



THE ULTIMATE GUIDE *TO COLLECTING STAMPS*

Expert advice on building your collection

- ✓ A brief history of the hobby
- ✓ Different approaches to collecting
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In the beginning...

Start your collection on the right foot, or ensure you're on the right path, with this brief history of our hobby, and some insightful advice on traditional stamp collecting

Exactly when this term arose or where it was first coined is uncertain, but it has come into common parlance in recent years primarily to distinguish stamp collecting, pure and simple, from thematic or topical collecting.

Not that there is anything pure and simple about stamp collecting, for there is a wide divergence between general collecting and the various degrees of specialisation. Stamp collecting itself has evolved over the past 160-odd years. Back in the 1840s it seems to have begun as a pastime for young ladies of leisure to acquire as many Penny Blacks or Penny Reds as possible, steam them off their letters and then glue them to firescreens, rack-plates or needlework boxes. Given the limited range of colours in stamps of that early date, the results could not have been very artistic.

In the satirical magazine *Punch* (1842) we find the earliest documentary evidence concerning the hobby, a lampoon on 'the industriously-idle ladies of England', one of whom had advertised in *The Times* for quantities of used stamps to paper the walls of her dressing room, and this inspired Colonel Sibthorpe to contribute a poem with the opening lines:

*When was a folly so pestilent hit upon,
As folks running mad to collect every spit upon
Post-office stamp that's been soil'd and been writ upon?
Oh for Swift! Such a subject his spleen to emit upon.*

There was a house in Market Drayton (and it may well still be there) in which every article of furniture was plastered with stamps, mostly from the early Victorian period, showing the lengths to which this craze went.

The father of stamp collecting

Even as early as May 1840, however, there were individuals who quickly perceived the collectable potential of stamps. One such was Dr John Gray of the Natural History Department at the British Museum who noted in his diary for May 1840 that he had purchased examples of the new-fangled adhesive stamps with the intention of preserving them for posterity. Dr Gray is thus regarded as the father of stamp collecting in the true sense, and later published one of the world's earliest stamp catalogues.

Within a decade, stamp collecting as we know it today, had begun to evolve. Many newspapers carried small ads listing stamps for sale. We know that sixteen-year-old Edward Stanley Gibbons was trading in stamps from his father's pharmacy in Plymouth by 1856 and we may be sure that he was not the first stamp dealer by any means. By the end of that decade the first slim catalogues were appearing in France.

Periodicals devoted wholly or partly to the hobby followed soon after; the first British stamp magazines were the *Monthly Intelligencer* (Birmingham) and the *Monthly Advertiser* (Liverpool), both making their appearance



Stamp Collector's Magazine first appeared in February 1863 and ran every month till 1874



Traditional philately is essentially the collecting and study of stamps according to the country of issue

the Cook Islands (including Aitutaki and Penrhyn) for the same reasons. In France the stamps of Monaco and the French post office in Andorra are included along with the last remaining dependent territories such as Mayotte, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Americans and Canadians collect each other's stamps and both have a strong predilection for the Bahamas, Bermuda and the Caribbean islands. Political and geographical groupings of this sort may be found in every part of the world and collecting along these lines is both practical and manageable.

An alternative form of general collecting is to concentrate on one of the larger countries and attempt to form a general collection of its stamps right back to the very first issue. Many so-called specialists are, in fact, no more than general collectors of a single country. Even on a simplified basis it would take a great deal of time and money to put together general collections of Britain, the USA, France, or Germany, but many people have done it and these collections then become the nucleus of something more advanced.

Monarch matters

Another general approach to traditional philately is to collect the stamps of a single reign. Elizabethan stamps are probably still the most popular in this group, despite the proliferation of issues in recent years. Certainly those who began modestly in 1953 with the Coronation omnibus and have managed to stick with it will now have collections running to many albums.

For the newcomer to philately, however, Elizabethan stamps as a whole present a very daunting prospect. This explains the increased popularity of the stamps issued in the reign of George VI (1936-52), a period in which the collector has a better chance of attaining completion – at least on a simplified system.

The one advantage of concentrating on obsolete stamps is that the subject is finite, unlike modern issues which are open-ended. At one time there was little interest in the 'dead countries'. Bernard Towler's long-running series on the subject reveals the considerable scope of territories which once issued stamps but are now part of some other political grouping.

