



Collecting Complexity

The Mullarney Malarkey

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

PART 3: The pain of the pane and other distractions

Overall, the series has now been a well-trodden road. We have covered the paper variations from ordinary to chalk-surfaced and the introduction of phosphor frames. We are now familiar with the currency “sandwich” with its small filling of dual currencies betwixt the old Punt and the new Euro. We have seen the variety of printers used - mainly Irish Security Stamp PTG but with additional input from Australian SNP as well as small look-ins from the UK by Walsall Litho and Questa and lastly the Dutch Enschede.

All the key ingredients of the series have been highlighted and, I think, some interesting statistics shared. Do I hear ad nauseum? All this information provides the essential components, or clues if you prefer, that can help to determine what issue is what. For most issues where the species is the same they are a rock to cling to, a reliable source of identification and determination. Well, not quite. The problems begin when these elements fail you.

Problem Area 1 - The numbers game

This is more a statistical aside rather than an identification problem, but it forms part of the context and is important in providing boundaries to what is to be collected.

Scharning acknowledges the way in which the booklet contents are cut and, helpfully, differentiates, but then fails to take into account the paper differences. Stanley Gibbons does distinguish between paper types but then pays no heed whatsoever to how issues are cut within each booklet. When the phosphor/non-phosphor issues are thrown in as well the result is, well, a confusion of totals. There are a number of variables and as a consequence the number of issues to collect don't tally. It's a numbers game.

Using the SG catalogue listings - believe me, a minefield to negotiate and check line-by-line - I ended up with 151 issues to collect. Try it, it'll drive you bonkers. Using Scharning's listing first time around and which is far more logically arranged I came to 157. However, when you then factor in the paper variations with the booklet cutting types, effectively merging the data, you reach 177 issues. Now, I am not going to claim that this is perfect, but I am convinced that the final figure must be very close to that sum.

To satisfy myself I undertook another line-by-line comparison of the two data sets matching each issue line-by-line, year-by-year and yes, it took several hours to complete. What it showed though was that nearly all the discrepancies are either because of leaving out the paper types - Scharning's error - or failing to acknowledge the distinctness of many of the booklet contents which is where Stanley Gibbons are at fault. There are one or two anomalies which seem to be related to the booklet pane nomenclature but I discounted them.

And then there is the Wirthmann listing produced by the German Irish Philatelic Study group, the FAI. This is a very thorough and detailed index and as well as paper types includes the numerous phosphor variations, notably those found on the coil and booklet contents. Wirthmann lists 198 issues (all Michel numbered) but without including FDC's, special covers and presentation issues. Again comparisons tend to throw up some anomalies, so for the sake of sanity I have kept to 177 issues as a working basis, whilst readily acknowledging that the Wirthmann index is probably the most comprehensive.

There is more that could be said about total numbers and how they can be measured, but not for this article. Do I hear a sigh? But, there is one other number issue to mention. In fact a measurement issue rather than a sum of parts. Both the SG catalogue and Scharning give the physical size to issues in millimetres. The problem is, they don't agree. At all. For example, Gibbons sizes the singles as either 23x26mm for the standard format or 26x47mm for the higher value format. Scharning gives you either 24.5x27mm or 27x48.5mm respectfully. That's a difference of one to one and half millimetres. With the coil strips there is a millimetre discrepancy for each dimension.

So out with a fine millimetre ruler and measuring from outer perf to outer perf I found the singles to be 24.5x28mm and the larger values 27x48mm. I tested it on several examples too. So Scharning is close, but not quite. Gibbons appear to be measuring from the inner perf, which is weird. For the coil issues I found Scharning to be spot on. My Michel's catalogue also appears to agree with Scharning. My advice: keep to Scharning measurements.

Problem Area 2 - The Sheetlet and the missing stamp

Another item that can trip you up is the sheetlet. This was printed by ISSP and issued on the 16th February 1999. It consists of fifteen species, each reduced in size to 21x24mm and with a perforation of 14x15. The issues contained on the sheetlet are all phosphor framed on chalk surfaced paper.

It looks innocuous, but Stanley Gibbons (again) can confuse you here. And how! If you follow your finger down the 1997-2000 listing, when it reaches the 30p Common Blackbird (SG1038) you'll note a series of suffixed numbers, for 30p was its normal value and the species turns up in a variety of formats. Fair enough, but you might then skip over catalogue number 1038aq which says "sheetlet" and plough on to the other issues now also valued at 30p and that form part of that sheetlet. I certainly did!

