

COLLECTING PRESTIGE STAMP BOOKS

Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

December 1969 saw the introduction of Prestige Stamp Books (PSBs). The £1 *Stamps for Cooks* issue, sponsored by the Milk Marketing Board, was described at the time as ‘an experiment aimed at the housewife’s handbag and to test the market’. This format has subsequently spread around the world with many post offices producing a similar product as either a regular or occasional part of the annual stamp programme.

PSBs normally comprise four or five unique panes of stamps in so-called *se-tenant* (joined together) combinations or use different printing processes to the counter sheet equivalent. The earlier books solely contained definitive stamps, but from 1990 special stamps also appeared within. The books have always contained several pages of highly informative text invariably written by leading experts, together with many relevant illustrations.

From the third book onwards, they have been produced in a larger page size that allows for all ‘outside edge’ stamps to have an unprinted margin. This change eliminated the poor perforation quality that spoilt the appearance of the first two smaller books. Stamp dealers and collectors had great difficulty in sourcing well perforated copies and therefore the *Cooks* and *Wedgwood I* titles with full perforations command higher prices.

All PSBs are sold by Royal Mail at the face value of the stamps contained within, although they did consider charging an extra 36p for the *Beatrix Potter* book, resulting in an inflated price being shown on the cover, but they relented before the issue date following collector pressure. New issues are a good buy, as the story and pictures in the book come free!

Several security printers have produced Prestige books and the process employed to make them follows a similar pattern wherever produced. Artwork is submitted to the printers, enabling proofs to be created and approved. Sheets are then printed from large plates containing multiple images of the same page, which later get examined for potential errors and collated into order. These stacks of sheets – now comprising front and back covers, text pages and stamp panes – are cut into vertical columns of books and then subsequently into singles. A heavy-duty sewing machine then thread sews all of the pages of the PSB together. A coloured binding tape is used to cover the stitching and books are counted, shrink-wrapped and shipped to Royal Mail.

The thread-sewing process presented production problems on the first issue and around 11,000 copies of the *Cooks* book exist with two staples instead of cotton stitching. These rare books sell for as much as £300 to specialist collectors.

There are different options available for housing your PSBs. Some collectors use filing boxes or First Day Cover albums, while others mount them with large photo corners onto album pages. Probably the best option is provided by Tallents House, which sells an attractive custom designed album with 10 leaves at £15.50 [order code PA707], with 10 extra continuation leaves at £4.50 [order code PA708]. Condition is important to collectors, so do not be tempted to break-up the book to display the individual pages (known in the hobby as ‘exploding’) if you do not wish to destroy the financial value of the item.

If you really get bitten by the bug, it is possible to expand your collection by adding ancillary material such as PSBs containing production errors, copies privately overprinted to commemorate overseas stamp exhibitions, or promotional examples without stamps inside, such as those printed for Wedgwood to present to its clients. Some specialists even collect the labels used on the bulk boxes of books and the publicity posters put up in Post Offices to encourage sales.

Another area that many collectors buy is PSB First Day Covers produced by Royal Mail using one of the stamp panes. If you have a special interest, perhaps military history, then you can collect the books or covers by theme and simply buy the issues that match your interest.

Acquiring a complete basic collection will be achievable for under £600. Sources for the older issues include stamp dealers and exhibitions, while online auction sites such as eBay and Delcampe will prove fruitful. Even boot sales will sometimes have examples, often at very reasonable prices.

Wherever you buy from, you will own a fascinating and attractive collection and with PSBs issued during the past 12 months on sale at face value from Tallents House and several exciting new issues promised for this year, there could not be a better time to get your collection started. In fact, why not take out a standing order to be sure of not missing any future issues?

(770 words)

PRESTIGE STAMP BOOKS LISTING

Year Issued	Face Value	Title of Book	Approx Retail £
1969	£1.00	Stamps for Cooks (£11 for selected perforations, £300 for stapled version)	£7
1972	£1.00	The Story of Wedgwood I (£45 for selected perforations)	£15
1980	£3.00	The Story of Wedgwood II	£4
1982	£4.00	The Story of Stanley Gibbons	£5
1983	£4.00	The Story of the Royal Mint	£5
1984	£4.00	The Story of our Christian Heritage	£15
1985	£5.00	The Story of <i>The Times</i> newspaper	£9
1986	£5.00	The Steel Wheel on the Steel Rail: The Story of British Rail	£12
1987	£5.00	The Story of P&O 1837-1987	£10
1988	£5.00	FT100: The Story of the <i>Financial Times</i> , 1888-1988	£15
1989	£5.00	The Scots Connection	£12
1990	£5.00	London Life	£14
1991	£6.00	Alias Agatha Christie: A Detective Story	£9
1992	£6.00	Cymru - Wales	£9
	£6.00	Tolkien: The Centenary 1892-1992	£9
1993	£5.64	The Story of Beatrix Potter (Cover states £6 price)	£9
1994	£6.04	Northern Ireland	£10
1995	£6.00	The National Trust: One Hundred Years of Conservation	£12
1996	£6.48	European Football Championships	£9
1997	£6.15	BBC75: Celebrating 75 Years of the BBC	£9
1998	£7.49	The Definitive Portrait: Her Majesty's Stamps Celebrated by Royal Mail	£15
	£6.16	Breaking Barriers: A Century of Great British Speed Records	£15
1999	£7.54	The Profile on Print: Her Majesty's Stamps Celebrated by Royal Mail	£18
	£6.99	World Changers: A Tale of British Scientific Genius	£18
2000	£7.50	Special by Design: Her Majesty's Stamps Celebrated by Royal Mail	£25
	£7.03	The Life of the Century: A Poem for HM Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother	£17
	£7.00	A Treasury of Trees	£17
2001	£6.76	Unseen and Unheard: Centenary of the Royal Navy Submarine Service	£16
2002	£7.29	A Gracious Accession: The Golden Jubilee Volume I	£17
	£6.83	Across the Universe: A Guide to Outer Space	£19
2003	£6.99	Microcosmos: A Guide to Inner Space	£10
	£7.46	A Perfect Coronation: The Golden Jubilee Volume II	£40
2004	£7.44	Letters by Night: A Tribute to the Travelling Post Office	£12
	£7.23	The Glory of the Garden: A Celebration of the Royal Horticultural Society	£20
2005	£7.43	The Brontë Sisters: Jane Eyre	£13
	£7.26	The Battle of Trafalgar: Death of Nelson	£14
2006	£7.40	Isambard Kingdom Brunel 1806-2006	£15
	£7.40	The Victoria Cross Medal	£18
2007	£7.49	World of Invention	£14
	£7.66	The Machin Definitive	£14
	£7.66	British Army Uniforms	TH
2008	£7.40	James Bond	£14
	£7.15	RAF Uniforms	£12
	£9.72	50 th Anniversary of Country (Regional) Stamps	£17
2009	£7.68	British Design Classics	TH
	£7.75	Charles Darwin	TH
	£8.18	Treasures of the [BPMA] Archive	TH
	£7.93	Royal Navy Uniforms	TH
2010	£8.06	Classic Album Covers (7 January)	TH
	£7.72	350 th Anniversary of The Royal Society (25 February)	TH
	c£8.00	The King's Stamps (due out in May)	TH
	c£8.00	Britain Alone (due out in May)	TH

- The column "Face Value" shows the cost at date of issue. Subsequent postage rate rises will mean that current books still on sale by Royal Mail are now priced at a higher cost, reflecting the latest 1st and 2nd class letter rates.
- Items Marked "TH" in final column are currently available at face value from Tallents House.
- Further Prestige Books for 2010 may be announced later in the year.