green, grey, black

12 – 1s 3d (horizontal): black and white rough

12a – 1s 3d: final version of 12 - orange, red

Harrison and Sons artists:

T Brown

13 – 3d (vertical): blue, black, grey, white

14 – 1s 3d (horizontal - not in the British Postal Museum & Archive);

David Collins

15 – 3d (vertical): orange and brown

16 – 1s 3d (horizontal - orange and brown.

The SAC viewed all the designs, considering those of Clive Abbott to be especially good and selected three for essaying, 3, 4 and 5. Only one change was required: the value figure on design 4 to be shown in a lighter tone of the background colour rather than yellow. The photographic designs submitted by Derek Birdsall were also liked, although the committee wished to see his 3d design (9 and 9a) with streets in the foreground or alternatively as a night shot. Unfortunately, it was decided that the tight production timetable did not allow sufficient time for this so the set was abandoned. F H K Henrion, the Post Office's design advisor, suggested that David Gillespie, who had produced an artist's impression of the Tower from the blueprints, be asked to produce some designs as quickly as possible from his original drawing. These were to be essayed and shown to the Committee on 11 August.

David Gillespie, with his wife Ann, submitted five designs on 9 August by which time it was too late to have them essayed for the SAC meeting. The designs, two 3d and three 1s 3d, showed silhouettes of the Tower overlaid against each other and the city background, in a variety of colours and were accompanied by three specimen silhouettes:

Designs:

3d: blue, purple, white and brown

3d: brown, purple, white and black

1s 3d: orange, yellow, black and white

1s 3d: pink, red, black and white

1s 3d: red, white, black and purple

Silhouettes:

1: microwave dishes for telephone and television

2: Tower and city

3: small version of Tower only.

On August 10 Harrison and Sons submitted essays of Clive Abbott's selected designs.

The SAC was advised that Harrison and Sons had not considered it worthwhile at this stage to print Clive Abbott's 3d design in its three colours as had been done for the 1s 3d design. The 3d had been printed in two colours only, omitting the additional blue shade. The Committee confirmed its approval of the designs, recommending they be submitted to the Queen as the first choice set. Mr York of Harrison and Sons made it clear that the designs by David Gillespie would require extensive alteration, so it would not be possible to produce essays in time for submission to the Palace. Final stamps could, however, be printed if the Committee selected them. Consequently the Committee agreed to submit two of Gillespie's designs to the Palace as artwork as an alternative to the first choice set. These were Gillespie's 3d with the red ground and the vertical design in brown. Although this arrangement was not entirely satisfactory, the Committee had been under a great deal of pressure to submit alternatives to the Palace for the Queen's approval.

York telephoned Beaumont on 12 August requesting permission from Harrison and Sons to begin cylinder preparation prior to approval by the Queen due to the shortness of time. Beaumont agreed advising which of the essays of Clive Abbott's designs had been selected by the SAC.

SUBMISSION TO THE QUEEN

Traditionally it was the PMG, as a Minister of the Crown, who submitted designs to the Palace for the Queen's approval; however, Wedgwood Benn was on holiday in France. At W A Wolverson's suggestion, it was decided that Sir Ronald German, the Director General, should submit the designs in accordance with the SAC's recommendations. The essays of Clive Abbott's designs 4 and 5 were submitted as first choice set (A1, A2), together with artwork and bromides of the two designs by David Gillespie selected by the Committee (B1, B2). The following brief accompanied the designs:

A1 - The Post Office Tower springing from a symbolic foreground of Georgian type buildings which are a feature of the immediate vicinity of the Tower.

A2 - The Tower overshadows the broad sweep of the Nash Georgian terrace.

(In each case we have the direct comparison of old and new architecture.)

- B1 - The Tower is superimposed against a miscellany of London buildings old and new.
- B2 - The Tower silhouette shown in conjunction with its telecommunications element.

The designs were submitted to the Queen on 17 August at Balmoral where she approved Set A. The PMG was informed of the approval on his return to London in early September.

STAMP PRODUCTION

Approved essays were forwarded to Harrison and Sons and to the Supply Department on 25 August. Harrison and Sons returned photographic negatives of the approved designs on 27 August to Postal Services for publicity purposes and a press showing of the stamps held on 7 September, at which the original artwork together with specially printed blocks of four of each of the stamps were displayed.

