

BRITISH *PHILATELIC* BULLETIN

New Technology for Stamp Collectors

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Cover The Queen's profile is a photograph from a Royal Mail website page, enlarged to over 1200%. At this size, the individual red, green and blue colours which combine to form colour images on a monitor or TV screen can be easily seen.

THIS BOOKLET shows how many thousands of collectors throughout the world use computers to help them increase the enjoyment of their stamp collections.

Perhaps the biggest deterrent to wider computer usage is the 'fear' syndrome. Collectors are heard to say 'I don't understand computers – they're too complicated for me'. This is a pity, because using a computer effectively does not require any deep knowledge of its inner workings.

Even collectors who do not have a computer of their own can find a way to use computer facilities. An increasing number of libraries have installed computers, and many allow free public access to the machines. Also, in many areas of the country, there are cyber-cafés, where time can be bought, normally at an hourly rate, on a modern computer in a pleasant environment where refreshments are also on sale.



INTRODUCTION



This is an overview of computer usage in philately at the beginning of the new Millennium. Because of the speed of change within the subject, it is certain that in a year or two's time there will be new ways of using computers available to collectors which are missing from these pages.

When writing about computers it is impossible to avoid using some jargon terms. Where a jargon word has to be used it is printed in *italics* the first time it appears. A brief glossary of these words is given on page 14.

All applications have been described as though the machine used is an *IBM-compatible* personal computer – the type of machine by far the most common available. Any advertisement for a particular computer that does not make specific reference to its type, can be assumed to be *IBM-compatible*. The second most common type of personal computer – the Macintosh – and any of the other non *IBM-compatible* types available, have had to be ignored because of lack of space. The assumption has also been made that the *operating system* employed is some version of Microsoft *Windows*.

DETAILS OF YOUR COLLECTION

A very common task for which collectors use their machines is to hold current details of the content of their collections. There are many programs available for this purpose. The *reports* produced by such programs are used for two main reasons: firstly to create want-lists, and secondly, to show valuations for insurance.

Many of these programs are designed to record the stamps of one country. They typically include built-in tables listing the adhesive issues of that country. These tables – known as *databases* – contain basic catalogue details of each issued stamp, sometimes including an illustration. Some programs allow the collector to add to these base details, whilst others simply provide entry and reporting facilities with no pre-set information. The latter type are intended to allow collectors to build up a database that reflects their own specialised interests.

The reporting functions built into these programs need close consideration. Some programs only allow you to list all the *records* in the database in a pre-determined sequence. Others provide for a selection of reports to be taken from a limited number of alternatives, none of which may suit your needs.

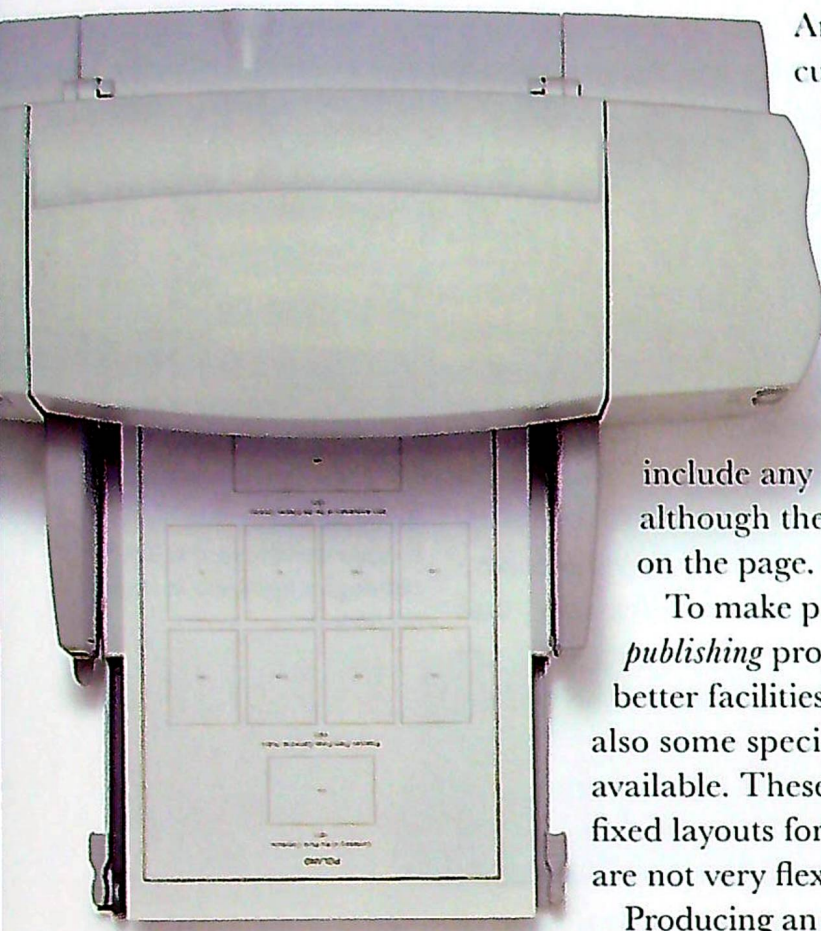
Two other areas are of concern when considering the use of this type of recording program. The first is the vexed question of catalogue numbers. Scott has permitted some suppliers of inventory programs in America to include Scott numbers in their databases. Stanley Gibbons, however, will not allow the use of their catalogue numbers in commercially-published electronic databases, and so to use Gibbons numbers with any computer-based inventory of your collection you have to add these references yourself on the relevant records.

