



Collecting Complexity

The Mullarney Malarkey

The 5th Irish Definitives: A series during a period of transition

PART 1: From Punt to Euro - catching up with innovations

Introduction

Killian Mullarney is an Irish wildlife illustrator of world renown. An acknowledged expert in field identification, he is best known for his illustrations of birds which, frankly, are superb. His drawings and paintings have been used internationally in a wide range of publications, but perhaps most notably in the Collins Bird Guide (2nd Edition) first published in 1999 and which, in my view, is THE best European guide available. Effectively, it's a classic. Of all the books on ornithology I possess, and I have several, this is my favourite and by far most used reference work.



Fig. 1 - The 28 pence Blue Tit, first of the series

Towards the middle of the nineties, I am unsure of the exact date, Mullarney was commissioned to illustrate for what was to be a new series of Irish Post definitives. Since 1990, Ireland had had only four definitive stamp issues and the then current Heritage and Treasures one needed to be replaced by something completely different. They chose birds and wanted one of the best illustrators in the world to fulfil this objective. Sensibly, there were to be no boring Machin heads for Ireland!

I think Mullarney succeeded wonderfully for, whilst in use for a relatively short period and not large in illustration numbers - just thirty species - and certainly not meeting the output scale of, say, Andre Buzin, they are nevertheless beautiful stamps. Beautiful, but also misleading. They are, for a number of reasons I hope to outline, fiendishly complex. Indeed, some issues in certain formats are confusing and more than challenging.

A daunting note to start off with. So what are the essentials of this series? Remember, they were “definitives.” During the period in which they were issued and like any definitive set they were intended to cover all the required postal rates and be available in all the necessary formats. They were to be the workhorses of the postal system.

But what, apart from being birds, makes this series so different from the other Irish definitives, or indeed any other set of bird definitives? Well, this was Ireland's first definitive set to be issued in full colour, but it also arrived at an interesting time, although that seems an understatement. The Irish Postal services, An Post, were starting to experiment and diversify - different papers, different printers, and the use of phosphor, self-adhesives, the introduction of standard rates, etc. And then all this against a background of a major change

in the country's currency. In philatelic terms these were indeed interesting times, a time of transition, and its impact on the series was to be substantial.

When I began to collect the Irish definitives I vaguely knew some of this background. I was aware that some issues fell into certain periods and that there were a handful of different formats to look out for. I naively started to tick off this issue and then that issue, to check the perforations and the physical sizes and then generally reach the point where I had amassed several hundred stamps that, I then realised, had only a sketchy coherence and a growing number of frankly irritating identification "problems" that I could not resolve. When I started I knew they had complexities, but what I hadn't realised was that these complexities were rather more challenging than I had imagined. Challenging certainly, but also very, very perplexing. A right malarkey!

Whilst the series only existed between 1997 and 2004, a mere seven and a half years, there is nevertheless a great deal to say about it. Just thirty designs, but a huge amount of complexity within them. In fact, far too much detail for just one article. So yet again I have had to split things up, but this time into three.

Part One is a run through of the series with the original currency, the Punt, and hopefully give a flavour of how labyrinthine and troublesome it is. This period covers roughly 60% of the whole series and includes two main variables. Part Two takes in the short period of dual currency and then the introduction of the Euro; together they make up the remaining 40% of the series, but include new illustrations and rate changes. And then last, but certainly not least, Part Three will focus on a number of particularly difficult areas that will certainly catch you out if you start to collect these stamps seriously.

To try and keep things simple, wherever possible, I have structured things chronologically, but then attempted to highlight the distinctive issues that, layer upon layer, makes this series so complex and often challenging to collect. You'll have to be patient to absorb all of it. It's a journey.

A) Gentle Beginnings

It all started very quietly and simply. Five values were issued on 16th January 1997 - the first issue being a 28p Blue Tit, (see Figure.1) with a 32p European Robin, 44p Atlantic Puffin (see Figure.2), 52p Western Barn Owl and a £1 Greater White-fronted Goose. They were all perforated 15x14, all portrait except the Blue Tit, all measuring 24.5x27mm except the larger top value which was 27x48.5mm. And all were printed by Irish Security Stamp Printers (ISSP) on ordinary paper. A gentle and low key introduction. Easy.



Fig. 2 - In with the new - the 44 pence Atlantic Puffin

But then things cranked up. Through 1997 there followed a further seven separate issuing's. This included a booklet (SB58), a cross-over affair with the 32p Robin presented in tandem with a 4th definitives series issue. Then came two coil strips with the unlikely pairing of the

Robin with a Peregrine Falcon, both at 32p on ordinary paper by ISSP and then duplicated with an Australian SNP Cambec version printed on chalk surfaced paper. In late May a mini-sheet appeared for the Pacific 97' International Stamp Exhibition with a large format, £2 Northern Pintail. The stamp didn't appear in its own right until the following year, but this was to be the only mini-sheet as such for the series.

