

British Stamp Exhibitions

Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

Stamp exhibitions are one of the best opportunities that the collector has to admire and learn from the collections on display and to buy new items from dealers. Maybe a single small purchase at an exhibition will set you off on a totally new collecting interest that might last a lifetime.

Perhaps just as importantly as the above, a stamp exhibition enables you to socialise with like-minded individuals in a convivial atmosphere away from the other pressures of life.

The times that I have heard friends say that they have not yet seen any of the show because they keep bumping into people that they know and have stopped for a chat!

This commemorative centenary issue of *Stamp Lover* has adopted the theme of looking back to 1908, comparing then with today and trying to predict the future.

I will attempt to cover all of these aspects within this article.

Looking Back to 1908

There were not the numbers of stamp shows being held around a hundred years ago that there are today. In fact the Editor of *Gibbons Stamp Monthly Journal* in 1906 wrote: "We cannot expect to have a stamp show in this country every year, and such a thing is perhaps hardly to be desired"!

By 1908, his views had mellowed somewhat, for the same magazine was stating: "...an ideal plan would be to have one great exhibition each year in a different city, if possible, local philatelists to make the arrangements and all the leading collectors to combine to make the show as fine a one as possible." For the past few years, ABPS has been making that early vision a reality.

1908 was not the barren year that I had assumed it would be prior to researching this article. This is because our very own Junior (now National, of course) Philatelic Society (JPS) hosted a major event at the Caxton Hall in London that year.

A year earlier in 1907 there had been the 'International Philatelic Exhibition' at the Horticultural Hall where apparently "one walked down long dreary aisles of



1908 JPS Imperial Show Opening Ceremony.
A direct contrast to the report
of the 1907 Exhibition

neglected exhibits" (Some less charitable readers might say that nothing has changed in that regard).

Clearly, the JPS had to put on something that beat not just this poorly regarded show, but that of the previous triumphant event that it had hosted at the Exeter Hall, London, in 1905.



1908 JPS Caxton Hall Stamp
Exhibition Delegate ticket

This show had seen 11,000 visitors pass through the doors without paying the usual admission charge, which was regarded at the time as "a daring experiment". There had been lantern lectures each evening to "huge audiences" and a talented orchestra had "introduced a little gaiety into the atmosphere".

It was regarded as "a great eye-opener for many inasmuch as it showed the great advances made in scientific philately as distinct from mere stamp collecting".

The 1908 JPS show was entitled the 'Imperial Stamp Exhibition' and ran from 12-14 March. It was open until 10pm each evening and was designed to stimulate the interest of young collectors and beginners. Perhaps unusually it comprised British colonial stamps only.

Donations to the Expenses Fund were sought by the organisers, but without much response from the trade or collectors.

The 9000 square feet of exhibition space was opened by R.H. Sydney Buxton, the Post Master General of the time. In his speech, he commented: "I am more interested in the collection of revenue than in the collection of stamps". Does that approach still sound familiar today?

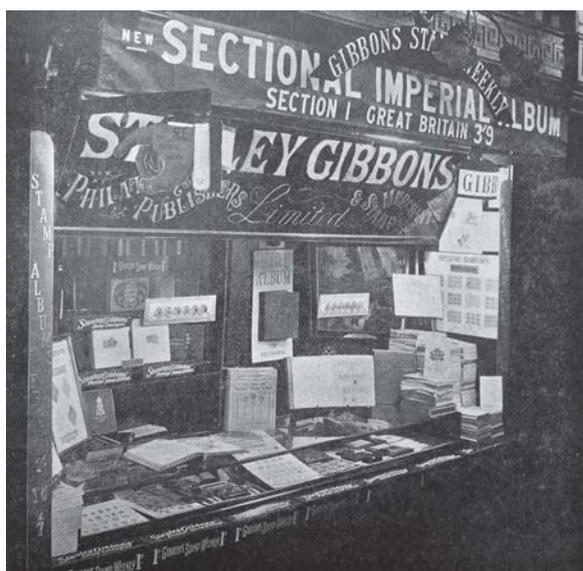
The world of a century ago comprised many countries now lost or having exotic sounding names and the exhibits reflected this, with stamps shown from Cyprus, Cape of Good Hope, Griqualand West, Ionian Islands, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, New South Wales, Western Australia and Zanzibar. There were also displays from countries still in existence, such as Barbados, Canada, India, Malta, New Zealand, St Helena, Sudan and Trinidad.

