

## Christmas 1970

Date of issue: 25 NOVEMBER 1970



On 11 February 1969 the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) received a list of proposals for the 1970 stamp programme from J R Baxter of the Operations & Overseas Department of the GPO, in his capacity as Secretary of the SAC. Baxter added that it might be necessary to forgo a special Christmas issue because of its proximity to the implementation of decimalisation on 15 February 1971: it was thought desirable to have a moratorium on special issues for several months either side of decimalisation day in order to simplify the process of transition to the new values from the old pre-decimal definitives. This was not greeted favourably by the two leading philatelists serving on the Committee, Kenneth F Chapman and R A G Lee. Chapman was a past chairman of both the British Philatelic Association and the Executive of the Philatelic Congress of Great Britain, a leading member of both the Royal Philatelic Society London and the Philatelic Traders' Society, philatelic correspondent of 'The Times' and editor of 'Stamp Collecting'. Lee was Honorary Secretary of the Royal Philatelic Society's Expert Committee, founder and President of the Great Britain Philatelic Society, a signatory of the Roll of Distinguished Philatelists, and the winner of a philatelic International Grand Prix in Vienna in 1965.

Both Lee and Chapman urged strongly that at least one stamp should be issued, and were supported by the Chairman of the SAC, G R Downes, Director of Operations & Overseas. After further discussion, George Rogers, Labour MP for North Kensington, suggested the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree, presented annually by the people of Norway, as a suitable theme; this was welcomed, and Herbert Spencer, prominent as an editor and publisher in the graphic design field and himself a designer, proposed the inclusion of the church of St Martin's in the Fields in any such design to maintain a religious element. Downes asked the committee to consider the problem before the next meeting, when more news on the eventuality of a Christmas issue would be available.

On 3 March, the Managing Director (Posts), A Wolstencroft, wrote to John Stonehouse, the Postmaster General (PMG), informing him that 'a Christmas issue is now generally expected and popular' and that the SAC would probably be recommending 'a traditional theme with some religious significance'. These views were basically the position taken by OOD drawn up towards the end of February. In his own discussions with OOD Wolstencroft tentatively suggested the commemoration within one issue of Christmas and Dickens, to mark the centenary year of the latter's death, but conceded that this clashed with plans to associate Dickens with 1970's other 'literary' anniversary, the bicentenary of Wordsworth's birth. Wordsworth had no especial connotations with Christmas, and it was desirable to commemorate the Dickens' anniversary near to the actual date in June, for marketing reasons. (Christmas stamps on a Dickensian theme would eventually be issued in 1993.)

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## **CHRISTMAS STAMP PLANS ANNOUNCED**

Downes informed the MDP of the proposed Trafalgar Square theme during the above exchanges; on 6 March, Baxter, in a minute to the DDO, produced the further argument in favour that, 'because of decimalisation we want to keep the Christmas 1970 stamps as simple as possible. The Trafalgar Square idea facilitates this because we can if necessary use one basic design for three stamps.' On 20 March the PMG agreed that there should be a separate Christmas issue, and subsequently stated to the House of Commons on 27 March that this would appear on an as yet undecided date in November. At the SAC meeting on 26 March Baxter reported that the PMG had been made aware of the Trafalgar Square proposal and seemed favourably disposed towards it.

It was at this meeting that there began a debate of some months' duration over the values for the Christmas stamps: this arose as a general question during viewing the 1969 Christmas essays, when it was noted that these did not include the 4d (second class) value. As explained to the meeting by Downes, the introduction of the 'two tier' (first and second class) posting system in September 1968 had led to difficulties in the segregation of the mail; an overriding operational requirement was that the lowest value in special sets was to be the first class rate: 'Our staff should be able to segregate and sort letters bearing special issue stamps in the knowledge that they are invariably first-class mail.' It emerged in the course of the discussion that the extra revenue from having 5d as the lowest-value Christmas denomination was also a factor. The publisher and Conservative MP Brian Batsford, and Anthony Lousada, Chairman of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, were both firmly opposed to this view, and were largely supported by the rest of the Committee. Some of this opposition arose from the misconception that there was still a separate cheaper rate applicable to greetings cards, whereas this was one of the arrangements that the two-tier system had replaced. However, the weight of feeling expressed both within the SAC, and most notably elsewhere by Sir Gerald Nabarro MP, made apparent a widespread concern

that Christmas stamps should be made available in the second-class value. Eventually on 3 July the PMG announced that the 1969 Christmas issue would be 4d, 5d and 1s 6d values (rather than 5d, 9d and 1s 6d as first envisaged). On 24 July, after discussion between the MDP and Chairman-designate Viscount Hall, it was confirmed that the Christmas 1970 stamps would also be issued in these values.