There were then more singles, five in all, mainly covering the lowest values, but also including the highest value to be ever issued, a £5 Common Shelduck. These were all on chalk-surfaced paper (chsp). Indeed. The Blue Tit and Robin were then reissued on chsp in October, and the year then closed in December with a further booklet and another unlikely pairing, comprising a 4p Corncrake and a 32p Peregrine Falcon. No bird family themes here!



Fig.3 - An unlikely pairing - Corncrake & Peregrine Falcon
(Note the imperforate edge cuttings for booklet use)

And this was just your starter for ten. Or rather more. Seven publication dates, four different formats (singles, booklets, coil strips and a mini-sheet), 12 values with 13 species and a total of 23 separate issues. One year, but the series was only just getting into its stride.

Ordinary and Chalk-surfaced papers

There is nothing new about chalk surfaced papers, they have been around for a very long time. Examples can be found in Commonwealth stamps dating back to the early 1900's. Nor was their use new to Irish stamps by the time Mullarney's birds were introduced; there are examples of commemoratives issued in the early eighties and both the third and fourth definitives series from 1982 onwards were printed on paper treated in this way.

Essentially, they are papers that have been coated on the printing side with a solution of chalk and gum. The gum fixes the coating. The result is that it allows for a more precise, brilliant and "fugitive" colour impression. Additionally, stamps printed in various forms of fugitive inks have some protection against the removal of postmarks or other forms of cancellation.

Telling the difference between ordinary and chalk-surfaced paper can normally be quite easy, although I stress the word, "normally." As chalk paper is finely powered chalk pressed onto ordinary paper, one clear test is whether it is sharply printed or not. Chalk-surfaced paper provides a vastly better printing surface, not unlike gloss paper thereby offering a

surface for sharper, crisper images. Another, much cited test - which I don't recommend - is to touch a small part of the surface with an item of sterling silver. On chalky paper, it leaves a black marking. Some chalk papers can be detected using a UV lamp where it detects differences in fluorescence. Compared with ordinary paper, the relative whiteness is not the same. However, in ordinary lighting, if you compare the two types by turning them over, the chalk surface tends to be whiter, the non-chalk slightly greyer. This does seem to work for me.

But none of this is fool proof, particularly when several different chalky and/or ordinary papers are used on the same issue. As with the Irish definitives. It can certainly be easier when the issues are mint but otherwise it can be a right faff trying to determine which is which. With used examples chalk-surface papers can sometimes be compromised when they have been soaked and are then less easy to distinguish. Try it with this series and you will see what I mean!



Fig. 4 - Taken out of context admittedly, as the left hand example

Is from a coil and the right hand one from a booklet, but the latter is printed on chalk surfaced paper and looks brighter and crisper.

Under normal circumstances postmark dates would provide useful clues as to when the stamp was available, but this is hardly reliable as: a) people may have kept the issues in a drawer for months before actually using them, and, b) as we have already seen with these definitives, the ordinary and chalk surfaced issues are intertwined and sometimes were issued at virtually the same time.

And all this is important. Even after the introduction of phosphor frames in November 1998 there continued to be a mixture of printings on ordinary and chalk surfaced papers although the latter was predominate by a large margin. The last outing for issues on ordinary paper was in January 2002 with the 1c Eurasian Magpie and 2c Northern Gannet, although quirkily, both were also printed on chalk surfaced paper - at the same time by the same printer!

All these issues may look virtually the same, but Stanley Gibbons gives each a different catalogue number, usually suffixed with an, “a.” If you are collecting just the birds and the different values you may not be bothered by all this malarkey, but otherwise, you are into a completely different ballgame.

B) 1998 - The year of the Phosphor

The following year, 1998, was the first to see a significant change in direction.

Again it began quietly, with one issue, a 4p Corncrake in March, but curiously this time on ordinary paper. At the start of April the 5p Wood Pigeon was issued for the first time - also on ordinary paper - and then there followed a flood of other new issues as either singles, booklets or self-adhesive coil strips.



Fig. 5 - The first of many, the Blackbird was to become the most prolifically issued design of the entire series

But, as well as the occasional steps back in paper types, a further curious feature was the duplication. The Blackbird (see Figure. 5) - which was to become the most used issue - saw the light of day for the first time with a value of 30p, but with versions on both ordinary and chalk papers. It was the same with the 35p European Stonechat and then the rest, again all new issues, appearing on ordinary paper:- the 40p Ringed Plover, 45p Song Thrush, 50p Eurasian Sparrowhawk and, this time as a single, a £2 Northern Pintail. That's now seven new additions to the series.



