

Bonus: Charles III on Stamps: How did we do?

Now that British King Charles III is officially coronated, new definitive stamps are appearing with his face replacing that of his late mother. Queen Elizabeth II, reigned over the British Empire (and on its stamps) for 70 years. Just for fun, let's see how we did with suggestions we made for Charles III stamps back in October, soon after the queen died at the venerable age of 96.



Above are the crudely photoshopped proposals I put together, combining portraits of Charles from the internet with various QEII definitives as background.



Above is what the Royal Mail has produced. (For an explanation of the bar codes, see below.) As you can see, the British post office pretty much adopted my middle design (see right), which also shows Charles, in profile, facing left, on a plain background. The new portrait is original, though its bas-



relief style is similar to the bust of Queen Elizabeth that graced British stamps from 1967 on. I prefer her portrait to his, with her elegant neck and distinct profile. Charles, in contrast, looks thick, pale and flat — particularly since the Charles we know is such a ruddy, pink chap. Oh well, we'll get used to it.

Here are a few other new "Charles" stamps, including what looks like a definitive from Canada. It's an appealing stamp, printed in basic black, with a close-up shot of the king facing the viewer with a calm, direct gaze. Nice.

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Charles is back in civilian garb for this high-value stamp from Bermuda, left. (Bermuda is a parliamentary dependency that is simultaneously a sovereign state and a British Overseas Territory. Apparently it works OK most of the time: the last referendum on independence in 1995 was soundly defeated.)

The GB series below is an interesting mix of portraits and allegorical artworks. Charles is pictured at work in his palace and posing for the camera. In one shot he stands with his wife, the Queen Consort Camilla. The accompanying woodcut scenes have a Ruskin-esque, arts-and-crafts feel to them, which strikes me as very much in line with Charles' own cultural inclinations. The inscriptions are revealing:

Commonwealth. Diversity and Community. Sustainability and



Biodiversity. The Coronation. The odd thought occurs that Charles, an artist of some skill, might as well have drawn these vignettes himself! (He didn't.)

Take a closer look at one of the woodcuts. (right). Notice the gold-colored profile in the upper right corner. Why, it's Charles, in a rendering very like that of his mother back in the day. There is continuity in these stamps, to be sure. There also are differences that reflect the personality of the monarch portrayed.

One thing that hasn't changed. The postage stamp may be an elegant artifact and a national emblem, but it's also a working document. It's meant to be peeled off its backing, stuck to an envelope and sent on its way. Part of the journey includes the unceremonious cancellation of that stamp. A black circular date stamp defaces the most pristine portrait. No monarch is above the humbling ritual of philatelic cancel culture.

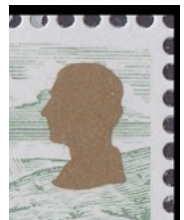
A note on the new barcodes: There's probably quite a bit to say about this innovative stamp technology. I plan to keep this short, however, because frankly it's not that interesting to me; doesn't really have much to do with stamps; may be something more in the future, but today it just seems ... gimmicky.

You will find the barcode on a vertical strip to the right of the stamp, as illustrated at right. The two are connected by a "virtual" perforation — that is, the two parts are not meant to be separated when you remove the self-adhesive stamp from its backing to place it on your letter.

Here's where it gets innovative — or gimmicky, depending on your point of view. The instructions say if you download the Royal Mail app, you can customize the barcode to embed a video message. The recipient of the letter then can scan the barcode and watch your video. (I've not tried this so I'm just passing along the information.)

Barcodes were introduced last year, and so far the only videos involve greetings from a character named Shean the Sheep. (See what I mean by gimmicky?) I checked out Shean the Sheep, who is a character in a pretty hilarious series of clay-mation videos-without-words set in a barnyard with fellow sheep, three annoying piggies, a dopey dog, a clueless farmer and others. The Royal Mail promises to introduce new features in future, such as your own messages in the barcode. We'll see.

Meanwhile, the post office warns that after July, regular definitives no longer will be valid for postage. If you are stuck with a supply of non-barcode



stamps on hand, you may exchange them for the new stamps for free. (Still seems like a bother, doesn't it?) Commemorative stamps will still be OK to use

An advantage of the bar codes, according to the Royal Mail, is that it allows for tracking of every piece of mail, formerly a premium service. (That may be good for the post office, but how often have you needed to track your mail?)

Personally, I don't find these barcodes at all attractive. They distract from the stamp, and there's absolutely nothing aesthetic about them. They offer a service I haven't asked for. And another thing: If a letter begins to function as a means of transmitting a video message, customers eventually will realize they can do the same thing, much easier and faster, simply buy going online. While I am skeptical about these barcode stamps, I do have an ace in the hole. Because the innovation came along in February of 2022, when Queen Elizabeth

was still on the throne, the first series of barcode stamps carried her famous "Machin" profile. Those stamps won't be on



the market for long. I smell a collector's item, and just bought a set for under 10 bucks at the latest Syracuse Stamp Show.

POSTSCRIPT: For years, modern British definitives have contained a security device that may have spurred a new collecting sub-genre. The solid-looking background actually is a series of tiny wavy banners, each one reading ROYALMAIL repetitively as they weave across the stamp. You can see them best by holding the stamp at an angle to bring out the iridescent ink. On each stamp, one of the ROYALMAILs has been altered to read "ROYALM23L" or ROYALMA13 or ROYALMCIL. There are dozens if not hundreds of these code numbers and letters, which apparently identify the source of the stamp (counter sheet, booklet, coil, business sheet ...). Not sure why anyone needs to know the source of every stamp. I don't doubt some collectors are determined to collect every variety. I do not plan to join them.



THE FMF STAMP PROJECT CONTINUES

Hold the stamp at an angle in the light and you can see the ROYALMAIL banners. Can you spot part of ROYALM23L?