It was not until 21 October 1969 that the issue was again discussed by the SAC. Acting as chairman in Downes' absence, Stuart Rose, Director of Design, reported that he had examined the Trafalgar Square proposal in some detail and did not feel that it would prove promising. He suggested instead that reproduced images could be used, drawn from such media as sculpture, tapestry or stained glass. This was welcomed by the Committee, and the process of seeking suitable designs was subsequently put in hand.

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## **ARTISTS' DESIGNS SUBMITTED**

No records of invitations to artists or artwork subsequently received are available, although it is known that the instructions sent out included the suggestion that 'the stamps should be based in some way on the work of a British artist' and 'left wide scope for the choice of medium and the age of the work'. The stipulation that the content should be traditional and include religious references seems to have been included, and Rose's own suggestion that the imagery be drawn from existing sources. On 2 December Downes announced that artwork would be ready for the SAC meeting on 13 January 1970 of which details are unfortunately unavailable, but designs were submitted in January both for the stamps and a special 9d air letter. The following list of designs is based on material in the British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA), and is not necessarily comprehensive.

### **Bradbury Wilkinson –**

4d Virgin & Child, 14th century stained glass, church of St John the Baptist, Fladbury, Worcs  
5d Unidentified figures  
1s 6d Madonna and Child, sculpture by Henry Moore

### **Ruari McLean Associates –**

4d Nativity, stained glass  
5d Flight into Egypt, tapestry in Victoria and Albert Museum  
1s 6d Nativity, 14th century stained glass  
4d Three sailing ships  
5d Shepherds and flock  
1s 6d Shepherds and angel, from mediaeval Book of Hours in British Museum

### **Peter Gauld –**

4d Head of Virgin, Fladbury, Worcs (14th century stained glass)  
5d Head of Archangel, Eaton Bishop, Herefordshire (14th century)  
9d Head of Angel, church of St Peter and Paul, East Harling, Norfolk (15th century)  
9d Unidentified head, stained glass

**John Sutherland-Hawes –**

4d Angel on horse; also in stamp size  
4d As above with plain border; also stamp size  
4d As above with red-brown background; also stamp size  
5d Angel; also stamp size  
5d As above with green background; also stamp size  
1s 6d Angel with trumpet and scroll; also stamp size  
1s 6d As above with gold background; also stamp size  
4d Praying man; also stamp size  
5d Praying woman; also stamp size  
1s 6d Three praying women (carving); also stamp size  
9d Angel and scroll  
4d Angel, glass engraving by John Hutton in Coventry Cathedral  
5d St Chad, first Bishop of Lichfield in 7th century, by John Hutton  
9d Two crowned saints; John Hutton, Coventry  
1s 6d Mother and Child; John Hutton, Coventry

**Collis Clements –**

4d Virgin and Child; 14th century stained glass, Fladbury, Worcs  
- Crucifixion scene, Holkham Bible  
4d Angels and shepherds; Holkham Bible (?)  
- As above, minus border; also stamp size  
5d Magi and star; Holkham Bible (?)  
- As above, minus border; also stamp size  
9d Magi at Nativity; Holkham Bible (?)  
- As above, minus border; also stamp size  
1s 6d Nativity; Holkham Bible (?)  
- As above, minus border; also stamp size  
4d Ride of the Magi; early 13th century stained glass, Canterbury Cathedral  
5d Dream of the magi; early 13th century, Canterbury  
- Nativity, stained glass  
4d Angel and shepherds  
5d Nativity  
9d Magi and Herod  
1s 6d Nativity  
- Magi in ship

- Dream of the Magi; also stamp size
- Angel
- Flight to Egypt

### **Sally Stiff –**

4d Shepherds and Angel, from De Lisle Psalter (1300-1320), Arundel Collection, British Museum manuscript section - two preliminary sketches, stamp size and 4/3 stamp size  
 5d Nativity, De Lisle Psalter; sketches as above  
 1s 6d Magi bearing gifts, De Lisle Psalter; sketches as above.