Fig. 6 - New boys on the block in 1998: the 35p Stonechat and 45p Song Thrush

But April also saw other formats. The 5p Wood Pigeon and 30p Blackbird were teamed up in booklets. One version was on chalk surfaced paper, the other ordinary. Why, I don't know. The Blackbird also appeared on self-adhesive coil strips, but this time with another new species, the 30p Goldcrest. Why two species but at the same value is a further query I can't

answer, but there were two issues of these coils, both on ordinary paper but printed by different printers, ISSP and SNP Cambec. With me so far?

1998 Postal Rate Adjustments

Postal rates remained relatively stable during the Punt phase of the series. However, An Post did make some changes that became effective on 6th April 1998. It was a down and up approach!

On the plus side, basic letters (up to 25gms) within Ireland and to GB were reduced from 32p to 30p, and the standard rate (up to 25gms) to all Europe was reduced from 44p to 32p. On the minus side there were increases to business mail with the “Printed Paper rate” increasing from 28p to 30p and Registration of mail increasing from IRE£1.05 to IRE£1.70. None of these changes appear to have impacted significantly on the series.

August saw the 50p Sparrowhawk issued again, but now on Chalk paper. In September there were further Blackbird/Goldcrest combinations as booklets; one on chalk surfaced the other on ordinary paper, but all printed by ISSP. And then in the same month the 5p Wood Pigeon, 45p Song Thrush and £5 larger format Shelduck were again issued but now - yes, you guessed it - on Chalk surfaced paper. And then on the 17th November, all change, phosphor printing was introduced. Do I hear a blare of trumpets?

I will talk about phosphor printing in more detail later (see the information box), but the immediate impact of its introduction towards the end of this year meant that existing issues were now re-printed with phosphor ink areas and then re-issued. The 30p Blackbird, 32p Robin, 35p Stonechat, 40p Ringed Plover, 45p Song Thrush and 50p Sparrowhawk all reappeared with phosphor frames on chalk paper and then, mysteriously, the £1 Greater White-fronted Goose also saw life on chalk paper but without the phosphor frame. Oh, and to add to the fun, the Blackbird/Goldcrest combo also saw new life with phosphor printings. Twice. And you must have worked out by now that one was on ordinary paper and the other on chalk surfaced. Of course you have.



Fig. 7 - 50p Sparrowhawk with the phosphor frame just about discernible

We are now two years into a seven year cycle for this series and if you have followed the narrative so far then it is Blue Peter badge time. To summarise, the count for species depicted now stands at a further 7 with 6 new values, and the number of separate issuings has risen to 16 for that year and the mixture of formats has continued against a backdrop of paper types and now the introduction of phosphor ink. In total, by the close of the second year we have 20 species (two thirds of what was to be realised) and 18 values (100% of the issues with the Sterling currency).

The Phosphors

The use of phosphor on stamps has been around for some while. British stamps for example saw their use during the 1960s. The phosphor ink can be detected by a machine. It is applied to the face of a stamp to allow automatic postal sorting machinery to orientate letters so that the stamp is in the top right corner.

The use of phosphor ink arrived late in Ireland. After November 17th, 1998 the application of phosphor ink pretty well figures on most Irish bird definitives thereafter with only lower value exceptions. When introduced by An Post the phosphor was normally applied to the frames (sometimes referred to as “boxes”) and not in bands as found in the UK. The frames normally covered a small area around each issue of about 2mm although 3mm and later 5mm examples can be found. In some later issues greater areas of phosphor application can be found, including the entire surface of the stamp.

The phosphor was applied to the higher values. In the old currency, the 1p (Magpie) to 20p (Northern Lapwing) were without phosphor inking; for the Euro currency this was repeated from 1c to 20c. In booklets where there are panes with a low make-up value paired with higher values this means a mixture of non-phosphors and phosphors. Identified booklet examples are as per Table. 1 below:-

Table. 1 - Phosphor/Non-phosphor Combinations

In Booklets with Mixed Values

Non-Phosphor Stamps	Phosphor Treated Stamps	Booklet No.
4p 4 th series issue	32p European Robin	SB58
4p Corncrake*	32p Peregrine Falcon	SB61
5p Wood Pigeon	30p Blackbird	SB64/SB64a
5p Wood Pigeon	30p Goldcrest	SB70
10c Common Kingfisher	38c Blackbird	SB95
4c Corncrake	48c Peregrine Falcon	SB112

Difficulties for collectors arise because the phosphor is largely “colourless.” On stamps which have the phosphor frames it is normally relatively simple to detect which issues have been treated in this way as the surface of the phosphor ink is usually matt in comparison to the rest of the stamps surface.