The second problem area with inventory keeping is valuations. Some inventory programs only allow one value to be recorded. Others allow separate price entries to be made for very fine, fine, good, average, poor, etc, and this aspect can make large differences in the overall valuation of a collection, and may be important to you.

Finally, with any inventory program that incorporates a catalogue-based database, you need to know how it is intended to keep it up to date. Some vendors offer annual updates, at a cost, whereas others make no mention of when, or how, the database will be amended over time.

Some American inventory programs include the Scott catalogue numbers in their database.

CREATING ALBUM PAGES



Another popular use for a computer is to make custom-designed stamp album pages. The advantages of using a computer to produce album pages are the ability to employ different typefaces for emphasis on the finished page, the ease of amendment to any typed wording and the greatly improved presentation that can be achieved, including the addition of images when desirable.

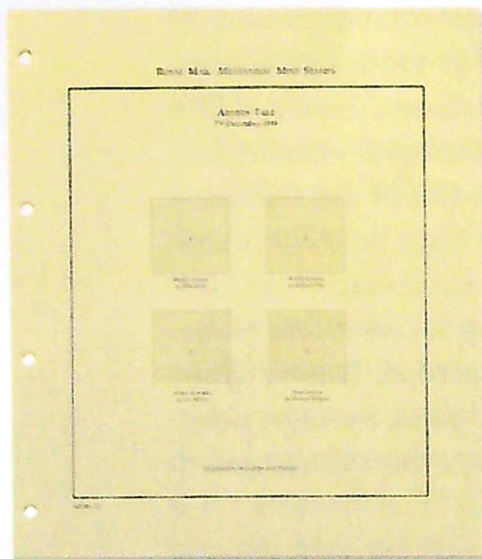
The programs available for this purpose include any of the standard *word processing* applications, although these require some care in positioning the text on the page.

To make page creation even simpler, the use of *desk-top publishing* programs is recommended as these have much better facilities for laying out the page elements. There are also some specially written album page creation programs available. These philatelic programs tend to offer relatively fixed layouts for the finished pages, and whilst simple to use are not very flexible.

Producing an album page requires a printer to be connected to the computer. Ink-jet printers are commonly used with home computers and can produce excellent quality images

in black and white. Others print in colour, although they may need special paper to obtain optimum results. Laser printers are a dearer alternative to ink-jet types, but normally produce the highest quality copies. They tend to be restricted to black-and-white printing, except for relatively expensive machines.

An important consideration is the size of the final printed page. Most ink-jet or laser printers accept a maximum paper size of an A4 sheet. This can often be smaller than a conventional English album page, and may not always be suitable when pages need many



An A4 printer will produce a smaller page than the traditional English album page.

oversized items to be displayed. The recent appearance of laser printers which accept paper sizes up to A3 (297mm/11.75in × 420mm/16.5in) overcomes this limitation.

