

# Elizabeth on Stamps

## Part One: the early years



No one been on more stamps than Queen Elizabeth II. As an American collector, I'm struck by the contrast: In the USA, you have to be dead to make it onto a stamp; in Great Britain, the monarch is front and center, philatelically speaking, but only as long as she lives. Take for example, the sets of definitive stamps that began appearing in 1967 bearing a profile portrait of the Queen designed by Arnold Machin — the Machin definitives (see example, above). Set followed set, moving from sterling to decimal currency, bearing phosphorescent bands, changing colors, adding new values and shades, redesigns, special inks and perforations, self-adhesives, new sizes and formats, multiple security features — right up to 2022. In an effort to count all the different Machins, Wikipedia threw up its hands and admitted: “The complete list of all variations is vast and outside the scope of this encyclopedia.” Not surprisingly, the Machin definitives spawned a philatelic speciality that has enthralled generations of collectors. Across the years there were occasional murmurs around Buckingham Palace about updating the portrait of the queen on stamps for Great Britain and the Commonwealth. Such suggestions were always thwarted by Elizabeth herself, so the story goes.

The only possible competition for Elizabeth as a philatelic icon is her daunting forebear, Queen Victoria, whose long reign gave the Victorian Era its name. Stamps were invented in 1840, three years after Victoria became queen. For a short while her face was the only one on stamps anywhere. The last issues bearing her visage came in 1902, the year of her death. Victoria had one unfair advantage over Elizabeth in the stamp-ubiquity contest: between 1850 and 1901, the Australian stamp-issuing state of Victoria put out more than 205 different stamps — all of them with portraits of its namesake. Think of it: all those stamp designs where the country name and identifying caption match!



Still, Elizabeth clearly has Victoria beat, philately-wise, both globally and numerically. For one thing, QEII was queen for 70 years, vs. 65 for Victoria. As the world was transformed through the 20th century, the use of stamps exploded. When she became queen in 1952, QEII was the sovereign of 32 stamp-issuing states or territories — Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, British Guiana, Seychelles, Australia, Hong Kong, Cyprus and the rest. In her time that number dwindled to just 12, including flyspeck islands like Ascension and St. Helena. However, when the Machin definitives came along in 1967, it was game over: Elizabeth's elegant profile on British stamps would be everywhere, decade after decade, making her arguably the most recognized global image. The last

Machin definitives were issued April 4, 2022 — five months before the queen's death Sept. 8. (More about the Machins in Part Two.)

Before leaving Victoria, let's have a little fun with some pairings of stamps from the Victorian and "Elizabethan" eras that shared the same design. To stamp collectors like me, examining the similarities and differences in these stamps that resonate across history provides a philatelic *frisson* (phrission?). The pleasure is enhanced by appreciating the imagination, artistry, expertise and wit that went into creating these modern incarnations of old classics. In a direct way, they speak of the continuity and stability of the British Empire itself — while it lasted.



Grenada 1864 /1953



New Zealand 1864/1955



St. Vincent 1871/1955



Hong Kong 1882/1954



Leeward Islands 1890/1954

Online tip: If you are reading this in the blog post, you can enlarge any of these images. Please do so, in order to spot the similarities and differences, and to admire the delicate filigree design work on these beauties.





Her Royal Highness the Princess Elizabeth in 1932, age 6. I thought she might be holding a teddy bear, but on closer inspection it may be a royal relic — an orb? A stuffed fish. An eggplant?

A British monarch is meant to be a symbol as much as a person. The reason Elizabeth II is on so many stamps is that she reigned for such a long time, over so much of the world. Seventy years (1952-2022). More than that: Elizabeth had a face, a figure and a pose perfectly suited to royal philately. From her earliest years, she demonstrated remarkable poise and self-possession. Sir Winston Churchill, after visiting the royal household at Balmoral in 1928 and meeting the two-year-old Elizabeth, wrote to his wife that the child displayed “an air of authority and reflectiveness astonishing in an infant.”

Elizabeth also had a head start on Victoria in the philatelic sweepstakes, because she has been on stamps practically since she was born. In 1999, Sierra Leone issued a stamp with then-Prince Albert (the future King George V) and his wife, the Duchess of York, holding the newborn Elizabeth in 1926 (see left).

(The images of young Elizabeth that follow are from stamps issued by commonwealth

nations on the dates noted, except for the 1937 image, from a souvenir sheet of Sierra Leone in 1999.)

Elizabeth was raised by loving, attentive parents, and was also a great favorite of her grandfather, King George V, who nicknamed her Lilibet. The future queen returned his affection, dubbing him Grandpa England. King George made clear that he hoped Lilibet would be queen some day, and that his second son, Elizabeth’s father Albert, would become king rather than the wastrel older brother and heir David, then Prince of Wales. “I pray to God my eldest son will never marry and have children,” George V said,



1935



1937







1938

"and that nothing will come between Bertie and Lilibet and the throne." The old king's prayers were answered: Though David briefly served as Edward VIII after George V's death in 1936, he soon abdicated and married Wallis Simpson, an American divorcee. The couple began a life of leisure and scandal as Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and in 1938 Albert (Bertie) was crowned King George VI — with Elizabeth now next in line to the throne.