Germans naturally concentrate on the issues of the kingdoms, principalities and duchies that issued their own stamps from 1849 till 1871, with Bavaria and Wurttemberg continuing as late as 1920. Italians favour the stamps of the various states before the country was unified in the 1860s, though this is a much harder field to cover than the German states.

The six Australian states – New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia – issued their own stamps from the 1850s till 1913.

Similarly Canadians collect the issues of New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, British Columbia and Vancouver Island, and South Africans favour the stamps of the Cape of Good Hope, Natal, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, plus the more ephemeral countries like Griqualand West, Zululand, British Bechuanaland, Stellaland and the New Republic.

Some dead countries have been resurrected in recent years, notably Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro (formerly Yugoslavia), Slovakia, Russia, the Ukraine, the Baltic and Caucasian states (formerly in the USSR). And of course, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the USSR have now themselves joined the ranks of the dead – but not forgotten.



British thematics



A simpler time: An early advertisement for the Gibbons Simplified catalogue

HOT TOPICS!

Your guide to collecting stamps by theme

Collecting by theme can be hugely rewarding, creating a colourful collection with a story to tell. Here we reveal the secrets of 'thematics'

Whether general or specialised, traditional philately follows set guidelines, the stamps being collected according to country and usually in chronological order. By the 1920s, however, there were so many stamps available, that the pictorial approach was becoming increasingly popular.

Whereas the stamps of the 19th century usually portrayed the head of state or showed the coat of arms, a few pictorial designs were already turning up, showing ships, railways and maps as well as scenery and landmarks, and this trend gradually escalated in the early 20th century.

In the 1920s, the development of aviation caught the imagination and many countries issued special airmail stamps, often featuring aircraft, real or imaginary (and often supporting an air service that was itself more imaginary than real). By that time, some countries were beginning to appreciate the propaganda value of stamps as a means of projecting an image of the nation to the world at large, and this was taken to new heights in Italy, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which pushed pictorialism to new levels.

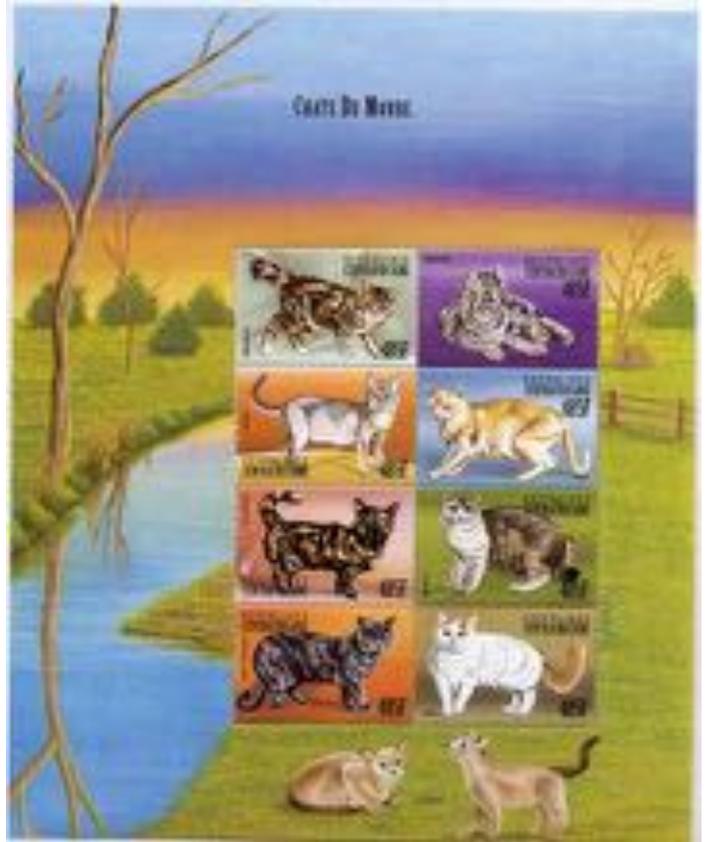
By the 1930s pictorialism got a big boost when many of the crown colonies and protectorates in the British Empire adopted bicoloured pictorial definitives. Some of the general books on stamp collecting published in that decade had attractive plates showing stamps grouped by subject, so we may suppose that by that time there were philatelists who were forming sideline collections of stamps arranged by topic, although no one seems to have come out publicly and admitted to this.