CATALOGUES AND OTHER REFERENCE



A word that appears in many computer advertisements is *multimedia*. This normally simply means that the computer system includes a *CD-ROM* or a *DVD* drive and can read the text, plus music, video clips or other graphic images, stored on these compact discs.

Large numbers of these compact discs contain general reference data, or information on a specific subject. In the latter category, stamp collectors will find many well-known catalogues available on this medium, as well as specialist philatelic handbooks. The main advantage of these electronic publications over their paper equivalents is the ease of searching and retrieving information, and their ability to include coloured illustrations.

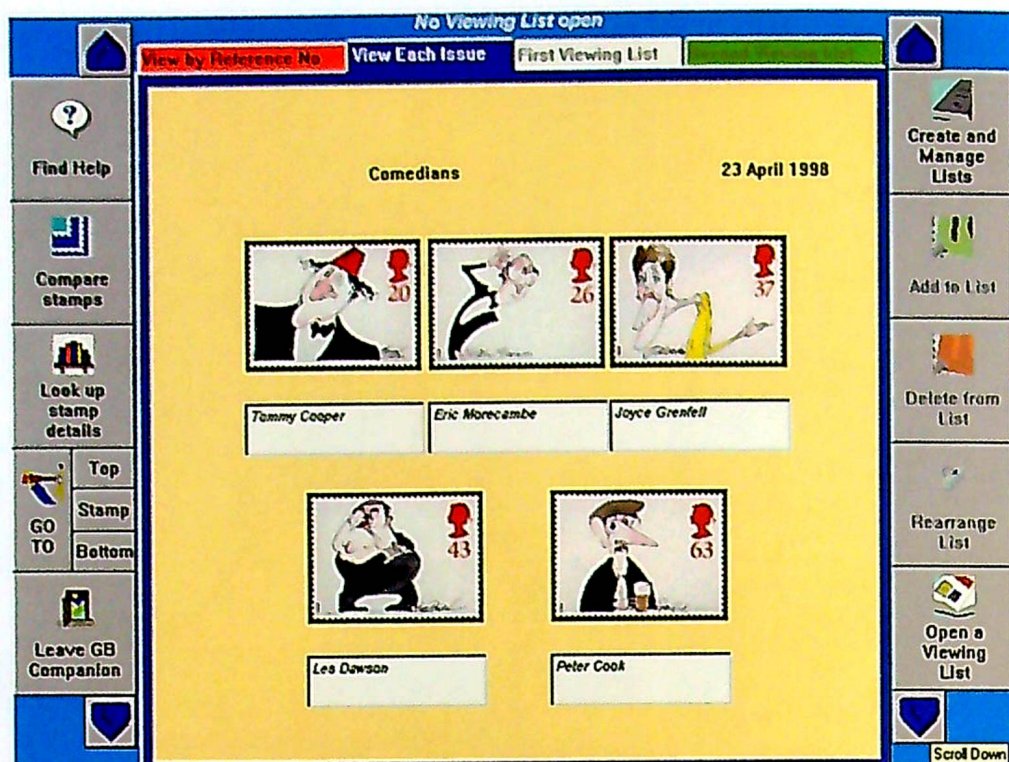
A disadvantage of multimedia discs is that they sometimes need a powerful computer system to run efficiently. If you require a computer for this purpose, try to have the compact disc you want to use (for example, an encyclopaedia) run on the machine you will be using, to confirm that the quality and speed of the screen displays are acceptable. Also remember that the information on the compact disc is fixed at a point in time. It cannot be brought up to date except by purchasing a later dated version, which is why the internet offers advantages for use as a reference source.

A wide variety of general reference information is available on CD or DVD.

FOR COLLECTORS OF GREAT BRITAIN

StampMaster GB provides detailed descriptions of all normally issued GB stamps from 1840 onwards.

StampMaster Companion, issued in 1997 on CD-ROM, complements the earlier StampMaster GB program and includes an illustrated GB stamp guide.

