

ROYAL MAIL SPECIAL STAMPS YEAR BOOK 2006 REVIEW

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The October 1984 edition of the *Philatelic Bulletin* announced that there was to be a new publication released on 20 November that year that would contain 'a complete record of the 1984 Special Stamps'. I purchased one on the first day of availability and have done so ever since, partly because I consider each edition to be a great way for a 'one of everything' collector to store the stamps (I was paying-out more for the annual extension pages needed for my pre-printed stamp album than the cost of the book minus the stamps), but I largely buy it because it is always such a good read. I strongly believe that the stamps take on a different form when they are separated from the academic side of philately and are placed in a more general interest context.

The original Year Book was priced at £14.95 and contained £8.13-worth of stamps within, while the 2006 version contains £40.16-worth of stamps and now sells for just £1.87 above face value of the stamps, i.e. a mere £39.95 for the standard edition. Print volumes have been shown inside each numbered copy since 2003's edition, when 35,000 were produced. 2004 saw a drop to 30,000 and last year's and this has seen a further drop to 27,000 copies, which is a shame for such a superb production and bargain, as these books undoubtedly are. A further comparison between the first and current edition reveals that there were originally 24 pages (now 64), 9 sets (now 13) and 36 stamps (now 76, plus the *Lest We Forget* MS of 5 stamps and *Celebrating Scotland* MS of 4 stamps, i.e. 85 stamps in all).

The 2006 edition has some innovations over previous years. All stamp designs are now featured in colour below clear mounts (previously they were black-backed mounts) which are pre-affixed in order to house the stamps, so that now even when the stamps are missing – as was the case with my advance copy received back in August – the book still looks as if it is complete. This was a simple and obvious change that is sure to be appreciated by the recipients, as previously it was necessary to go to the rear of the book to see colour images of each stamp to help with correct insertion within (the stamps come supplied mounted within temporary stock sheets slipped in to the front of the book).

A new one-piece presentation box has also been introduced this year instead of the slip-case that was previously provided. For those collectors who stand the books end-on with the opposite end to the spine visible there is compatibility with the first 22 volumes in the series, thus maintaining continuity of appearance on the bookshelf, which I certainly appreciated.

I like the new approach to the text whereby the book includes interviews/articles with/by top celebrities – Ricky Gervais, David Dimbleby, Nigel Marven (TV presenter) and the young VC winner, Private Johnson Beharry, who put over a popular/expert view in magazine interview style. The idea was to give an article approach rather than provide a running story as in previous yearbooks and I believe that the concept has worked very well.

The text includes technical details for each stamp issue, with most of the information that a collector would expect to find in a stamp catalogue, although the phosphor bars are stated to be 'as appropriate', which fails to assist anyone.

There are also enlarged quotes scattered throughout from several people associated with the yearbook in some way. I particularly liked Brunel's comment about the railways where he stated that: "The time is not far off when we shall be able to take our coffee and write while going noiselessly at 45mph" and the chilling revelation by

Nigel Marven about the Ice Age Animals stamps that: “The old belief was that ice age animals died out because of the effects of climate change, but we now think they may have been over-hunted. Unfortunately we’re still doing the same thing to some species today”. This latter comment is quite thought provoking, of course, and inspired me to visit the Zoological Society of London’s zoo in Regent’s Park to see a number of the magnificent endangered creatures while I still can. Stamps (and the yearbook!) really can stimulate.

The text has been written this year by Fay Sweet with additional contributions by Tim Shackleton, picture research was by Kathy Lockley, design by Ian Chilvers of the Atelier Works design group and printing was undertaken by Fulmar Colour Printing of Croydon, with binding and finishing by FF Allsopp of Nottingham. The ISBN number is 0-946165-54-8 and the publisher is, of course, Royal Mail from where Simon Ball acted as the yearbook editor and Marcus James was the in-house designer.

The original *Bulletin* announcement for the 1984 yearbook stated that ‘this absorbing book will enrich the experience of everyone interested in British stamps, since it contains not only the special stamps, but also the fascinating facts behind them’ and this maxim still remains true to this day, 23 years later.

Some collectors may claim that the yearbook no longer contains *all* of the special stamps, since all but a couple are excluded. However, Royal Mail policy is to include each MS that has at least one new special stamp as part of its design, hence the *Lest We Forget* and *Celebrating Scotland* sheets being included to the exclusion of all the others. The Poppy and Barbed Wire *Lest We Forget* 1st class design is currently unique to this sheet, although it is understood that it will be used for the next two years in similar sheets and so will presumably be excluded from the yearbook in 2007 and 2008.

With Christmas fast approaching, the *Royal Mail Special Stamps Year Book 2006* would make a high-quality gift for any collector of modern British stamps, or for a non-collector who has an interest in the British way of life and its history. Or why not purchase a copy for your own library and see why I am such a fan of this annual publication.

(1,100 word count)