

“Me” on stamps: Queen Elizabeth II

by David Mahsman

“Would you like to see my stamp collection?” she asked. “It is quite large and quite valuable. It even includes a complete collection of *me* on stamps!”

Her Majesty the Queen, Elizabeth II, probably never said those words. But she could have; they would have been the truth.

Who else can talk about “me” on stamps? A few people, perhaps, including the late queen’s son and heir, King Charles III. But no one else could have claimed such a large collection of “me on stamps.”

Except for Jesus of Nazareth, no one has ever come even close to the number of stamps bearing one person’s image as those of Elizabeth II. The American Topical Association (ATA) checklist for “Royalty - Queen Elizabeth II (British)” includes a topic count of 4,649 items.¹ The number of actual stamps would be far more than that since one listing can comprise more than one stamp. “Generally, if all the stamps in a set are of the same basic design, there is just one item listed; it will contain all the Scott catalog numbers in the set,” says the ATA website.

While Jesus has 8,115 ATA listings in his topic, he is not a stamp collector. All other famous people pale in comparison to the late queen, who died Sept. 8, 2022, in the number of listings: Winston Churchill, for example, has 526, while John F. Kennedy has the most of any American figure at 775. The queen’s progenitors also have far fewer than she does. Queen Victoria, who graces the first adhesive postage stamp, the Penny Black, has 829. Kings Edward VII, George V, and George VI have 189, 502, and 580 respectively. No need even to mention Edward VIII, who reigned for less than a year.

The first stamp of me!

“The first stamp with me on it was not issued in Great Britain like the black one with Great-great-grandmum Victoria on it, but by one of the colonies: Newfoundland,” Her Majesty did not say (but could have).



Fig 1. The Queen looks at stamps with her grandfather’s magnifying glass.



Fig 2. First stamp with Princess Elizabeth



Fig 3. Detail of the first stamp.



Fig 4. Original Marcus Adams photo.

The Queen was just a six-year-old princess when that first stamp, face value of six cents, was issued in 1932. The stamp was printed in “dull blue” (per the Scott catalog; Stanley Gibbons calls it “light blue”) and featured a portrait of the curly-haired little princess clutching something—though just what is not clear. A generic toy? A teddy bear? A bundled-up

¹ American Topical Association, “ATA Checklist Topics,” accessed April 26, 2023, <https://americantopical.org/Checklist-Topics>.

blanket? The photo was taken three years earlier, in November 1929, by photographer Marcus Adams, when the princess was only three years old.² Her curls are reminiscent of her contemporary, child star Shirley Temple. Her Uncle Edward, who was given the title Duke of Windsor after he abdicated the throne, is said to have nicknamed his niece “Shirley Temple,”³ though probably not as a term of endearment.

Newfoundland issued two more stamps of Princess Elizabeth after her father ascended the throne, in 1938 and 1947. The latter issue was on the occasion of Elizabeth’s 21st birthday. Other stamps that picture the future queen while she was still a princess include issues from Australia in 1947 and 1948; Canada in 1935, 1939, 1948, and 1951; and three semi-postal stamps of New Zealand in 1943, 1944, and 1950 (with her young son, Prince Charles).

It’s worth noting that when Newfoundland issued the first Princess Elizabeth stamp in 1932, there was little to no thought that she would ever be queen. Her grandfather, King George V, was still on the throne. Next in line was Elizabeth’s Uncle Edward, who at the time was Prince of Wales. Her father, who eventually would be George VI, was next, then finally Princess Elizabeth third in line. And had her parents produced a son, he would have gotten in line ahead of Elizabeth as well.

Then came 1936.

Me as queen on stamps

“There would be a lot more of me on stamps once I became queen,” Elizabeth never said, though this, too, is true.

Three British kings reigned in that one year, 1936—George V, who died that year; Edward VIII, who became king early in the year but abdicated before the year was out; and finally, George VI, Princess Elizabeth’s father. Suddenly, she was first in line to the throne.

When her father died in February 1952, Elizabeth was 25 years old. She immediately became queen of seven independent Commonwealth countries: the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Pakistan, and Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka), as well as head of the British Commonwealth of Nations. The first stamps bearing the new queen’s image were issued later that year.

“I posed for Dorothy Wilding, a royal photographer, just three weeks after Papa died,” the queen could have said. “The first British stamps with me on them are called ‘Wildings,’ after Dorothy. They could have been called Elizabeths, don’t you think?”

Great Britain issued 18 low-value “Wildings” on paper with three different watermarks over the years: Tudor crown plus the royal cipher, EIIR (1952 to 1954); St. Edward’s crown plus EIIR (1955 to 1958); and St. Edward’s crown alone (1958 on). On those stamps, the Queen is wearing the “Diamond Diadem,” which was created for the coronation of King George IV in 1821.



