

# King George VI: Changes in Stamp Printing During His Reign

By Cyril R H Parsons

The transition from traditional processes for printing stamps to more modern practices gained pace during the reign of King George VI. Cyril R H Parsons, a member of the King George VI Collectors' Society, reviews the changes that occurred during the King's 15-year reign.

In December 1936 when George VI ascended the throne the processes used for printing postage stamps had hardly changed for half a century. Although Bavaria issued in 1914 the first stamps to be printed by the photogravure process, relatively few countries adopted this process for printing stamps over the next 30 years. This article examines the very slow transition to more modern processes that did not really gain momentum until after the King's death in February 1952. The stamp printers' limited capacity, a lack of investment in new plants, plus supply issues in the period of austerity following World War II probably delayed the widespread introduction of the new technology.

Throughout this article the term 'colonies' means British Colonies plus the dependencies and protectorates, even though the legal status of some changed to independent states. Throughout the reign, in addition to other responsibilities, the Crown Agents for the Colonies arranged for the production of stamps for the colonies. The British dominions made their own arrangements for printing stamps; some, such as New Zealand, used British printers with their High Commissioners in London placing the contracts, while Australia, Canada, India and South Africa had their stamps printed in their own countries.

Table 1 shows that some of the four stamp printing processes used during the reign of George VI were known by several names. For example, gravure includes both photogravure and rotogravure. Photogravure was probably appropriate for the majority of stamps printed by Harrison & Sons, since that company used a photochemical process for etching the design onto printing cylinders. By comparison, today, International Security Printers, for example, uses printing cylinders engraved using a computer-controlled system that scans the design. A series of three articles by Glenn Morgan in *GSM* (February, March and April 2016) described in some detail both the traditional and current methods of making gravure cylinders. Table 1 also summarises the relative costs at the time of the different processes and identifies those most suitable for printing particular stamps depending upon the print run and their design.



Fig 1 and Fig 2 Gravure-printed British and the Virgin Islands stamps



Figs 3 and 4 Intaglio-printed Basutoland and Cyprus stamps. Note the white space between the vignette and frame of the Cyprus stamp employed to compensate for any shifts in registration during the two-colour printing process

Table 1: Comparison between printing processes used during the reign of George VI

	Gravure	Intaglio	Letterpress	Lithography
Alternative names	Photogravure, Rotogravure	Line engraving, Siderography Recess Rotaglio (A Waterlow & Sons brand name) Copperplate/steel engraving	Surface printing, Typography Flexography	Offset lithography Offset
Single colour	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Two colour	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Three colour	No	No	No	Yes
Printing plates need engraving	No	Yes	Yes	No
Timescale	Moderate	Long	Long	Shorter
Cost	Moderate – Costs on a par with letterpress at 1946 prices	High – Costs four times higher than gravure or letterpress in 1946	Moderate – Costs on a par with photogravure at 1946 prices	Lower – Little used at the time, but would today be the cheapest
Good for;	Long print runs, tonal range, increased security (due to expensive set-up and presses)	High quality, increased security (due to difficulty in die creation and printing technique), raised 'tactile' feel, fine line work, single colour jobs, anti-forgery	Solid areas of colour	Short to medium print runs, solid areas of colour, low set-up costs. Quality today is at least as good as gravure
Not so good for;	Short print runs (due to set-up costs)	Short print runs, solid areas of colour, multi-colour work	Imagery (especially photographic)	Text and fine line work (but both now resolved)

## Printing processes in use in 1937

At the beginning of the reign of George VI the majority of stamps for the colonies and also for many of the Dominions were printed by the intaglio (recess or line-engraved) process. A few, particularly for those colonies favouring the economy of the key type format in its widest interpretation continued to have their stamps printed by letterpress (surface-printing or typography).

Only Great Britain, South Africa and a few colonies had gravure-printed stamps. Burma was the only country within the British Empire to have all its stamps printed by lithography during this period, its first stamps issued in 1938 being printed at the Security Printing Press, Nasik in India. Table 2 lists under the four printing processes the countries or groups having stamps printed by the different processes at the beginning of the reign of George VI.