I then realised that the sheetlet as a whole has its own catalogue number - yep, 1038aq - and then its constituents each possess a unique number as well. The Blackbird, being ubiquitous is actually suffixed 1038ap - easy to confuse with "aq." The Goldcrest, which is also well used in other formats follows as 1039p and then the numbering is consecutive right up to SG1052. However, confusingly, the Goldcrest bears the issue date of 25th January 1999, not the February date. This feels wrong.

Gibbons makes it clear that the sheetlet is made up of 1038ap, 1039p and then 1040 to 1052. Fine, except the Goldcrest as 1039p also forms part of the booklet issued in January of that year alongside the Blackbird and catalogued overall as SB67a. Okaaay, so this issue in this format was used twice? Nope. The issues for the booklet have the same perforation but they are formatted in a larger size, 24.5x27mm. It's a different stamp. Either the sheetlet constituent is wrong or the booklet make-up is wrong. My view? It's a mistake and there is a catalogue number missing from the sheetlet.



Fig. 1 - The “missing” bird

Problem Area 3 - Coils & Booklets

As I more than hinted with the missing Goldcrest, the make-up of the booklets are a minefield in their own right. And complex. In fact, if you collect this series - and I certainly try to - you soon start to realise that the most intangible identification problems lie within this format and the self-adhesive strips.

The Irish 5th definitives is typified with, I believe, a disproportionately large number of coil strips and booklets. They were issued pretty well throughout the lifetime of the series. In total, 27 booklets and 14 strips were used, most with paired species represented and often with the same values for those species. But, they were produced by a mix of printers, sometimes in different sizes or with different perforations and this has created a fascinatingly complex number of issues to sort through. Here lies the heart of the series challenges.

a) The Self-adhesive Coils

Ireland has been using coils and issuing booklets of stamps for a considerable time. The earliest booklets were issued across the counter as early as 1931 and the first definitive series was certainly available in coils after 1940.

Early coils were of course gummed, not self-adhesive, and could be obtained via a dispensing machine at post offices. Perhaps prior to, but certainly by the time of the introduction of self-adhesives, the coils ceased to be issued by machines. Indeed, by the end of the 1990's booklets were available through machines and coils were not.

For the Bird definitive series coils were made up in rolls of 100 stamps, often strips pasted together, and could be issued straight from a small “Peel and Stick” box. These were illustrated with the appropriate birds for the strips and are highly collectible in their own right. The box worked rather like those stationery devices you can buy in WH Smiths, for items like photo-corners or punched-hole reinforcers. They were sold primarily to small businesses who were not large enough to use metered post machines. They weren't cheap either. A box of 100 at say 30 pence per stamp is, of course, £30, or €38 after the currency changes. The final coil issues in the series - the Pied Wagtail and Peregrine Falcon pairings - were €48 per box of strips.



Fig. 2 - The last s/a coil strip in the series (2004)

-The Enschede printed Pied Wagtail & Peregrine Falcon pairing
(Note: how the stamps were arranged tail to head in the strip)

Where two species featured they were normally arranged alternatively in the strip (see Fig. 2 above). In each coil after the 80th and 90th stamp there were reminder labels. They were normally arranged at right angles between the stamps, but some issues had these labels the same way up as the stamps. The labels would advise that there were, "Only 20 stamps left," and then later repeated with, "Only 10 stamps left...ORDER NOW."

Some of the subsequent coils, for example the Blackbird and Goldcrest ISSP issue of 9th October 2000, as well as the two reminder labels had eight other "advertising" labels with messages such as: "PRIORITY for faster overseas delivery," or, "SWIFTPOST Guaranteed next day delivery nationwide." Five different ones in all and with different printing treatments, black lettering on white, white on blue, white on red, green on orange, yellow on green, etc, to mention a few. They are also collectable.

Another variant to look out for is whether the surrounding self-adhesive paper has been removed. An example is the late December, 1998 strip with a 30p Blackbird and Goldcrest pairing. Here the stamps are cut to allow separation from their surrounds but need to be teased away when required for use. Other issues have the surrounding paper already removed with the stamps sitting in isolation on their backing paper.

Fourteen separate coil strips coils were issued and they can form a collection interest or study just by themselves - I seriously mean this - and, frankly, are highly complex. In part this is because of the different printers used, different perforations, different papers, and variations in label numbers and then the use of phosphor frames, etc, etc. There are all sorts of variations even when the same species form the strip. The only consistency is the size - 25x30mm. Part of the problem with collecting them though is that you'll be hard push to find an entire coil, let alone in their dispensing boxes. Finding hen's teeth might be easier!

