

BRITISH POST OFFICE  
SANTA MAIL  
SERVICE

Glenn H Morgan



A MORGAN PHILATELIC MONOGRAPH  
NUMBER ONE

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SANTA MAIL  
S E R V I C E

by

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#### NOTICE TO READERS

This monograph has been compiled for private circulation only and its existence is not to be publicised, neither may it be reviewed in any philatelic or other publication.

This is to protect the service itself from unwanted publicity which could force the Post Office to abandon the scheme, and to ensure that children's illusions are not allowed to be shattered.

It is hoped that you will honour the wishes of the author.

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Reindeer Land 1963.

My dear young friend,

How nice of you to write to me.  
My gallant reindeer are ready and  
eager to gallop with me through snow  
and cloud to visit everyone we can.  
I shall do my best to do as you ask -  
but I get thousands and thousands  
of requests, so do forgive me if I  
make a mistake.

Be good; be fast asleep; and  
whether you get all you wish for or  
not, I hope you will have a very  
happy Christmas.

Father Christmas

## 1 BACKGROUND TO THE SERVICE

1963 was a special year for collectors of British stamps as a new policy regarding commemorative issues was instituted. It was special for another reason, also. For the first time the Post Office acknowledged the existence of Father Christmas.

Each year hundreds of thousands of children write letters and cards to Santa at various fictitious addresses, such as Reindeerland, Mr Snow, C/o Snowland and Santa's Grotto, amongst others. Prior to 1963 there were no facilities available to send a reply, letters just had to be destroyed or returned under separate cover addressed to the parents to avoid any disappointment to the child.

However, thanks to the kindness of the British Post Office and its staff every child has the chance of receiving a full-colour Christmas card depicting a festive scene, with a 'handwritten' printed message inside. The outer envelope is written by hand and until recently a special machine cancellation and slogan depicted Santa on his sleigh together with the words "REINDEERLAND / CHRISTMAS / 19-- / POSTAGE PAID". A postage paid impression (PPI) is now used on pictorial envelopes instead, struck in red to conform to Universal Postal Union (UPU) regulations.

Some children address their letters to known countries, ie Greenland or Iceland, etcetera and by international postal conventions our Post Office must forward them to those countries. In most cases they reply with their own Santa service.

In 1972 the cost of providing the service amounted to £5,000 for printing and distributing over 100,000 cards. Now with over four times that number of cards being sent each year the cost must be astronomical. However, anyone who objects to this money being spent may as well advocate the cancellation of Christmas itself!

The number of replies sent would be greater still if every child remembered to include their address. As it is, many only include a snapshot of themselves probably working on the assumption that Santa will remember from last year where they live.

Most of the letters get delivered to a central processing centre, known to collectors as the British Post Office Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh; whilst the remainder are dealt with locally by district Post Offices (Welsh cards only) or by a mailing agency. Incidentally, every year a leaflet numbered PHQ/PMK3.3s is issued to inform postal staff of the correct way of forwarding its Santa mail. Father Christmas could obviously not handle the volume of mail involved on his own, not even with the help of his elves.

Just as soon as the years final issue of stamps are issued (appropriately enough the Christmas issue) all Bureau staff are seconded to the First Day Cover section to begin the mammoth task of opening the mail and hand



addressing a reply envelope. Despite recent advances in word processing technology it is felt that hand written addresses makes for a nice personal touch.

Many of the children include such useful things as grass and cough drops for the reindeer and even money in some cases. The cash is not returned as the children may be offended so instead it is sent to a children's charity. In 1972 the sum of £56 was collected and sent to the Anglo-Danish Children's Holiday Scheme; whilst in 1976 £33.77 was donated to the Save the Children fund.

The Post Office has always gone to truly great lengths in its attempts at trying to deliver a reply, even in cases where the address quoted is rather short, incomplete or, believe it or not, missing. It is Santa's policy to try and ensure that every child receives a reply in time for Christmas day. If this is not possible, different cards are sent out subsequently. It will not come as a surprise to learn that the considerable powers of detection of the Dead Letter Office are employed on the especially tricky letters.

One word of warning to all you rather old 'children' out there reading this monograph - Santa has a wonderful knack of spotting adults writing. You may also be assured that a letter addressed to Father Christmas care of the Philatelic Bureau will remain unanswered. An exception was in 1963 and 1964 when the subscribers to the Philatelic Bulletin received specimen strikes of the Reindeerland cancellation on the reverse side of Bureau 'with compliments' cards. As there were relatively few subscribers then compared with now there cannot be too many of these strikes in collections today.