If they did, they would have been regarded as eccentric to put it mildly. It was a practice of which the philatelic trade heartily disapproved, because it resulted in the breaking up of definitive sets which in those days covered many different subjects.

This type of collecting only really took off after the Second World War and seems to have originated in Germany where it was known as Motiv-Sammlung (subject collecting). It was soon taken up in the USA and in 1949 the American Topical Association was founded, still the world's leading body for thematic collectors. At its peak, the ATA boasted almost 100,000 members world-wide.

It did more than any other organisation to make thematic or topical collecting respectable and over a period of half a century it has published numerous check-lists and reference works, as well as its magazine *Topical Time* which lists new issues according to their subject.

Of course this has led to the professional catalogue publishers following suit. In the UK, for example, Stanley



Sheetlet from the Central African Republic showing cars of the world



Page from a collection of Coins on Stamps

Gibbons leads the field with catalogues on such popular subjects as birds, aircraft, ships and railways, as well as some more esoteric subjects including seashells, fungi and butterflies. There are also numerous thematic catalogues published on the Continent, notably the Domphil series from Barcelona.

In addition, there are many individual catalogues and handbooks detailing stamps relating to religion, fine art, space exploration, the Europa theme, the Red Cross, Scouts and every aspect of sport.

Meanwhile, dealers who once shunned thematic collecting now specialise in this themselves, and their job is made infinitely easier by the world's philatelic bureaux which tend to produce entire sets, including definitives, with a single theme.

Perhaps it is all becoming too easy. In the 1960s collecting stamps showing stained glass windows was a challenge. A few years later, however, when many postal administrations had seemingly exhausted the subject of Old Masters with religious themes for their annual Christmas and Easter stamps, they suddenly discovered stained glass and this led to a positive torrent of stamps with this theme.

This is nothing compared to the deluge of stamps from every part of the world that greets each Olympiad. Such stamps are not confined to the Olympic Games themselves. What with 'aftermath' issues by countries honouring their Olympic gold medallists, and 'pre-publicity' issues by the host for the next Olympiad – and any other country that may or may not have a legitimate interest in the matter – there is no closed season for the Olympic theme. With the revolution in stamp production in recent years, host countries including Great Britain, Australia and Greece have even been able to release celebratory sheets of stamps for each gold medallist almost as soon as the event has been won.