The designs for stamps printed by either intaglio or letterpress have to be engraved on steel plates. Creating the master dies is time-consuming and depends upon skilled

Table 2: British Empire countries using different stamp printing process in 1937

Gravure	Intaglio	Letterpress	Lithography
Great Britain (Note 1). Virgin Islands. Dominica (Note 3). Grenada (Note 3). Seychelles. South Africa.	Great Britain (Note 2). Australia. Canada. New Zealand. Southern Rhodesia. South West Africa. Majority of Crown Colonies. Crown Colonies Coronation.	Bahamas (Note 2). Bermuda (Note 2). Ceylon (Note 2). Eire. Hong Kong. India. Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika (Note 4). Leeward Islands. Mauritius. Malay States. Nyasaland (Note 2). St Kitts-Nevis. Straits Settlements.	Burma.

Notes: 1. Low values only. 2. High values only. 3. ¼d value only. 4. £1 value only.



Fig 5 and Fig 6 Letterpress-printed Leeward Islands and St Kitts-Nevis stamps



Fig 7 Litho-printed Burma stamp

craftsmen of whom there were few. Thus, the timescale for producing stamps using these processes was much longer than, for example, producing gravure-printed stamps where the artwork was transferred to plates by chemical etching. As a consequence, the cost of designing and printing by these older processes was greater.

Some would argue that the extra cost and extended production cycle was justified in view of the superior quality of intaglio-printed stamps. High-value stamps printed by intaglio were more difficult to forge, thus using that process helped to protect the revenue of a country's postal service. Hence, throughout the reign of King George VI British high-value definitive stamps (except the £1 Silver Wedding stamp) continued to be printed using the intaglio process.

However, in 1923 Harrison & Sons had broken new ground for British stamp printers by producing a definitive series for Egypt using the gravure process; the British Post Office waited until 1934 before it followed suit. The process was certainly economical, speedy and particularly suitable for long print runs, such as the British low-value definitives.

Lithography had been used for printing stamps in the 19th century. It has the advantage of not requiring dies to be engraved or hardened steel plates to be created. However, the technology of this process had not evolved sufficiently for it to be appropriate for printing stamps in any quantity until the 1920s. By then, the use of specially coated metal or more recently plastic printing plates replaced the stone on which the image to be printed had been laid down. In 1929, India resumed printing some of its stamps by lithography after a gap of over 70 years and, as previously stated, Burma also used this process for printing stamps. Only after the lithographic process had been fully developed (during the second half of the 20th century) was it suitable and cost-effective for printing commemorative and other issues for which the print runs were relatively short.

Many stamps of the George VI period were printed in a single colour. For stamps printed in two colours, the central feature of the design (the vignette) was printed in one colour, while the frame was printed in the second. As each colour

was printed in a separate operation, two-colour printing posed problems of registration, largely because of paper shrinkage occurring between the two passes through the press. Registration problems were often minimised by the design having a narrow margin of white space around the vignette. As producing the printing plates for that process relied upon the skills of an elite group of engravers, the colonies often shared an omnibus design for stamps commemorating empire-wide events.

## Timescale

Of course, much has changed in the 80 years since 1937. Younger readers, who are more familiar with digital photography and virtually instant communication via the Internet, may be surprised to learn how different matters were then. In 1937, the authorities in some distant colonies had first to send to the Crown Agents design sketches and photographs for inclusion in the proposed stamps. In turn, the Crown Agents liaised with the British stamp printers and the printers submitted artwork and proofs for approval. These stages in finalising the design of stamps occupied a significant portion of the total time from design concept to the stamps' delivery. At best, the sketches, photographs and artwork could be sent by, often infrequent, airmail. Once the work was completed, the parcels of printed stamps had to be sent by sea. There could also be delays in the relevant authority receiving from Buckingham Palace approval of the designs. The timescale for creating a new stamp from design conception to delivery of printed sheets was typically six to nine months, depending upon the printing process chosen, but in a few instances the total process took much longer.

Rod Vousden's article titled 'Antigua 1937 – Then And Now' (*Gibbons Stamp Monthly*, August 2017) revealed that the timescale for producing Antigua's new definitives eventually issued on 15 November 1938 was one of the longest. The invitation for islanders to submit design ideas and relevant photographs was published on 18 March 1937 with a closing date of 15 April. In the autumn of 1937, the Crown Agents invited Britain's stamp printers to tender by an extended deadline of 4 November 1937. At that time all the stamp printers were very busy working on new colonial stamps incorporating a head of George VI. It appears that lack of capacity in the printer's design studios led to a whole year elapsing between tenders being submitted and Antigua's stamps being issued in the colony. It also seems likely that problems of transferring design ideas into acceptable artwork posed problems that led to the matter being referred back to the colony more than once.

