

The colours that kept on running

Which have been the longest-lasting links between denomination and colour in the history of British definitive stamps? The answers may surprise you

□ Report by David Wright

From the earliest days of postage stamps, colours and face values have become closely linked, in Great Britain as in most other countries. 'Penny Black' is a phrase known far beyond the world of philatelists, even if it was only relevant to post office customers for a year.

Today, we instinctively know that a 2nd class definitive is blue and a 1st class gold, and we can feel reasonably confident that this will still be the case next year, as it has been for the best part of a decade.

But which colour/value links have lasted longest? Let's investigate.

Breaks in the chain

The custom of allowing key values to be easily associated with certain colours has been pursued through much of the history of the postage stamp. But there have been two lengthy breaks in the chain, and one sudden upheaval.

The first long break came in late Victorian times. A series of colour changes around 1880 preceded the 1883 'Lilac & Green' series, in which either lilac or green was used for most values. Just four years later, in the 1887 'Jubilee' series, most denominations were printed in two colours for the first time.

The clear association of colours and values reasserted itself during the reign of King George V, however, as a return to monochrome issues was completed. And they continued in the King George VI era, even though the bright colours of 1937-38 were deliberately faded as a wartime economy measure in 1941-42.

The brutal revolution came in 1950-51, when the Post Office made a very belated attempt to fit in with the Universal Postal Union's rules. This entailed standardising selected colour/value links, but these were not the same as those which had become



FATIGUING FIFTIES

In the 1940s, everyone knew that a stamp for the printed-matter rate was red and cost 1d, and that one for a letter was blue and cost 2½d.

Most people also knew that you needed a 2d orange stamp for a postcard, and that a ½d green stamp was useful for upgrading this to the letter rate. But that was all about to go out of the window.

Unwisely, when trying to fit in with UPU rules in 1951, the Post Office failed to strengthen the colours it used. As a result, the 1½d green, meeting the new printed-matter rate, looked far too

similar to the old ½d.

Changing the 1d from red to blue also made it look very much like the 4d for overseas sea mail. And changing the letter stamp from blue to red, even though the rate was the same, merely compounded the confusion.

But the public had to get used to rejigs of this kind. It wasn't long before the printed letter rate rose to 2d, so the required stamp was brown. And when price rises were introduced in 1958, everyone had to learn that stamps for basic letters were now violet.



settled over the previous four decades.

The second major hiatus came with decimalisation in 1971, which meant that continuity was no longer possible.

Humble ½d

The humble ½d started life bantam-sized and red in 1870, but was standard-sized and green from 1880 to 1884, when, bizarrely, the Lilac & Green version was blue!

After turning orange in 1887, it reverted to green in 1900, and remained that way for the first half of the 20th century, including in the PUC, Silver Jubilee and Postage Stamp Centenary commemorative sets of 1929, 1935 and 1940.

That's a continuous run of 51 years, until it changed back to orange in 1951 – how many people realised that this was a reversion to a Victorian colour?

Persistent 1d

After red rapidly replaced black as the colour of the 1d stamp in 1841, it stayed that way for almost 40 years. But that was followed by a break lasting half as long again.

In 1880 a Venetian red (effectively brown) 1d appeared briefly, before the celebrated 1d lilac was issued in 1881. As this particular value was not a feature of the 1883 or 1887 series, lilac remained the colour in residence for this iconic value until 1902.

However, the stamps of King Edward VII reinstated red as the colour of the 1d, and so it would be for almost another half-century. In 1924-25, Britain's first commemorative stamps, for the Wembley Exhibition, included a 1d red.

In 1934, and again in 1937, the value acquired a new brilliance, thanks to photogravure printing, and the 1d in the 1940 Centenary set was also a

'The 2d famously started life blue and almost became Tyrian plum. But its longest continuous run was orange'

vibrant shade. A year later, fulsome inks were abandoned for the sake of the war effort, so many of today's collectors grew up with muted colours.

Even so, the 1d was unquestionably red, until the belated attempt to fit UPU rules turned it blue in 1951.

That 49-year run is impressive, albeit marginally beaten by the longevity of the ½d green. But if we count the total of the two periods for which the 1d stamp was red, it comes to an even more striking 88 years.

Oddly, the 1d was olive for the last few years of its life, from 1967 to 1971.

Unsettled 1½d

Introduced in 1870 as a rose-red stamp, the 1½d turned red-brown in 1880, lilac in 1884 and purple and green as the lowest-value two-colour stamp in the 1887 Jubilee series.

Amazingly, it stayed a two-colour value for 25 years, until 1912. Then, after common sense set in, it settled on brown until 1951.