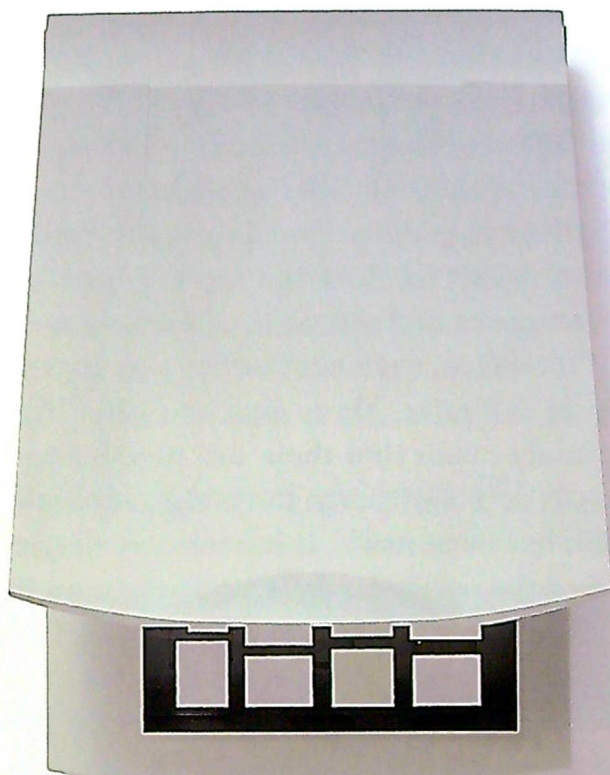


In 1994 the first version of the StampMaster GB program was released. Written by Philatelic Software Ltd, and endorsed by both Royal Mail and the National Postal Museum, this program provides detailed descriptions of all normally issued GB stamps from 1840 onwards. The stamps are numbered sequentially by issue date using the Chronolist numbering system of the National Postal Museum, but collectors can add their own catalogue identifying numbers if required. Different levels of detail are presented on separate screens, so that the program can be used by collectors from beginner to expert.

As well as a reference source, this program can copy entries into an inventory section to record which stamps are held in your collection. Where varieties are held, details of these can be added to this inventory. Basic holdings can be valued from the 'average mint and used catalogue prices' which are recorded on the detailed stamp records. These pre-recorded values can be amended by the user if considered to be incorrect. Reporting mechanisms within the program include the ability to print a want-list. The program is updated annually.

A program covering the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, and a StampMaster General program, which follows the same principles but allows the details of the stamps from any country or thematic subject to be typed in by the user, are also available.

RECORDING STAMP IMAGES



The addition of another piece of hardware, called a *scanner*, allows a collector to enhance the use of the computer. One use for scanners is to record copies of a complete collection for security or insurance purposes. The resulting images of the album pages should be stored on some kind of external recording medium, and CD-ROM or DVD are the common choices. Either of these options require the computer equipment to have a suitable *disk drive* that can make recordings on the chosen medium.

Scanners also give the user the ability to copy stamps, covers, photographs or printed pages, and the resultant images can then be manipulated with special image-editing programs. One common use for such editing programs is to lighten the background on a scanned copy of a stamp so that the copied image can be viewed on the computer screen with postmarks, surcharges, etc highlighted. These adjusted screen images can also be incorporated on computer-printed album pages.

Three main designs of scanner exist, which are: 'hand-held', 'rotary fed' (like fax machines), and 'flat-beds'. Only the last type is really suitable for general philatelic work. These look similar to small photocopiers, and will normally copy material up to a maximum image size of A4.

A scanner and its editing program allow for image manipulation, such as the 'removal' of a stamp, to reveal its postmark.

INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERNET



A computer can be joined to the internet by a modem.

The wider use of personal computers has been stimulated by the growth of the internet. This allows a network of computers around the world to be inter-connected. Your home computer is able to join this network when fitted with a piece of equipment called a *modem*.

The modem acts as a bridge between the personal computer and an organisation known as an 'ISP', short for 'internet service provider'. Connection between your computer and the ISP is achieved via the telephone. The elapsed time for calls is calculated whilst you are connected to the internet, at local call rates. Many ISPs now offer 'free' services. This does not normally mean that there are no telephone costs involved, only that the ISP does not charge for using its facilities.

