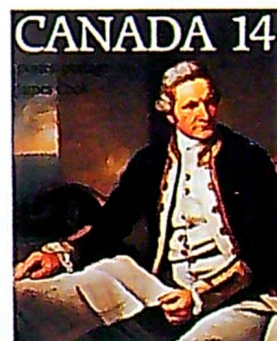
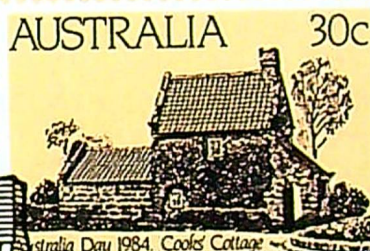


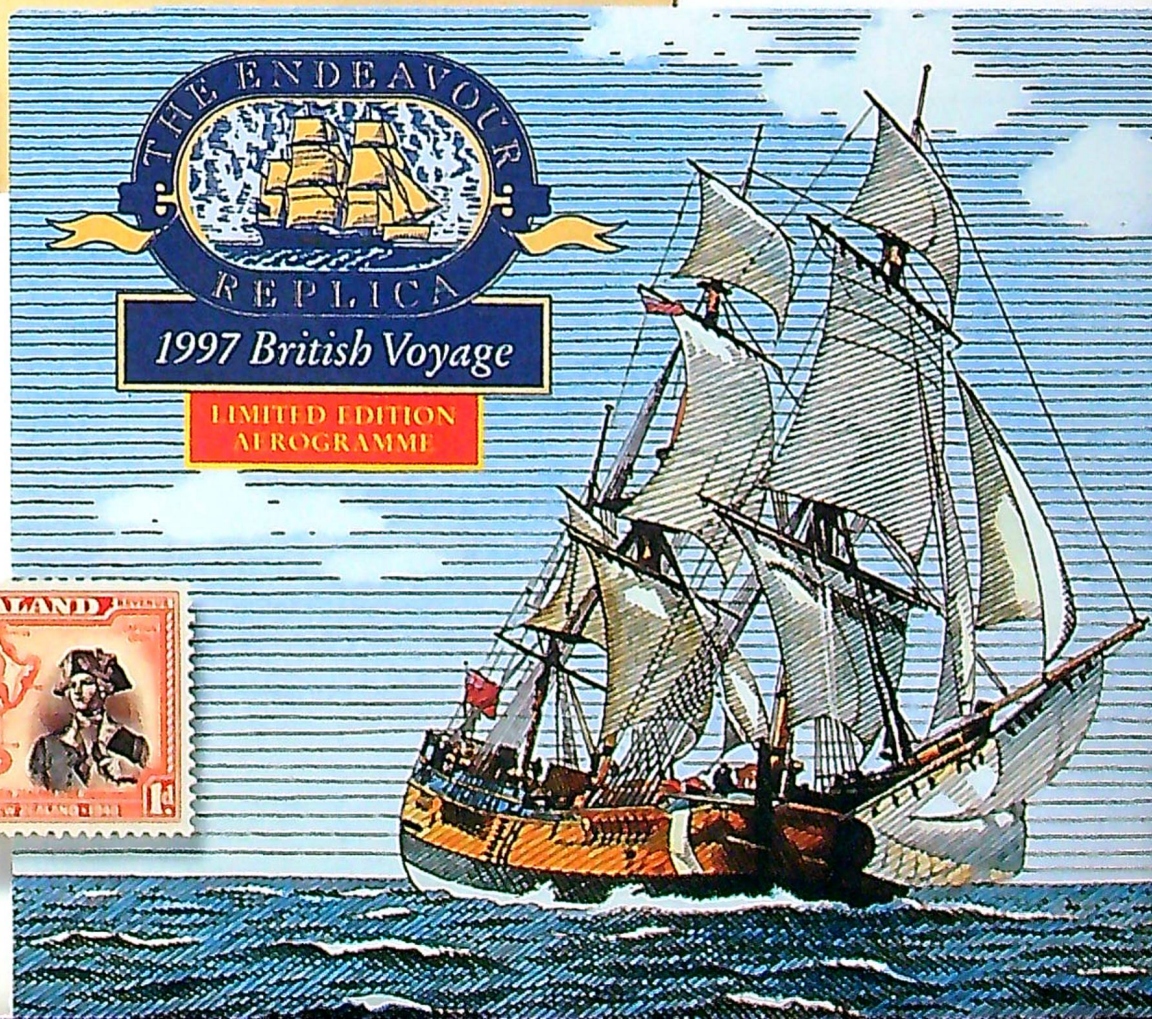
BRITISH PHILATELIC BULLETIN

An Introduction to Thematic Collecting

PUBLICATION N° 5



MARGARET MORRIS



Introduction to Thematic Collecting

BRITISH PHILATELIC BULLETIN

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- 3 Introduction
- 4 What is thematic collecting?
- 6 Choosing the theme
- 7 Assembling the material
- 9 Assembling the information
- 10 Getting it all together
- 12 Displays and competitions
- 13 Suggested further reading
- 13 Contact addresses

Cover A major theme such as Captain Cook is capable of many sub-divisions – for example, Place Names, the Voyages, or Portraits. Conversely, many stamps from this topic could find applications in such other themes as Navigation, Costume or Flora and Fauna.