No lesser a personage than HRH The Prince of Wales made a surprise visit for one-and-a-half hours on the Friday, apparently taking great interest in the exhibits on display (including, no doubt his own display of Barbados). He was accompanied by his son Prince Albert and a Mr Hansell on the private tour.

On the Saturday, the show was so busy that the doors had to be closed for a while as the "crush was so great". Oh for such problems today.

Interestingly, a commentator of the time is quoted as saying that "perhaps the best feature of a stamp exhibition is the number of new recruits that are attracted to the hobby". Sadly, I doubt that more than the occasional person these days starts collecting thanks to Stampex or Philatex, which is more a reflection on the changing perception of the hobby rather than any fault of the current show organisers.

Trade stands (or 'stalls' as they were then referred to) cost £6 for 'a standard sized one', or £16 for 'a very large one'. At today's prices this would be £449.17 (small stall) and £1,197.80 (large stall), using the Retail Price Index as the basis for the calculations.



1908 JPS Imperial Show Stanley Gibbons Stall



Hulme Town Hall, venue of the 1909 Manchester JPS stamp exhibition and inaugural Philatelic Congress of Great Britain



1909 Manchester JPS Stamp Exhibition Delegate Ticket

Mr Leonard Wright's Orchestral Band that had been so admired at the 1905 JPS show was hired again to play throughout the 1908 event.

It is quite obvious from reading the contemporary reports that the collectors of the day had a great time at this exhibition. There had been a high attendance of around 30,000 visitors (compared to fewer than 6000 over four days at recent Stampex shows), thanks in no small part to the advertising that had apparently been "at a rate unequalled by any former stamp exhibition in the world".

5000 copies of a publication entitled *Notes and News* had been distributed, 'double royal' sized posters were at all 500 railway and underground stations in London and all London newspapers had contained notices of the exhibition for weeks beforehand.

Such publicity would be beyond the financial means of any stamp exhibition organiser today, certainly in this country. Perhaps it would not be such a financial burden in Asia currently, where stamp show attendances are always high.

There was a real “buzz” about the hobby following the ‘Imperial Stamp Exhibition’, together with much enthusiasm late in 1908 about the show that was being planned for 1909 in Manchester. Apparently “for quite a generation past”, Manchester had ranked second only to London as a philatelic centre.

Aside from the 7000 square feet of displays, 14 trade stands and the 35,000 visitors who attended, the exhibition additionally hosted the first Philatelic Congress of Great Britain (PCGB), which proved to be a major success.

It is currently hoped that the 2009 centenary year Congress (but not the one-hundredth Congress, due to the intervention of two world wars) will be commemorated by similarly being hosted in that fine city.

The Situation Today

As you will realise by now, we are extremely fortunate today with the number of stamp shows that are put on in Britain every year.

The social events side of exhibitions seems less to the fore these days. Having said that, the recent Eurothema show organisers clearly made a big effort to look after the many foreign visitors, judges and exhibitors that supported this international event.

The number of visitors to stamp shows appears to be declining year-on-year, the age profile of a collector gets ever-older, young adults have many other distractions for both their time and their money.... I could go on.

So is it all doom and gloom? I do not really think so, but only a fool would not acknowledge that an exhibition of any kind needs the support of the trade, postal administrations and collectors to be a viable proposition.

It is therefore most encouraging that trade stands for Britain’s next international were sold out virtually



Official Signing of the Agreement Between London 2010 International Stamp Exhibition and FIP



Business Design Centre - Venue for the London 2010 International Stamp Exhibition

straight away, with a long waiting list of potential attendees.

