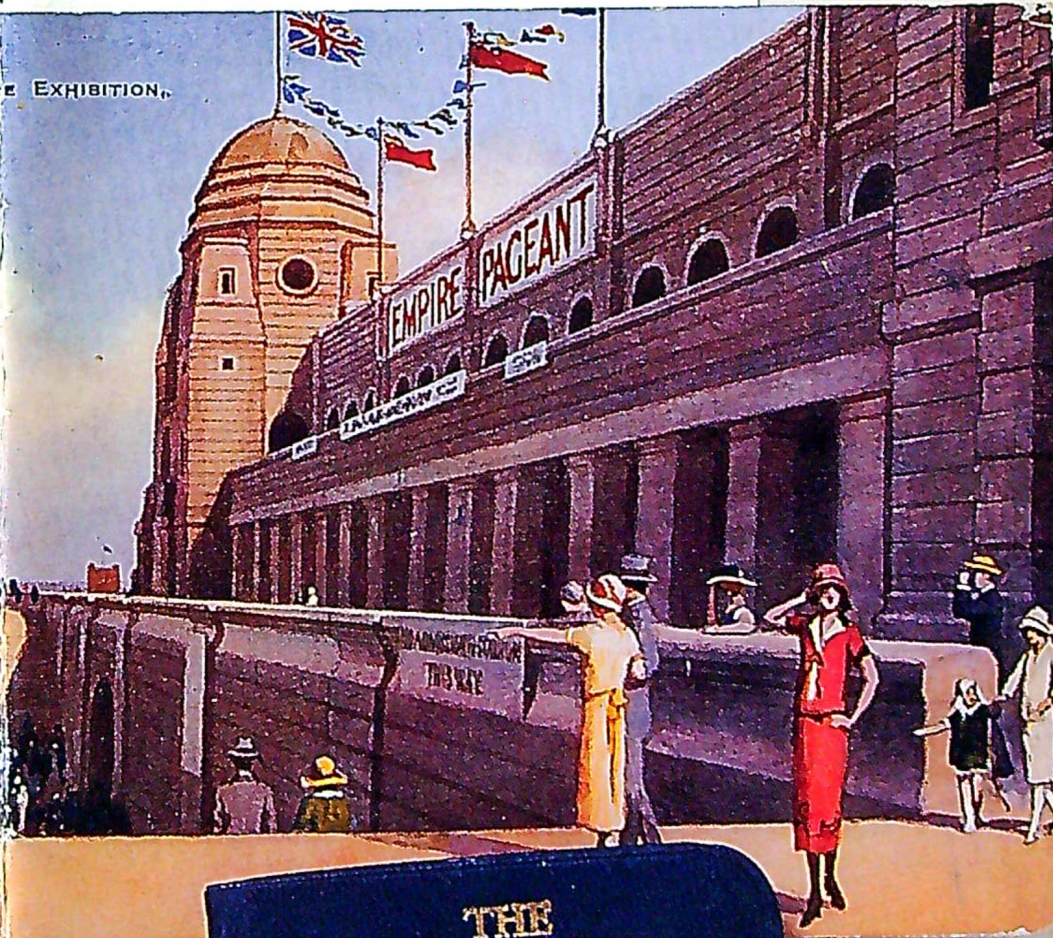


BRITISH *PHILATELIC* BULLETIN

The British Empire Exhibition Stamps of 1924 and 1925

PUBLICATION No 6



BY ALAN D SABEY



British Empire Exhibition Stamps 1924-25

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SEVENTY FIVE years ago this month saw a new venture in the issuing policy of British postage stamps, with the introduction of special stamps to mark the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 at Wembley. Until then, the stamps in daily use had shown just the portrait of the Monarch, frequently with little decoration.

King George V was, as every collector knows, an avid philatelist in his private life, but as Monarch, he was responsible for approving the designs of British stamps. With these two principles in mind, it was not an easy task for him.

The Exhibition stamps, as Britain's first commemoratives, have a special place in the affections of philatelists. Seventy five years after issue they are still popular and much sought-after. Since 1924 the British Post Office has issued over 1000 special stamps. It is fitting that in this anniversary year, the 1999 programme has been dedicated to stamps celebrating the forthcoming Millennium.

