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PUZZLING ASPECTS OF G.B. STAMP PRINTING

By

1—The Errors “Colour Omitted” E. C. EHRMANN
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This first article of a casual series on various facets of British stamp production is meant to help the collector to see facts in true perspective. The author will answer readers' individual questions and would also welcome suggestions for further topics of general interest.



1966 6d. Technology, normal and missing red Mini-Cars, only 13 copies known. £95. Reel-printed (Halley).

(Globe Stamp Co. Ltd.)

NO sooner had the G.P.O. decided on more colourful commemoratives, starting with a modest two, that the phenomenon of “Colour Omitted” could be observed. Little was made of the very first error, bronze-green omitted on the 6d. “Europa” of 1960; a block of four sold by Harmers’ at £100 in January 1962, for the simple reason that it never became widely known. But over the years, as the number of colours increased and culminated in nine different on the 4d. Hastings strip of 1966 – a printing world-record, by the way – so did the number of errors. There have been some very angry protests recently, not so much from those who were lucky enough to acquire such misprints from their local post office, but mainly from those who had missed the gravy waggon. I mean, when did you last buy a “colour omitted” at face value? Quite.

How Does it Happen?

The phenomenon – and my dictionary defines this word very aptly as “a deviation from the normal; an extraordinary happening or event” – is well worth a little technical investigation. Right from the outset, in 1934, when the Post Office switched from typography to photogravure, it was decided to print “on the web”, that is on reels of paper which yield a continuous length of maybe 15,000 sheets each. Multi-coloured stamps are obtained from these very imposing *reel-printing presses* in one

single “run”: the length of paper passes successively from one colour cylinder to the next. It stands to reason that these various cylinders must be carefully synchronised to print stamps without a noticeable “colour shift”. The paper, having received its first colour impression, is dried whilst it moves on towards the second cylinder, and again towards the third, and so on. Each time, printing ink and drying cause the paper to expand and to contract, and although this change is only a very small one, in the course of printing it may build up to a fraction of an inch, too much to ensure an exact register of the colours.

To obviate constant visual checking by the printing operatives, the machines have now a built-in “electric eye” device which works on colour lines printed in the margin. Electronic search beams scrutinise these lines with every cylinder revolution, i.e. on each sheet length, and the moment they should print out of alignment an ingenious action of self-adjustment takes place within the printing press, lifting the offending cylinder off the paper for a fraction of a second, so that the reel can regain its normal tension. This very short interval, in view of the speed with which the paper travels through the machine, is still enough to leave two or three horizontal rows of stamps without any colour at all, and the adjoining rows usually only with traces of it. At this stage, quite obviously, it would be impossible to discard any imperfectly-

printed sheet, short of stopping the machine, cutting the paper reel to extract the sheet and joining it up again after re-treading it through a number of transporting rollers.

Same Again, Only Different . . .

The same error of one colour omitted can also happen through a different production method, in *sheet-printing presses*, also colloquially known as “flatbed rotaries”. Here the paper is pre-cut into sheet size and the rotating printing cylinder grips the top sheet of a stack every time it comes to zero position, repeating this with every revolution. Some of the presses contain only one single colour unit, and in that case sheets for multi-coloured stamps have to be fed into the machine as many times as there are colours, the cylinder and its ink supply having been changed each time. It is, of course, far from impossible that a partly-printed sheet should miss out during one of these phases of repeated printing, and the result is “colour omitted” over the whole sheet.

Other types of presses contain four or five colour units arranged horizontally one after the other, and the sheet, after leaving the first unit, is air-dried and passes automatically on to the next unit. Expansion and contraction of the paper – which, let us not forget, into the bargain is already gummed – may cause it to curl, or to travel forward slightly out of true, in which case the next colour cylinder will not accept it for printing but activate a warning light. The printing operatives – there may be three or more to each machine – immediately stop the mechanism, remove the offending sheet or sheets and re-start the press. The sheet



1961 6d. Parliament, Gold Omitted. £135. Reel-printed (Timson)

1964 6d. Forth Road Bridge, Blue Omitted. £230. Sheet-printed (Rembrandt).

1965 1/6 I.T.U., Pink Omitted. £100. Sheet-printed (L. & M. No. 4). (H. R. Harmer Ltd.)

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"Colour Omitted" Errors*(Continued from page 19)*

1963 3d. Red Cross.
Red fully and partly
Omitted. £420. Reel-
printed (Thrissell).
(H. R. Harmer Ltd.)

following the offending one will then more likely than not slip through the second unit without receiving its colour impression since, on re-starting the machine, the second cylinder, which was lifted in order to extract the misbehaving sheet, has not yet returned to its normal printing position. The ultimate result again is "colour omitted" over the whole sheet.

Thus, one and the same type of misprint may be due to entirely different causes. To sum up, on the whole the missing colours occur over part of the sheet in reel-printing, over the entire sheet in sheet-printing. Additionally, the absence of a colour may also be caused through a sheet corner folding over during sheet-printing, but such an error is defined as a "casual non-repeating printing flaw" and normally has no catalogue status.

