

The 75th Anniversary of the Irish Postage Stamp

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Dec. 6, 1997, marks the 75th anniversary of the Irish Free State's first postage stamp: a green definitive (Scott 68) denominating two pence and showing the map of Ireland (Figure 1).

Before that, stamps of Great Britain (Figure 2) were used from 1840 until Feb. 17, 1922. On that date the current British definitives were overprinted in Gaelic *Rialtar Sealadac na héireann*, which stood for Provisional Government of Ireland (Figure 3).

The provisional government had come into being Jan. 14, 1922. Although the Post Office was nominally under the control of the provisional government, the use of British stamps was mandatory until February 17. Full responsibility for the Post Office was not transferred until April 1,

1922. Unoverprinted British stamps remained valid for use in Southern Ireland until March 31, 1922.

Properly dated covers of this period are sought after by collectors, particularly if they combine an overprinted stamp with an unoverprinted one. On Dec. 6, 1922, the provisional government gave way to the government of the Irish Free State.

The emergence of the Irish Free State could not go unnoticed postally. The provisional government felt it appropriate that stamps be prepared for the new state. On Feb. 1, 1922, the *Irish Free Press* published a notice of a national competition for the design of a definitive series of postage stamps.

However, Ireland was in the midst of a Civil War and stamps were not the first order of business. Delays occurred and it looked unlikely that the series would be ready on time. The government managed to get one of the stamps in its new definitive series out on December 6. This 2p stamp, and the rest of the long definitive series (Figure 4), was to be in use, with a watermark change, for 46 years until a new Early Irish Art definitive series replaced it in 1968.

Post office officials concentrated work on the 2p stamp because that was the



Figure 5: Booklet pane (Scott 109a) of six watermarked "e" upright.



Figure 6: Used coil pair (Scott 92).

O'Reilly and Perry Adams differed on the interpretation of the stamp's original status and production.

Adam's contention was that the stamp, although printed in Dublin, was prepared entirely by the

British. His view is that the dies and plates were rushed through the Royal Mint and that the stamp paper originated in Kent and was gummed in London before being sent to Dublin. He also insists that the British crew was unable to correctly set the perforating machine in Dublin and that the stamps were sent to London, perforated and returned just in time for the issue date.

O'Reilly's view was that the 2p stamp was a commemorative. Its first printing being done in London at Somerset House, the British government's printing works. He views the first printing as a commemorative because the Irish Government issued it as a single stamp on the day of the proclamation of the Irish Free State. He further believed that the "re-issue, or Dublin Castle printing"

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Figure 1: Ireland's first stamp (Scott 68) designed by James Ingram and issued Dec. 6, 1922, the beginning of the Irish Free State.

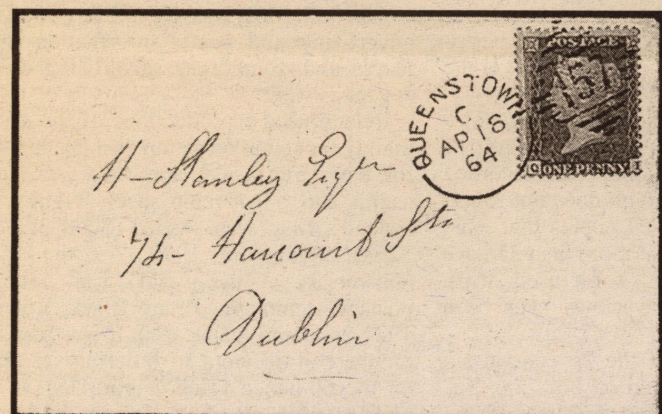


Figure 2: One-penny red (Great Britain Scott 20) used April 18, 1864, in Queenstown (now Cobh), Ireland.



Figure 3: A British George V 2p deep orange Type I (Scott 162) overprinted Provisional Government of Ireland.



Figure 4: The remainder of the Irish Free State's first definitive series (Scott 65-67 and 69-76).