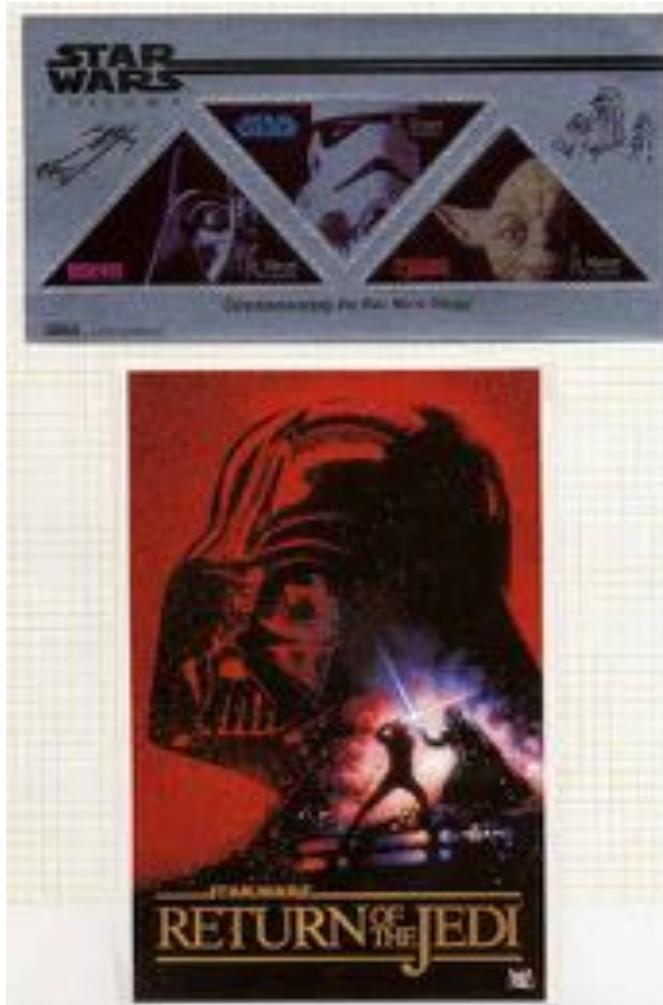
Not stamps alone

Thematic collecting is now a serious business with its own rules and regulations when it comes to competitive entries. Unless stamps are very rare, mint specimens are the norm, but of course stamps on piece of cover with postmarks relevant to the theme are also very desirable. A thematic study would be expected to encompass such fringe material as maximum cards, meter marks and pictorial hand-stamps as well as non-postal labels (for exhibitions, sporting events, etc.). Even in thematics, one cannot escape from 'pure' philately, for points are also awarded for philatelic knowledge, exemplified by the inclusion of perforation and watermark varieties, specimen overprints and even die and plate proofs.

“Thematic collectors are becoming more and more selective in their choice”

Because of the vast increase in new issues in the past twenty years thematic collectors have been forced to narrow the scope of their interests. The combination of much more frequent issues and the use of modern multicolour printing processes have greatly widened the scope of stamp design and there is now hardly a subject under the sun that has not had stamps devoted to it.

Even if collectors have been soured by the so-called band-



Picture postcards (in this case a film poster) can be used to augment stamps (St Vincent, Star Wars)



Meter mark of 1964 marking Shakespeare's Quatercentenary



Shilling label and postcard, c1900, raising funds for the proposed Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford – ancillary material for a thematic collection devoted to Shakespeare

wagon issues, there is still plenty of material for them to explore. Ideally you want to find a subject that has not been overdone. Thematic collectors are becoming more and more selective in their choice. One collector, for example, has formed a collection of stamps showing bicycles and umbrellas, and even has several stamps that show both: one from Laos featuring a cycle rickshaw and a bystander carrying a parasol, and another from the USSR portraying the writer Chekhov carrying an umbrella, with a bicycle just visible in the background.

Themes tailored to you

Many adults have taken up stamp collecting because of a link with their profession or other pursuits. Doctors and dentists can collect stamps with a medical theme, airline pilots and truck drivers can collect stamps depicting aircraft and road vehicles. Others might collect stamps honouring the nursing profession or Mother's Day, Freemasons, Rotarians, Esperantists, Boy Scouts and members of Lions' Clubs will all find a wealth of material of specific relevance to them.

You may not be able to afford to collect Old Masters or Post-Impressionists but you can have a most impressive picture gallery of your own, since every aspect of fine art from Stone Age cave paintings to Surrealism and Dadaism has been reproduced on stamps. Numismatists can combine an interest in coins and medals with stamps depicting them. Collectors of militaria can form a sizeable collection of stamps depicting badges and insignia, uniforms and head-dress, arms and armour and military equipment of all kinds from gas-masks to guided missiles.

Sculpture, architecture, folk arts and crafts have all found adequate coverage in stamps. Even stamps themselves have frequently been reproduced, mainly in connection with anniversaries of first issues but also increasingly to publicise stamp exhibitions. The centenaries of the Universal Postal Union (1974) and the death of Sir Rowland Hill (1979) provided a marvellous opportunity for 'stamps on stamps' from virtually every country.

SUBJECT COLLECTING

The main branch of thematic collecting is simply to arrange stamps according to the subject depicted on them. However, the subject can be broken down into various categories and sub-groups. A collector of stamps featuring horses, for example, could create the following sections:

Early history

Prehistoric horses, wild horses, horse relatives such as zebras, asses and hybrids (mules)

Mythological horses (Pegasus, centaurs, etc.)