2. *The Wildings.*

² Royal Collection Trust, “HM Queen Elizabeth II (b. 1926), when Princess Elizabeth of York, 14 November 1929,” accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/2943664/hm-queen-elizabeth-ii-b-1926-when-princess-elizabeth-of-york-14-november-1929>.

³ Los Angeles Times, “Letters to Duchess of Windsor: Duke Called Relatives ‘Seedy Bunch of Old Hags,’” accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-06-20-mn-3553-story.html>.

The same image was also used on four high-value stamps featuring various castles, as well as regional issues for Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Guernsey, Jersey, and the Isle of Man.



Fig 6. Commonwealth Coronation Issues.

Elizabeth’s coronation was broadcast from Westminster Abbey the year after she ascended the throne, on June 2, 1953. Great Britain and 77 other Commonwealth countries issued a total of 106 stamps commemorating the event. Of those, 62 were of the same design and featured another Wilding portrait of the Queen in which she is wearing “The Girls of Great Britain and Ireland Tiara.” The tiara originally belonged to Queen Mary, Elizabeth’s grandmother, who gave it to then-Princess Elizabeth as a wedding gift when she married Prince Philip in 1947.

The Wilding photo of the Queen wearing the Diamond Diadem appeared on British stamps from 1952 to 1967. That portrait was replaced by a sculpted profile of the Queen, still wearing the Diamond Diadem, by Arnold Machin. The “Machins,” as they are called, had a longer run than anyone could have expected—just two months shy of 55 years! So, even at 96 years of age, she was only about 40 on British stamps.

Over the course of their run, the Machins were reproduced an estimated 220 billion times, making it the most reproduced work of art in history. And although the stamps are of a simple design—the profile of the queen and the denomination or class of service, in one color—the Machin definitive stamps are well known to provide collectors with plenty of challenges. “Arguably the world’s most intimidating stamps to collect are the Machins,” writes Janet Klug for *Linn’s Stamp News*. In an article on collecting British and Commonwealth stamps by reign, Klug adds, “The complexity of the stamps is legendary, with varieties of gum, phosphor tagging, paper, perforations, dies, printing methods and formats.”⁴ That’s not to mention that they were produced in 130 different colors.



Fig 7. Machins.



Fig 8. Final stamps - Flying Scotsman (March 2023).

Since 1966, one other image of Queen Elizabeth has appeared on numerous commemorative stamps of Great Britain and many Commonwealth countries, usually in the top right or top left corner. That is the small profile silhouette of the Queen’s head based on a design by sculptor Mary Gillick for use on coinage. In it, the Queen is wearing a laurel wreath and ribbons, so it sometimes is called the “ribbon silhouette.” The ribbon silhouette is the last image of the Queen to appear on British stamps, some six months after her passing. In March 2023, Royal Mail issued a 12-stamp commemorative set honoring the centennial of the steam locomotive Flying Scotsman that had been prepared before the Queen’s death.

Of course, there are plenty of British and Commonwealth stamps with pictures of the Queen that are not stuck at 40 years of age (or younger). Issues for such events as her various wedding anniversaries; her golden, diamond, and platinum jubilees; and her 80th and 90th birthdays, among other noteworthy milestones, do include photographs of the Queen that marked her passing years.

⁴ Janet Klug, “Britain and the Commonwealth: collect by reign,” *Linn’s Stamp News*, April 29, 2021, accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.linns.com/insights/britain-and-the-commonwealth--collect-by-reign.html>.

The Queen of Stamps?

There's no question that Elizabeth II was the foremost queen *on* stamps. But, could she also be the Queen *of* stamps?

Shortly after the Queen's passing last year, David Feldman International Auctioneers published an article in its "Legendary Collector" series titled "The Queen of Stamps."⁵ The article praised the late monarch especially for "one aspect of her enormous contribution to the world, and that is to the world of stamp collecting." The article continues, "Yes, Queen Elizabeth II was a stamp collector, and not only did she maintain the Royal collection, the Queen enhanced and developed this collection, as well as supported and encouraged the hobby. Inspired by her grandfather, King George V, Queen Elizabeth II took a real interest in organized [sic] philately."

The Royal Philatelic Collection was begun in 1864 by Queen Victoria's second son, Prince Alfred. It was acquired by the prince's brother, King Edward VII, who passed it on to his son and Elizabeth's grandfather, King George V when he was still Duke of York. The then-future king once wrote, "I wish to have *the* best collection and *not* one of the best collections in England." His son, George VI, and granddaughter, Elizabeth II, both added to a collection⁶ that was already quite impressive. The collection belongs not to the people or government of the United Kingdom but to the monarchy and is valued at some £100 million (about \$126 million).