Figure 7: (from top, left to right) Unaccepted designs for the 2p stamp. The designers were a) James A. Walker & Co. of Rathmines, Dublin; b) S.V. Baker, School of Art, Cork; c) R.A.S. Mac Allister, Donnybrook; d) Edward Dolan, Drumcondra; e) the only design to be submitted by an overseas artist, Noel F. Harrison, Winnipeg, Canada; f) Domhnall MacGiobuin, Cork; g) and h) Sean MacNurchadha, Dublin; i) William MacBride, The Craftworks, Dublin; j) Millicent Girling, Metropolitan School of Art, Dublin; k) Elizabeth A. Whitty, Waterford; l) Seán Mac an tSamraigh (John Somers), Dublin; and m) the name of the artist who submitted this design is unrecorded.



Figure 8: Designs selected by the Provisional Government for consideration for the first Irish definitive stamps.



Figure 9: The Figure 3 stamp (Scott 162), now overprinted Free State of Ireland.

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mentioned by Adams, "took place in late December of 1922."

Whatever the right answer is, the original supply of the 2p was quickly exhausted. British stamps continued to be overprinted. Now the overprint read *Saorstát Éireann* — Free State of Ireland (Figure 9). These were issued Dec. 11, 1922. Overprinted stamps were to continue well into the fourth decade of the century. In fact, the Seahorse George V high values (2/6, 5 and 10-shillings) continued to be overprinted until 1937 (Figure 10).

O'Reilly goes on to say that the December 6, stamps printed at Somerset House used paper made in Ireland and are "a beautiful deep sea green." They give the appearance of being "on chalky or coated paper." He states that the reissued stamps are a "deep-blue green and have a strong bluish tint when held to the sunlight."



Figure 10: Great Britain 5 shillings (Scott 180) issued in 1919 and overprinted in 1925 for use in Ireland.



Figure 11: Ireland's rarest stamp, the perf. 15 by imperforate coil (Scott 68b).



The telltale sign apparently is that, when soaked, the reissued stamps lose "the green appearance and tend toward blue." Later printings of the 2p are more stable. The Dublin Castle printers stabilized the inks and while shades and paper difference should be expected in such a long running issue the color no longer runs. A genuine First Day Cover for this issue must be of the "deep sea green" color.

James Ingram of Glasnevin, a suburb of Dublin, prepared the design for the stamp. His design was also used for the one penny (Scott 66, 87 and 107) and one and a half penny (Scott 67 and 108). They appeared for sale on Feb. 23, and Feb. 2, 1923, respectively.

They, and the 2p, were printed in sheets of 240 stamps consisting of two panes each containing 120 stamps 12 wide by 10 high. Inter-pane gutter pairs are known and command at least 20 times the price of a single.

Stamps overprinted "SPECIMEN" were mainly distributed to other countries through the Universal Postal Union. Until 1937, paper watermarked "se" with the letters intertwined and set diagonally in the paper was used. With the proclamation of a



Figure 12: The souvenir sheet issued to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Ireland's first stamp (Scott 326a).

Figure 13: A 50-pence stamp (Scott 804) showing Ireland's first stamp. It was issued to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the world's first adhesive postage stamps.



Figure 14: A prestige booklet about the History of Ireland's Postage that contains panes (Scott 804a & 804b) of the 50p (Scott 804) showing Ireland's first stamp (Scott 68) with other definitives.

new Irish Constitution that year new stamp printings started to use a paper watermark with a series of diagonal "e"s (Scott 109). An inverted and reversed watermarked is found on the "se" watermarked paper while on the "e" paper it is only found reversed. A variety of the stamp, on the "se" paper, is called "Storm of Lough Swilly." They are actually some short transfers north of the island and below the letters I and R of Eire.

From about 1924, the 2p was issued in coil rolls with both vertical and horizontal formats. The vertical coils were made up in strips of 10 stamps with a paper join. The stamps were perforated on all four sides.

Two 2p experimental coils were also produced. The first, in November 1934, was issued with the two horizontal sides imperforate while the others were perf. 14 and on paper watermarked sideways (Scott 92). These were soon withdrawn.

A perf. 15 with the vertical sides imperforate was issued in 1935 (Scott 68b). It is the rarest stamp of Ireland (Figure 11).