Horses in folklore and legend

Medieval horses

War horses and chargers. Knights on horseback

Horses in heraldry, literature, epic poem

The horse in paintings sculpture and other art forms

Horses and their uses

Work horses, plough horses

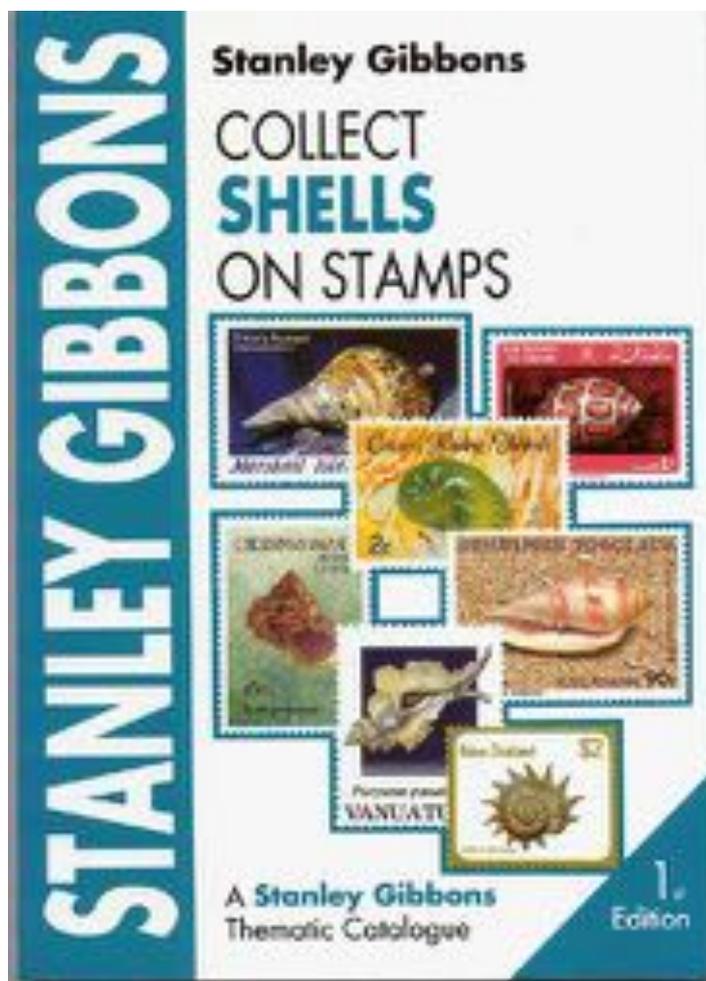
Horse-drawn vehicles

Mail carried on horseback

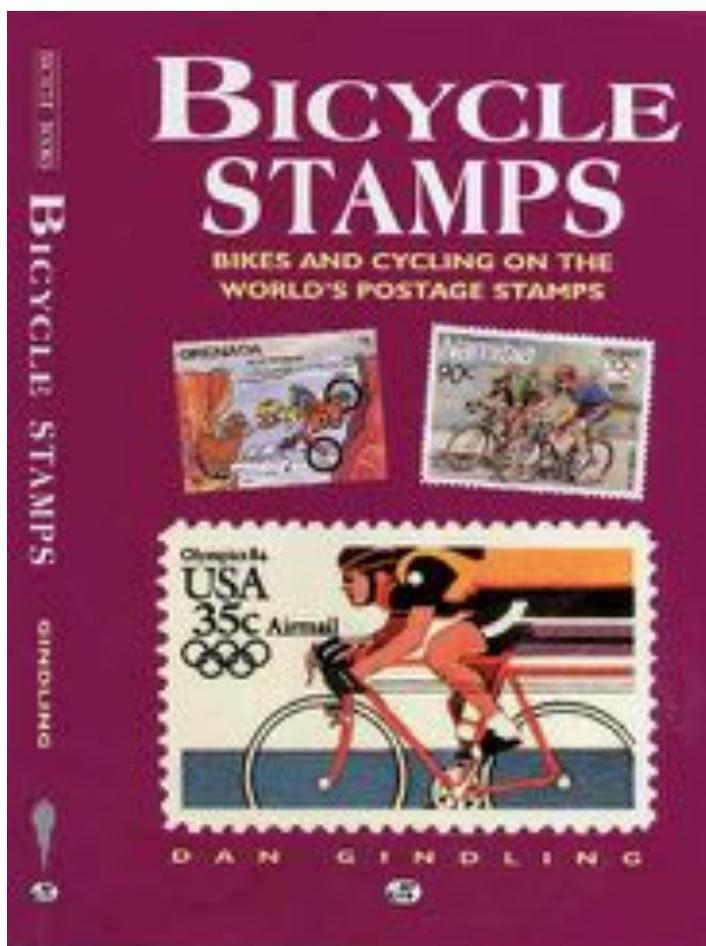
Cavalry and mounted police

Horses used in hunting

Chariot racing, steeple-chasing, flat racing, trotting



One of the excellent Stanley Gibbons series of thematic catalogues



Cover of Bicycle Stamps by Dan Gibling, a fine example of a thematic handbook

Polo, Buzkashi, guks and other equestrian games
 Horses in bullfights, tournaments and circuses
 Show jumping, dressage and haute école movements
 Ancillary subjects
 Saddlery and harness
 Horse ploughs
 Portraits of famous jockeys and race trophies

'PURPOSE OF ISSUE' COLLECTING

Thematic collectors can also look out for stamps and postal stationery issued in connection with a particular event. This form of collecting really began in the 1890s with the celebration of the discovery of America by Columbus, continuing with stamps in the 1940s and the 1990s for the 450th and 500th anniversaries of his voyages of discovery.

Royalty looms large in this category, from the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria (1897) to the Diamond Wedding of our present Queen (2007). Major world exhibitions, from the New York World's Fair (1939-40) onwards, vie with outstanding international anniversaries, from Shakespeare (1964) and Churchill (1974) to the centenary of the Scout movement this year.