Once a suitable connection has been made, it is necessary to navigate around the internet to find the particular information you need – for example, philatelic details. The basic information unit within the internet is called a 'site' – and there are many hundreds of thousands of these. Each site, which can consist of multiple 'pages', is identified by an *address*, called its 'URL', which means 'uniform resource locator'. Addresses commonly start with the letters 'www' and in total they make up the world wide web.

FINDING PHILATELIC SITES

One of the problems with the world wide web is that there is no single comprehensive 'index' which includes every site. A number of programs, known collectively as *search engines* exist which can be used to try to find relevant sites, but it is often necessary to employ more than one. Some common search engines are called AltaVista, Excite, Yahoo and Lycos. These match a search term that you type in – such as 'stamp collecting' – with any websites that contain that term in the search engine's internal index listing.

Searching can be frustrating because it relies upon the quality of the website listings stored in the search programs' indexes, and their search techniques. You will often find sites listed for which you can see no connection with what you were seeking and, if too many of these 'mis-hits' keep occurring, it is worth trying another search engine. UK collectors need to remember that many search engines use American spelling for their indexes. It is always worth trying an American alternative if a keyword in standard English spelling keeps giving mis-hits.

Another approach to searching is to employ a specialist index, where somebody has already collated lists of suitable sites on a given subject. Fortunately for stamp collectors, there are at least six indexes of this type available on the web. The longest-established is the index maintained by Joseph Luft, an American dealer/collector, which can be found at www.execpc.com/~joeluft/resource.html. His initial index, in April 1995, included the URLs of just 60 philatelic sites. By January 2000, it contained over 2200. Its importance was recognised by the FIP (the International Philatelic Federation) who named it as the inaugural winner of its 'Best Web Site' award.



Joe Luft's index won the FIP's inaugural 'Best Web Site' award at the Beijing International Exhibition in August 1999.

SOME SELECTED PHILATELIC SITES

The screenshot shows the StampTrac software interface. At the top is a menu bar with 'File', 'Internet', 'Window', and 'Help'. Below it is a toolbar with buttons for 'Inv', 'Settings', 'Export', and 'Import'. The main window is titled 'Inventory Items - Wants and Haves By Country'. It features a 'Status Filter' section with radio buttons for 'Want', 'Have', and 'Both'. A 'Search By' dropdown is set to 'Cat #', and there's a 'For Item' dropdown. Below these is a table with columns: Count, Cntry, Sec#, Catalog#, Var, Cond, Grade, Qty, Cost, Value, Calc'd, Status, Topic#, Catalog, and Notes. The table contains two rows of data for Poland (POL) with catalog numbers B40 and B41, both in 'Have' status. Below the table are various filters and input fields: 'Country' (POLAND), 'Variety' (Normal issue), 'Cat#', 'Qty', 'Status' (Have/Want), 'Condition' (with radio buttons for different grades), 'Grade', 'Section' (SEMI POSTAL STAMPS (001)), 'Cost', 'Value', 'Calculated', and 'Location'.