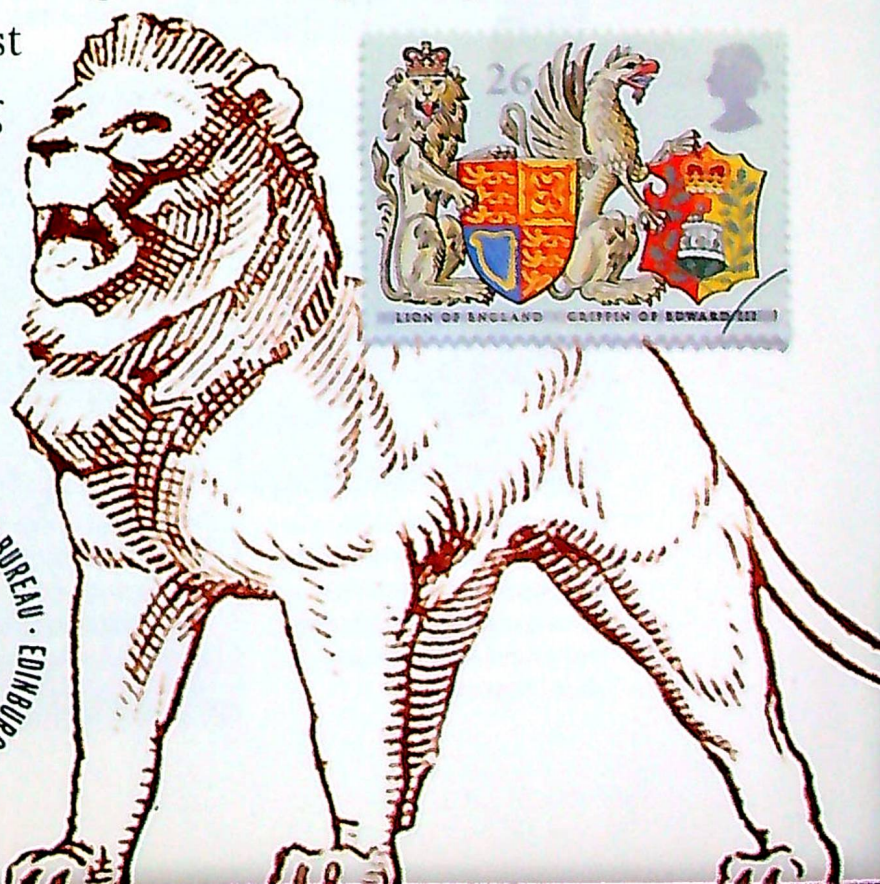


We have only just met, so I have to make a couple of assumptions about you. The first is that you are a keen and committed collector who knows how to handle and care for stamps. The second is that you are interested in British stamps and very likely have a collection of these issues – and this is only right and proper in view of the fact that the world's first postage stamp was issued by Great Britain.

To begin with, British stamps were produced in more or less standard format, and the design consisted of the monarch's portrait with varying amounts of decoration. The King Edward definitives of 1902 had laurel and oak leaves framing the portrait, but it was not until the reign of King George V that other elements started to appear in the designs.