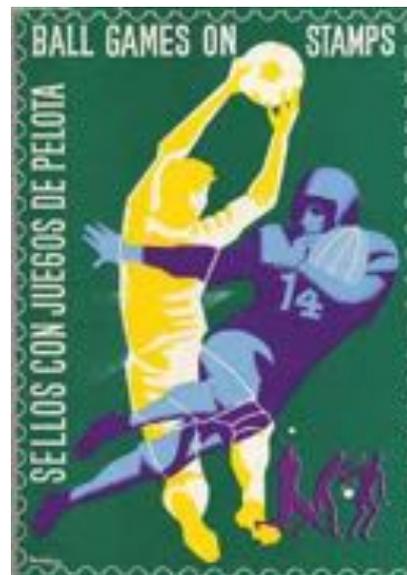
'TRUE THEMATIC OR TOPICAL' COLLECTING

The third branch offers the greatest scope to the collector and consists of the arrangement of stamps in such a way that they develop a concept. In effect, the stamps are used to illustrate a story and tend to become merely incidental to the historical research undertaken by the collector. You could merely amass space stamps (subject collecting) but it would take much more thought and ingenuity to create a display illustrating 'Man's Conquest of Space.' The possibilities with this type of collection are endless and stamps can be, and are used, to illustrate everything from nuclear physics to Shakespeare quotations.

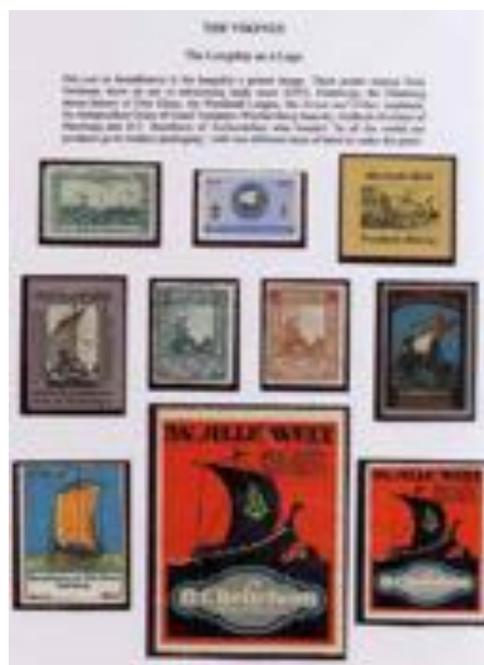
This approach involves a great deal of lateral thinking, and considerable ingenuity is shown in finding a link, however tenuous, between the theme and the stamp selected. It is this that scores well in competitive exhibits for it shows just how thoroughly the collector has researched the subject.

Judaica is the term describing stamps pertaining to anything with a Jewish interest and it gained tremendous impetus in 1996-7 with stamps celebrating the 3000th anniversary of Jerusalem as the City of King David. You might not expect to find stamps from Egypt showing Jerusalem but two from 1997 alone featured the great Dome of Rock, one of the holiest shrines of Islam and, as such depicted on many stamps from the Arab countries.