Clements' work was produced in collaboration with Graham Clarke and Edward Hughes, with whom he formed the Maidstone-based design team of 'Clarke-Clements-Hughes'.

The SAC saw the designs on 13 January and decided that one set by Sally Stiff and Collis Clements should be carried forward for essaying. Four air letter designs were also seen; the Committee was unanimous in choosing one by Peter Gauld, and requested proofs. Two of the rejected designs were by John Sutherland-Hawes, and one by Ruari McLean Associates.

## **ESSAYS SEEN AND APPROVED**

At the meeting on 4 March the SAC unanimously approved the essays of Sally Stiff's designs, which it was felt might prove as successful as had the previous Christmas issue by Fritz Wegner. The 4d essay was in horizontal format and the others vertical; the object was to compare the two formats for, while there were aesthetic advantages in preserving the vertical format as in the original designs, operational considerations argued for both the 4d and 5d to be horizontal. Essays of Collis Clements' 4d design had been produced in both formats for the same reason. After viewing both formats, it was decided that all three stamps should be vertical as first intended; Downes was, however, concerned that the vertical format for the most used denominations might cause operational difficulties.

Other than revising the 4d to be vertical, the only amendment required of the Stiff essays was that the oblique stroke between the '1' and '6' of the 1s 6d have greater emphasis. Meanwhile, the essays of Collis Clements' designs based on stained glass windows in the North Choir aisle of Canterbury Cathedral were thought far too promising to be discarded and it was decided to hold them in reserve for inclusion in a set dedicated to stained glass. In fact they were used substantially unamended for the Christmas issue of 1971: the original 1970 artwork for the 'Adoration of the Magi' is not held in the BPMA albums.

Downes forwarded the essays to the MDP (Geoffrey Vieler, who had replaced Wolstencroft in October) on 13 March; Vieler sent them in turn on 16 March to John Stonehouse, now

Minister of Posts & Telecommunications (MPT). A note was attached explaining the changes to the 4d format and 1s 6d oblique that were being prepared. The MPT did not forward them for the Queen's approval until 25 March; a reply the next day advised that they had been approved by the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret in the Queen's absence. After another delay Stonehouse returned the essays to the MDP with the Royal approval on 2 April.

Fresh essays of the approved Stiff designs were seen by the SAC on 6 May. Following a decision taken after the March meeting, the background colour of the 1s 6d had been changed to green from mauve, as the latter had been thought too similar to the bluish-violet of the 5d. The 4d was now in the vertical format but no change made as yet to the oblique of the 1s 6d - this was done subsequently. A proof of Peter Gauld's Christmas airletter was seen, and found acceptable subject to the embellishments in the corners of the stamp being defined more clearly; it was approved by the Queen later in the month.

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## STAMP SALES AND SPECIAL POSTMARKS

The stamps went on sale on 25 November; they were printed in photogravure by Harrison & Sons Ltd on unwatermarked chalk-surfaced paper in sheets of 120. Each stamp was 30mm by 41mm, the 4d having one centre band of phosphor and the 5d and 1s 6d two bands. The Queen's head was embossed in gold, the other colours being given officially as: brown-red, blue, turquoise-green, pale chestnut, brown, grey-black and vermilion (4d); emerald, blue, brown-red, ochre, grey-black and violet (5d); grey-black, pale turquoise-green, salmon, ultramarine, ochre, red and yellow-green (1s 6d).

The 5d and 1s 6d were printed by Harrisons on a 'Rembrandt' press, and the 4d on the 'Woods 10"' machine that simultaneously applied colours using eight cylinders and the embossing and phosphor bands on the remaining two. Sally Stiff assisted by supplying colour photographs of the illustrations from the De Lisle Psalter she had used and later complimented Harrisons on the accuracy with which the company had reproduced the colours.