In reality I think Irish stamps with phosphor inkings are very slightly yellowy/creamy in appearance. However, if uncertain, by holding the stamp to a light source and then adjusting the

angle it is possible to determine the shiny bits from the duller areas. If the edges are less reflective this will indicate the application of phosphor ink.



Fig. 8 - The introduction of Phosphor ink:
Common Ringed Plover

It all sounds straightforward, but... Some of the later issues had all-over phosphors, either coated onto the paper or just printed over the entire stamp and these can be very tricky to detect. Fortunately there are few issues printed in this way and the SG catalogue does indicate which issues were so treated. Alternatively, you have to rely on that old friend, experience, to help you. In addition, the difficulties can be exacerbated with used stamps. Those that have been soaked off paper tend to lose their contrast between the ordinary paper and the phosphor. Floating instead of soaking can reduce this happening, but I have to say that I have personally not noticed much difference!

The problems tend to lie between those stamps of the same value issued before November 1998 and those then re-issued with phosphor frames after that date. In addition, the phosphor frames for self-adhesives printed by SNP Ausprint when the Euro was introduced came in a number of varieties or types with indents and overlaps in the pairing, etc, but there is not space to go into any detail here. Suffice to say that there are at least seven phosphor types and four phosphor pairing arrangements. The SG catalogue says nothing about them but they are a collecting area in their own right! Indeed, when you take the variety of phosphor types and pairings into account the numbers to collect grow.

C) To the end of the Punt

There were no major new species/values in 1999, save in the sheetlet (see below). The rate of publication stayed high with eight separate issuings. They were mainly booklets with the same combo's and this time with phosphor frames, but there was also two curious singles - the 30p Blackbird and the £2 Northern Pintail were now re-issued on ordinary paper. With phosphor frames, of course.

The main novelty for this year was a sheetlet that came out on 16th February. This contained fifteen species, all at 30p perforated at 14x15 again but physically smaller, reduced in size to 21x24mm. The sheetlet was chalk coated and the stamps phosphor inked. The phosphor

printing is individualised with the frame around each issue. Each stamp is arranged portrait, but the sheetlet is landscape (108x145mm overall) with three rows of five stamps and “Birds of Ireland” printed on the top margin and ISSP’s name in full in the bottom right corner under the Atlantic Puffin.

The sheetlet introduced two new species: a Eurasian Wren and the Pied (or White?) Wagtail. Scharning calls it a White Wagtail but the issue itself uses Pied Wagtail for its name in English. They both use the same Latin name, *Motacilla alba*, and the Collins Guide itself hedges its bets with White/Pied Wagtail, so take your pick! Either way, I think both illustrations are lovely, although it seems an injustice that the Wren illustration was to be under-used, appearing on only two more occasions - in 2001 as part of the “temporary” dual currency set and finally in 2002 as part of the new currency set.

The Pied Wagtail became a workhorse late in the series (2003/4) on self-adhesive coil strips and in booklets. It is also the only example I am aware of where the Irish name has two spellings. As well as the Latin name each species had, as per convention, its common name as well but for this series in both English and Irish Gaelic. The later 48c issue came with two different Gaelic inscriptions: “Glasog shraide,” which Stanley Gibbons designate as Type I, and “GlasUg shr-ide,” designated Type II. The second version is a misspelling. Believe me, they are important to look out for as the types can be a clue when trying to identify issues.

I regard 2000 as a “pivot year” for the series. Not a lot happened. There were just three issue events and they were all late in the year. In October there was a self-adhesive coil strip with Blackbird and Goldcrest, both at 30p. Again. Both were on ordinary paper and both had phosphor frames. This was the fifth strip to be issued with this combination and other than its distinctive 9x9 perforation it is difficult to see what it added to this pairing.

There were then three singles. In November a 1p Magpie and 10p Common Kingfisher were issued, but this time on ordinary paper. And in December there was a 35p Stonechat, still on chalk-surfaced paper but now with phosphor frames. All three singles were with the by now standard 14x15 perforation and sized 24.5x27mm. Quite unremarkable.

By the close of 2000, now over the halfway mark, the number of species had nearly reached three quarters of all that were to be issued and only nineteen values had been used. Table 2 below provides a summary of the issues to date:-

Table. 2 - Summary of Species and Values issued in the period 1997 - 2000

Year	Species	%Age*	Values
1997	13	43.3	12
1998	7	23.3	6
1999	2	6.7	1
2000	0	0	0
TOTAL:	22	73.3	19

*Percentage of all species in series

2000 saw no new species or values introduced. There was nothing innovative or different tried. Instead, there was the same perverse switching back and forth between paper types and a small increase in the number of issues with phosphor inking. And why yet another coil with an unchanged make-up? It is as if An Post knew something. And they did. The Euro was coming.

But you’ll have to wait to read about that until Part Two.