When you do discover these issues mint they are invariably chopped into one issue or sometimes (rarely) both if a pairing and you could then be challenged to determine what they are and from which coil they are derived. The perforation can help and the presence or absence of a phosphor frame but if you find them on their own, either still on their backing paper or used on piece or cover, you have to examine them carefully. And this might still fail.

There are particular problems with the later Euro currency coils. In fact, let's look at some comparative examples from both the old currency and the new currency.

Pre-Euro, there were five strips featuring the Blackbird/Goldcrest combination. Table. 1 below lays out the key pieces of information:-

Table. 1 - Pre-Euro Blackbird & Goldcrest Combination s/a Coils

Issue Date	Value	Printer	Phosphor Status	Perf	SG Nos.
02/04/1998	30p	ISSP	Non-phosphor	9x10	1086a - vertical pair
02/04/1998	30p	SNP Cambec	Non-phosphor	11.5x11.5	1090a - vertical pair
17/11/1998	30p	SNP Cambec	Phosphor	11.5x11.5	1090p/1091p
14/12/1998	30p	ISSP	Phosphor	9x10	1086pa
01/10/2000	30p	ISSP	Phosphor	9x9	1086pb/1087pb

All five pairings are distinguishable in one way or another. The two earlier non-phosphor inked issues have different perforations. And the same goes for the three strips with

phosphor frames, they each have different perforations. There might be some paper difference as well, but Gibbons is not clear on this matter.

Now contrast with two examples that have Euro currency: the 41p Chaffinch/Goldcrest, and 48c Peregrine Falcon/Pied Wagtail pairings in Tables 2 and 3 below.

Table. 2 - Euro Chaffinch & Goldcrest Combination s/a Coils

Issue Date	Value	Printer	Phosphor Status	Perf	SG Nos.
02/04/2002	41c	SNP Ausprint	Phosphor	11x11	1493a - vertical pair
17/10/2002	41c	Enschede	Phosphor	11x11	1498a - vertical pair

Table. 3 - Euro Peregrine Falcon & Pied Wagtail Combination s/a Coils

Issue Date	Value	Printer	Phosphor Status	Perf	SG Nos.
30/09/2003	48c	SNP Ausprint	Phosphor	11x11	1495da - vertical pair
12/05/2004	48c	Enschede	Phosphor	11x11	1500a - vertical pair

We can see that in both tables the examples have phosphor printing and the same perforations. And I should add that they were also both printed on chalk surfaced paper and had the same physical size. So no joy there then. It looks insuperable to distinguish, doesn't it? This is certainly the case for the Chaffinch/Goldcrest combo even though they have different catalogue numbers. Without their boxes or mint with printer stickers I am uncertain how you could tell the difference without some guiding prompts.

It would also be the same for the Peregrine Falcon if not with its companion issue. But there is a ray of hope here if you find the Peregrine with the Wagtail. The SNP Ausprint version of the Pied Wagtail is Type II with the erroneous Gaelic spelling, while the Enschede version is correctly spelt and therefore Type I. Details, even mistakes can matter. Oh, and it comes in useful for the booklet issues as well.

There is not space here to go into any more exhaustive detail. It would make a lengthy article by itself - but below is a small and certainly not exhaustive listing of some of the variations between self-adhesive strips that can be sought. (*I am grateful to the Eire Philatelic Association as a source; See: Jung, Otto - The Coil Stamps of the Definitive Bird Series; "The Revealer," Autumn 2001, pps30-32*).

1. Coils continuous (100 stamps) or sections of strips pasted together (5 strips of 20 stamps or 4 strips of 25 stamps)
2. The paper around the stamps has been removed or retained
3. The perforation may be blunted or sharp
4. Phosphor box or no phosphor box
5. Detectable UV backing strip or not
6. Small design layout issues (eg: Whether the size of the image reaches the margins)
7. Colour variations between printers (eg: Robin has red or orangey breast)
8. Whether the printers name is on the reverse of the coil sheet
9. Whether there is a black printed rectangle on the reverse of the coil
10. Perforation sizes
11. Paper type (even "Ordinary" could be CCP1 or CCP3)
12. The presence of "Ad" labels within the stamps (eg: "Registered - the safest way to send all your documents")
13. The many varying colours of these "Ad" labels

b) The Booklets

The booklets are another complex area. Unless, of course, you obtain an entire mint booklet! Issues taken from booklets in used condition or on cover can prove to be more difficult to distinguish.