Total sales stood at 360,016,216 of the 4d, 181,161,720 of the 5d, and 22,598,520 of the 1s 6d when the stamps were withdrawn on 25 November 1971. Production costs were later recorded as £11,900 for development of essays, proofs, plates, and cylinders, plus £86,096 for printing. A presentation pack was also produced at a cost of £17,694, of which 103,039 were sold. As well as the normal first day of issue facilities, both a slogan postmark and a special handstamp were in use at Bethlehem, Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire. The special handstamp for Bethlehem was designed by Sally Stiff and based on a part of her 4d stamp. The first day envelope was designed by John Sutherland-Hawes and reproduced a figure

from the De Lisle Psalter, which the artist also used to illustrate the presentation pack (this was not one of the figures which Stiff had used). There were 261,332 first day covers sold at post office counters; including these, total first day postings in philatelic boxes came to 699,355 items. A separate figure is recorded of 40,326 'extractions from normal post', presumably first day covers posted in ordinary boxes. A breakdown of the first day postings showed that 88.36 per cent bore complete sets of the stamps, 7.03 per cent 'normal postage' only, and 4.61 per cent 'others'.

Maximum cards were also accepted for first day handstamping; of some 5,700 cards accepted nationally, over 80 per cent were bulk postings in Wales to obtain the Bethlehem handstamp. These cards have the stamp affixed for cancellation on the pictorial side. To avoid having such cards in normal mail, where the unconventional placing of the stamp would classify them as 'embarrassing items', they were left for collection in the poste restante section of the handstamping office; the alternative was to hand them in with a stamped addressed envelope - this was done in the case of only 430 of the Christmas 1970 maximum cards accepted. Analysis of the accepted cards showed that 1,939 bore the 4d stamp, 1,901 the 5d, 1,648 the 1s 6d, and the majority of the 200-odd remaining a complete set.

A special handstamp in use on 25 November 1970 only was 'Lilleshall Parish Church AD670-1970' at Lilleshall, Shropshire; of the various slogan postmarks in use on the day, 'See the Christmas Illuminations during December' from Cheltenham had a connection with the issue.

The Christmas air letter was printed by McCorquodale & Co Ltd and went on sale from 28 October until 24 December; approximately three million were printed but sales figures are not known. As with the stamps a special postmark was available from Bethlehem, Carmarthenshire on the first day of issue. The air letter 'stamp' was the design showing the head of an angel from 15th century stained glass in St Peter and Paul's Church, East Harling, Norfolk, used on one of the two 9d stamp designs submitted by Peter Gauld. The rear of the air letter depicts the adoration of the shepherds, also from East Harling, while the front bore a Nativity scene from 16th century stained glass in Great Malvern Priory, Worcestershire. Peter Gauld produced many designs for the Post Office ranging from the Post Office Savings Bank Centenary 2½d of 1960 to the British Conductors set of 1980; he was deeply interested in ecclesiastical art and architecture, and had been responsible for the Cathedrals issue of May 1969.

The Christmas 1970 stamps were also sold in a special pack on the Post Office's 'Scandinavia '71' philatelic tour, during which a special mobile display unit toured from 15 April to 20 May, visiting Copenhagen in Denmark, Malmö, Norrköping, Stockholm and Göteborg in Sweden, and Oslo in Norway. The pack was in a red wallet bearing the Royal

Arms and the inscription 'Christmas 1970' and was meant as a supplement to the main pack containing the ten new low-value decimal definitives. The stamps were the final pre-decimal special issue and were made up into a supplementary pack for the Scandinavian tour because all further special issues had been suspended until the following July, five months after decimalisation.

At the time of the Christmas 1970 issue Sally Stiff was a freelance artist aged 28. She was trained at the High Wycombe School of Art and Regent Street Polytechnic before attending the Royal College of Art from 1963 to 1966. She produced several experimental stamp designs while studying under Andrew Restall during his tenure of the Fellowship in Minuscule Design at the Royal College of Art funded by the Post Office from 1965 to 1967. Later she worked in various areas of design including children's book illustration, and also taught part-time at Southampton School of Art. She was first recommended to the Post Office by the Council of Industrial Design at the beginning of 1970 and went on to work on designs for several stamp issues up to 1980. She was only successful, however, with another Christmas issue in 1972, by which time she was employed as a graphic designer by the Greater London Council.

GILES ALLEN  
18 February 1994

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