Although not in the top tier in terms of longevity, the 1½d brown was an important denomination in its time, included in all the early commemorative sets in 1924, 1925, ▷





1929, 1935, 1937 and 1940.

However, the value was switched to green in 1951, staying that way in the Wilding era but falling out of use before the advent of the Machins in 1967.

Famous 2d

The 2d famously started life as a blue stamp in 1840, and nothing changed until 1880, when it must have offended a few traditionalists by suddenly appearing in rose-red. By 1884 it was one of the lilacs.

From 1887 it was green and red, and like the 1½d it remained two-colour

for a quarter of a century. But it was due to be issued in Tyrian plum in 1910, only for the printing to be scrapped when King Edward VII died; so not only is it Britain's greatest philatelic rarity, but it has the distinction of existing in 'the colour that never was'.

All this to-ing and fro-ing meant the 2d's longest continuous run in one colour was still to come: it was orange from 1912 to 1951, becoming especially familiar to collectors on the postcards of the 1940s.

From the Wildings of 1953 to the

Machins of 1968 it was brown, completing quite a rainbow of colours.

Reliable 2½d

The 2½d blue is a definite candidate as one of the longest standing value/colour combinations.

It had the same half-century run from 1902 to 1951 as the 1d red, but the colour dates back much further, to 1880, when blue replaced the denomination's original rosy mauve of 1875.

If you accepted the lilac of 1884 and the purple on blue paper of 1887 as blue (surely the man in the street would have called it blue?), you could argue that the relationship endured for an impressive uninterrupted total of 71 years.

The 2½d was used mostly for overseas mail before World War II, but became the home letter rate in a big price-rise during the conflict.

In 1951 it turned red, and stayed that colour as a Wilding in 1952, but the value was never released as a Machin.

Stubborn 3d

If you are prepared to consider various incarnations of the 2½d as broadly blue, you now have to decide whether you also accept the mauve, purple, violet and lilac versions of the 3d as essentially one colour palette.

The first 3d stamps, of 1862, 1865, 1867, 1873 and 1881, were all red. But life for this value was never the same again after the well-known 1883 3d lilac, with its 3d overprint in red.

The stamp in the 1884 series remained lilac, and the 1887 and 1902 Jubilee stamps, which you probably envisage as bright yellow, were actually printed in purple, on yellow paper.

Violet became the constant colour from 1912, with brighter shades from 1935 to 1942. But in the case of the 3d, 1951 did not bring radical change; this was no longer the overseas rate, so there was no need to change the colour, and it continued until 1954.

From then onwards, Stanley Gibbons lists the colour as deep lilac, but it is doubtful whether many people noticed it had changed, and what was essentially the same hue continued through the 1960s (when this was the most common stamp seen on ordinary letters) into the Machin era, ended only by decimalisation in 1971.

So you have only to be a little lenient to assign a 69-year continuous run to this combination of value and colour. If you're feeling charitable, you can consider it an uninterrupted run from 1883 to 1971, an impressive total of 88 years.



SHORT RUNS

None of the stamps which have denominations above 1s but are still considered low values can boast long-lived value/colour links. Three were late arrivals, and the other made an early departure.

The 1s 3d green and 1s 6d indigo were first issued in 1953, and only the latter continued into the Machin era, in two colours which were almost identical shades of blue. The first 1s 9d was an orange and black Machin in 1967.

In stark contrast, the 2s was initially blue in 1867, then brown in 1880, but was never deemed necessary again!

Tempestuous 4d

The first 4d stamp of 1855 was red, and the 1862, 1865 and 1876 series kept it essentially the same colour. But in 1877 it turned green, in 1880 brown, and from 1884 green again.

In the two-colour era from 1887 to 1909 it was green and brown, but there was a 1909 issue in orange before it reverted back to green after 1912.

Were it not for that curiosity, there would have been green on this stamp for 66 years in succession, before it switched to blue in 1950.

In the modern era, it is anyone's guess why the 4d got lumbered with three different colours (deep blue, sepia and red) in four short years from 1965 to 1969!

Unappreciated 4½d

The only records this value holds are for the shortest-lived denomination. The 4½d lasted only a few years from 1892 in green and red, and again from 1959 in chestnut, and no Machin was required in 1967.

Understated 5d

In its early days the 5d was one of the least used denominations, and had a chequered history.

It was indigo when first issued in 1881, green in 1884, and purple and blue in 1887. But after changing to brown from 1913 it kept that colour for more than half a century, until the advent of the Machins.

Ironically, it was only after switching to blue in 1968 that it became a prominent value, enjoying a brief reign as the basic letter rate from 1969-71.