With or without the phosphor frame

The make-up of the panes within booklets can be important. Where there is a lower value teamed with a higher value, the lower value is without a phosphor and the higher is phosphor framed. For that matter, this is the case with singles as well. The two booklets where this occurs are SB70, the 5p Wood Pigeon (without phosphor) and 30 Goldcrest (with), and also SB95 the 10c Kingfisher (without) paired with 38c Blackbird (with).



Fig. 3 - 1999 Wood Pigeon and Goldcrest booklet pairing (SB70)

The pain of the pane

Stanley Gibbons add to the complexity with their cataloguing arrangements. And how! Both the booklets and the self-adhesive strips that form the coil stamps are listed separately and receive their own catalogue numbers. I could live with that, but then unlike the coils, the make-up of the booklets then sometimes utilises issues with the self-adhesives forming part or whole of a booklet pane. For example, the 41c Common Chaffinch, printed by SNP Ausprint and issued on 2nd April 2002 (SG1493) can occur as a constituent in a vertical pair for a coil (1493a) or, as part of a booklet pane (1493b) coupled with a 41c Goldcrest (1494). The booklet was issued on the same date as the coil set and the pane then became part of booklet SB97! Are you still with me? And remember, that Chaffinch stamp remains, as far as I can optically discern, effectively the same stamp. A low groan is permitted here.

The booklet make-up with the constituent elements of their panes are, well, frankly a pain! As the example illustrated above showed SG numbers each booklet uniquely, but then the pane itself is catalogued and as we have seen the individual issues that make up each pane also have a catalogue number.

Let's take another example, booklet SB112, which was issued late in the series on 30th September 2003. This consists of a 4c Corncrake (SG1486) and a 48c Peregrine Falcon (1490a). They are arranged within the pane vertically, formed of two of the former species and four of the latter thereby giving left and right cropping. The pane is catalogued 1486ab with a total booklet value of €2. That's a lot of catalogue numbers.

If you follow this pattern through the catalogue against each booklet - all twenty seven of them - it will, I guarantee, try your patience. I know, because I have done just that. Tracing the make-up of each booklet through their panes to their constituents is fiddly and can be immensely time consuming, but the product of my tour of this Alice in Wonderland world was a Look-up Table. Perish the thought that Stanley Gibbons should think of providing you with one. It took a bad tempered while to construct.

I repeated the exercise for the self-adhesive strips and whilst it is generally more straight forward - no booklet numbers for a start and less of them too - they can still turn up in the booklets. Oh joys!

Identifying each is not without its challenges either. It can be possible up to a point to identify what is what when mint. Strips are on strips, panes are in booklets. But it can be neigh on impossible for some issues when found used or on cover. Unless I have missed some distinguishing features the challenges are not always surmountable.

You would have thought that the Blackbird and Goldcrest issues - the most numerous by far - would throw up the greatest number of queries, but strangely enough the ubiquitous Blackbird registers no anomalies and the strips and booklets in which it is found can be identified and distinguished in one way or another. The Goldcrest has only one incidence where it is not possible to tell which is which. Both are s/a strips. One is Australian, printed by SNP Ausprint and issued in April 2002 (SG1494), the other is Dutch, printed by Enschede and issued six months later in October and catalogued as SG1499. They appear identical - same values, same size, same perforations, same everything.

The chief sources of confusion are to be found with the relatively late Peregrine Falcon and Pied Wagtail issues of 2003/04. They appear together in two guises. Firstly as an "N" rate booklet (SB110) issued on 25th August 2003, as well as on a self-adhesive strip of this value on the same date. Then again in another booklet issue of late September 2003 (SB114), but this time with a 48c value and repeated with s/a strips. Apart from the value changes, neither issues, whether booklets or strips are distinguishable. Oh, and the same printer, SNP Ausprint again, produced them. This gives four indeterminate issues for each species. Plus a further one for the Peregrine Falcon as an Enschede strip of 2004 (SG1500) also has the same characteristics. Found used, I doubt you would know which was which. A right pain, what?

Altogether, I believe there are seven cases where it appears impossible to distinguish what the issue is when in a used condition. Table. 4 below details these examples of cases, but in particular, note the prevalence of the Peregrine Falcon and Pied Wagtail issues. Together, they amount to over 57% of the total.