The 'Wembley Lion' was adopted as the Exhibition's trademark, as it was used on advance publicity labels by firms advertising their participation. Before the stamps were designed, it had already been decided that post-cards sent by Exhibition visitors would be cancelled with a special postmark featuring the Lion.



THE IDEA AND THE DESIGN

On 22 November 1923 the Secretary of the Post Office sent a letter to the British Institute of Industrial Art, stating that an issue of postage stamps was contemplated for the forthcoming Exhibition. On the following day, the Post Office was informed that a special meeting of the Design Sub-Committee of the Governors of the Institute would be held at 12.30pm on 28 November.¹ A list of artists was specially chosen from whom essays would be accepted, including F C Herrick, Noel Rooke,

Eric Gill, E W Tristram, J D Batten, Harold Nelson, Frank Richards, George Kruger Gray, and John D Barton. Barton and Richards did not reply, the latter being busy working on Queen Mary's Doll's House.

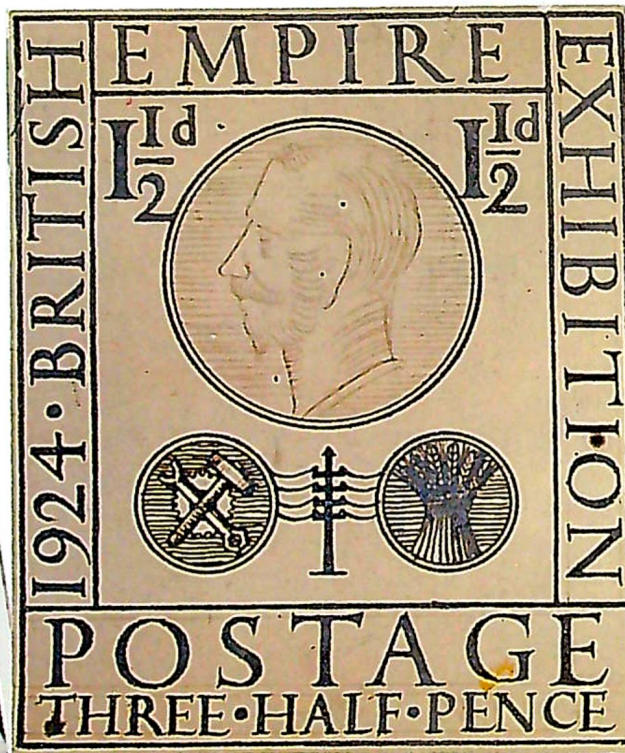
The King has heard of the proposal to issue a commemorative stamp at the British Empire Exhibition and although His Majesty is not very much in favour of stamps of this sort, because the whole idea is un-English and is copied from America, the King thinks that if it is to be done at all, it should be done properly. Assuming, therefore, that the Post Office has approved of the general idea, His Majesty hopes that a really competent Committee will be appointed to assist the Master of the Mint with the designs.

The King is of (the) opinion that it is (a) waste of time to put people on the Committee who do not know anything about stamps or designs.

Above A minute in Post Office Archives shows the forthright views held by The King about the issue of 'special' stamps².

Right The design by Eric Gill, shown to The King.

Below Gill, photographed by Howard Coster.