Queen Elizabeth was, however, patron of the Royal Philatelic Society London, the world's oldest society of stamp collectors. In November 2019, the Queen visited and officially opened the new headquarters of the society, which reported, "The Queen showed great interest in letters and books signed by King George V and the items from the Royal Philatelic Collection brought from Buckingham Palace for expertisation [sic] that day. In the John Sacher Library, The Queen was presented with a copy of A History of the Royal Philatelic Society London 1869-2019 and signed a further copy for the Society's archive. On returning to the Members' Lounge, The Queen unveiled the plaque commemorating Her Majesty's visit and signed the visitor's book.

"It was the most important and memorable occasion during our 150th Anniversary year. It was a great privilege for our President to have the honor of accompanying Her Majesty on her tour of the building to meet so many UK and international members."⁷

The Queen also visited the society's former headquarters in 1969. The David Feldman article asserted, "On both occasions, it was clear that her interest was indeed genuine and not just formality or ceremony, those who were fortunate to have been at these two events are on record as saying precisely that. And how many stamp collectors do you know who have spent £250k on a cover? Not many. However, Queen Elizabeth II purchased the famous Kirkcudbright 1840 Penny Black first day cover in 2001, undoubtedly recognizing [sic] its significance and no doubt the importance to the Royal collection."



Fig 9. Princess Elizabeth examines an album from the Royal Philatelic Collection.

⁵ Devlan Kruck, "The Queen of Stamps – Legendary Collector #37 Queen Elizabeth II," accessed May 7, 2023,

<https://www.davidfeldman.com/2022/09/queen-elizabeth/#:~:text=Yes%2C%20Queen%20Elizabeth%20I%20really,real%20interest%20in%20organised%20philately>

⁶ Smithsonian National Postal Museum, accessed May 7, 2023, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/the-queen%E2%80%99s-own/introduction>.

⁷ The Royal Philatelic Society London, "Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II Opens 15 Abchurch Lane," accessed May 7, 2023, https://www.rpsl.org.uk/Official_Opening.

However, *The Guardian* newspaper took a more circumspect view in a recent article, “Revealed: official gifts to royal family contained in £100m ‘private’ stamp collection.” The article alleges that the royal family has received gifts of stamps over the years that perhaps should have been considered property of the state but that were added to the privately owned royal collection. The article seems to support transferring the royal stamp collection to what is known simply as “the Royal Collection,” which *The Guardian* describes as “a trove of artworks not owned by the monarch, but held in trust by him or her for the nation.”⁸

The article, part of an investigative series titled “The Cost of the Crown,” reports, “‘Why not just merge the royal philatelic collection with the royal collection? A lot of people have said that; me included,’ said Muir,” referring to Douglas Muir, a former senior curator of philately at the Postal Museum.

Muir added, “The last thing anybody wants is that it [the royal stamp collection] moulders away.” The article says, “That may be a risk if the Windsors are unaware of the value of the stamps in their possession.

“In 2001, the stamp dealership Stanley Gibbons held an auction to sell the Kirkcudbright Penny Black first day cover from 6 May 1840 holding 10 of the world’s first adhesive stamps for general use,” the article continues. “Colin Avery, a philatelic auctioneer, recalls how he hoped the cover would sell for £1m, but bidders hesitated when they discovered Queen Elizabeth II was a buyer.

“They just felt they didn’t want to outbid the royalty,” Avery recalled. As a result, it sold for £250,000.

“It was a royal bargain, although that appears to have been lost on the monarch. When Elizabeth was later shown the Kirkcudbright cover on a visit to her stamp collection, she remarked: ‘I expect my grandfather bought that.’ Charles Goodwyn, then the official keeper of her collection, replied: ‘No, you did, ma’am.’”

The *Express* did not take such a skeptical view of the Queen as a stamp collector, however, in a 2019 piece on the Queen’s hobbies:

“Talking to Fabulous Digital, Royal expert Phil Dampier said the Queen takes great joy in the collection—which is worth more than £2 million—and often takes it out to show visiting heads of state. He added: ‘It is one of her pride and joys, not only because she owns some of the world’s most valuable stamps, but also because she has built on a family treasure and feels she has done her father and previous monarchs who owned it proud.’”⁹



Fig 10. The Kirkcudbright cover.

⁸ Henry Dyer, *The Guardian*, April 13, 2023, “Revealed: official gifts to royal family contained in £100m ‘private’ stamp collection,” accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/apr/13/revealed-official-gifts-to-royal-family-contained-in-100m-private-stamp-collection>.

⁹ Liam Doyle, *Express*, Oct. 10, 2019, “Royal hobby: The Queen's curious hobbies - Favourite things to do in her spare time,” accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/royal/1189172/royal-hobby-Queen-Elizabeth-II-hobbies-Royal-Family-news>.