## The first King George VI definitives

In 1936 work started on designing stamps featuring portraits of Edward VIII, but only Great Britain issued any during his short reign. Those stamps were, of course, overprinted for the Morocco Agencies and Tangier. All that work was suspended when Edward VIII abdicated, but many of the new designs survived with the head of George VI replacing that of his brother. Essays and proofs of stamps bearing the head of Edward VIII are very collectable.

In the early months of 1937 De La Rue and Bradbury, Wilkinson were heavily committed to completing the orders for printing the Coronation stamps for the colonies. Thus, of the British printers using the intaglio process, only Waterlow had the capacity to work on definitive stamps for the colonies. About a third of the colonies opted to substitute the head of George VI for that of his father in existing designs, while the others took the need for new definitives featuring an image of the new King as an opportunity to design completely new stamps.

As a result, only the ¼d. stamp for Grenada (gravure-printed) and the first six values of the Straits Settlements' series (letterpress-printed) appeared in 1937. During that year, the Crown Agents and the British printers were struggling to produce a suitable likeness of the new King to feature on stamps. The bulk of the colonial definitive issues incorporating a head of George VI were released during 1938. The last colonies to issue their first pictorial definitive series including images of the George VI were Aden, British Solomon Islands and Gilbert & Ellice Islands and they appeared during 1939. Figure 1 to Figure 7 show examples of definitive stamps printed by the principal process issued soon after the King's accession.

Table 3 presents details of the first and second (post-war) definitive series for the colonies together with the dates of issue and the number of different designs in each series.

### The ¼d. stamps of Grenada and Dominica

For many years collectors had become accustomed to consistency in format, design and printing process within series of stamps, perhaps with higher values in definitive issues having a larger format. One glaring exception to this general principle occurred with the ¼d., gravure-printed definitives of Grenada and Dominica issued in 1937 and in 1940 respectively (Fig 8 and Fig 9). The remaining values in the definitive stamps for both these Caribbean island colonies were printed by the intaglio process.



Fig 8 and Fig 9 Gravure-printed ¼d. Grenada and Dominica stamps

The background to their issue provides some insight into official thinking about the cost of producing stamps. Research by Brian Livingstone published in the September 2010 issue of *GEOSIX* (the journal of the King George VI Collectors' Society) has revealed that a ¼d. rate for sending inland newspapers had existed in Grenada since 1913. No stamps for this value had been issued previously; instead, the post office sold stamped newspaper wrappers at face value and with negligible profit.

Mr Edward Baynes, the Acting Governor of the three Windward Islands territories of Grenada, St Lucia and St Vincent, had strong views about the economics of postal services and about stamps in particular. At the time of the abdication of Edward VIII, the Crown Agents had been working with De La Rue on series of three small-format stamps for all colonies differing only in value and the name of the colony. Artwork for these planned Edward VIII stamps is preserved in the Royal Philatelic Collection and bromide prints of that design had been distributed to the colonies in mid-1936.

Mr Baynes proposed using this small format design for the ¼d. Grenada stamp, but that it be printed by gravure to minimise cost, gravure being much less expensive than intaglio. While work on all Edward VIII designs ceased upon the King's abdication, the Colonial Office agreed that work on the ¼d. Grenada stamp could continue as it was relatively easy and cheap to substitute the head of George VI for that of Edward VIII.

Collectors usually associate the gravure process with large rotary machines, such as that which Harrison & Sons used for printing long runs of British low-value definitives. Using such a rotary press for printing the relatively small quantities of ¼d. stamps that Grenada would require would be quite uneconomical. However, notes from a tour of Harrison's factory in about 1950 seem to confirm that the company also had a sheet-fed gravure machine. Such a machine could