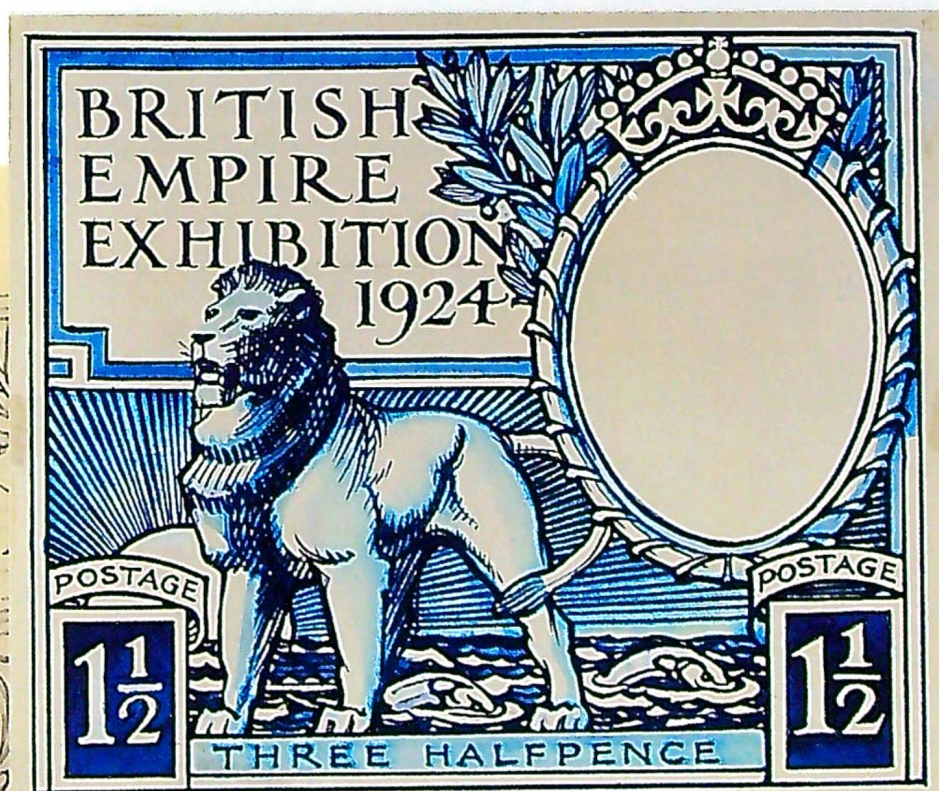
As a result of The King's interest, the artists formed a Committee under the leadership of Edward (later Sir Edward) Denny Bacon, The King's philatelic expert. The first meeting of this Committee took place on 16 January 1924, to consider designs submitted by the chosen artists. A *Reclining Britannia* design by Miss Maitland Howard was rejected, as she was not among them.

At the second meeting held on 19 February, two designs were chosen: one by Eric Gill and one by Harold Nelson. These were submitted to The King for his approval. The King did not like the design by Gill, saying he did not think his design for the Three Halfpenny value at all attractive, and on 28 February 1924, chose the one by Nelson. A couple of weeks later, on 14 March, The King, ever the keen collector, asked for the original designs and any drawings connected with the stamps for his collection!

Below left A preliminary sketch by Harold Nelson, and artwork submitted to The King along with Gill's design.

Bottom centre Nelson, photographed by Howard Coster.

Below King George V and the letter giving his verdict on the two designs.



BUCKINGHAM PALACE

28th. February, 1924.

My dear Murray,

I have submitted to the King the design for the Empire Exhibition Stamps.

His Majesty very much likes the 1½d. design by Mr. Harold Nelson: but, I am sorry to say, the King cannot think Mr. Gill's 1½d. design (which I understand is recommended by the Committee) at all attractive. His Majesty rather likes the design of Mr. Harold Nelson's 1d. stamp, St. George and the Dragon: but, as the



PROOFING THE NEW ISSUE



The Three Halfpence value was proofed first, in black (below right) and the issued colour. Below left, the One Penny worked from the same die, proofed in black. Above, a proof of the One Penny in the issued colour.

The design submitted by Harold Nelson which was chosen for the issue, originally showed the Lion standing astride a sea of dolphins, but this was later changed so that it stood over the rolling countryside. In the instructions to the artists, the Post Office stated that they would supply the head of the King for the eventual stamp and it would be the same type as used on the high value stamps – the Seahorses which had first been issued in 1913. The Three Halfpence value was proofed first, in black and in the issued colour, between 21 and 24 March 1924. This was die number 10289, and the One Penny value was worked from it as die number 10290 which was proofed only in black and is an exceedingly scarce item. The engraver employed for the work was J A C Harrison, and in the Harrison Collection at the British Library there exists an example of the One Penny value proofed in the issued colour.

The stamps were put on sale at the Exhibition when it opened on St George's Day – 23 April 1924. At first the policy was that the stamps could only be purchased by a personal visit to the Exhibition, but this was later relented.



Mar 24/24

STAMPS ISSUED

The stamps were printed on a large sheet of Block Cypher watermark paper in two panes of 60 stamps each. These were later divided in two, so that the 'sheets' issued to the Postmaster at the Exhibition at Wembley were only of 60 stamps. The format of the sheets was 10 horizontal rows of six stamps. It appears that Waterlows, the printers, were not instructed to remove their practice of numbering the sheets of stamps as they had done for the Colonial issues, and so the British Empire Exhibition stamp sheets were put on sale with numbers from 1 to 999 at the top right hand corner.