However, few collectors would make the connection with a stamp from Sweden, 1998 showing the Red Hen Cinema in Halmstad in a set devoted to domestic architecture, but the press release announcing this stamp mentioned that the first film shown there was entitled *Jerusalem*, based on the novel by Selma Lagerlof. On that score, the stamp would merit inclusion in a Judaica collection.



Ball Games on Stamps, published in Spain with text in Spanish and English



Page from a collection dealing with the Vikings and showing a range of advertising labels using the iconic Viking ship as their logo or image



Part of a page from the Dimphil catalogue of Butterfly stamps, listing the very first one – from Hawaii, 1891

POST FROM THE PAST

Discover the appeal of postal history

The study of postal services of the past can be hugely rewarding, giving a collection a historical context that few other hobbies can offer

Broadly speaking, postal history is the study of the history of postal services from their earliest inception. Although 'history' suggests something old if not ancient, the study of how the posts operate, and (more importantly) the end product that this produces, is an ongoing subject. Indeed, some of the stuff that came through your letterbox this morning may be the postal history of the present and the future!

Although postal services of one sort or another have been around for centuries and can be traced right back to the cuneiform clay tablets of ancient Assyria and the parchment letters of Dynastic Egypt, for all practical purposes the collectable aspects of postal history start in the Late Middle Ages with the introduction of paper as a writing material in Europe.

Historical significance

The earliest letters still extant are extremely rare and mostly preserved in museums and archives. These include the correspondence of the monasteries and early universities. More readily accessible are the letters of merchants and trade guilds dating from the 14th century. The Venetian merchants conducted an extensive correspondence in every part of Europe and the Near East and examples come up at auction from the time to time. They are entirely handwritten, but are of historical significance on account of the manuscript endorsements indicating the route taken.

By the 17th century the earliest handstruck marks were beginning to emerge and it is from that time onward that the material avidly sought after by postal historians belongs. The era from the emergence of the Bishop marks in 1661 to the advent of Uniform Penny Post in 1840 is often referred to as the pre-stamp period, and the material represented by it as 'stampless covers'.

Both terms are misleading and inaccurate. If we define a 'stamp' as something indicating the prepayment of postage, then there were certainly many types, albeit struck by hand rather than represented by gummed paper, since the time of William Dockwra's London Penny Post in the 1680s. Cash prepayment of postage was widely practised in many countries long before the adhesive postage stamp first saw the light of day.

Letter sheets

Apart from handstruck postage stamps for prepaid



An assortment of mainly early 19th century Italian postal markings, cut out and pasted inside an Austrian letter card about 1900: an indication that even as long ago as that there were collectors showing some curiosity about postmarks as well as stamps



A page showing postmarks of Estonia. The inscriptions in bold type give the names by which the towns are generally known abroad, followed by columns of pieces showing postmarks from the Tsarist era and the first republic in the 1920s and 1930s

mail there were, of course, numerous postal markings, either handstruck or manuscript, to be found on cover. Here again, a cover should be defined as the outer wrapper of a letter. Prior to 1840 the use of envelopes for sending letters was virtually unknown, for the simple reason that postage was charged according to the number of sheets, and an envelope would have been counted separately. It was not until 1840 that envelopes ceased to be regarded as a second sheet, doubling the postage due from the recipient.

In fact letter sheets were often foolscap or double-quarto in size so that they could be folded in such a way that the back of the sheet formed the outer wrapper. For that reason 'entires' or 'entire letters' are found with the letter and wrapper still intact, thereby adding considerably to the social interest of the item.

Postal history, as a branch of philately, was a late starter. The vast majority of stamp collectors in the 19th century were only interested in stamps, preferably unused. Philatelists regarded the cancellation as a blemish and it was not until the 1880s that collectors began to study the postal markings themselves. They began to form sideline collections of postmarks, extending their interest to the datestamps found alongside the adhesive stamps or on the backs of envelopes. They cut them out and pasted them in notebooks, the more fastidious collectors even neatly cutting round the postmarks, regardless of the adhesive stamps they mutilated in the process.

