

# The Omnibus Design Issue of King George VI Coronation Commemorative Stamps

By Brian Livingstone FRPSL

On 11 December 1936, just one day after the abdication of King Edward VIII, the four stamp printing firms (Harrison and Sons, Waterlow and Sons, Bradbury, Wilkinson and De La Rue), together with the Crown Agents, attended a meeting at the Colonial Office in order to discuss designs for a Colonial Omnibus issue marking the coronation of the new monarch, King George VI. With only five months before the Coronation, and because of shipping times to some of the most remote colonies, the firms had just one week to prepare initial essays for the new issue. Brian Livingstone FRPSL, General Secretary of the King George VI Collectors' Society, describes the frantic race to produce this omnibus issue: from the initial essays and die proofs to the final issued stamps.



Above Fig 1 The GB Coronation Commemorative and below the omnibus design Coronation Stamps issued for Ascension

The GB commemorative stamp for the Coronation of George VI was based on a photograph of the new King and Queen commissioned from Dorothy Wilding and chosen personally by the King (*Fig 1*). By contrast, the omnibus design for Coronation commemorative stamps in the Colonial Empire was put together using old photographs obtained in a great hurry by the stamp printing companies. In the case of the King, the portrait on the omnibus was melded with a naval uniform copied from a photograph of Edward VIII. This had some consequences for the Coronation and definitive issues of other Commonwealth territories that have not been widely recognised.

## Rumours of the Abdication

Until early in December 1936, King Edward VIII's plan to marry Mrs Simpson and his possible abdication from the throne was not discussed in the British press, but well-connected people like the directors of De La Rue must have got wind of it. Indeed, even if they had not seen the American or French newspapers, they would have been forewarned when, in November 1936, they received an unexplained instruction from the Crown Agents to suspend any further work on Edward VIII stamps of Ceylon. De La Rue would have been particularly anxious because they had been given the large contract to print sets of three definitive stamps in a uniform design for every colony, to be issued on the day of King Edward's coronation in May 1937 (*Fig 2*). Many colonies had been running down their stocks of George V stamps in anticipation of receiving these.

De La Rue must have realised that the issue would have to be urgently replaced by fresh designs bearing pictures of the new sovereigns but, of course, they could



Fig 2 Artwork by Harrison and Sons for the proposed three definitive stamps to be issued by each colony from Coronation day. De La Rue had been awarded the printing contract. Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen to whom copyright belongs

not make much preparation until officially told to do so. The most they could do was to obtain some photographs and make plans to commence engravings of the heads as soon as they received instructions to tender for the replacements that would become necessary.

That instruction was, in fact, given in a meeting held at the Colonial Office on 11 December 1936, the day after the Abdication. This was attended by the four stamp printing firms (Harrison and Sons, Waterlow and Sons, Bradbury, Wilkinson and, of course De La Rue), together with the Crown Agents. They were asked to essay designs for sets of three stamps bearing portraits of the new King and Queen together with appropriate Coronation emblems.

It was recognised that, given the urgency, printing would have to be shared by more than one company and the printing method should be intaglio or recess. Consequently, Harrison and Sons, who were committed to photogravure, dropped out of the process at this point. As with the Silver Jubilee issue of George V, there would be a uniform or 'omnibus' design of the stamps for every colony. The urgency for all this was greater than one might expect. After all there was still five months to go until the Coronation in May

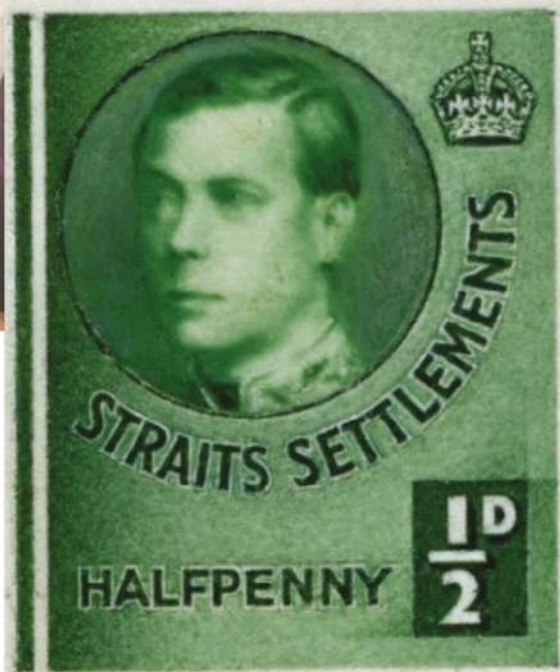




Fig 3 The surviving essay submitted by De La Rue on 18 December 1936. Note the portraits are reduced photographs but the King's uniform has been drawn by hand. Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen to whom copyright belongs



Fig 4 The photos by Bertram Park that were used as models for the portraits on the De La Rue essay and the subsequent stamps of the Coronation Omnibus issue for the Colonies. Bertram Park's negative numbers for these are 01953G for Queen Elizabeth and 03259B for King George.