Table 3: Colonial definitive stamps issued during the reign of George VI

Colony	First Issue			Second Issue	
	Date	No. Designs	Repeat ‡	Date	No. Designs
Aden	19/01/1939	6	N		N/A
Antigua	15/11/1938	4	N		N/A
Ascension	12/05/1938	5	Y		N/A
Barbados	03/01/1938	1	Y	01/05/1950	12 §
Basutoland	01/04/1938	1	Y		N/A
Bechuanaland	01/04/1938	1	Y		N/A
Bermuda	20/01/1938	6	Some		N/A
British Guiana	01/02/1938	11	Most		N/A
British Honduras	10/01/1938	12	N		N/A
British Solomon Islands	01/02/1939	12	N		N/A
Cayman Islands	05/05/1938	5	N	02/10/1950	13
Ceylon	01/01/1938	13	Many	04/02/1950	6
Cyprus	12/05/1938	12	Many		N/A
Dominica	15/08/1938	5	N	01/07/1951	12 §
Falkland Is	03/01/1938	13	N	02/01/1952	14
Fiji	05/04/1938	14	N		N/A
Gambia	01/04/1938	1	N		N/A
Gibraltar	25/02/1938	9	N		N/A
Gilbert & Ellice Is	14/01/1939	12	N		N/A
Gold Coast	01/04/1938	2	N	01/07/1948	12
Grenada †	12/07/1937	6	Half	08/01/1950	3 §
Hong Kong	05/04/1938	1	N		N/A
Jamaica	10/10/1938	12	N		N/A
Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika	11/04/1938	5	Y		N/A
Leeward Is	25/11/1938	2	Y		N/A
Mauritius	23/02/1938	1	Y	01/07/1950	15
Montserrat	02/08/1938	3	N	17/09/1951	8 §
Nigeria	01/05/1938	3	One		N/A
North Borneo	01/01/1939	15	N	01/07/1950	15
Northern Rhodesia	01/03/1938	2	Y		N/A
Nyasaland	01/01/1938	2	Y	01/09/1945	7
Pitcairn Is	15/10/1940	10	N		N/A
St Helena	12/05/1938	1	N		N/A
St Kitts-Nevis	15/08/1938	4	Half	14/06/1952	12
St Lucia	22/09/1938	6	Some	01/10/1949	2
St Vincent	11/03/1938	5	N	26/03/1949	5 ¶
Sarawak				03/01/1950	15
Seychelles	01/01/1938	3	N	03/03/1952	5
Sierra Leone	01/05/1938	2	N		N/A
Singapore				01/09/1948	1
Somaliland	10/05/1938	3	N	27/04/1942	3
Straits Settlements	08/11/1937	1	Y		
Swaziland	01/04/1938	1	Y		N/A
Trinidad & Tobago	02/05/1938	11	N		N/A
Turks & Caicos	18/05/1938	2	N	01/08/1950	13
Virgin Island	01/08/1938	1	N	15/04/1952	12§

‡ Same design as George V stamps, with new king's image substituted  
 § New currency (WI dollar)  
 † ¼d. value only, remainder 16/03/38  
 ¶ Same design as 1938 stamps, but with new currency (WI dollar)



Fig 10 and Fig 11 Intaglio-printed colonial and gravure-printed South African Coronation omnibus stamps



Fig 12 and Fig 13 Intaglio-printed colonial and New Zealand Victory/Peace stamps

Fig 14 and 15 Gravure and intaglio-printed British and colonial Silver Wedding stamps

well have been used for printing some other colonial stamps by gravure, such as those for the Virgin Islands and, perhaps, Britain's £1 Silver Wedding stamp.

### Omnibus issues

Since the Silver Jubilee of King George V in 1935, the UK and many Commonwealth countries have issued what philatelists have come to call omnibus issues to mark notable events. During the reign of King George VI such omnibus issues appeared for the Coronation (1937), Victory at the end of World War II (1946), the Silver Wedding of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (1948), the 75th Anniversary of the Founding of the Universal Postal Union (1949) and for the West Indian Colonies the inauguration of the University College of the West Indies (1951). *Figure 10 to Figure 15* show a selection of the omnibus issues from both the colonies with standard designs and from the dominions with their own designs.

Producing such omnibus issues, particularly when required at relatively short notice, such as for the Coronation in 1937, posed a major challenge for the designer and printers. This applied particularly for stamps printed by the intaglio process as the designs had to be engraved and there were few skilled engravers. As Brian Livingstone has already reviewed the issues commemorating the Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth on the same day in May 1937 as the planned Coronation of Edward VIII (*GSM* April 2017), this article will not consider that aspect of the story any further. The combined efforts of De La Rue and Bradbury, Wilkinson printed the Coronation stamps for 42 Colonies in five months.