Gold Colour and Gold Embossing

The misprint "Gold Colour Omitted" occurs in two instances, once on the purple 6d. Parliamentary Conference of 1961, and again on the very recent 4d. "Red Boy" of the British Paintings issue. In each case it concerns a true photogravure colour which is produced with powdered brass and aluminium mixed in a suitable clear printing liquid, and as stable as any other colour.

On the other hand, the experimental Gold Embossing on last year's Hastings and Christmas stamps, though very similar in appearance, is quite a different matter; it is obtained through a coating of "Wyle's gold" under vacuum on a very thin I.C.I. polyester film, which is deposited on the stamps under heat and pressure, a process known as "foil blocking". There have been several instances when stamps with gold embossing omitted were sold over the post office counters but, since it is none too difficult to remove it from normal stamps through solvents or heat treatment, the errors are now treated cautiously by the catalogue publishers and dealers.

What the G.P.O. Thinks of Misprints

Tongue in cheek, I put it to the G.P.O. that, after all, they might not be all that adverse to printing errors as they tend to stimulate the general interest in commem-

oratives. But here a spokesman quickly put me wise: - "Certainly both the printers and the Post Office take great care to prevent such misprints being sold. Careful and exhaustive checking of every sheet is done both by the Printers and our own Supplies Department before the stamps are issued to post offices and, of course, a counter clerk who notices a fault in a sheet issued to him should return it".

1961 2½d. P.O.S.B.,
Queen's Head
Omitted. The only
surviving copy of 12
sold at Rochester,
Kent, post office.
Reel-printed (Tim-
son).

(Bridger & Kay Ltd.)

**What the Printers Have to Say**

Deputy Chairman H. F. G. Harrison, reading an article of mine on printing errors, gave me this frank opinion: "When you think we printed over 700,000,000 of these commemoratives last year all going through at break-neck speed, the number of irregularities is not so very high; we calculate the distributed waste of our entire production both at home and overseas totals only .000001 per cent. It always seems dreadful to me that something bad is worth so much more than something good . . ."

And the Auctioneers . . .

Mr. Cyril Harmer, whose world-famous auction house has long been favoured as a sounding-board to determine the value of major G.B. misprints, told me that he finds these varieties interesting and sometimes slightly rewarding, and frequently good publicity, as in the case of the 1964 Forth Road Bridge, blue omitted, which was discovered by a Scottish schoolboy. "But", he added, "I would rather sell a Bavarian tete-beche, and would advise anybody going for these modern varieties, that he

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must be prepared for possible losses, and treat the money as a gamble, and not as a sure investment". It is only fair to add that, to the best of my knowledge, so far none of the "Colour Omitted" varieties has dropped in value; quite to the contrary, most items have appreciated considerably since they were discovered.

This article is an excellent example of how an understanding of the basics behind the printing process can explain and make sense of the occurrence of certain types of error. In this case missing colours.

However to avoid some of the pitfalls an understanding of how a genuine missing colour error may arise is not in itself always enough.

I have had an interest in GB errors and varieties for many years, and in the 22 years in which I have also been dealing in GB philately I have frequently been asked to give opinions on "errors" that individuals have optimistically assumed to be genuine. On many occasions I have to disappoint.

One of the more common requests is to give an opinion on a missing colour on a fairly shabby used example of a GB commemorative. Invariably the missing colour is "unrecorded" and it is frequently the case that when compared to a "normal" used example it can clearly be seen that virtually all the other colours on the "error" stamp are altered from the normal and the only verdict can be that the colour that appears absent does so due to the affect of external agents or environmental factors.

There are occasions when I am asked to give an opinion on mint items. If a missing colour it is not infrequently the case that the suspected missing colour is red or a shade / hue of red.

Twice in the last couple of years I have been asked about the "Missing salmon pink colour" on the 1977 Machin large format £5 salmon & chalky blue. SG 1028.



Illustrated above the suspected "error" missing salmon pink at left with a normal example at right. To the unsuspecting naked eye this at first appears to be a plausible item.

However two main reasons why one should be alert to all not being as it seems. Firstly this is an as yet unrecorded error and secondly the suspected missing colour is a shade of red.

A key determining fact in my opinion in this instance can be readily identified by use of an Ultra Violet lamp, importantly in complete darkness. Under the UV light the white border of the "error" item is notably and obviously less white than that of the normal. The normal in comparison is a bright white under the UV light. My interpretation of this is that some agent, likely exposure to sunlight or another bright light source has "bleached" the Optical Brightening Agent out of the "error" item, hence the paper appearing duller than normal under UV. This agent has also had the effect of bleaching the salmon pink colour. It is therefore not a genuine missing colour.

What is of significant concern to me is the number of examples of the 1968 Paintings 4d value that can be found on the likes of eBay being offered as SG 771b vermilion omitted. I have seen this supposed error being offered at a local stamp fair and it failed the UV test for reasons stated above. My advice to all would be not to purchase this error from ANY source without a certificate of authenticity from a RECOGNISED and independent authority such as the Royal Philatelic Society London or the British Philatelic Association. Details of both of these expertising authorities can be found in The Philatelic Register.

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