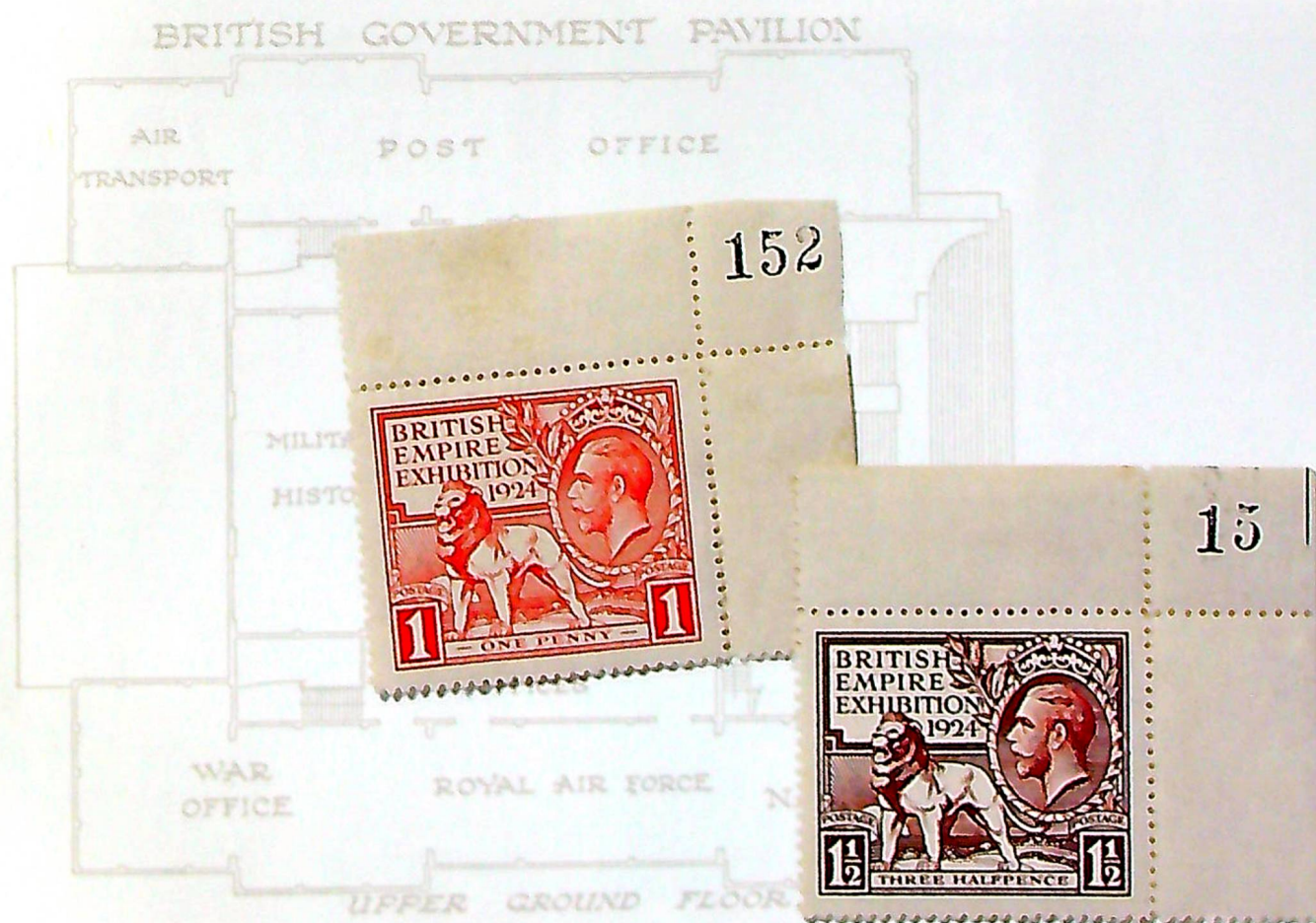
When the stamps were first put on sale, the perforation was line perf 14, but it was soon realised that the sheets would not hold together satisfactorily with the perforation hole being so small under this method, and so it was changed to comb perf 14 sometime about July 1924, and this perforation remained for the 1925 issue.