From the George VI period onwards, stamps have been issued in an amazing profusion of designs covering many different subjects. I would like to suggest the possibility of organising a collection based on one or other of these themes.

The 1887 'Jubilee' issue of Queen Victoria included heraldic emblems such as those above. Right, a lion from the reign of George V, and heraldry in this year's Queen's Beasts issue and in a definitive stamps postmark.



WHAT IS THEMATIC COLLECTING?

There are basically three ways to collect philatelic material. The first is to set a geographical limit (for example collecting the stamps of a country or group of countries). The second method is bounded by a period of time (for example, the reign of a monarch or the duration of a war).

The third method cuts across the constraints of geography or date of issue and instead considers all the items relating to a chosen theme. The items to be included can feature the theme as a major or minor element of the design, or may simply have wording on them relating to the chosen theme, or perhaps the theme is implied in the reason for issue. This is thematic collecting.

You may think that the set of five Rose stamps issued by Royal Mail in 1991 for the 9th World Congress of Roses in Belfast would be simple to deal with but in the hands of Sheila Foster the set would be broken up as shown here in her gold medal collection 'Roses, Roses All the Way'.



Rose breeders The 26p would be mounted under Rose breeders.



Modern roses The 33p would appear in the section on Modern roses (it gained the Rose of the Year award in 1991).



Rose naming The 22p value depicts a rose which was named for the silver jubilee of Queen Elizabeth and would be mounted under Naming.



Historical roses The 31p and 37p depict old wild roses and would appear in the historical section of the main collection under their countries of origin.



If you have been used to collecting in sets, thematic collecting can often involve breaking up these sets. For example, a country might have issued a set on a general transport theme, but that set might include a pony and trap, a steamship, a diesel locomotive and a jet aircraft. If you are really serious about forming a collection on the history of transport, then each one of these stamps will find its own place in a logical story.

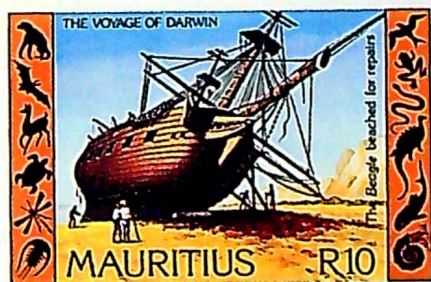
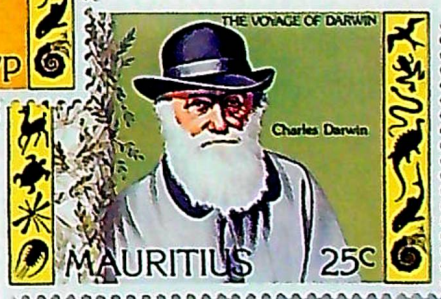
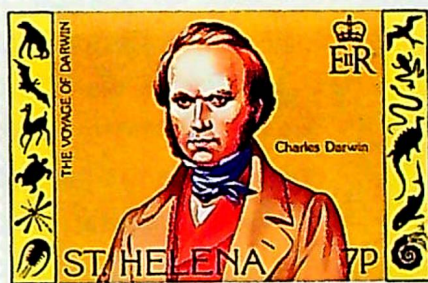
A thematic collection can include items from all countries of the world and issued through all periods. It is therefore liberating but at the same time can be demanding because of the wide knowledge you need to have – not just of the actual theme but also of what exists in philately.

These challenges may initially cause some problems which need to be thought out, but the whole method of collecting is very stimulating and can provide a lifetime of rewarding interest.

In 1982, several territories together honoured Charles Darwin and the voyage of the *Beagle*. Ascension, Falkland Islands, Mauritius and St Helena each issued sets of four stamps and a few representative values are shown here.

Darwin's career impinged on geology, botany, zoology and paleontology so individual stamps could be diverted to these subjects, as well as to those suggested below.

Portraits Within each set, one stamp showed a different portrait of Darwin, so that the sets could be broken up into the portraits themselves and the theme of Gerontology (ageing of Darwin).



The ship Each set included one stamp depicting the *Beagle*, which belongs to the Ships theme, but could also have applications in Exploration, and scenes of places visited.

