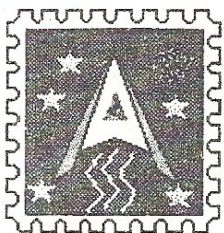


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ORBIT



Historical Mosaics of British Astronomy

Margaret Morris dissects the 1990 British
Astronomy Issue*

The set of four stamps illustrated right was issued on October 16th 1990 to celebrate British Astronomy by highlighting the importance of astronomy to navigation for an island nation - as well as the important contributions of some famous British Astronomers. Additionally two special events were commemorated - the centenary of the British Astronomical Association and the bicentenary of the Armagh Observatory in Northern Ireland.

The designs, by Australian artist Jeff Fisher, are of approximately square format and are unusually "busy" making up quite an attractive set especially with the selection of colours used. Each is topped with an arch shape (perhaps representing "the vault of Heaven"?) and the artist has cast his net widely in searching for appropriate motifs.

The British Astronomical Association is not directly commemorated on the stamps, although several special postmarks honoured the centenary. (See below.) However, Armagh Observatory features prominently on the lowest value of the set, the 22p, then the first class inland postage rate. Armagh Observatory was founded by Archbishop Richard Robinson, Baron Rokeby, Primate of Ireland, as one step toward establishing a University of Ulster. This never materialised, but the Observatory remains, the second oldest in the British Commonwealth. A library was also founded.

Construction of the Observatory commenced in 1789 and the first Director was appointed in 1790. In spite of financial difficulties, an equatorial telescope of 2½ inches aperture and 3 feet focal length by Troughton was delivered and installed.

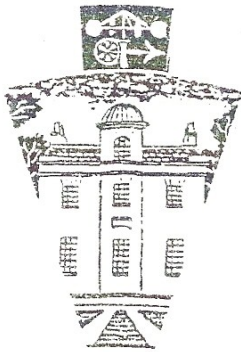
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*In its original form this article first appeared in the January 1991 issue of *Astrofax*, the bulletin of the ATA Astronomy Study Unit and is reprinted with permission.



Historical Mosaics of British Astronomy

continued from front cover



A section of the handsome old building which houses the Armagh Observatory is shown on the 22p stamp. The cup anemometer from the roof of the observatory appears against a black section of the "arch" above. This was designed by the Rev Dr Thomas Romney Robinson who became third Director in 1823. He held office for 59 years which must be a record for an observatory Director. Under Robinson the building was extended and further instruments added. The Observatory also received some historical instruments from the collection of King George III. Observations under the leadership of Robinson were published as the Armagh Catalogue.

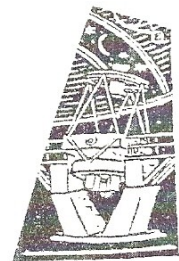


In 1882 the fourth Director was appointed, Dr John Luis Emil Dreyer. He very soon acquired a 10-inch refractor by Grubb from Dublin and commenced work on the famous New General Catalogue of Nebulae and Clusters of Stars (NGC numbers are now used as standard). The present Director, Dr Mart de Groot, took up office in 1976 and began a period of modernisation with extensive use of computers; a node of the UK's STARLINK system is situated at Armagh. It is interesting to note that Dr Ernst Julius Opik, who appeared on a stamp and miniature from Mauritania in Comet Halley series, worked at the Observatory.



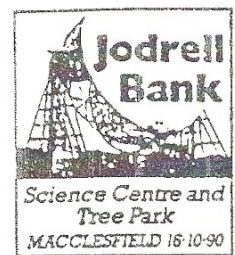
Carved above the entrance is the wording "The Heavens Declare the Glory of God," which wording also appeared (together with a star and a bishop's mitre) on one of the special postmarks associated with the issue of these stamps.

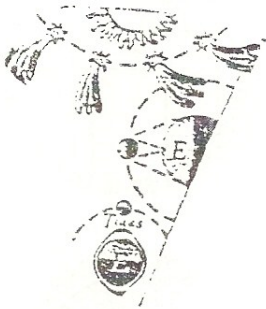
The other elements of the design of the 22p are as follows: at left appears the mark 1A Jodrell Bank radio telescope and at right the 4.2m William Herschel Telescope on La Palma. Note that throughout the set the



influence of William Herschel keeps recurring.) Along the top of the stamp are drawings illustrating the principal research area of the observatory - studies of star spots, solar flares and binary star systems. It should be noted that the Royal Mail's description of this design is "Present Day", so that the progression in astronomical thinking and achievement is actually in reverse to the ascending face value of the stamps.