Steadfast 6d

The 6d value has varied less in colour than most British definitives.

First issued in 1854 as an embossed lilac stamp, it retained that colour for the designs of 1856, 1862, 1865 and ▷



NONPLUSSED BY NVIs

When NVIs first appeared in the 1990s, they caused much confusion to some people, especially those with fading eyesight.

To my mother, '2nd' looked like 2p, and dark green wasn't that distinct from dark blue, so her letters to me were often underfranked.

Sometimes I paid postage due, but on other occasions the letter got through, so perhaps postal workers were equally perplexed?



1867, before mysteriously turning brown in 1872 and grey in 1873. By 1883 it was lilac once again, with the same style of red overprint as the 3d value had at that time.

But it was the purple printing on red paper of 1887 that set the pattern for the future. The colour was retained, for a new design printed on chalky paper, in 1902, and purple was also the colour of the King George V issues of 1913 and 1924.

The King George VI 6d was purple, too, although a notably paler shade. This was not because of wartime economies, but because the background had to contrast with the design's dark lettering.

This dark-on-pale approach continued with the 1952 Queen Elizabeth II definitive, and the colour choice continued into the Machin-era, all the way to decimalisation in 1971.

Thus the longevity of this value/colour combination adds up to 88 years, equalling that of the 3d, if you take the same relaxed approach to distinguishing lilac from purple.

Tardy 7d

The 7d did not exist until 1910, when a dull grey stamp was issued.

It became olive-green in 1912 and bright emerald green in 1939, remaining green into the Machin era until decimalisation in 1971.

That adds up to a continuous run of 59 years in different shades of green, quite impressive for a late starter.

Oddball 8d

More radical colour changes have affected the 8d than almost any other value.

Although first issued in orange in 1876, it must have felt like a new value when it reappeared in 1913.



Surprisingly, after coloured paper had been phased out for other values, it was printed in black on yellow.

In 1939, the colour was changed to magenta, which endured into the current reign. It changed to the similar vermilion in the Machins series in 1968, before switching to turquoise blue a year later for its swansong.

Verdant 9d

The first 9d stamps, of 1862, 1865, 1867 were printed in bistre, but in 1883 it

was the first of five values to turn green. The issues of 1887 and 1902 were then purple and blue, and the stamp of 1913, rather oddly, was black.

The olive-green 9d of 1922 was the start of a more settled run, however. It was reissued in brighter colours in 1935, but olive-green remained in use under King George VI and and bronze-green was the colour choice in 1954.

The pre-decimal Machin was green too, so this value can claim a run of 49 years in similar shades.





Ill-fated 10d

The first 10d arrived in the embossed issue in 1848, printed in brown. It was still brown for the designs of 1865 and 1867, before turning purple and red in 1887 and 1902.

However, a 10d turquoise appeared in 1913, and various shades of blue remained the colour through three reigns, clocking up an impressive 54 years' service.

Unfortunately the 1968 Machin was 'drab' – a wonderfully accurate description, because not since the King Edward VII 7d had such a dreary colour been seen!

Short-lived 11d

The 11d was a new value in 1947, in plum. The colour continued into Queen Elizabeth II days, but there was no Machin at this value so 20 years was its lot.

Earthy 1s

The 1s stamp had a long early run in green, lasting 33 years from 1847. Four years as a brown stamp from 1880

were a rude interruption before green returned in 1884, and green continued as the choice in 1887 until joined by red on the two-colour stamps of 1900 and 1902.

So this value's longest run in one colour was as brown, again, for three reigns and 54 years from 1913, until the Machins introduced an attractive mauve in 1967.

Prize winners

So which were the longest-lasting combinations of value and colour in the history of British definitives?

For overall longevity, the 1d red wins, with two separate eras adding up to 88 years out the first 131 years of postage stamps. The 3d can equal that only if you group together its various shades of violet, lilac, mauve and purple.

For the longest uninterrupted stretch, the 3d violet/lilac, and the 6d purple are joint winners at 69 years, although you could make an argument for the 2½d blue at 71 years.

But many other values also



deserve an honourable mention for reaching or exceeding half a century in one colour.

What a contrast with the short-lived colour/value links that have been such a feature of the past 30 years! Rapid inflation in the 1970s and 1980s caused postage rates to change so frequently that colour changes could not keep up, and public awareness of the meaning of stamp colours vanished.

Only with the coming of non-value indicators denoting 1st and 2nd class rates in the 1990s has that collective understanding begun to return. □

DECIMAL SURVIVORS

The link between colour and value was almost killed off by decimalisation, but not quite.

The 1s (now 5p) mauve and the 1s 9d (now 9p) orange and black retained their colours into the new currency.