Tools Each set featured an implement or instrument used by Darwin: a pistol, telescope, microscope and hammer.



A bonus Twelve tiny silhouettes decorate the side panels of all the stamps so that you have numerous extra applications such as under Baboon, Bat, Deer, Turtle, Dragonfly, Frog, Snake, Dinosaur etc.

CHOOSING THE THEME

It is always fascinating to hear someone describe what started them off on a particular collection. In some cases, the theme grew out of a professional interest (for example a doctor collecting Medicine), in others the collection was formed because of a hobby or pastime (a keen gardener collecting Flowers, or an amateur pianist collecting Music).

Sometimes an absorbing interest can be sparked off in an apparently casual way – say by an image on a television programme or a chance remark by a speaker at some function. From such beginnings can spring collections on themes like AIDS, global warming or other modern health and environmental issues. A wonderful holiday can be the springboard for a collection on the culture, archaeology and scenery of a happily remembered country. And remember that quite often aspects of one country will appear on stamps of another.

It's nice to be adventurous. For instance, it is not too difficult to make a good collection on the Europa theme. There are the annual special

CEPT issues such as statues, folklore and contemporary art of member states, and stamps showing the starry flag or the Channel Tunnel or representing common European legislation. But for something a bit different which could be a real challenge to collect, (especially if you have a strong leaning towards history) a collection on the Changing Face of Europe could prove quite absorbing and lead you into some very specialised fields of philately. Just think of the alterations to boundaries which have resulted in names of towns being spelt in different ways on their postmarks, and the states which appeared briefly at the end of the First World War and then vanished from the stamp album; only to reappear as fully fledged countries once again in more recent times.

A bit of thought will usually reward you with a new insight into your chosen theme and a new way of approaching it. Whatever the stimulus, there are certain well recognised paths towards achieving the goal of a fine thematic collection and perhaps we could walk down these paths together to see where they lead.



ASSEMBLING THE MATERIAL

Having decided on your theme, it is now necessary to find out what exists and probably the best way to start is by looking at the various stamp catalogues. This is where thematic collecting gets a bit difficult because some catalogues illustrate only one or two individual stamps from long sets and you really need to scrutinise every stamp in case you miss out on some small detail.

If you belong to a stamp club, it is likely that there will be a library or else you could maybe ask individual members to let you have a peek at their special country catalogues. Usually collectors are happy to help one another in this way. The other advantage of belonging to a stamp club is that you will see displays of many different kinds which will increase your awareness of what exists.

Just as in the case of a country collection, you do not need to restrict yourself merely to the stamp issues. As a reader of the *Bulletin* you already know that in addition to stamps, Britain produces presentation packs, booklets, the PHQ cards, air letters, special postmarks – in fact, a whole suite of collectables. Other countries do the same, so for your theme you need to look at these other possibilities. This is where things start to get interesting.

In Britain, it is easy to keep up to date with special postmarks through the *British Postmark Bulletin* which also carries helpful articles such as the Thematic Review of 1996 Slogans published in the April 1997 issue. Special cancellations cover a huge range of themes and provide some variation to the collecting. In many cases stamp plus related cancellation form an attractive unit.

A wealth of philatelic material is available, from the early stages of stamp production (essays, proofs, etc, as shown above) right through to the issued stamps used on covers for special purposes and with special postal markings. Varieties add spice to a collection – especially if they also happen to make a valid thematic point. What could be better than the Israeli stamp on the Road Safety theme above, where a missing colour leaves the poor little man on the scooter minus his safety helmet!



A dated progressive proof compared with the issued stamp, top, and a most appropriate variety on an Israeli Road Safety issue.

A Calendar theme The card at right was posted in Stuttgart on 12 April 1887 (Gregorian calendar) and received at St Petersburg on 4 April (Julian calendar), apparently arriving before it was sent.

Similar anomalies occur with mail flown across the International Date Line. The Jet Stream cachet (far right, with a stamp depicting the Date Line) is on a cover mailed on 1 January 1954, arriving in Hawaii on 31 December 1953.

A German first day cover and Vatican stamp, bottom right, celebrate 400 years of the Gregorian calendar.

Near right, a Hungarian stamp for 1 January.



