

Stamps: reading

Every 6 May, National Stamp Day, Penelope White invites local schoolchildren to her home where they can see one of the largest private stamp collections in the UK. Martin Howard visited her to find out just why she's so keen on stamps.



“ My parents called me Penelope and, as often happens with first names in the UK, it was shortened to Penny. When I first went to school teachers teased me about my name and started to call me Penny Black. I had no idea why it was so funny or why they changed my name from White to Black. Later I discovered that this was the name of the very first stamp and I was so intrigued I had to find out more; I started collecting when I was eight.

Stamps are one of those everyday items that people, especially children, take for granted. In our world of email and text messaging it's almost impossible to imagine a time when you couldn't communicate to anyone in writing at all, and of course no chatting on the telephone either. Imagine not knowing what was happening to friends and family who didn't live within walking distance! Before 1635 there was only one person who could send and receive letters in Britain and that was the monarch – letters were only carried to and from the Royal Court. It was King Charles 1 who allowed the use of the Royal Mail to members of the public and that's when the Post Office system was founded.

But the whole process of sending a letter was both complicated and expensive as the price was calculated on how many sheets were written and the distance travelled. So as a result it was only businesses and the wealthy who could afford to send letters. All this changed on 6 May 1840 when the world's first adhesive postage stamp went on sale. Not only was the process of sending a letter made easier (the price was standard for all letters delivered within the UK) but, at only one penny a stamp, it was also affordable for everyone. The impact of the Penny Black was incredible. First of all literacy standards improved dramatically (you can't send a letter if you can't write!) and then economic growth increased as people started to use stamps to invest their hard-earned money. No more saving your pennies in a sock under the bed!

So a small piece of gummed paper revolutionised a country. But others were quick to follow. The Brazilians were next issuing their famous 'Bull's Eye' stamps on 1 August 1843, they were followed by Switzerland in the same year, the USA and Mauritius in 1847 and then France and Belgium in 1849.

But far from having just an administrative function stamps also reflect the society that produces them. I remember being fascinated by my first stamps from Magyar Posta – first of all I never knew where *Magyar* was and secondly because the stamps had a heroic, working class feel about them. There were often pictures of young people working in agriculture or industry – scenes which would never appear on a British stamp. In such a small image there was a clear message about the people's attitude to their work and country, and politics. In the UK we favour portraying individuals famous for their personal achievements. The person who has appeared on most stamps, other than a British monarch, is Sir Winston Churchill, the prime minister during the Second World War. The second is the Italian-born explorer Christopher Columbus although

they tend to picture his ships, or places named after him, rather than an actual portrait of the man.

For me one of the most interesting sets of stamps, historically, is the one issued in January 1900 by the Nicaraguans. The US government had long been interested in a canal cutting through Central America but couldn't decide on whether it should be in Nicaragua or Panama. Then Nicaragua issued a new definitive series of stamps whose main design showed Mount Momotombo with smoke billowing from its summit. A rival to the idea of Nicaragua being favoured circulated the stamps to every US Congressman and Senator and as a result Panama was chosen. In fact the volcano had been dormant for centuries but the artist wanted the mountain to look more interesting!

Politically, stamps can be dangerous too. In 1964, four years after the independence of Belgian Congo, violence led to a People's Republic of Congo. Various stamps of the new Congolese Republic were overprinted with 'République Populaire'. The breakaway regime was suppressed by Belgian paratroopers who executed anyone in possession of the overprinted stamps – presuming them to be rebels.

The same year Sierra Leone issued the world's first ever self-adhesive stamps in the shape of a map of the country. Then in 1969 the Pacific Island of Tonga did the same – but their self-adhesives were in the shape of bananas!

Children prefer the story of the 14 year-old Swedish boy who, in 1885, sold an unusual *Tre Skilling Banco* stamp to a local stamp dealer for seven kronor. Normally the stamp was green but the one he had steamed off a letter from his brother was yellow. No one has ever found another example of this stamp printed in the wrong colour and so it's unique. In 1996 it was sold for £1,400,000! It's regarded as the most valuable man-made object on earth in relation to size, weight and composition. Needless to say that stamp is not in my collection! That there can be so many fascinating stories about such small pieces of paper never ceases to amaze me. ”