It had also been realised that something had to be done to alleviate the pressure on the two Exhibition Post Offices in the Palaces of Engineering and Industry.

1924 sales figures Final figures for the 1924 issue both at the Exhibition and after the decision to sell them later at the London Chief Office

One Penny	7,385,640
Three Halfpence	5,956,680

Below Issued stamps, and a plan from the Exhibition guide, showing where the activities of the GPO were featured.



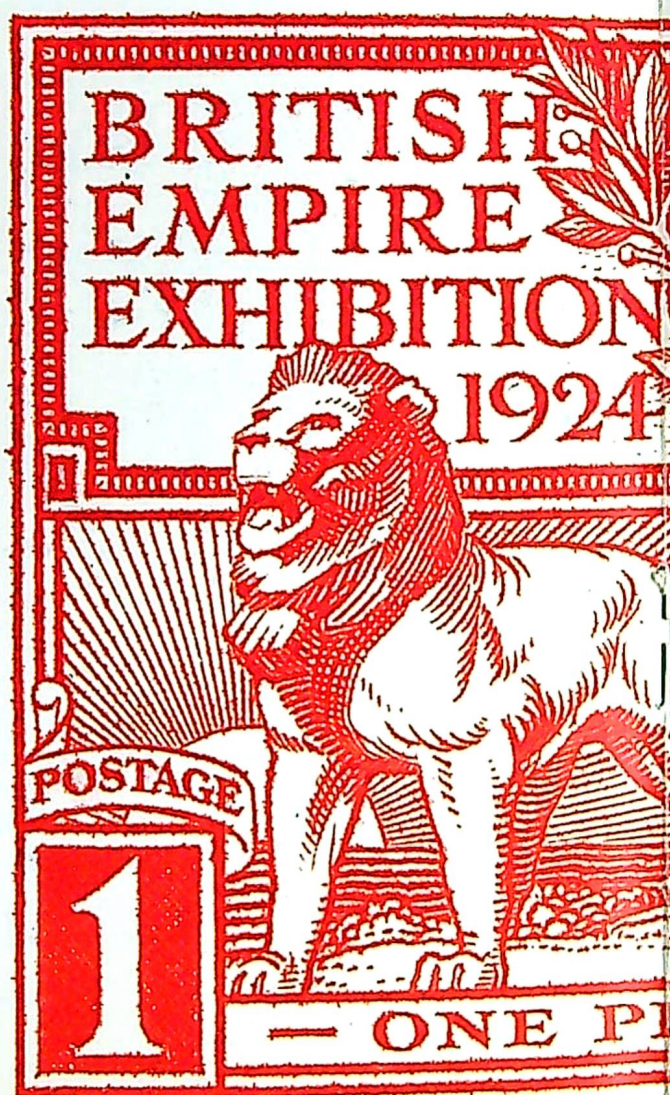
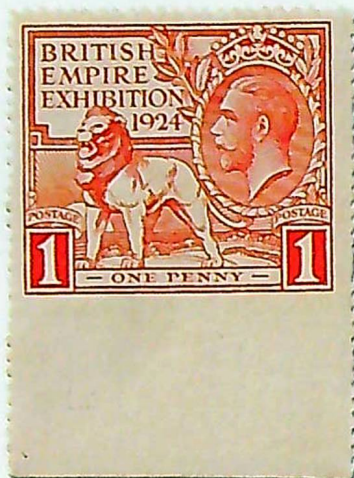
COIL STAMPS

Below A coil-join pair of 1d stamps, overprinted 'cancelled', left; the 1d imperfect at foot; and a rather spectacular paper fold variation. Here, the paper has been concertina-ed during printing, remaining so while it was perforated, and only straightened afterwards. The resulting 'freak' stamp is 3mm wider than normal.

The British Stamp and Automatic Delivery Company requested some sheets of stamps in order that they could experiment with them to get their machines to take and satisfactorily issue the larger-size stamps.³ On 22 April five sheets of each value of the British Empire Exhibition stamps overprinted CANCELLED (type 28) were forwarded. Although the Post Office later requested the return of their stamps, some were not returned and there exists from these a coil-join pair of the 1d stamps and a coil strip of four of the Three Halfpence with the type 24 CANCELLED. (Type numbers as in *SG GB Specialised Stamp Catalogue*, vol 2).