1937. However, transport of heavy parcels of stamps to the Colonies could only be done by sea. For the most remote, such as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, the Crown Agents advised that, if they were to arrive in time, the stamps would have been available for delivery by the end of January. Hence, essays were required by 18 December

De La Rue were quickest off the mark (Fig 3). They had almost certainly obtained photographs already (Fig 4) and they had also made plans about engraving. The former Duke and Duchess of York had kept out of the limelight as far as possible until this point. Accordingly the company recognised that most discussion would centre on the framing element of the design since the choice of suitable portraits was so limited. They planned to engrave the heads separately from the frame, using different engravers for each. The King was to be done by a freelance engraver in Edinburgh and the Queen by one of De La Rue's staff in London. The covering letter to their submission on 18 December states, 'In order to save time, should this design be accepted, we have already put in hand the engraving and could submit the proof of the original die on January 11th.' This gamble succeeded.

They actually submitted two essays but only one survives in the Royal Philatelic Collection. It is a hand-drawn design for the frame with reduced photo-images of the heads. Note that the King's head is placed on a hand-drawn uniform because as illustrated, the original photo shows him in a lounge suit (Fig 4). Its negative number indicates that it was taken in 1933. The Queen's portrait dates from 1932 and had previously been used by Perkins Bacon on the 7c. definitive stamp for Newfoundland that year.

Both of the photographs were taken by Bertram Park who was as well regarded as Dorothy Wilding. Indeed, the first post-accession photos of the King were taken by him on 14 December 1937 and it is interesting to compare the old and new portraits and see how the King's appearance had altered in the intervening



Fig 5 Bertram Park's photo of George VI negative number 05262C taken on 14 December 1937, just after accession. In particular, compare the King's hair with the appearance of the portrait in Fig 4.

Fig 6 The essays submitted by Waterlow and Sons. These are preserved in the Royal Philatelic Collection. On the original specimen, the pictures of the 5c. blue and 10c. violet are marked 'A' and 'B' respectively. Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen to whom copyright belongs



few years (Fig 5). However, De La Rue's letter indicates that their engravers had already started work using the old picture and before Bertram Park's photo in Figure 5 had even been taken. A later letter from the Colonial Office to the King's Private Secretary confirms that the photos in Figure 4 were used as models for the issued stamps.

The submission from Waterlow (Fig 6) was more elaborate and several of their artists must have been involved. They clearly obtained several photographs one of which was the same as that used by De La Rue (the images top right and centre right) but none of the portrayals of the Queen look much like the photo by Park. Their origin is thus speculative because there is no other evidence as to which pictures they used as models. The precise date of this submission is not recorded.

Bradbury, Wilkinson seem to have been content to subsequently tender for the printing of whichever design was chosen and as noted Harrison and Sons did not participate at all.

The next step was to consult the King. He was at Sandringham for the Christmas period, but the essays were sent there and returned on 22 December with his requests. He wanted the elements of several of the designs to be combined.



Fig 7 The three essays from which elements were combined to form the appearance of the issued stamps, illustrated below by a die proof of De La Rue's accepted design. Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen to whom copyright belongs

Figure 7 above shows the essays from which these elements were selected. The left essay (from Waterlow) was to be the arrangement of the frame and Coronation emblems but the King specified that the portraits were not to be in the oval frames. The middle essay (Waterlow) shows the portrait that he wanted of himself. The right essay (De La Rue) has the portrait of the Queen that he wanted to be used.

As already noted, the portrait of the King on the middle essay was almost certainly based on the same photo used for De La Rue's essay (right), so De La Rue's gamble in starting to engrave had paid off. However, the other firms were given the chance to catch up because all three were instructed to prepare engraved dies combining the elements requested by the King, with proofs to be submitted by the middle of January 1937.



### Getting the uniform right

Having started from a portrait of the King in a lounge suit (Fig 4), the artists and engravers had to find a picture of an appropriate uniform to go with the head; the one they all used for these dies and proofs was taken from a portrait of Edward VIII. This is illustrated in Figure 8 and there are two points to note. Firstly, the insignia on the epaulettes are the three stars of an Admiral but, starting with George V, the Sovereign has assumed the higher rank of Admiral of the Fleet (see Note 1). The other point relates to the small badge hanging from the collar. This is the badge of the Grand Master of the Order of St Michael and St George, a position held by King Edward when he was Prince of Wales but given up to one of his uncles shortly after his accession. The badge is unique to the Grand Master and George VI would never have worn it.

The epaulette insignia were of no consequence because they were not included in the image on the stamps. However, the Grand Master's neck badge was clearly visible and was incorrect for a portrait of George VI. De La Rue and the Crown Agents realised this at the end of December and, although it only seems a small point, it did matter to them. An urgent request for guidance was sent to the Palace. The solution was to obliterate the intertwined 'M' and 'G' letters and Crowns from between the rays. This made it look like the badge for the Order's Grand Cross (GCMG Fig 8), which the King did sometimes wear (Note 2). De La Rue's engraver in Edinburgh made the alterations. He had worked continuously over Christmas, but took a break for Hogmanay, and his die was ready to be collected by the Crown Agents' Chief Inspector of Stamps on 7 January. De La Rue were then able to incorporate it as a 'slug' into the rest of the



Fig 8 The photo by Hugh Cecil of Edward VIII that provided the model for the King's uniform copied onto the essays and dies of the omnibus design. Despite the soft focus that is typical of Cecil's photos, the epaulettes clearly show the three star rank markings of an Admiral, compared to the King's actual rank as an Admiral of the Fleet. The star-badge hanging from the collar is the Grand Master's badge of the Order of St Michael and St George which differs from the Grand Cross by having decoration between the star arms made up of intertwined letters 'M' and 'G' topped by a crown. Photo by permission of the National Portrait Gallery

stamp die and to submit proofs by mid-January, as promised in their letter quoted earlier.

