

The Congo Churchill Commemoration Preliminary Proofs

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I am indebted to Roger Badman for providing the material used in this article. Roger specialises in the work of the British printer Harrison & Sons, the producer of these preliminary proofs.

James Harrison established a printing company in London in 1750. In time it became Harrison & Sons, which started to print postage stamps in 1881. In 1911 the British Post Office decided not to renew its contract with De La Rue for the printing postage stamps, and awarded it to Harrison & Sons. De La Rue was affronted, a reaction that dominated its attitude to Harrison & Sons thereafter

Over time, Harrisons & Sons (Ltd) acquired a reputation for the quality of its printing and competitive prices. From the 1930s through to the 1990s the company printed most of Britain's postage stamps and very many for 168 other countries. The Harrison family connection ended in 1979 when the conglomerate Lonrho bought 100% of the stock. Under Lonrho the company continued to enjoy success, notably in the printing of banknotes. Unfortunately, in 1997 Lonrho reviewed its corporate structure and Harrison & Sons was found to be not part of the core activity. De La Rue seized this opportunity and bought the company. It is generally accepted that Harrison & Sons had become a thorn in the side of De La Rue by taking an increasing percentage of worldwide banknote production. While we know that there is no sentiment in business, the behaviour of De La Rue was particularly ruthless. An immediate restructuring of production facilities was carried out. Although stamp production at Harrison's High Wycombe factory continued until 2003 (when the factory was closed) the Harrison & Sons imprint did not appear on new printings and was phased out from the continued printing of the UK Machin definitive. De La Rue erased the name Harrison & Sons and a century of tradition as soon as it was practicable. From a commercial perspective, De La Rue had seized its opportunity and eliminated a major competitor. In the process the archive and records were destroyed, which from a philatelic perspective was an act of vandalism.



Figure 1: The three preliminary proofs for the Churchill Memorial Issue 1965 / 1966

