

*Postal Heritage Trust*

# The Machin Head of The Queen



## The Penny Black

**T**he story of the Machin design begins with the story of the Penny Black. That could be said of all postage stamps, but it is particularly true of the Machin. Arnold Machin strove to recapture the simplicity, elegance and authority of the world's first stamp.

It is interesting to note that despite all the problems associated with being first in a completely new field, the Penny Black was conceived, designed, engraved, printed and put on sale all in the space of five months, from January to May 1840. The design was deceptively simple. Rowland Hill had stated before (with regard to security from fraudulent imitation) that "there is nothing in which minute differences of execution are so readily detected as in a representation of the human face. .. I would therefore advise that .. a head of the Queen by one of our first artists should be introduced". Other security devices and value were added, but no country name. With no other rival, there was no need. This "privilege" of the monarch alone representing the United Kingdom on stamps has remained to this day.



There are other points of immediate comparison. The dimensions of the stamp have remained almost exactly the same for standard definitives for over 160 years, and the monarch is still normally the main feature, always facing left, or into the envelope. In this it differs sharply from coinage, where monarchs face in the opposite direction to their predecessor (Edward VIII being the typical exception). And it is interesting that both Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth are portrayed wearing the same diadem.

## The Design Competition

**E**ven before official invitations were sent out by The Post Office to selected artists in November 1965 the work of Arnold Machin was being considered for a new portrait of The Queen on postage stamps. This was because of his successful work for the Royal Mint for the new coinage. A copy of the coinage plaster cast was obtained from the Mint together with Machin's preliminary drawings as early as August that year and a preliminary briefing was given to Machin and Reginald Brill. Formally, invitations were sent out at the end of November to Machin, Brill, David Gentleman, Stuart Devlin and John Ward. All were to submit "renderings" of the Queen's head in profile by the end of January 1966 and were supplied with photographs taken by Lord Snowdon as a basis.



*One of Snowdon's photographs supplied to the artists*

Arnold Machin had already received the Snowdon photographs which he had used for his sculpture of the Queen's head for the Royal Mint. When he approached the stamp brief he utilised them again for the portrait but he also relied on personal im-

pressions of The Queen and, most importantly, his previous work for the coinage.

From material extant it is clear that, for the head, Machin utilised a photograph of the mould made for the Royal Mint (or a reverse of the plaster cast). This showed The Queen facing left which was required for stamps (facing into the envelope) rather than right as on the issued coins. After eliminating the coinage legend he then worked on the head and produced ink wash drawings with or without a tiara. This provided his “rendering” of the portrait. He then created up to 70 colour variations of frames to surround this.



*Machin's "rendering"*



*Based on the Penny Black, one of Machin's first sketches*

First images from all five invited artists were shown to the Stamp Advisory Committee (of the Council of Industrial Design) on 26 January 1966. Several of the heads by Brill, Gentleman and Machin suggested a possible treatment by blind embossing, or by photography giving much the same effect, and these artists were asked to take their work forward. Devlin's two plaques were ruled out as being a poor likeness although completely realistic. Ward's drawings had not been taken far enough and did not show the promise to justify further work. The Committee felt that as the portrait would have to last for twenty years or so, it must have some qualities of a symbol but that a bad likeness would be a great mistake.

## Machin's Coinage Head

By the time of the next meeting, at the beginning of March, Machin had modelled his portrait in clay and cast this at Stoke-on-Trent. Harrison & Sons Ltd, the stamp printers, had taken photographs, variously lit, of both the unworked plaster cast and the matrix and the Committee agreed that this approach held great promise and was preferred. (Other artists such as Andrew Restall and David Gentleman continued with their own work throughout 1966 often without reference to the Stamp Advisory Committee but rather to the Postmaster General - Anthony Wedgwood Benn - and this served as alternatives to Machin's sculpture.)



*The "Coinage" plaster cast*



*First regional essays*

Work now centred on the stamp printers under R. F. (George) York with whom Machin worked closely throughout the coming year. Here essays, or trial stamps, were printed using a photograph of the plaster cast of the Queen's head within adaptations of one of Machin's frames. This incorporated symbols of the four countries making up the United Kingdom and the legend "Postage Revenue". A large number of essays were prepared during

April and May in both single and bicoloured versions, and with variations of the frame design, but it was felt that more work was needed.

Using photographs, Machin now worked on his sculptured head to simplify it. This he did by cutting the neckline and omitting any legend other than the value (which had also been created from a plaster cast). The resulting image was essayed in five colours and shown to members of the Committee. These essays were compared with alternatives based on new photographs of The Queen which had been taken specially by John Hedgecoe in June and approved by The Queen in August.



*Essays from Machin's simplified design*

## Hedgecoe Photographs

As far back as March 1966 a member of the SAC, F. H. K. Henrion, had been pressing the case for a specially taken photographic head. David Gentleman was very keen on this. In May it was agreed at a meeting of the SAC with Benn present that a new sitting of The Queen should be requested.

“The Committee agreed that alternative heads should emerge from the exercise, the treatment being as varied as possible, from a straight reproduction of a photograph to the Machin three dimensional treatment.”



*Photograph by Hedgecoe with the diadem*

Subsequently, John Hedgecoe was chosen. He had recently been appointed to the Royal College of Art as Head of the Photographic Department which was to be enlarged and developed under him. The sitting took place on 22 June 1966. A large number of prints were shown to The Queen in August and she marked her clear preferences in her own hand. David Gentleman proceeded to produce a number of designs based on these and essays were made from them.

## Machin's Diadem Head

In the Machin portrait The Queen was wearing a tiara; in the Hedgecoe photographs a diadem. The new simple sculpture design by Machin was regarded as a considerable improvement, but the diadem was preferred to the tiara harking back to the Penny Black when the same diadem was worn by Queen Victoria.



*Essays from Machin's "Diadem" cast*

At this point Machin reworked his clay model and a new



sculpture was created with the diadem, as seen on the Hedgecoe photographs. Again a plaster cast was made and photographs taken under different lighting conditions. This was recognisably similar to the final portrait but with a simple cut-off neck. Acceptable bromides were sent to the printers on 25 October and essays without value were already prepared by the end of that month.

When these essays were shown to The Queen she expressed a preference for a corsage. To achieve this Machin took an enlarged photograph of one of the essays and added clothing in China White and India ink. He then translated this on to his clay model and a further plaster cast was produced. More than one cast was made and work on these created

slightly different versions which can be differentiated on the issued stamps. Many photographs were taken in various lighting conditions both by Machin with an old camera at the printers and by others elsewhere. Subsequently, a large number of essays were produced in different colours and shades and with varying value positions.



*Hand-worked photograph to add a corsage*



The design was accepted and approved by The Queen who chose a particular dark olive brown sepia for the basic inland letter rate (4d). This was a conscious imitation of the original Penny Black, whose classic simplicity Machin's design emulated. Other colours were suggested by Machin, with the assistance of the printers, for the other low

values required and the first stamps appeared on 5 June 1967.

## A Time for Change?

To mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coronation in 1983 it was proposed by The Post Office that a new definitive design be created. The Queen agreed in principle for work to go ahead but thought that a work of real quality would be required to replace Machin's symbolic representation. No accurate portrait proved successful and the Machin head has continued to this day.

Machin's iconic image is timeless and has now been in use for more than 37 years. In that time it has been reproduced at least 170 billion times and is likely to remain in use until the end of The Queen's reign.

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