Cards and letters, both stamped and unstamped, begin arriving from all over the British Isles from around about April onwards, although the deluge does not start until about October, increasing rapidly until late December. The Bureau has a truly festive atmosphere about it at Christmas time as the walls get steadily covered with cards and good wishes. Some messages must have the staff rolling in the aisles as they read what the children want (or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say expect?) for their Christmas presents.

Each card usually measures about 200mm by 150mm and is centrally folded, the design being continued onto the reverse of the card as well. The inside always has a different message each year and is printed in a variety of styles and colours being written either by the artist that designed the card itself or by a Post Office employee. Some of the texts are quite inventive. A fine example of this reads: "By the way, you may not hear the sleigh bells this year because the reindeer are going away on holiday to a party in Lapland". This inventive text explains away quite nicely the fact that the card depicts Santa aboard his airship which is, not surprisingly, called "SANTA 1".

So, the next time you are pleased at having received a Christmas card from either friends or family, think how pleased all those children are when they find that Santa himself has replied to their letter. All of which goes to show just how much our Post Office really cares about its young customers.

## 2 SANTA MAIL CARDS

A year by year listing of cards despatched in response to individual letters sent to Santa.

Year	Got?	Design description	Designer	Quantities Despatched
1963	[ ]	Santa with reindeers outside their forest home	Ian Jackson NDD, ATD, FSIA of Midland Creative Publicity	c.8,000
				Note: 11,000 letters received but only 8,000 had return address
1964	[ ]	Santa holding letter. Globe and clock	Bernard Brett RBA ARE ATD MSLA FSIA	c.9,850
				Note: 10,000 believed to have been printed
1965	[ ]	Santa cleaning sleigh, pine trees, rag doll and reindeer	Clifford Bayly	c.12,500
				Note: 15,000 believed to have been printed
1966	[ ]	Santa on reindeer pulling sleigh through woods	Daphne Padden MSIA	21,300
				Note: When the Philatelic Bureau moved to Edinburgh all records regarding the service were lost.
	[ ]	Emergency issue printed in Edinburgh. Santa and children on front. Line drawing of front and message side of original card	John Paterson of Inveresk Paper Company	20,901
1967	[ ]	Santa and sleigh outside workshop in woods with children	Janet Archer	47,102
				Note: Reminders used in 1968 as that issue was oversubscribed



- 1968 [ ] Santa in workshop (the helpers look to be oriental). Loading up sleigh  
Stewart Irwin 65,847  
Note: 60,000 copies printed. See 1967 note
- 1969 [ ] SANTA 1 airship  
Peter Hatch FSIA, FSTD of Peter Hatch Partnerships, London 90,649
- 1970 [ ] Santa on goose plus robin and teddy all in red hats. Very large moon  
Daphne Padden MSIA 89,021  
Note: Remainders used in 1971 as that issue was oversubscribed
- 1971 [ ] Santa driving sleigh, birds on reindeer antlers, toys, fairy and a cat  
Harry Stevens FSIA 104,500  
Note: 100,000 copies printed. See 1970 note
- 1972 [ ] A Christmas picture for each letter of the alphabet  
Philip Sharland 123,333  
Note: The cost of the Santa service for 1972 amounted to £5,000. Apparently, from 1972 sufficient quantities have been printed, so left-overs since that date are no longer kept in stock but destroyed
- 1973 [ ] Santa's reindeer helicopter with reindeer horns for propellers  
Eric Hill 136,118
- 1974 [ ] Santa in workshop marking off calendar, elves etc (design looks to be of Germanic origins)  
Andre Amstutz MSIA 138,000  
Note: From this year onwards most quantities quoted are to the nearest thousand in the interests of a Post Office cost-cutting exercise that saved physically having to count each card despatched