Similarly, the number of collectors seeking a medal level entitling them to international qualification at London 2010 during the recent ABPS Harrogate show was more substantial than usual, as it offered the final opportunity for reaching vermeil level.

I believe that this augers well for the ongoing future of stamp exhibitions in Britain.

What of the Future?



The Part We Don't Normally See – Business Design Centre –

There can be no doubt that things are changing in all spheres of life and the hobby is not exempt from this. So, how do I think that stamp shows of the future will be affected?

It already seems clear that funding from the home postal administration can no longer be relied on. With postal deregulation, perhaps the ‘new boys on the block’ could be convinced to come-up with some resources. DHL, TNT and their like are major corporations that may see the hobby as a viable investment for a portion of their marketing funds.

London 2010 will be a different international from previous shows and is being described by the

organisers as a 'compact' version of The Stamp Show 2000, with most aspects scaled-down.

Perhaps the greatest innovation will see a unique approach whereby there will be a change-over of competitive exhibits half way through the exhibition. This will help greatly with floor-space constraints.

However, I believe that the future lies in 'virtual' exhibiting, whereby the material is not actually at the show, but will be able to be seen on computer screens by visitors and those unable to get to the show.

Trials have tentatively started at a couple of exhibitions overseas and a visit to www.japhila.cz/exponet will reveal to you just how successful this approach can be. This website already contains c400 exhibits for viewing anywhere in the world, anytime – not just for the few days that an exhibition is on for.

Only time will reveal whether any or all of my predictions come true, of course, so perhaps you should re-read this article in a few years time!

Show Souvenirs

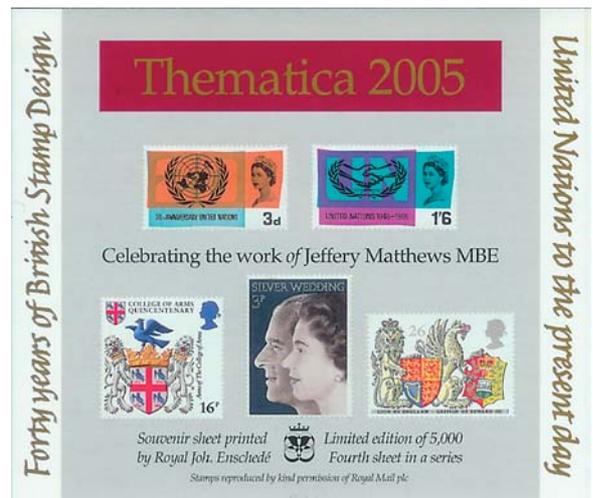
We all like to take home a souvenir of an enjoyable day out and stamp show organisers have long taken the opportunity of selling us a sheet, card, cover or label unique to the event. I have heard that for some shows, sales in the heyday of such items were essential for balancing the books.

I began collecting these stamp show souvenirs in 1969 when I attended my first British Philatelic Exhibition at the age of thirteen and have been collecting and cataloguing them ever since.

The 1890 London Philatelic Exhibition held 19-26 May at the Portman Rooms, Baker Street, London produced the first such items.

Unissued brown and blue stamps in the Mauritius 'Britannia' design (SG39-40) were typo-overprinted L.P.E. 1890 in red at the exhibition. The stamps were from imperforate sheets remaindered in 1872. The original printer, Perkins Bacon, perforated these (perf 11½) at the show; overprints and varieties were made by M.P. Castle. Stamps were on greenish gummed paper and the total overprinted was probably 2700. Forgeries are reported.

This simple beginning has in the intervening years seen over 270 shows produce some 1200 items. Thematica still issues a lovely range



Thematica exhibition sheet depicting unadopted artwork by Jeffery Matthews MBE

of well-printed sheets each year. These are able to be given away to visitors thanks to the generosity of stamp printers used by Royal Mail, but generally the heyday of souvenirs has, alas, passed due to the costs of production and falling collector demand.

Bibliography

This select bibliography provides readers with some catalogues and articles worthy of reading on the subject of British stamp exhibitions.

All are to be found in the National Philatelic Society Library and many are available from other philatelic libraries.

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Acknowledgment

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