The sheets of stamps were broken down into strips of 10 which were joined by the selvage and 120 of these formed a coil of stamps for the vending machines.

The Exhibition in 1924 was open from 23 April to 1 November. Records show that 191 rolls of the One Penny and 58 rolls of the Three Halfpence were sold in 1924, and in 1925 the coil vended sales were 161 rolls of the One Penny and 87 rolls of the Three Halfpence value.

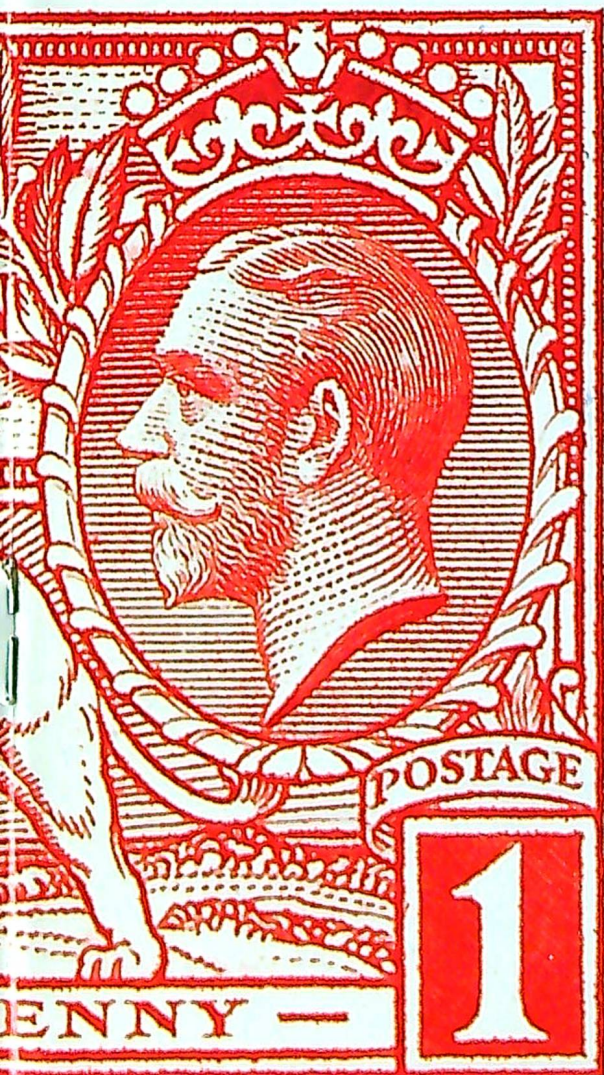


VARIETIES

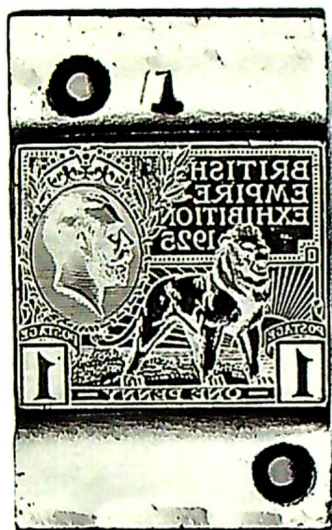
With line perforation, mistakes can occur as each row and each column is perforated individually (unlike comb which is done in one operation). Both values of the line-perforated 1924 issue are known with imperforate edges – the One Penny is known imperforate at the foot, (as shown opposite) and is known imperforate at the left-hand side. The Three Halfpence is also known imperforate at the left-hand edge.

There are many insignificant 'fly-spec' varieties on these stamps but there are only two major constant ones and fortunately they appear only on the One Penny value for 1924, and even more conveniently next to one another on the top row. The top row is referred to as Row 1 and the stamp at position number 4 has the variety – Scratch across the Lion's Nose. For some unknown reason this is not listed by Gibbons in their catalogues. The stamp at position number 5 has the listed variety – Tail to the 'N' of Exhibition.

Below The major constant varieties: a scratch across the lion's nose, left, and a tail to the 'N' of Exhibition. Details 400% actual size.