- 1975 [ ] Children playing in foreground, Santa with Christmas tree and houses in background  
Gwyneth Mamlok 135,340
- 1976 [ ] Santa and wellies reading letter requesting a bionic crocodile plus a reindeer and Christmas presents  
Graham Clarke 143,000
- 1977 [ ] Boy and girl with dog, Santa riding into the Moon. Rabbit, bird and mouse in foreground  
Julian Graddon 125,000
- 1978 [ ] "Pop-up" type card. Santa in a helicopter with helpers loading gifts. Snow and trees  
Harry Stevens FSIA 142,000
- 1979 [ ] Santa in workshop, toy sack, 20 helpers all but one with a beard  
Leon Baxter 155,290  
Note: The 1979 cards were despatched exceptionally by the National Television Licensing Records Office (NTVLRO) at Bristol, owing to the Philatelic Bureau being too busy with mail orders
- 1980 [ ] Santa with sleigh and reindeer leaving ground with people waving them goodbye  
Leon Baxter 177,000
- 1981 [ ] Santa on snow covered roofs with sleigh  
Nick Butterworth 176,000
- 1982 [ ] Santa with quill pen reading at desk, with robin and a reindeer  
James Marsh of Folio Arts Agency 240,000
- 1983 [ ] Santa sitting in armchair reading letter. The wall bears a rudolph calendar on it and there is a fireplace and toys  
Rory Matthews 219,000



1984	[ ]	Santa waving to birds flying with letters, decorated tree, two cats, three rabbits and a reindeer	Caroline Ebborn	244,650
1985	[ ]	Santa with reindeer on leash. and snow falling. The card is in very pale colours. English language version	Trevor Crocker	c.250,000
	[ ]	Welsh language version of above mentioned English language card	Trevor Crocker	1,178
	[ ]	Emergency edition for Chester due to shortage of supplies. Design depicts Santa going down a chimney	Unrecorded	928
	[ ]	Emergency edition produced due to shortage of supplies. "Postcard" reduced original message - decorated	Unrecorded	Unrecorded
1986	[ ]	Santa putting stamps on letters, Wood burning range, toys, dolls. English language version	Liz Moyes of Studio 3 London	c. 250,000 to 500,000
		Note: 250,000 sent out by the Post Office Philatelic Bureau and the remainder by a private mailing agency		
	[ ]	Welsh language version of above mentioned English language card	Liz Moyes of Studio 3 London	63
		Note: Small quantity despatched due to a major misunderstanding		
1987	[ ]	Santa with sleigh, Christmas tree plus pantomime characters on stage. English language version	Moirra Kemp	c.400,000
		Note: Approximately 100,000 despatched by private mailing agency		
	[ ]	Welsh language version of above mentioned English language card	Moirra Kemp	1,300

1988	[ ]	Mice in beds and Santa in the right hand corner, etcetera. English language version for all children who wrote in time for a pre-Christmas reply	Graham Percy	c.400,000
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Note: Quantity despatched includes all four 1988 card versions. 250,000 sent by the Philatelic Bureau and the remainder by a private mailing agency. 450,000 cards were printed

	[ ]	Welsh language version for all children who wrote in time for a pre-Christmas reply	Graham Percy	Max 4,000
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Note: 4,000 cards printed

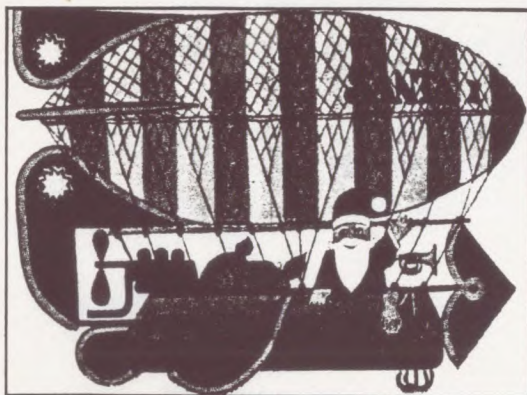
	[ ]	English language version for all children who wrote too late for a pre-Christmas reply	Graham Percy	Max 50,000
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Note: 50,000 cards printed

	[ ]	Welsh language version for all children who wrote too late for a pre-Christmas reply	Graham Percy	Max 1,000
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Note: 1,000 cards printed





### 3 SLOGAN POSTMARK DIES

In the early days pictorial slogan cancellations were used on a Universal machine that had the driving motor especially geared to reduce the speed of the cancellation to a ratio of 1:10 to guarantee good quality red strikes. For the first two years subscribers to the British Post Office "Philatelic Bulletin" received strikes of the cancellation on a "With Compliments" card. Press publicity "Specimen" envelopes exist to publicise the service.