During the French Revolution, each month was given a new descriptive name. This letter is dated *le 7 Vent^{se} 12*: the 7th day of Ventôse (March, the Windy month), year 12 of the Revolution.

Chalon le 7 Vent^{se} 12
Cochet p. 12



It can be fun to search for older philatelic items to add to your collection. In a Calendar theme, for example, you could be interested in mail from Russia prior to 1918 using the Julian calendar (above, top), or from France using the calendar introduced in 1792 (above, bottom left).

If you intend to include a used stamp in your collection, the postmark should not be too heavy and above all should not obliterate the most important part of the design relative to your theme. (However, there are occasions where the postmark itself is the important element.)

It is never too early to be careful about the appropriateness and condition of the material you add to your collection and, if you are discriminating from the start, it will pay dividends later on. You will have a collection that is not only better to look at but better value.



Postmarks should not be too heavy.

ASSEMBLING THE INFORMATION

Just as important as the material you are gathering is the information. Perhaps you are lucky enough to be already an expert in your chosen subject and the available information is well known to you. If not, then you are going to have to start by doing a lot of reading. A browse around a good library or book shop will indicate some books as starters and will likely suggest some further reading.

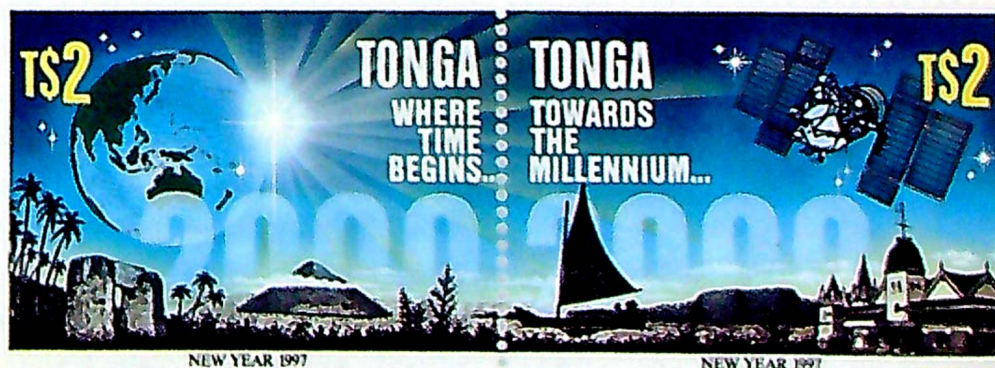
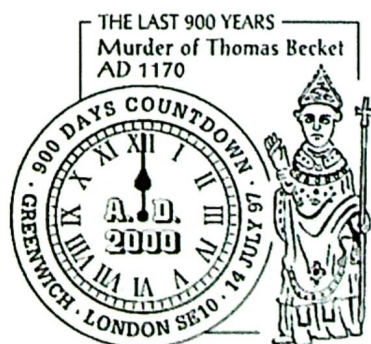
Radio and TV programmes and newspapers can help you keep up to date with developments in your field of interest. There will almost certainly be a related non-philatelic specialist organisation publishing magazines on whatever theme you have chosen. Lastly, using the World Wide Web, it has nowadays never been easier to acquire information. The problem may indeed end up being one of selection!

However, for thematic collecting, there has to be a blend of theme information and philatelic information.

The philatelic information may not be quite so well known to you and here again some reading will be needed. There is an immense quantity of philatelic literature in the form of books, magazines and the publications of the specialist groups. As you talk to more collectors and also to helpful dealers, you will learn more about what is available.

Sometimes an interest in a particular theme will lead you to join an associated specialist society. For example, I collect Whales (among other things) and have found a lot of interest in publications of the Polar Postal History Society of GB and the American Society of Polar Philatelists. The same organisations could be helpful if your theme was Polar Explorers. Numerous other examples could be given.

Like every other aspect of human endeavour, thematic collecting is subject to changing tastes and fashion. Themes change position on the 'pop chart' from time to time and it is interesting to try and predict which will be the upcoming ones. Perhaps the millennium?



GETTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Having chosen your theme, read widely about it and gathered suitable items into stock books and cover albums, it is time to take your collection to the next stage. While you have been making these preparations, you will have found that a logical system has emerged and that there are quite clear lines along which you want your collection to develop.