The next stamp in the set is the 26p (described as "Appreciation of physical properties") which in 1990 represented the rate for European countries other than the EEC, as the EU was called at the time. Here again there are numerous elements in the design and many of them feature the achievements of Isaac Newton. His studies of gravity are represented by two diagrams, one demonstrating the orbital motion and the other the effect of the Moon

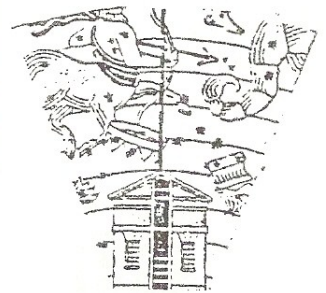
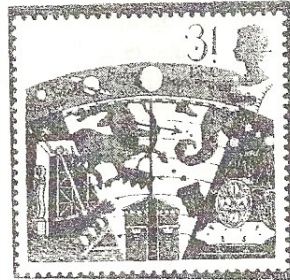




on tides. Edmond Halley's use of Newton's theories to calculate cometary orbits is represented by the comet in the frieze and the comet tail diagram at the top of the central wedge of the design. Note also the tiny spectrum and of course Newton's reflecting telescope which features prominently at the left side. The Herschel influence is here again seen in his diagram of our galaxy and also in the right hand panel where there appear his 40 foot reflector at Slough.



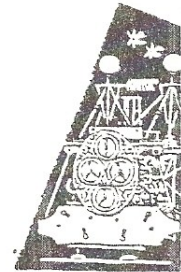
The third stamp in order of value is the 31p which was the airmail postcard rate for all destinations. This is described as "Advances in Observation" and relates particularly to navigation. In the centre wedge appears the old Royal Observatory



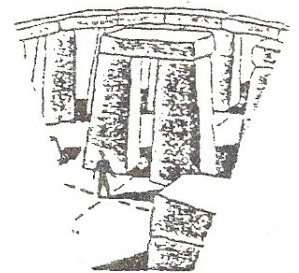
and the Greenwich Meridian. Above this is a section of an old star map and the topmost arch shows the planets in order from the Sun as far out as Uranus (correct for the 200 year limit imposed by the celebration of the Armagh bicentenary.) At the left of the design is a mural quadrant with the steps necessary to use the instrument and a clock. At the right side is the famous Harrison Chronometer.

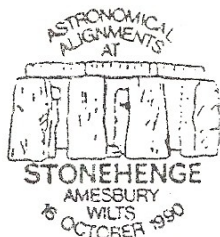


Finally there is the 37p value which was the standard airmail rate to all destinations outside Europe for letters weighing not more than 10g. The Royal Mail described this design as "Early Appreciation." It will of course be up to each collector to decide whether to take these stamps in sequence of face value or in the chronology of the astronomy. With the wealth of detail in the designs, no doubt several copies of each of these stamps will be required to fit into various places in a collection on astronomy.



The main feature of the design of the 37p value is a representation of Stonehenge, possibly one of the world's oldest astronomical alignments. It is a nice touch to the little human figure and the crossing dashed lines. At left appears an armillary sphere and at the right a drawing to show navigation by the stars. The arch on this occasion is used simply for the phases of the moon - the earliest calendar.





Margaret Morris had a wonderful opportunity to visit Armagh Planetarium for the Press Review of these stamps and concludes her article with some memories of the occasion.....

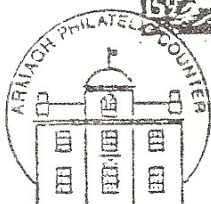
Being based in Glasgow, I found it very convenient to take the small Loganair plane directly across to Belfast Harbour (or City Airport.) The advantage was that I arrived about one hour earlier than everyone else. The Post Office sent a car to the Airport to pick me up and I was then taken to postal headquarters to collect another member of Post Office staff and the handout material for distribution to the press.

I had a privileged view of the exhibition before everyone else and was able to photograph the display panels which featured unaccepted designs against large blown up photographs in full colour of sky areas such as the Trifid Nebula, the Horse's Head Nebula in Orion, a comet etc. Then came panels with the first stage of the Fisher designs and the finally accepted designs followed by complete sheets of the stamps and the designs for the first day covers, stiffeners, special cancellations and cachets.

The official party arrived next, just a short time before the rest of the journalists. This party consisted of Dr John Mason, President-Designate of the B.A.A. and Patrick Moore the well-known TV personality and populariser of astronomy. They were met by representatives of the Northern Ireland Postal Board, a director of the House of Questa (printers of the stamps) and also by Dr Mart de Groot, Director of the Observatory. It was a very friendly occasion and the speeches were quite short and very well received.

After the formalities, the party walked the short distance up the hill to the lawn facing the Observatory, where an excellent buffet lunch was served in the open air. An item of interest here was a large sundial laid out between some flower beds; when the sun shines, you stand on a marker and form your own gnomon. Due to the fact that one of my colleagues at Glasgow (Professor Archie Roy) is on the Board of Management of Armagh Observatory and Planetarium I was given a personal guided tour of the Observatory. Then everyone went back to the Planetarium for a special hour-long programme on 200 years of astronomy at Armagh. This rounded off a wonderful and exciting day and there was such a lot to think of on the flight home.

Several items depicted on these interesting stamps can be amplified by the use of other philatelic elements, for example the Jodrell Bank radio telescope has appeared on several stamps and also as various meter marks; Stonehenge is on cancellations and a stamp, while Armagh Observatory itself was for a short time used as the design of the special cancellation of a philatelic bureau until business was removed to Portadown. Have fun !



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