

Postage stamps for King Charles

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The world's first postage stamp was the Penny Black, issued in May of 1840. The design was based on a medal designed by William Wyon, chief engraver at the Royal Mint, to commemorate Queen Victoria's first visit to the City of London. It was printed by a line-engraved process with an engine turned background to reduce the risk of forgery and with heavy cancellations to reduce the possibility of cleaning and re-use. Since they were unique in the world, these first stamps did not carry the country's name and in recognition of this, no stamps issued in this country ever since have carried a country name but there has been an image of the monarch somewhere in the design, the same image being used for Queen Victoria's head until her death in 1901. The line-engraved process was replaced by other printing processes over the years, leading to the modern computer-based methods of gravure and offset lithography.

In subsequent reigns the monarch's image was taken from photographs, often based on the images on coinage or on medals. This practice was followed by Arnold Machin in 1967 when he introduced the Queen's image, taken from the coinage he had designed, that would be in use for more than 55 years and becoming an iconic symbol of the United Kingdom around the world. It was reproduced billions of times on British stamps and stamps from some Commonwealth countries, as well as elsewhere.

Over the years there have been many changes to stamps and postal services with advances in technology. During the late Queen's reign there was, for example, the introduction of phosphor to the stamps to aid automatic sorting, both here and abroad, and attempts to reduce problems from forgery. In 2009 this resulted in stamps on self-adhesive paper and with other features to prevent re-use. Then from 2021 to 2022 coded labels were added to the side that could be read digitally and could detect reuse.

It is not surprising, therefore, that these traditions have been followed by Martin Jennings who designed the image of His Majesty King Charles III for the new coinage and subsequently adapted it for use on the new stamps that are to be issued on 4th April. These will be first and second class stamps issued in sheets for purchase at post offices as well as in booklets and in business sheets. Other values will be issued later when current stocks are exhausted. All such normal stamps will continue to have coded labels attached to them. Special stamps will carry a small profile image of the King, replacing a similar image of the late Queen, the first of these being a set of pictures of garden flowers issued on 23rd March.