

How Charity Christmas Cards came about

I was a salesman for the colour printers Cox and Sharland who were located first at Eastleigh and then they moved to a new factory at Sholing in Southampton. The new site was a 'shadow' factory built for Fairy Aviation who for some reason did not take up occupancy, so Cox and Sharland who did printing for them learned of the opportunity to take on the lease.

I was based in London and among my clients I secured printing contracts for much of the work Save the Children Fund produced, including their magazine *World's Children*. In the late autumn of 1955 Peter Blachford, the Public Relations Officer for Save the Children Fund asked me to print a few Christmas cards to use as a thank you to the Press. It was a delightful monochrome photograph of a little black boy with a big 'watermelon smile', and on seeing this I suggested to Peter that the Save the Children Fund (SCF) should produce Christmas cards for sale to the public and was confident that people would gladly give their support and help the funds. Peter liked the suggestion and said he would refer the matter to the Directorate at their next meeting. In the meantime I got support from my company and the in-house artist Brian Milner began putting some card designs together whilst I researched other sources for classical subjects that could be considered. Happily, the Save the Children Fund accepted the idea and we produced the first Charity Christmas Cards for 1956. To keep running costs to a minimum the plan was for Save the Children staff to handle the packing and postage of orders received from the public. However, this was the year the Hungarian uprising sprang up unexpectedly and the SCF was inundated with requests for aid, and donations of clothing flooded into the headquarters. Staff who were to handle the Christmas card orders were directed to help with the Hungarian crisis and give all their attention to the aid programme. With no other source of packers for the Christmas cards I persuaded Alice, my wife to undertake the despatch arrangements from home. We had three children, all at school and Alice gallantly rose to the challenge. As this exercise proved very satisfactory in its first year the SCF requested that we continue packing and despatching cards so they could meet any future emergency affecting their headquarters' staff.

Storing the cards and envelopes in the first year was not too much of a problem, but within four years the total number of cards with envelopes rose to 6,000,000 and Alice was able to recruit another mother to help with the packing and despatch. We ended up taking over our daughter's bedroom and placing her in with the two boys during the period late September to mid-December. At that time we lived in a three-bedroom semi-detached house in Orpington and at the height of orders received for cards they were stacked from floor to ceiling in every room except the toilet and bathroom, but we somehow coped. Eventually, in the end it grew too large to manage and though I could have made this into a specialist packing facility I was too busy with my main career. I had to smile when some years after the launch I read in a SCF publication the statement of one of their personnel who claimed he was the one who started Charity Christmas Cards. Ah well!

I cannot claim the Christmas card idea was exclusive as UNICEF (operating from the USA) launched their charity cards in the same year as the Save the Children Fund. The business led to printing contracts for other charities launching Christmas card appeals, including Oxfam. Over fifty years on, charity cards are well established and must run into many millions of copies, how many I wouldn't care to guess. Hopefully the funds raised are doing well for each of the charities.