Clive Abbott prepared designs for a first day envelope and presentation pack following instructions sent to him by Beaumont in mid-August. The artwork for the envelope was sent to HMSO and an order for 200,000 placed on 18 August. Proofs of the envelope were approved on 26 August with delivery requested by 20 September. The presentation pack design was forwarded to Harrison and Sons on 3 September together with the text that had been adapted from an existing Post Office Tower leaflet. A total of 150,000 packs was ordered at this stage.

ISSUING THE STAMPS

The Post Office Tower stamps went on sale on 8 October 1965 on the day the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, officially opened the Tower. Gift cards bearing mint stamps were sent by the PMG to the Queen, Princess Margaret, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Commons, former Postmasters General and Assistant PMGs, Postmasters General of the Commonwealth, members of the Stamp Advisory Committee, and the designer.

The stamps remained on general sale until 30 June 1966.

SALE AT THE POST OFFICE TOWER

In April 1965 an inter-departmental committee was established to discuss postal facilities for the public at the Tower. At a meeting on 7 April, it decided that the commemorative stamps would be available from self-service machines only due to difficulties over the

grading of Post Office personnel working in the shop at the Tower. The committee also decided that mail posted at the Tower be datestamped with a special postmark inscribed 'Posted at the Post Office Tower'. A sub-committee of representatives from the Public Relations Department, Postal Services Department and the London Postal Region was given the task of making the arrangements. Specifically it was to arrange for a permanent supply of the stamps in roll form for dispensing machines. Unfortunately neither papers relating to this sub-committee's activities nor its report to the larger committee are found in the British Postal Museum & Archive files: however subsequent correspondence seems to suggest the proposal was pursued. A minute of 10 June from V C Lucas to A A Mead, both of Postal Services, reminded the latter that the department was attempting to move away from the sale of individual stamps towards the provision of stamp booklets. Mead was asked to keep this in mind when the decision was made regarding how the stamps would be available at the Tower.

Although the idea of selling the stamps at the Tower had by all accounts already been taken by the inter-departmental committee, Kenneth Hind of Postal Services argued vociferously against the idea in a minute to the Deputy Director General, W A Wolverson, on 7 July. Hind regarded the project as cumbersome, expensive and not at all worthwhile as it would lead to pressure to provide similar facilities for other issues. F B Savage of Public Relations, however, countered with the argument that the opportunity of stamp sales to the estimated 750,000 people who would visit the Tower annually was too good an opportunity to miss. It was thus agreed that the stamps would remain on sale at the Tower until supplies were exhausted. The printing cylinders were not to be destroyed until the first month's sales figures were known, at which time it would be decided whether a reprint of the stamps was worthwhile.

This decision satisfied the Public Relations Department, but created another problem as Savage pointed out to Lucas. As the Tower stamps had been printed in sheets of 120 it would not be possible to sell them in the self-service machines that were to be installed at the Tower. These required rolls of stamps that would now be impossible to produce; otherwise ordinary machines for the 3d and 4d definitives would have to be used. A minute from Postal Services signed by A Mead to the Supply Department on 22 February 1966 indicated that when the Tower was opened the stamps would be available in the following formats:

1. Envelopes containing 4 of the 3d and two of the 1s 3d Tower stamps sold by machine.
2. Presentation packs containing one of each stamp sold by machine.
3. 'J' stamp rolls (480 of the 6d definitive), sold from Post Office vending machines.
4. Commemorative envelopes, Tower issue unstamped, sold in the Post Office shop.

As the Post Office Tower stamps were never produced or sold in roll format, it must be assumed the idea was abandoned. When the Tower opened to the public on 19 May 1966 the

special stamps were available in the two formats outlined. The envelopes containing four 3d stamps and those with two 1s 3d stamps were sold at face value, 1s 0d and 2s 6d respectively, while the presentation packs were sold at the value of the stamps plus 1s 0d as was usual.

A NEW PHILATELIC COUNTER?

Initial sales figures showed that making the stamps available at the Tower was successful and the practice continued on an indefinite basis, the only change being that from July 1968 only phosphor stamps were available from the self-service machines. In October 1967 G R Downes, the Director of Postal Services, raised the question of selling other stamp packs at the Tower with J Baxter of the department. It was discovered that issuing packs was not possible due to objections from the Union of Postal Workers over the use of lower grade staff at the Post Office Tower shop, not graded to sell stamps. This dispute had led to the installation of self-service machines in the first place. However, the problem could be resolved if a full philatelic counter was sited at the Tower. This would have the twin advantages of providing a service to the 1,000,000 visitors a year that the Tower enjoyed while easing the considerable pressure on the existing counter at King Edward Building.