Examples of the die proofs submitted by Waterlow and Bradbury, Wilkinson are also illustrated (Fig 9). Careful examination suggests that no-one told these firms about the neck badge problem and it is engraved unaltered. In my opinion, the Waterlow proof is the most attractive but it was De La Rue who were awarded the contract.

### Printings

On their own, De La Rue could not possibly print enough stamps for 42 colonies in time for May 1937. At the original meeting in December, it had been agreed that printing should be shared. Waterlow, perhaps upset by the rejection of their design, now stated that they were

too busy to take any further part in the issue. It was left to De La Rue and Bradbury, Wilkinson to finish the job. De La Rue provided dies for Bradbury's with blank spaces for the inscriptions and the values (Fig 7). Between them, the companies are recorded as printing 100,000,000 stamps for the colonies with another 30–40,000,000 for dealers in London. The Crown Agents staff worked flat out to have these distributed in time for Coronation day on 12 May 1937. They record that, towards the deadline, De La Rue were actually running their presses at a higher speed than they thought desirable. The value of sales to dealers is recorded £266,000 while total sales in the Colonies during 1937 earned £300,000 or about £7000 per Colony – a very substantial boost to income of the governments of the smaller West Indian and Pacific Islands. In many of these, the stamps remained on sale into 1938, while arrangements were made for printing definitive issues with King George VI's portrait.

Part two of this article will continue the story of the designs, to mark the Coronation in the Dominions and some consequences of using these old photographs.

**King George VI Collectors' Society**

For more information about the King George VI Collectors' Society visit their website at [www.kg6.info](http://www.kg6.info)



Fig 9 Examples of the die proofs unsuccessfully submitted by Waterlow and Sons (red) and Bradbury, Wilkinson (blue). The King's neck badge is not very clear but comparison (especially of the Bradbury, Wilkinson proof) with Fig 8 shows that the incorrect Grand Master OMG badge was never altered by these printers. Images used by permission of the British Library

**Further reading**

More detail on the story behind the Colonial Coronation Omnibus issue, with a full list of the supporting documentary evidence can be found in the two articles published in *The London Philatelist* cited below and published by the Royal Philatelic Society London.

'The King George VI Coronation Issue and the Case of Northern Rhodesia' Drysdall A R, *London Philatelist*, vol.117, pp82-93 RPSL April 2008.

'King George VI Coronation Stamps', Livingstone B N, *London Philatelist*, vol.118, pp165-178 RPSL June 2009

**Notes**

Note 1: The office of Lord High Admiral, in command of the whole Royal Navy, was, from 1709, exercised by a Commission ("The Lords of the Admiralty") until the Defence Council took control in 1964. The Queen then assumed the title of Lord High Admiral for some years until she bestowed it on Prince Philip in 2011.

Note 2: The cross-shape badge of the Order of the Bath would have been ideal but this alteration would have been a major undertaking and time was too short.



**Quality  
British Commonwealth  
POSTAL HISTORY**

Catering to the discerning collector  
**Specialising in pre-1953,  
non-FDC material**  
**We stock all Commonwealth  
areas except B.N.A**

If you are not already on our Wants Register, please drop us a line and let us know your requirements. We shall be pleased to send photocopies of available material.

**ALWAYS KEEN BUYERS OF  
CHOICE POSTAL HISTORY**

**Willard S. Allman**  
828 Arrow Lane, Ridgewood  
NJ 07450, U.S.A.  
Tel: 001-201-848-8883  
Fax: 001-201-847-8481  
Email: [willard.s.allman@gmail.com](mailto:willard.s.allman@gmail.com)

**Worldwide Approvals**

ALL countries and interests covered.  
**FREE postage both ways (within UK)**  
HUGE Variety of Commonwealth, Foreign and GB material awaiting you.  
**NO Obligation.**  
GUARANTEED Satisfaction.  
ESTABLISHED 25 years.  
21 Day Approval Period.  
Beginners and specialists welcome.

Application Form. (BLOCK CAPS)  
Please send me an introductory selection of stamps on 21 day approval. I Undertake to pay for any stamps I may return and will return, in the manner requested, any stamps I do not purchase.

Signature.....  
NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

Postcode..... Home Phone (Essential).....

Collecting Interests .....

NEWTON HOUSE, P.O. BOX 116,  
BRIDGWATER, SOMERSET, TA5 1YU  
TELEPHONE: (01823) 413067

e-mail: [c.stott@ymail.com](mailto:c.stott@ymail.com)