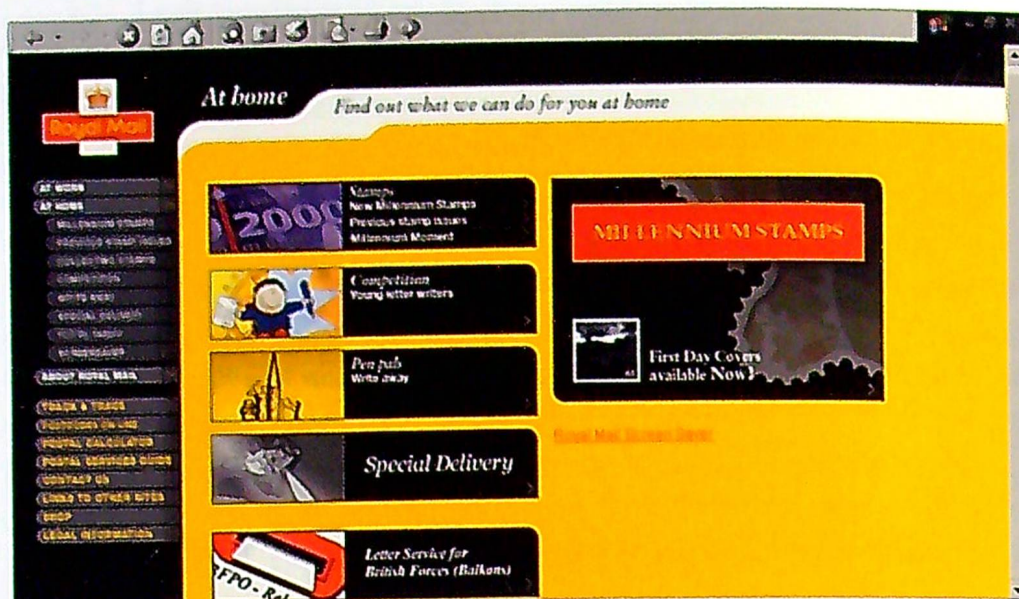
All the software mentioned earlier for keeping an inventory of collections is of the stand-alone type, bought directly from the vendor. In 1997, a free program became available on the web, called StampTrac, which allowed collectors to record their holdings, and produce want lists and valuations based upon these records.

An American collector, Bill Steiner, took early retirement in 1998 to concentrate on an activity he had been working on in his spare time for the previous 10 years: the production of worldwide album pages. He had tried to sell these originally, but after his retirement decided to offer them via the internet for a nominal annual donation.

StampTrac is a program for keeping an inventory. The URL of this useful facility is www.stampfinder.com.

More information on Bill Steiner's worldwide stamp album pages can be found at www.stampalbums.com.

Details of all recent British stamp issues, including the Millennium series, may be found at Royal Mail's web-site: www.royalmail.co.uk



Many philatelic societies are now using the world wide web to provide details of their activities, and to attract new members. A useful listing of clubs can be found at www.stampshows.com/clubs.html.

The American Philatelic Society has a website at www.stamps.org with full details of its various activities. The site includes extracts from the regular column on computer matters that appears in its monthly magazine 'The American Philatelist'. This site also provides an access point for the American Philatelic Research Library.

One of the affiliated specialist groups within the American Philatelic Society is the Philatelic Computing Study Group, which has been operating since 1984. This group's website at www.pcs.org contains a wealth of detail concerning the application of computers in philately, with details of available software, plus listings of published CD-ROM stamp catalogues. The group also produces a magazine, 'The Computatelist', which became a quarterly issue from 1992 and regularly contains in-depth reviews of new software.

The post office authorities in many countries now use the web regularly to announce their latest issues. A site which provides a starting point for accessing them is currently maintained by Fabio Alarci at www.geocities.com/fabioala. By September 1999 he had listed the postal administrations of over 100 different countries who were using the internet to attract new collectors. His index contains direct links to the official sites concerned and he has ranked them with his own assessment of how useful they are to philatelists. Amongst these is the site for the Royal Mail (www.royalmail.co.uk) which gives details for all recently issued British stamps including background information about the Millennium stamps series.

OTHER USES OF THE INTERNET

As well as giving access to the wealth of philatelic information on websites, being connected to the internet is useful in other ways. Perhaps the most common of these is for sending and receiving electronic mail, which is more generally called 'e-mail'. This is simply a means of writing letters to anybody worldwide who is also connected to the internet. The format of their e-mail address can be recognised by having an @ sign in it somewhere – for example, joebloggs@service.com. These e-mail programs also have facilities to allow scanned photographs of items from their collections to be sent to other philatelists.

Another widespread use for the internet is to act as host for 'newsgroups'. These are public e-mail discussion forums each connected with a single subject. For philatelists, four English language newsgroups exist and can be located via one of the newsgroup programs that are included within your web browser. There are also a number of similar philatelic newsgroups conducted in other languages.

The internet is also used by collectors for buying and selling goods and services. This activity has attracted the name of *e-commerce*, and is often predicted to become the fastest growth industry of the Millennium. For stamp collectors it covers private sales, stamp dealers business and the activities of the various auction houses.