This strange fashion had died out by 1900 but the habit of cutting postmarks square, irrespective of the adhesives, died hard. Even today, you will sometimes come across old-time postmark collections where many a fine specimen has been cut into or trimmed to preserve a neat postmark. By the 1950s, however, people were starting to realise that postmarks were best preserved on complete covers. Nevertheless, there is still a school of thought which prefers postmarks 'on piece', albeit cut with generous margins.

Cumbersome collections

A general rule of thumb is that if there is only one postal marking on an envelope then it can be cut out. This is a sensible and practical approach for otherwise collecting postal history would be extremely cumbersome. Covers with two or more postal markings, which might include postage due or redirection marks as well as the cancellation on stamps, should be kept intact. Moreover, postcards, once cut for their postmarks, are now more generally kept intact because of the picture postcard market.

Postal history, as a separate branch of philately, really began to take off in the 1930s. Indeed, the late Robson Lowe, a dealer who made a market in this field, even attempted to patent the term 'postal history' to prevent his rivals using it, but this absurd ploy was rejected. It is a vague term which is all things to all men. The person who merely amasses large quantities of postmarks and mounts them in an album, considers himself as much a postal historian as the person who only collects 'pre-stamp' covers. Conversely there are true postal historians who do not collect anything, but who have devoted a lifetime to research into the history of various aspects of the



A display of the neat little 19th century datestamps known to collectors as 'thimbles', arranged alphabetically from Austria to Zanzibar



A page from a collection of RFC and RAF postal history



A page from the collection of registered mail formed by the late Halley Grant showing labels used at offices in the Habsburg Empire, then Czechoslovakia and finally the Nazi protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia

particular post office or even its change of address (especially arising from the re-organisation of counties and regions since the 1970s).

These comments apply mainly to post offices in the British Isles but similar examples will be encountered from other countries as well. Most countries have also made considerable strides in recent years with the concentration and mechanisation of the mails, reflected in the changes of inscriptions in postmarks as well as the type of cancellation employed, notably the spread of Integrated Microprocessor equipment.

The wheel has now come full circle for we are living in a new era of 'stampless covers' ranging from meter marks and postage paid impressions to Frama labels, postal service indicator labels, pre-printed envelopes with Condition 9 impressions and computer-generated e-stamps. These are all beyond the scope of the stamp catalogues, but with the sharp decline in the use of conventional adhesives, perhaps this is the shape of philately in the future.

HOUSING A POSTAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Storing postal history material poses some problems. Obviously such material takes up more space than stamps. Stanley Gibbons used to market a tiny album known as the Lilliput, advertised as being 'ideal for such side-lines as postmarks'. Those of us who developed an interest in postmarks, let alone entire covers and cards, soon discovered that the 'side-line' took over to such an extent that extensive shelving or filing cabinets were required to accommodate them.

Conventional, full-size loose-leaf albums were commonly used, although the sheer bulk of material made this an expensive ploy. Nowadays collectors usually mount material on A4 cards which can be obtained in packs of 500. Card of 160gsm is ideal – stout enough to support even the thickest covers or entire letters, but still thin and pliable enough to be printed out on a standard computer printer. These cards can be stored in plastic wallets or rigid folders, or they may be inserted in polythene sleeves with holes punched on one side to facilitate storage in lever-arch folders.

Postmark collections can be mounted on 6 by 4 inch cards stored in small filing drawers, a neat method of dealing with a collection of postmarks or registration labels of towns and villages arranged in alphabetical order, although this is not so practical where larger or bulkier items are concerned..

Pieces may be lightly hinged with conventional mounts, but larger pieces, cards and covers should be held in place by photographic mounting corners, preferably the clear plastic type with self-adhesive backing. Generally two mounts, in opposing corners, suffice, but larger items and documents may require three – never four, as you should always allow your material to breathe. Many a fine cover was damaged by corner buckling or distortion due to shrinkage of mounting corners.



Back and front of a much travelled and heavily re-directed letter that chased the addressee all round India from 1941 till 1945 as he moved from one unit to another



Portion of a page from the collection of Aberdeen postmarks formed by George Brumell (1875-1950), the doyen of British postal history. The album bears the annotation 'Revised 1940' and shows how collectors preferred cut-outs instead of complete covers in those days

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