THE 1925 ISSUE

In 1925, the year was re-engraved very skilfully onto the original die, so that the design was otherwise identical with the year before. So skilful was this operation that it is almost impossible to detect the re-engraving. The fact that the design for both year's stamps was almost identical fooled quite a lot of collectors who thought that they already had the stamps and that last year's stamps were being re-issued! Consequently the sales figures for the 1925 issue

were well down on the year before. The story of the 1925 Impri-matur Three Halfpence stamp was told by me in the February 1997 issue of the *British Philatelic Bulletin*.

The 1925 Three Halfpence stamp sold out completely on 30 October 1925, and being one day before the closure of the Exhibition it was decided that no further quantities of this value would be sought.

The Exhibition in 1925 was open from 9 May (the anniversary date of The King's proclamation as Monarch in 1910) until 31 October.

Left The engraved die for the 1925 1d.

Opposite, below Proofs of the 1d, showing amended year and changes to the engraving and shading of the leaves.

Below The issued stamps, with a detail of the year on the 1d.



1925 sales figures⁴

One Penny	1,930,020
Three Halfpence	1,524,720

EXHIBITION POSTAL STATIONERY

Below An inland post card, a letter card, and envelopes in their wrapper, 1924.

Opposite An overseas post card, 1924, and envelope posted at the 1925 Exhibition. All postal stationery items for both years were printed by McCorquodale & Co Ltd.

Postal stationery with a surface-printed impression of the adhesive stamp was also issued on 23 April 1924. There was one slight difference in the appearance of the 'stamp' on the postal stationery and that is that the rays of the Sun are wider apart. Four items were issued: a penny postcard for inland use, a three halfpence postcard for use to addresses abroad, a three halfpence envelope and a three halfpence lettercard. The ordinary postage rates at the time were: one penny for a postcard and three halfpence for a letter. The same items were issued with the year altered to 1925 on 9 May 1925 which was the date of the opening of the 1925 Exhibition by The King.

POST  CARD



LETTER



11
A. SIZE
1½d.
POSTAGE
ENVELOPES.



309
Green Lane
N. 16

THE PERFORATION.

Postal stationery items sold As the letter-rate adhesive stamp sold out on 30 October 1925, a greater number of postal stationery envelopes were subsequently sold.

	1924	1925
One Penny postcard	100,368	31,700
Three Halfpence postcard	9,536	5,710
Three Halfpence envelope	75,348	41,620
Three Halfpence lettercard	45,786	24,000



POST CARD  CARTE POSTALE
UNIVERSAL POSTAL UNION UNION POSTALE UNIVERSELLE
GREAT BRITAIN



MR. G. J. KING,
85, ALGIERS ROAD,
LONDON, S.E.



**1923**

- 22 November The Secretary of the Post Office informs the British Institute of Industrial Art that an issue of postage stamps is contemplated for the forthcoming Exhibition.

1924

- 16 January The newly-formed committee of chosen artists, led by Edward Denny Bacon, meets for the first time.
- 19 February The Committee selects designs by Harold Nelson and Eric Gill for submission to The King.
- 28 February The King approves the design by Nelson.
- 21-24 March Proofing of the Three Halfpence value, followed by the One Penny.
- 23 April Exhibition opens. Stamps go on sale at the Exhibition, with postal stationery.
- 1 November Exhibition closes.

1925

- 9 May Exhibition re-opens. 1925 issue stamps go on sale, with postal stationery.
- 30 October Three Halfpence stamp is sold out.
- 31 October Exhibition closes.



The author Alan Sabey is a leading collector of the stamps, postal stationery, postmarks and related material of the British Empire Exhibition. He is co-author, with D R Knight, of *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, 1984. He collects all philatelic and other material connected with exhibitions and sporting events at Wembley, including the 1948 Olympics and 1966 World Cup. He provided a most impressive display of items from his Wembley collection at the Stamp '95 exhibition at Wembley, April 1995. He has displayed his collection of the Empire Exhibition stamps at Stampex and to the Royal Philatelic Society.

Alan Sabey is a member of the Exhibition Study Group, the Society of Olympic Collectors, and a Fellow of the Royal Philatelic Society, London.