What you have, then, in your head is a plan, and it is now time to convert that plan onto the most important page of your collection. If you collect without some kind of plan in mind, you will end up with a loose hotch-potch (take it from one who has been there!). You are also likely to buy something you later find you don't really need.



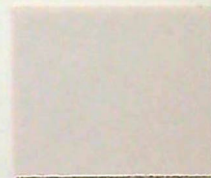
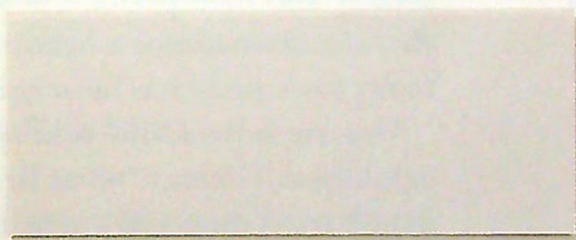
If you collect Dogs, you would perhaps progress from history of the dog, through various breeds, dogs in the service of man and so on.

Having got your plan (similar to chapters and sub-headings in a book) laid out, you can now start to place items on pages. This can be a bit difficult to start with. Compared to the relative simplicity of setting out a country collection with unified sets, you are now faced with stamps of all ages, sizes, shapes and colours. And not only stamps, but miniature sheets, meter marks, postal stationery and all sorts of other goodies. A useful short cut is illustrated opposite, on a page featuring designs based on the Torun portrait of Copernicus.

The advice given to general collectors on paper size and quality applies also to thematic collectors. The colour of the paper should be very restrained – plain white is usually preferred but a delicate pastel may be acceptable if it suits the subject (for example a famous American lady collector mounts her collection of the elephant on ivory pages).



and gourmet treats



In a lightweight cotton blend Chambray dress is cool and comfortable to wear. It is your well deserved winter b

Hand printing, typewriting, dry transfer lettering and stencilling can all be very attractive *if well executed*. Nowadays many people use personal computers for writing up and this can make a very handsome exhibit, but some collectors get carried away with the variety of fonts available to them and this can spoil the whole effect. Several experts have written good articles in the philatelic press on writing-up and plenty of help is available.

Whatever you do, the writing-up for a thematic collection should not overwhelm the philatelic material. In spite of all that reading you have done, the text on your pages will be a mere distillation of the knowledge gained. Also, it is considered good practice to use one font style for the flow of the 'storyline' and a different and smaller font for philatelic annotations.

It might be necessary to combine early pale stamps with bolder large modern stamps in odd shapes and sizes, or with a miniature sheet, postal stationery or a special cancellation.

A useful short cut is illustrated here. Cut up suitably sized pieces of coloured paper and text (maybe from an old magazine) and play around with these on blank pages until you begin to get the idea of good layout and balance.

DISPLAYS AND COMPETITIONS

If you are invited out, you usually spend a bit of time getting ready, putting on fresh clothes, tidying your hair, and so on. Similarly, if you are asked to display your collection, or a part of it, you would make some preparations.

The display might be to some friends or neighbours, or to your local stamp club. Whatever the reason, try to select some pages which give a clear logical insight into what you are doing. It's best not to risk boring your audience with lengthy explanations but instead just set the background and then let the pages take over and tell their own story.

The next progression could be to competitions – first at your local society and then perhaps at a national event. Whatever you do, *read the rules*. Sometimes a beautiful entry has done badly because some really basic point has been ignored.