For private sales, the use of one of the newsgroups provides a means by which collectors can contact each other. There is also an established website called Stamp Trader List (www.stamptraderlist.dk) which contains the names and e-mail addresses of those who wish to trade stamps with other people. It only allows entry of details from persons wanting to both buy and sell, or exchange stamps. It does not accept entries from those wishing to sell only, and thus excludes most dealers.

Many stamp dealers use the web to provide up-to-date price lists of their stock, and dealers' advertisements in the philatelic press often include their URL. Joe Luft's index has a separate section devoted to dealers' sites entitled 'Commercial Offerings'. A major advantage of the internet for collectors is the ability to examine price-lists from dealers in other countries easily, which may lead to being able to buy the material you require at lower prices.

Auction houses are also becoming increasingly attracted to e-commerce, and many sale catalogues are now posted on the web. These sites sometimes allow bids to be entered directly, and the majority of them show details of prices realised after each sale.



FURTHER READING

PCs for Dummies Recommended general introductory guide. ISBN 0-7645-0435-5.

Among many good books describing more about the internet are the following two.

The Rough Guide to the Internet by Angus J Kennedy, published by Rough Guides. ISBN 1-85828-442-2.

The Internet edited by Anna Milner and Terry Burrows, published by Dorling Kindersley. ISBN 0-7513-0425-5.

Guide to Stamp Collecting Software and Collecting on the Internet by William F Sharpe, published by Linn's Stamp News. Appeared in 1997 and gave an overview of the major programs available at that time, some of which have been updated subsequently. ISBN 0-940403-76-5.

Stamp Magazine in the UK and the American journals *Linn's Stamp News* and *The American Philatelist* all regularly carry columns about computers in philately.

GLOSSARY

Address A specific Uniform Resource Locator that identifies a site on the world wide web

CD-ROM Compact Disc – Read Only Memory. A form of storage that uses discs like those for home audio CDs

Database A structured set of tabular data and the programs needed to enter, amend and query the data

Desk-top publishing Specialist programs that allow pages of text and pictures to be manipulated to produce publishable items

Disk drive The hardware needed to read, or write, on CD-ROMs or DVDs

DVD Digital Versatile Disc. A version of CD-ROMs which stores much more data

e-commerce The generic term given to trading goods and services on the internet

Hardware The physical pieces of equipment that together make up a computer system

IBM-compatible A term used in early advertisements for PCs to indicate that equipment would operate any programs designed to run on IBM machines

Modem Modulator-demodulator. An electronic device that converts computer data for transmission over a telephone line

Multimedia Computer applications that combine text, graphics, voice and video usage. Often used now to mean hardware that is able to use CD-ROMs

Operating system The main program that runs user applications and provides the necessary linkages for attached hardware

Record An ordered set of fields, where each field is capable of holding a stated number of typed characters

Report The printed output derived from a computer application

Scanner A hardware device that converts pictorial material into a form that can be stored within a computer system

Search engines A program that allows keyword searches to be made for information on the internet

Windows Operating system introduced in 1985 by Microsoft Inc. Different versions are identified by a suffix – current ones are Windows 3.1, Windows 95, Windows 98, and Windows NT and Windows 2000

Word processing Programs used to create and print, chiefly textual documents that might otherwise be prepared on a typewriter

The author Ron Negus first became involved in computers in 1959, and his subsequent career included various computer management and consultancy roles. He has written four books about computers.

He has been a stamp collector since his teens and specialises in Polish issues from 1914 onwards. He has written two philatelic books, the latest, co-authored with George Kay in 1999, covering *Polish Exile Mail in GB 1939-1949*. Over the last 40 years his work has appeared in both UK and foreign philatelic magazines. Since 1981, he has edited the Bulletin of the London & Provincial Stamp Club.

In 1996, Ron became Hon Archivist for the Royal Philatelic Society, London, of which he is a Fellow. He is a member of their Publications Committee, and regularly contributes articles on philatelic history to the *London Philatelist*. He also writes biographies of early collectors and other pieces, from time to time, in the *British Philatelic Bulletin*.