### Other commemorative issues

Apart from the omnibus issues, only an average of less than two colonies each year issued stamps to mark other events as *Table 4* shows. Stamp centenaries, other significant anniversaries, royal visits and moves towards independence accounted for most of those special issues. By comparison, some former colonies now issue almost as many special stamps in one year. *Figure 16 to Figure 20* show a selection of such commemorative issues.

The situation with Australia, Canada and New Zealand was quite different. Australia issued some 30 different special stamps (i.e. not definitives) in 15 series with Canada issuing 22 such stamps in ten series. Throughout the reign, New Zealand issued Health stamps, usually two each year and two long series marking the nation's centenary and peace after World War II.

One of the last commemorative issues bearing the head of George VI, but issued shortly after his death, was Jamaica's series marking the First Caribbean Scout Jamboree. These two stamps were printed in three colours, by Bradbury, Wilkinson, using lithography, thus starting the use of that process for short print runs. Strangely for litho-printed stamps, Bradbury did not include in the design a photographic image of the King's head; instead the head seems to have been taken from one of its contemporary intaglio-printed stamps with the image comprising dotted lines of varying thickness. Maybe the stamps were to have been intaglio printed, but pressures to print



Fig 16 Intaglio-printed Barbados Tercentenary of General Assembly stamp (1939)



Fig 18 Gravure-printed South African Royal Visit stamp (1947)



Fig 19 Gravure-printed New Zealand Health Stamp (1950)



Fig 17 Intaglio-printed Jamaican New Constitution stamp (1944)



Fig 20 Litho-printed Jamaican 1st Caribbean Scout Jamboree stamp (1952)

and deliver them in time for the opening of the Jamboree led to a change of process.

*Table 4* omits events marked by overprinting the current definitive stamps. The long lead time for delivery may perhaps have accounted for the very low number of new design special issues while overprinting of existing designs was quicker, cheaper and could have been done by letterpress sometimes on existing stocks held locally.

Next time, I conclude this study by looking at the printing methods used for definitive and commemorative King George VI issues in the post-war years, in particular the impact of austerity and the break-up of the Empire.

Table 4: Colonial commemorative stamps issued during George VI's reign (Overprinted Issues Omitted \*\*)

Colony	Year	Process	Event
<b>Omnibus Issues</b>			
	1937	I	Coronation
	1946	I	Victory
	1948	G/I	Silver Wedding of King and Queen
	1949	I/(Le)	Universal Postal Union 75th Anniversary
	1951	I	University College of the West Indies
<b>Local Issues</b>			
Bahamas	1948	I	Tercentenary of Settlement of Eleuthera
Barbados	1939	I	Tercentenary of Settlement
	1952 †	I	Stamp Centenary
Basutoland	1947	I	Royal Visit
Bermuda	1949	I	Stamp Centenary
British Honduras	1949	I	150th Anniv Battle of St George's Cay
Ceylon §	1947	I	New Constitution
Fiji	1951	I	Health stamps
Hong Kong	1941	I	Centenary of British Occupation
Jamaica	1945	I	New Constitution
	1952 †	Li	1st Caribbean Scout Jamboree
Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika	1952	I	Royal Visit
Malta	1950	I	Visits of Princess Elizabeth
	1951	I	7th Centenary of the Scapular
Mauritius	1948	I	Centenary 1st British Colonial Stamp
Newfoundland §	1937	I	Additional Coronation Issue
	1939	I	Royal Visit
Nyasaland	1951	I	Diamond Jubilee of Protectorate
St Lucia	1951	I/Le	Reconstruction of Castries
Southern Rhodesia	1940	I	Golden Jubilee British South Africa Co
	1943	G	50th Anniv Occupation of Matabeleland
	1947	I	Royal Visit
	1950	I	Diamond Jubilee British South Africa Co
Turks & Caicos	1948	I	Centenary Separation from Bahamas
Virgin Islands	1951	I	Restoration of Legislative Council

Notes:

\*\* Reasons for overprint included Royal Visit, New Constitution, Self Government

† Issues after the death of King George VI

§ A Dominion at date of issue

Key: G = Gravure, I = Intaglio, Le = Letterpress, Li = Litho