A September 1995, monograph, *The Rare Coil* by Joseph E. Foley, shows that a strip of four, two pairs and 12 singles are recorded unused. Foley's monograph does not report the total number of used copies that exist although it is known that more than 25 have been recorded, including some used strips. Only one copy on cover has ever been authenticated.

All booklet panes of the 2p contain six stamps and can be found on both the "se" and "e" watermarks. Special sheets of 264 stamps were used to prepare the booklets. They had half the booklet panes inverted resulting in half the panes having inverted watermarks. Therefore booklets, when

assembled, could contain either type of watermarked pane or a mix of both.

The panes are perforated all around but in the cutting of the booklets the perforations were usually clipped. The "se" panes were produced between Aug. 21, 1931, and 1940, and stitched into booklets with a face value of two shillings.

Two numbers showing the year of issue and the serial number are found on booklet covers until 1964 when the use of serial numbers ceased. Later booklets (1950s and 1960s) put the serial number first.

Two penny "se" watermarked panes are found in booklets having serial numbers 1 to 22, while the "e" watermarked panes are in booklets with serial numbers 23 to 30. There was a change in the face value of the booklet in 1948 (serials 31-36) and 1966 (no serial number) to 2/6. Three shilling booklets (serials 43-44) were issued in 1962-1963. Most booklets of the period had advertising and postal information interleaves and, sometimes, advertising on the covers as well.

Ireland used reproductions of the stamp, mainly for stamp on stamp designs. In 1972, for the stamp's 50th anniversary, a single stamp and a souvenir sheet (Figure 12), Ireland's first, were issued (Scott 326 and 326a). Again, in 1990, for the 150th anniversary of the world's first adhesive postage stamp, the Penny Black, Ireland's 1922 2p stamp reappeared. It was part of a montage of different Irish definitives found on the 50-pence value (Figure 13). It was printed both in sheet format and in a Prestige booklet (Figure 14, Scott 804, 804a & 804b).

This year it is again featured in a montage. It is silhouetted, on a 32p stamp, against a photograph of the General Post Office. This new representation of Ireland's first stamp is part of the four stamp "Post Office Service to the Nation" phase of a three-part commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the state. In all, 12 stamps, celebrating the post office, democracy and state institutions, sport, culture, commerce and the arts will be issued. The 12 stamps are also being produced in a limited edition State Anniversary Souvenir Sheetlet available only between Dec. 6-31, 1997 (Figure 15).

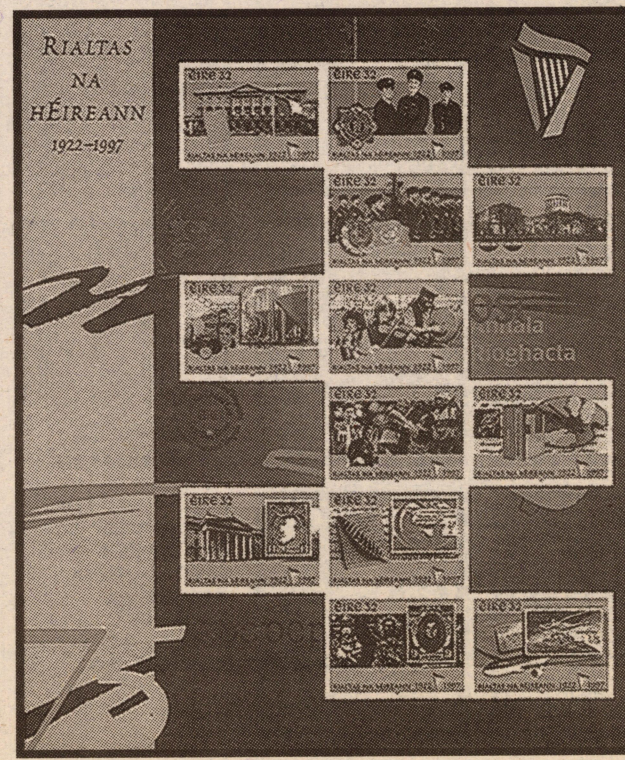


Figure 15: The limited edition souvenir sheet celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Irish State. The 2p map stamp is shown on the left stamp of the fifth row.