Other publications in this series

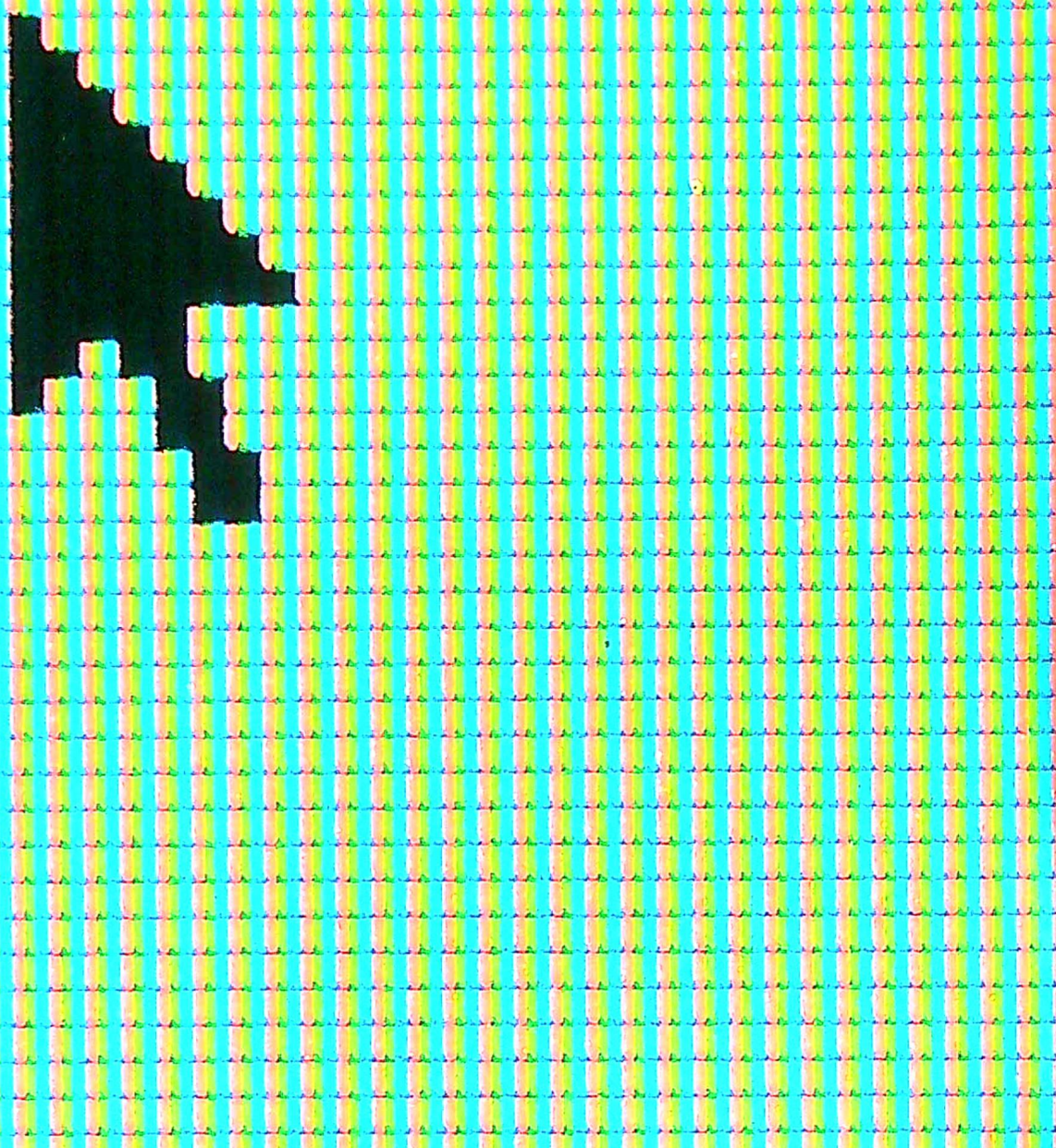
- The Early Days of the Postal Service (1986)
- British Special Stamps 1985-86 (no1 1993)
- British Stamp Design 1993 (no2 1994)
- Burns Bicentenary 1996 (no3 1996)
- British Victorian Stamps (no4 1997)
- An Introduction to Thematic Collecting (no5 1998)
- British Empire Exhibition Stamps, 1924-25 (no6 1999)

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