Table: 4 - The Cases of Indistinguishability

Species	Printer	Date of Issue	Value	Format	Perf	Size (mm)	Strip/Bklt No.*	SG No.
Chaffinch	SNP	02/04/2002	41c	Booklet	11	25x30	SB97	1493
	SNP	02/04/2002	41c	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S10	1493
	Enschede	17/10/2002	41c	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S11	1498
Goldcrest	SNP	02/04/2002	41c	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S10	1494
	Enschede	17/10/2002	41c	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S11	1499
Peregrine Falcon	SNP	25/08/2003	N	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S12	1495b
	SNP	25/08/2003	N	Booklet	11	25x30	SB110	1495b
	SNP	30/09/2003	48c	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S13	1495d
	SNP	30/09/2003	48c	Booklet	11	25x30	SB114	1495d
	Enschede	12/05/2004	48c	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S14	1500
Pied Wagtail (Type II)	SNP	25/08/2003	N	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S12	1495c
	SNP	25/08/2003	N	Booklet	11	25x30	SB110	1495c
	SNP	30/09/2003	48c	s/a Strip	11	25x30	S13	1495e
	SNP	30/09/2003	48c	Booklet	11	25x30	SB114	1495e
Wood Pigeon	ISSP	02/04/1998	5p	Booklet	14x15	24.5x20.5	SB64	1081b
	ISSP	16/02/1999	5p	Booklet	14x15	24.5x20.5	SB70	1081b

*Note: The numbers for the s/a strips are my own references and are date sequential.

Observations? Nearly all with the exception of the Wood Pigeon are Euro currency issues. Apart from this case, most were issued relatively late in the series - 2002 to 2004. The Wood Pigeon is also the only ISSP printed example, the others are SNP Ausprint or Enschede. They are all printed on chalk surfaced paper and all phosphor framed which removes some of the identifying variables. There are slightly more strips than booklets - a close 56%/44% split. Note that nearly all have the same perforation and the same physical dimensions. The earlier Wood Pigeon issues are again the only exception. The Eagle-eyed will have noticed that the Pied Wagtail which pairs with the Peregrine Falcon is not included for the Enschede printing. This issue (SG1501) does pair but can be distinguished from the others as it has the different Gaelic spelling. Gibbons designated this Type I whilst the other versions as included in the table are Type II.

And the killer issue, these sixteen booklets and strips account for ten different catalogue numbers and provide seven cases where the issues are indistinguishable. If you pair all the characteristics up you have the following summarisation:-

- Case 1: The Common Chaffinch has three issues with the same characteristics, but from two different printers and with two different catalogue numbers;
- Case 2: The Goldcrest example, whilst only two self-adhesive strips is again from two different printers giving two different catalogue numbers;
- Cases 3 & 4: The Peregrine Falcon provides two indistinguishable examples - one for August 2003 with two issues, and another for September 2003 AND May 2004 where three issues match;
- Cases 5 & 6: This is repeated with the Pied Wagtail, but without the Enschede May 2004 printing example; and finally,
- Case 7: There is one indistinguishable example with the Wood Pigeon, both with the same printer and other characteristics, but printed nearly a year apart, found in different booklets and given the same catalogue numbering. Effectively the same stamp but in different incarnations.

Okay, that's only 6% of what's out there, but nevertheless a seemingly difficult nut to crack.

Not quite the end

The stamps began to be replaced by a new definitive series during the autumn of 2004. The sixth definitives were wild flowers. Pleasant, but not as exciting.

However, it was by no means the end of issues illustrated by Killian Mullarney. A non-definitive set of four ducks, accompanied by a mini-sheet appeared in April 2004. In July 2010 a beautiful set of four birds of prey, also with a mini-sheet were issued by An Post. And most recently, Mullarney was selected for Ireland's 2019 Europa contribution with two lovely NVI stamps depicting a Roseate Tern and Golden Plover in a large upright format. Somehow, I feel sure that there will be more to come.

Further Reading:

A number of extremely useful updates on these definitives were produced by Brian Warren in the pages of *The Revealer*, the journal of the Eire Philatelic Association (EPA) in a running series entitled "*That was the year that Was.*" I have a list of the most significant references if anyone is interested.

Amazingly, there is also a book on the series: "*Ireland's 5th Definitive Series - Birds*" by Bernd Wirthmann; published by the FAI, the German sister group to the EPA. Reference No. 29, 2012, price: €14.80 (Paypal accepted). It's an excellent source book with the text in English as well as German. I highly recommend it.