Other publications in this series

- The Early Days of the Postal Service (1986)
- British Special Stamps 1985-86 (no1 1993)
- British Stamp Design 1993 (no2 1994)
- Burns Bicentenary 1996 (no3 1996)
- British Victorian Stamps (no4 1997)
- An Introduction to Thematic Collecting (no5 1997)

References

- 1: *Cross Post* vol 7, no2 (1998) p44
- 2: *British Philatelic Bulletin* vol 26, no1 (September 1988) p27
- 3: King George V Stamps Issued in Rolls (GBPS 1998) p31
- 4: *British Philatelic Bulletin* vol 26, no1 p30

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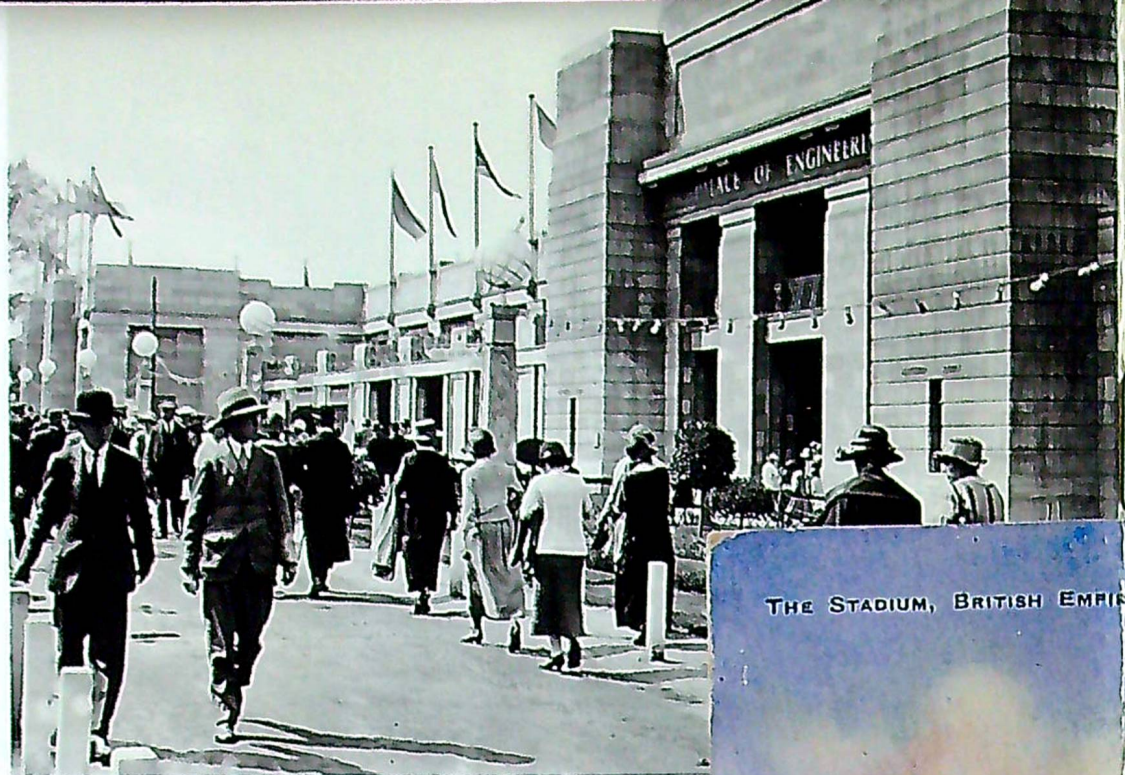
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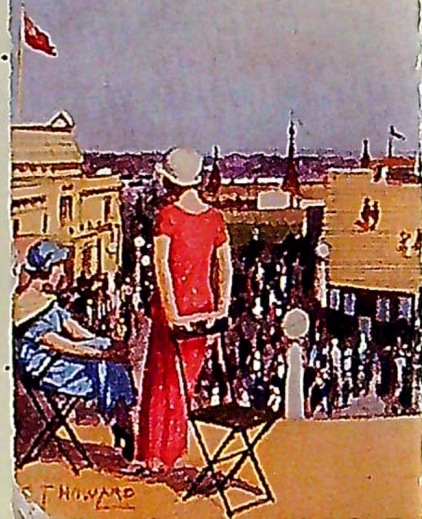
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