CDS Die 1

No Bar Slug



CDS Die 1a

Bar Slug



CDS Die 2

Small Letters  
and Bar Slug



CDS Die 2a

Bar Slug but  
no Year Slug



Slogan Die 1

With Buffer Bars



Slogan Die 2

No Buffer Bars, Nine  
Points on Snowflakes



Slogan Die 3

No Buffer Bars, six  
Points on Snowflakes



Year	Got?	CDS Die	Slogan Die	Notes
1963	[ ]	1	1	"With Compliments" card strike from Bureau
	[ ]	1	1	
1964	[ ]	1	1	"With Compliments" card strike from Bureau
	[ ]	1	1	
1965	[ ]	1	1	
1966	[ ]	1a	1	Handstamp worded "SPECIMEN" struck in purple on an unaddressed envelope for press publicity use
	[ ]	1a	1	
1967	[ ]	1a	1	
1968	[ ]	1a	1	
1969	[ ]	1a	1	
1970	[ ]	1a	1	
1971	[ ]	1	2	
1972	[ ]	1	3	
1973	[ ]	1	3	
1974	[ ]	1	3	
1975	[ ]	1	3	
1976	[ ]	1	3	
1977	[ ]	1	3	
1978	[ ]	1	3	
1979	[ ]	1	3	
1980	[ ]	1	3	
1981	[ ]	1	3	
1982	[ ]	2	3	
1983	[ ]	2	3	
1984	[ ]	2	3	
1985	[ ]	2	2	Used on Welsh language card only
	[ ]	2	3	
	[ ]	2a	2	

#### 4 PICTORIAL SANTA ENVELOPES

From 1986 pictorial envelopes have been used to house the cards listed in section two. They bear a second class Postage Paid Impression (PPI) from Reindeerland and appear on both English and Welsh language editions, always printed in red ink. They are headed-up "A MESSAGE FROM SANTA" or "NEGES ODDI WRTH SION CORN". For quantities despatched see relevant year in section two.

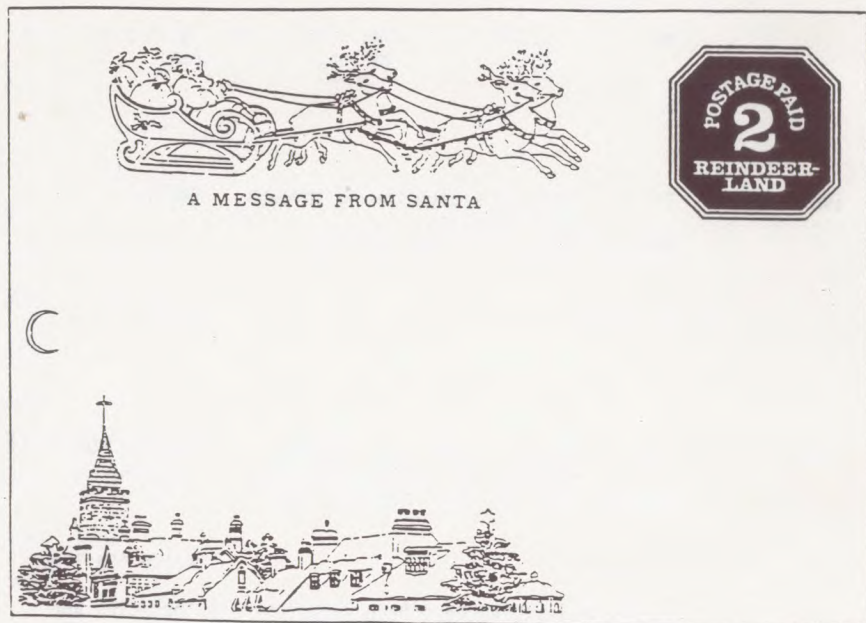
Year	Got?	Design description	Language
1986	[ ]	Top: Santa and sleigh Bottom: View of church and houses	English
		Note: An accountancy diamond in red appeared on the reverse of each envelope despatched	
	[ ]	As above	Welsh
		Note: This is the first time that an envelope has differed in length. It is 10mm longer than normal	
1987	[ ]	Top: Santa in sleigh coming through stage curtains Bottom: Fairy, curtains, etcetera	English
	[ ]	As above	Welsh
1988	[ ]	Top: Three mice writing, licking envelope and posting letters Bottom: Santa in chair reading letter	English "On Time" replies
	[ ]	As above	Welsh "On Time"
		Note: Believed to have been despatched by the Wales and Marches Postal Board	

[ ] Enlarged Santa reading a letter      English "Late"

Note: All English language "Late" replies despatched by mailing agency and bear typewritten address labels

[ ] As above      Welsh "Late"

Note: Believed to have been despatched by the Wales and Marches Postal Board



## 5 QUANTITIES SENT IN BULK TO JUNIOR SCHOOL CHRISTMAS LETTER BOXES

The records contained below are believed to be, in the main, additional to the numbers of cards sent out in response to individual letters as detailed previously in section two.