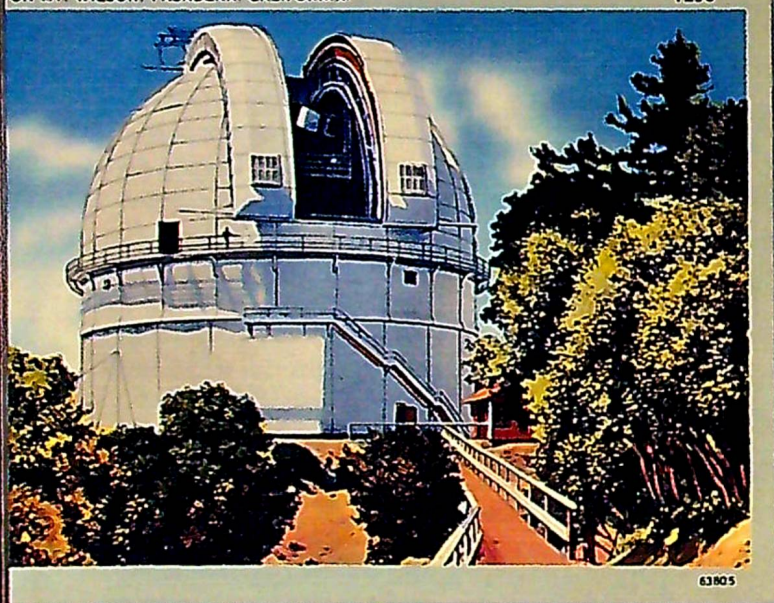
You are in luck this year because there is to be a major thematic exhibition Themex '98 at Brighton and Hove '98 in November. No matter what stage you are at, this will be an event worth attending and in addition to the National and International Classes, there is also an Open Class. Watch out for more information and try to get there. At the same time, a new set of FIP (International Philatelic Federation) regulations for thematic exhibiting has been approved and these can be obtained from the British Philatelic Trust, 107 Charterhouse Street, London EC1M 6PT by sending £1.

Even if you are not yet in this league, there is no harm in taking on board the various principles involved as they will help you improve your collection. There are a lot of little refinements to be learned and tricks of presentation. One important thing to remember is that not all items which are collectable are also necessarily 'exhibitable'.



ON MT. WILSON, PASADENA, CALIFORNIA.

T296



It can be fun to include picture postcards in your collection, but remember they are not admitted at exhibitions held under FIP regulations. Also, Cinderellas now have their own classification.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

To take you further than this little introduction, you would enjoy:
Adventures in Topical Stamp Collecting, by Griffenhagen and Husak
(2nd edition)

For more advanced collecting and exhibiting, I would suggest:
Handbook of Thematic Philately, by W E J van den Bold, and
The New Philatelic Exhibitors Handbook, by Randy L Neil

And for general information:

Errors in Postage Stamp Design, by D E G Irvine and M Seshold, and
Philatelic Terms Illustrated, by James Mackay

CONTACT ADDRESSES

There are a lot of people who enjoy the same things you do, and contact through the sharing of information and experience with people collecting the same theme is encouraging and fun.

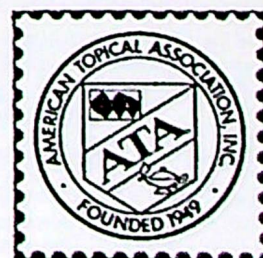
Please always be sure to send a stamped addressed envelope or International Reply Coupon as applicable when you write for contact addresses. Thank you.

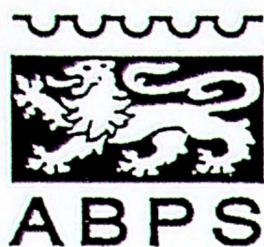
The British Thematic Association The BTA was founded in 1984 and exists to help all thematic collectors. The quarterly magazine *Themescene* is full of interesting articles, hints and tips, contact with collectors and a full library list to keep you abreast of other published work.

For further information send a stamped addressed envelope or International Reply Coupon as applicable to: Membership Secretary: Ian Paton, 15 Humberstone Road, Cambridge CB4 1JD.

The American Topical Association The ATA has been in existence for almost fifty years. There is a bi-monthly magazine *Topical Time* with news of all the specialist groups and reviews of their publications. Well illustrated articles are published on a wide variety of topics both thematic and philatelic.

For further information send an International Reply Coupon to: ATA Central Office, PO Box 65749, Tucson, AZ 85728 USA.





The Association of British Philatelic Societies For help in contacting your local philatelic society or stamp club, you should get in touch with the ABPS by sending a stamped addressed envelope to: Brian L. Asquith, 'Alandale', Radcliffe Gardens, Carshalton Beeches, Surrey SM5 4PQ.

Brian can also put you in touch with any of the following British specialist thematic groups which may be of interest to you.