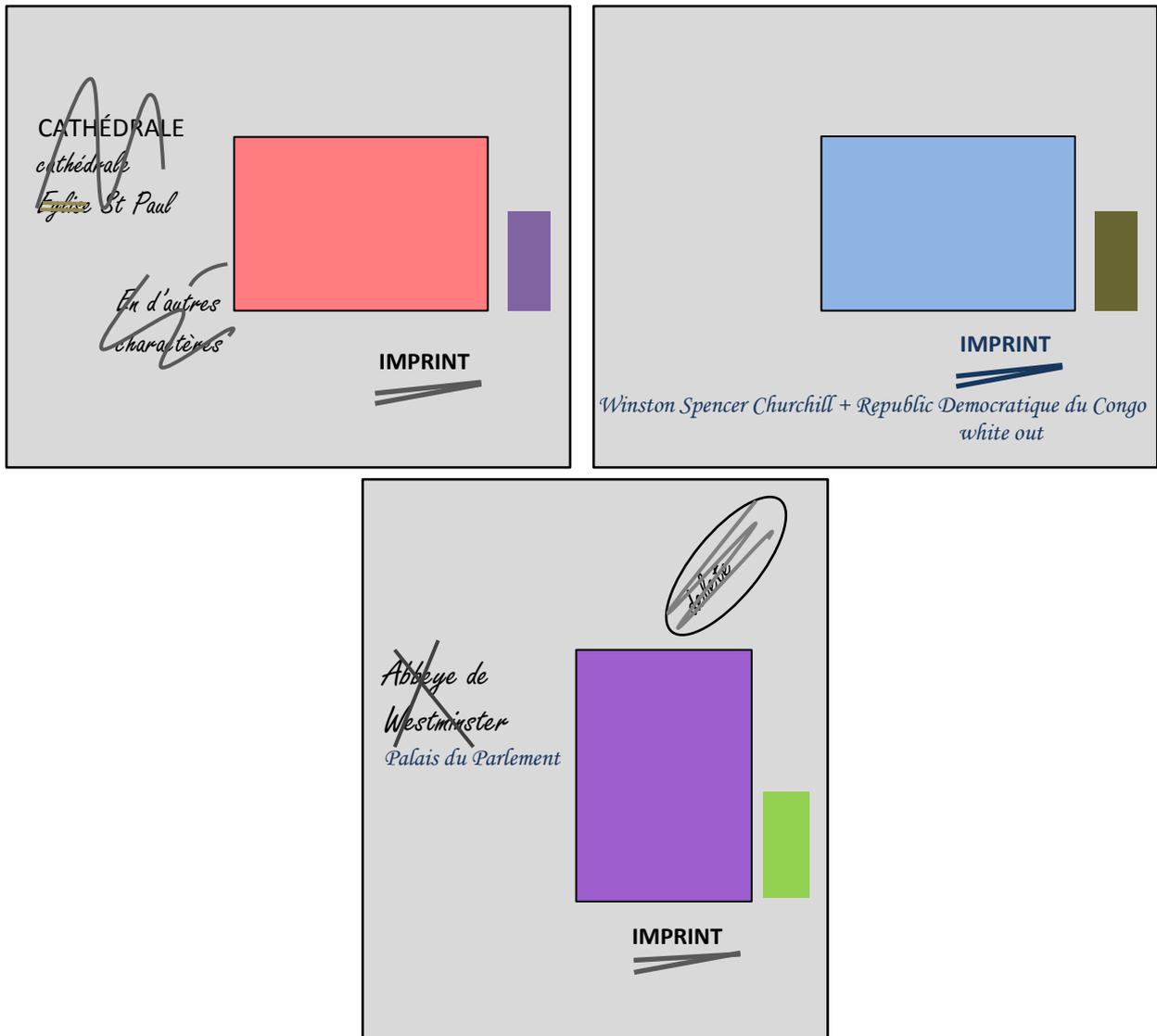


Figure 2: The annotations on the cards

The Silver Jubilee of King George V was commemorated by Great Britain and the British Empire with an omnibus postage stamp issue. Each of 55 dominions and colonies issued a set of four stamps that had attractive designs and were finely printed. The concept proved popular and the stamps were in great demand by philatelists. The sales income was a great benefit to the smaller colonies. Over the next 25 years five more omnibus issues appeared. However, after 1960 a great many more events were commemorated in this way. Winston Spencer Churchill was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War II and much admired for his leadership. He died on the 24th January 1965 at the age of 90, an internationally respected statesman. The Crown Agents (which managed the stamp issues of the remaining colonies) decided that Churchill should be honoured with a memorial omnibus issue. These colonies were joined by a number of independent British Commonwealth and foreign countries producing stamps of their own design. For many countries the prospect of increased income from sales to collectors was the motivation to join in. Stamps memorialising Churchill were issued between May 1965 and January 1966.

Most of Britain's former African colonies did not participate in the Churchill memorial issue, which is not surprising because Churchill was a great imperialist, fighting in colonial campaigns as a young man (Indian NW Frontier 1896, Sudan 1898 & South Africa 1899) and as a politician who opposed Indian independence. The decision of the postal authorities in the DRC to issue a Churchill

memorial commemorative set is interesting, given the near paranoia of its politicians to colonialism. Roger Badman has told me that a change in DRC government after the stamps had been commissioned led to the issue being cancelled. This is consistent with the political turmoil at that time. In June 1964, President Kasavubu appointed the pro-western Moïse Tshombe as interim Prime Minister until the elections scheduled in March 1965. In November 1964 Tshombe allowed Belgian & US forces to rescue hostages held at Stanleyville. This cost him the support of Kasavubu and General Joseph Mobutu, and was used by those who opposed him as confirmation that he was “an imperialist’s puppet”. After the elections, although Tshombe’s CONACO controlled the Chamber of Deputies, the opposition FDC controlled the Senate. A post-election paralysis of government was the opportunity Kasavubu needed to dismiss him (in October 1965). In reality, Kasavubu believed Tshombe wanted to become President and feared his growing power. He appointed another Katangese politician Évariste Kimba as Prime Minister, which did nothing to solve the crisis. Within weeks, Mobutu seized power in a coup and then set about removing all colonial cultural influence from the Congo in his policy of “national authenticity”. Ordering Churchill memorial stamps by the Tshombe administration in the first half of 1965 is a reasonable conclusion. Then, after Mobutu’s coup on the 25th November 1965, the order was cancelled.

Three designs were produced (Figure 1). Following Harrison & Sons practice, imperforate examples were stuck to cards. The theme of these is important events in Churchill’s life (World War II – The Battle of Britain; World War II – Victory in the Western Desert; Parliament – his long and distinguished career in the House of Commons). Only one of these has a denomination (12F), and was probably intended to show the font to be used. A paper swatch of an alternative colour is taped to the each card. There are pencil annotations in French. Because these are on a grey card they are not easily read on the scans, as printed in the Bulletin. Therefore, I have reproduced them in Figure 2. Most are crossed out. However, there are two that are not, *Palais du Parlement* and *Winston Spencer Churchill + République Démocratique du Congo - white out*. Both are in ink and from a different hand. The first is inexplicable because this is the wording on the stamp. The second is intriguing because the instruction is in English. The name RDC was adopted in 1964 and used until the change to Zaire in 1971 – i.e. the name is correct. Was the font size used for Churchill too large, being as prominent as that of the country? It is my speculation that this instruction points to the possibility of submission to another state after the Congolese cancellation.

On each card IMPRINT is added and not crossed out. Because the printer’s imprint is already present what is this instruction? The designer’s name is not present as it is on another contemporary Congolese issue produced by Harrison & Sons. Was it an instruction to add his name? Neatly, this brings us onto the artist. 50 years have elapsed and Harrison & Sons records are gone. Roger Badman acquired these preliminary proofs in an auction a number of years ago and recalls that the designer was Belgian. Two Belgian stamp designers worked with Harrison & Sons in this decade. They are Oscar Bonnevalle (1920-1993) who created the IUT issue of 1965 [COB 586-593] and Jean Van Noten (1903-1982) who created the Flowers issue of 1971 [COB 778-781]. Both have passed away, nothing is recorded in our Bulletin and nothing can be found on the internet. However, Roger kindly contacted Jennifer Toombs, the internationally renowned British stamp artist, who designed the Churchill issue produced by Harrison & Sons for the Crown Agents (acting on behalf of 34 countries) and many other postage stamps for the company. She found these designs interesting and although she could not name the artist definitively, thought Oscar Bonnevalle the more probable because of the proximity in time to the IUT issue. (For this conclusion she will have drawn on her knowledge of company practices as well.) Sadly, many of the senior employees who might have knowledge are advanced in years but she will try to uncover any more information. I hope that some knowledge of this aborted issue might be held within the Study Circle membership. If anyone has information, please contact the Bulletin editor.