Canada 1939

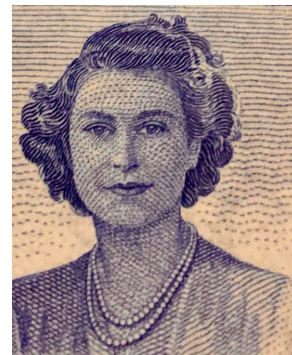
It was during a royal visit to Kenya's famed Treetops resort in 1952, with her young husband Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh, that Elizabeth learned of her father's death, which made her queen.



1947



Bechuanaland 1947



Bechuanaland 1947



1948

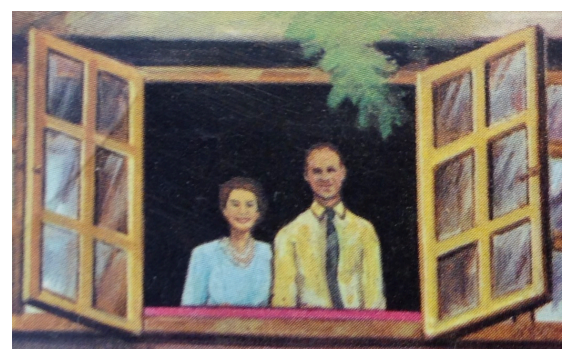
The familiar trope is repeated in the inscription on the souvenir sheet from Kenya in 1977 (below):



1950



"For the first time in the history of the world, a young girl climbed into Treetops one day a princess and she climbed down the tree the next day a queen — God bless her."







Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953 officially launched the era of QEII postage stamps — an era that would last nearly 70 years. The classic portrait that graced the “omnibus” Coronation issue (left) would spread around the world — to all 32 British dominions and beyond. Several nations issued stamps with different portraits (see right for a couple of examples), but most adopted the standard issue. And what a beauty it is!

The same portrait was carried on many of the first definitive series in British territories, replacing the George VI sets. There were a variety of portraits used in the early days. Here is an offering of the close-up portraits, and a few of the stamps they are on. Notice how the rendering shifts when the queen is looking left or right, whether in half-profiled or full profile.



First is the series from Great Britain, in use from 1953 through 1967 (left). The photographic portrait by Dorothy Wilding is presented in several frames. The high values pair the portrait with a royal castle. The stamps portray an attractive yet thoroughly regal young woman entering the prime of life.



Canada's first portrait for a definitive set in 1953 was a clunker (see right). The queen looks cold, aloof, pinched. There's too much neck. She's not a goose! Her gaze combines disinterest and disdain. And heck, she's prettier than that.

Apparently realizing their blunder,







Canadian postal authorities quickly issued another definitive set the same year. This one was much more satisfying, with a dramatic close-up drawn from the Coronation portrait. She's all warmth and radiance, isn't she? And oh! That six-center (right) looks good enough to eat. Just take a lick of that sweet orange ...



Australia and New Zealand came up with numerous portraits of Elizabeth for their first QEII definitive sets. Very nice ...

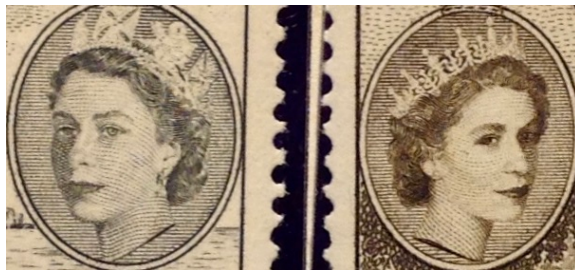


While these proud dominions decided to strike out on their own with images of the sovereign, the British Post Office had perfectly satisfactory portraits and designs available for use throughout the Commonwealth (see example, left). These

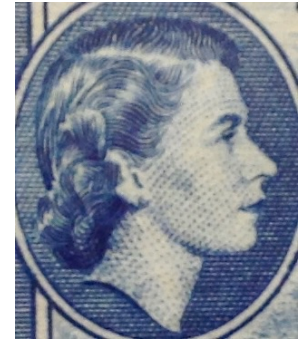




designs worked for the colonies, protectorates, mandates — all territories under British supervision. There were four engraved models — a three-quarter-view, looking left or right, and a profile, facing east or west. These elegant portraits often were set in frames around local scenes, charmingly engraved and printed as gorgeous bi-color stamps. What follows is a small gallery, first of the three-quarter portraits, then the profiles. Enjoy.







As I put together this mini-portrait gallery of QEII on definitive stamps in 1953-4, I got a distinct impression of ... difference; that is, although there are basically two poses, three-quarter and profile — four if you count looking both ways — the engravings are not all exactly alike. Even in the small sample I present here, it is not hard to pick up little dissimilarities — even though I suspect some kind of templates were used. The effect is to change the queen's expression, ever-so-slightly. This adds to my appreciation of these

beautiful stamps, whose appeal rests in part on the blend of variety of topic and color and the consistency of the portrait, frame and other common elements. The same, yet not the same.



**END OF PART ONE**