Alba Stamp Group (Scotland in the stamp album)	International Guild of Rugby Theme Collectors
Astro Space Stamp Club	International Philatelic Golf Society
Bicycle Stamps Club	Judaica Philatelic Society
Bird Stamp Society	Masonic Philatelic Club
British Royal Portraits Study Group	Medical Philatelic Study Group
Butterfly and Moth Philatelic Society	Methodist Philatelic Society
Captain Cook Study Unit	Philatelic History Society
Chess Philatelists Society	Philatelic Music Circle
Churchill Collectors Club	Polar Postal History Society of Great Britain
Concorde Study Circle	Railway Philatelic Group
Constabulary and Other Philatelic Society	Rotary on Stamps
Cricket Philatelic Society	Scout and Guide Stamp Club
Exhibition Study Group	Ship Stamp Society
Football Topical Society	Society of Olympic Collectors
Guild of St Gabriel (Religion on stamps)	Stamp Art Society
	United Nations Study Group
	Windmill Study Unit

Regional Groups If you live in one of the following areas, you can contact the three regional groups, again through Brian Asquith of the ABPS: Glasgow Thematic Society, North East Thematic Society, and West of England Thematic Society, where you will find a number of people all with different collecting interests which is very stimulating.

The author Margaret Morris studied astronomy at Glasgow University and subsequently worked in the University's observatory. She was elected the first lady President of the Astronomical Society of Glasgow in 1968 and first lady President of the Association of Scottish Philatelic Societies in 1980. She began stamp collecting as a schoolgirl and later became interested in Gold Coast and modern colonials. She is now an internationally respected thematic collector, with collections of Astronomy, Captain Cook, Pre-Columbian Art, and Whales and Whaling. She also collects Greenland. Margaret is a Fellow of the Royal Philatelic Society London, and Co-ordinating Secretary for the Glasgow 2000 stamp exhibition.

An article about her collections and philatelic work was published in the *British Philatelic Bulletin*, June 1997.



Other publications in this series

The early Days of the Postal Service (1986)
 British Special Stamps 1985-86 (Publication No 1 1993)
 British Stamp Design 1993 (Publication No 2 1994)
 Burns Bicentenary 1996 (Publication No 3 1996)
 British Victorian Stamps (Publication No 4 1997)

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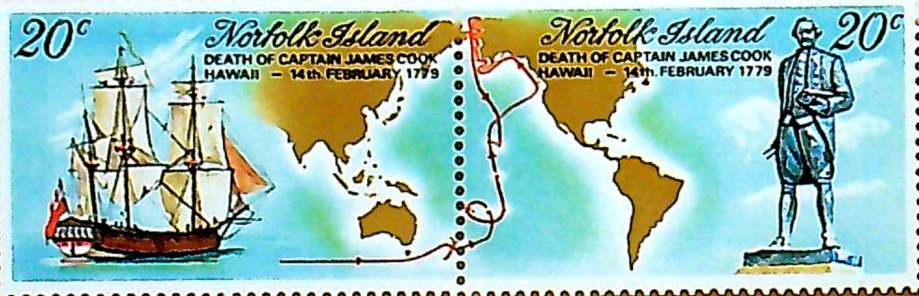
Jubilee issue stamp (p3) loaned by Buchanan Street Stamps, Glasgow; information about stamps on page 5 supplied by Eugene Wood.

British stamps and postmarks © The Post Office

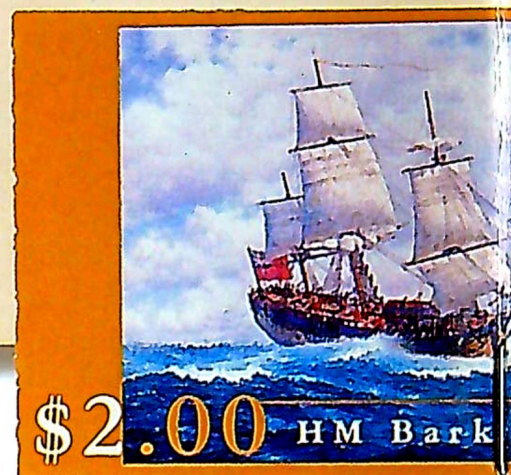
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