The only problem was that space for the counter was not available within the Tower itself, so a site nearby had to be arranged. A number of options were pursued, including purchasing a nearby house and building on derelict land, none of which came to fruition. In the end it was decided to temporarily house a new philatelic counter in the existing offices at Procter House, Procter Street, High Holborn until a more suitable site could be found. However, these plans never came to fruition..

CONTINUED SALES AT THE TOWER

Although it had been agreed that the practice of selling stamps at the Tower would be reviewed towards the end of 1966, it was not until March 1969 that the matter appears to have been raised formally. A minute from the Supply Department to Postal Services in March sought permission to destroy the printing cylinders if a reprint was not required. It was informed that sufficient stocks were still to hand and the cylinders could be destroyed. In reply, the Supply Department requested a reprint of the presentation pack if sales were to continue.

This triggered an extensive discussion in which the matter of continued sales of the stamps was reviewed. It was discovered that although stocks of the stamps were still quite high, the bulk consisted of 'non-phosphor' stamps while only phosphor stamps were being sold at

the Tower. Supplies of the phosphor stamps would be exhausted within nine months. Additionally, the existing presentation pack was still that issued when the stamps were first released and was now considered out of date: it still referred to the forthcoming opening of the public sections of the Tower. The plates for the pack had been destroyed by Harrison and Sons, so a new design would have to be sought. It was decided to continue to sell the existing pack until supplies were exhausted and then to issue the stamps only thereafter. The final presentation packs were sold in November 1969.

This decision raised the problem of a reprint of the stamps again in June 1969 as the supply of phosphor stamps was dwindling. A minute from Miss N Page to Langdon, both of Operations and Overseas Department, outlined the possibilities. The printing cylinders for the Tower stamps had been destroyed and therefore a reprint was not possible. On the other hand, as all Tower post was hand processed, the sale of non-phosphor stamps would not create too many operational difficulties for the sorting offices and was therefore feasible. On a different matter, the half-crown coin (2s 6d) was being withdrawn at the end of the year and the self service stamp vending machines would have to be converted to accept 2s 0d. Langdon concurred and it was decided to sell phosphor stamps until the supplies were exhausted after which the non-phosphor stamps would be reintroduced. Once the half-crown was withdrawn, the 2s 6d packs could be replaced with packs containing one of the 1s 3d and three of the 3d stamps.

Langdon asked Miss Page to see if it would be possible to have decimal stamps for the Post Office Tower issued in time for the switch to decimal currency in 1971. Beaumont suggested that a decimal stamp would constitute a completely new issue, not feasible at the time due to the already large workload incurred by decimalisation. He suggested that the '£sd' stamps be withdrawn completely on decimalisation (decimalisation day - 14 February 1971). It was subsequently decided that as £sd stamps would remain valid for a 18 months after decimalisation, the Post Office Tower stamps would remain on sale until the end of this period.

On 6 August 1971 a minute from Operations and Overseas Department to the Supply Department stated that the supply of phosphor 3d Post Office Tower stamps was exhausted and so the envelopes on sale at the Tower now contained non-phosphor stamps: therefore the remaining supply of phosphor 1s 3d stamps should be destroyed. Precisely when non-phosphor stamps were reintroduced is not known, but sales figures for the period May 1969 to August 1970 indicate that 647,160 of the 3d and 141,120 of the 1s 3d non-phosphor stamps were dispensed from the Post Office Tower machines.

FINAL QUANTITIES ISSUED

Stanley Gibbons provides the following figures for quantities issued; it is not clear whether these include sales at the Post Office Tower:

Ordinary

3d – 51,291,120

1s 3d – 5,722,320

Phosphor

3d – 4,274,880

1s 3d – 1,107,480

Presentation Packs – 25,060 (contain either non-phosphor or phosphor stamps).

The figure for presentation packs does not include sales at the Tower; it is therefore likely that the stamp figures also do not include Tower sales. British Postal Museum & Archive records indicate that total quantities issued from the self-service machines at the Tower were:

3d – 3,039,480

1s 3d – 630,720.

All of the presentation packs out of an order of 150,000 were sold.

These figures are not totally accurate as the lists from which they are compiled contain gaps in some places and overlap in others after 1968. They are considered a reasonable estimate of the amounts issued. Unfortunately it is not possible to separate sales of non-phosphor and phosphor stamps.

A D Griffiths
September, 1993

REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archives file:
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