Year	Quantity sent out in bulk	Number of schools involved
1963	No Records	No Records
1964	"	"
1965	"	"
1966	1,777	85
1967	No Records	176
1968	"	258
1969	14,639	411
1970	15,267	538
1971	22,770	697
1972	34,200	885
1973	34,354	966
1974	31,475	964
1975	41,999	1,062
1976	39,265	1,172
1977	810	810
1978	700	700
1979	No Records	No Records
1980	5,000	190
1981	5,580	200
1982	32,550	1,319
1983	41,855	1,629
1984	39,797	1,803
1985	53,000 English	1,263
	1,178 Welsh	161
1986	59,000 English	2,170
	None Welsh	None
1987	56,000 English	2,200
	300 Welsh	No Records
1988	68,600 English	1,300
	No Records Welsh	No Records

Notes: Owing to financial problems within the Post Office letters were sent to teachers in 1977 and 1978 stating that only one card would be sent to each school in future. By 1979 new funds had been found and the service continued.

Due to a misunderstanding no Welsh cards sent in bulk during 1986.



## 6 QUANTITIES OF UNDELIVERABLE MAIL RECEIVED

The following are records of letters received too late for a reply and those not bearing a return address. Clearly, if all the letters received without an address had one, a serious extra strain would be placed on the resources of the Post Office.

Year	No Return Address	Too Late for Reply
1963	3,000	No Records
1964	No Records	"
1965	"	"
1966	"	5,922
1967	8,540	5,887
1968	8,622	840
1969	11,514	1,760
1970	12,257	1,952
1971	13,077	1,692
1972	14,094	5,003
1973	15,006	9,837
1974	No Records	7,503
1975	"	4,056
1976	"	18,631
1977	"	5,825
1978	"	20,560
1979	"	29,000
1980	"	30,000
1981	"	33,500
1982	"	39,000
1983	"	44,511
1984	"	77,811
1985	"	63,000
1986	"	20,000
1987	"	100,000
1988	"	No Records

Notes: From 1974 no records were kept for "no return address".

In 1986 an outside agency was used for some cards, which continued to be sent by them until after Christmas. Quantities not known.

For 1987 the figure is the approximate number of letters sent to the mailing agency by the Bureau after its own supply was exhausted.

Now late cards are despatched, the "too late for reply" figures are no longer of any relevance.

## 7 PRINTERS OF THE CARDS

There follows below a full listing (at least as complete as records allow) of the printers that the Post Office employed when producing the Santa cards.

Year	Printer
1963	Records destroyed
1964	Records destroyed
1965	Records destroyed
1966	Records destroyed (normal issue)
	Inveresk Paper Company Limited (emergency issue)
1967	W R Royal and Sons Limited
1968	Westerham Press Limited
1969	Talowe Limited
1970	Tinsley Robor Group Limited
1971	Moore and Matthes Limited
1972	W S Cowell Limited
1973	Robor Limited
1974	W R Royal and Sons Limited
1975	Questa Colour Limited
1976	Questa Colour Limited
1977	Fulmar Colour Printing
1978	Howards Printers (Slough) Limited
1979	Howards Printers (Slough) Limited
1980	Howards Printers (Slough) Limited
1981	Howards Printers (Slough) Limited
1982	Howards Printers (Slough) Limited
1983	Fulmar Colour Printing
1984	Fulmar Colour Printing
1985	Fulmar Colour Printing (normal issue)
	Retail Advertising Services Limited (Chester emergency card)
	Unknown (emergency 'postcard')
1986	Moore and Matthes Limited
1987	Hill and Tyler Limited
1988	Lithotech Colour Printers

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## 9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks also to Ron Wedgerfield for providing me with encouragement and data.

The Santa Service has given so much pleasure to literally millions of young Britons and on their behalf I take this opportunity of thanking the British Post Office for the unstinting generosity shown in running a non-profit making service for over a quarter of a century.