

## OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC GOLD

Brian Warren



In my *That Was The Year That Was 2012* supplement, I referred to a series of five postmarks used in Northern Ireland in relation to the Olympic Torch relay<sup>1</sup>. There are however a number of other GB postal connections in relation to Irish (and former Irish) competitors who participated in either the Summer Olympic or Paralympic Games in London in 2012.

Most members will be aware that Royal Mail issued a series of miniature sheets for every individual or team who won gold for Team GB in either Games. Unfortunately, no Northern Ireland competitor won Gold in the Olympics. Rowers Richard and Peter Chambers took silver in the men's lightweight fours, while Alan Campbell won a bronze in the men's single sculls – all as part of Team GB. Belfast boxer Paddy Barnes had to be content with his second Olympic bronze after suffering an agonising defeat in the light-flyweight semi-finals. Fellow Belfast man Michael Conlan also won a bronze medal in the flyweight boxing competition, after losing his semi-final bout. As boxing is organised on an all-Ireland basis, both boxers competed under the Irish flag.

However, there was one Team GB competitor with an Irish connection. Peter Charles MBE (born in Liverpool, 1960) is a British-Irish equestrian who competes in the sport of show jumping. He originally represented Great Britain before switching to represent Ireland in 1992 (the country of his mother's birth) and competed as part of the Irish show jumping team in both the Olympics of 1992 and 1996. In 2007, he relinquished his status as an Irish rider and once again competed for Great Britain. He was a member of the gold medal equestrian show

jumping team in London 2012 and appears on one of the GB miniature sheets (he is at left on the stamps shown above) together with fellow team members Scott Brash, Ben Maher and Nick Skelton. He was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2013 New Year Honours, for services to equestrianism.



fig. 1



fig. 2

To commemorate Team GB gold medal winners at the 2012 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, Royal Mail painted a number of post boxes gold. Each gold medalist had a post box painted in recognition of their achievement, usually in their home-town. In the case of Peter Charles, a "B" size EiiR pillar box (PB 1042/1) at Paper Mill Lane/Waterside Court in Alton (his home town as recorded on the Team GB website) was painted gold (fig. 1). Residents in Alton described the gold postbox as "excellent" but pointed out that Peter Charles lives in the village of Bentworth, about four miles away. As a result, a second box at Holt End Lane in Bentworth, a larger "A" size EiiR pillar (PB 1041/1) was also painted gold (fig. 2).

<sup>1</sup> See page 12 of *That Was The Year That Was 2012* - "Olympic Torch Relay" (published March 2013).



There was further glory for Irish competitors in the Paralympics. Ireland's medal haul totalled 16 medals - 8 Gold, 3 Silver and 5 Bronze and the team were positioned 19th on the final medal table. Three members of the Irish Paralympic team who won gold were born in Northern Ireland. – Bethany Firth, Michael McKillop and Jason Smyth. At first, Royal Mail announced that these athletes would not have gold boxes painted gold. However, they changed their minds after public and civic representations.



fig 3



fig 4

Swimmer Bethany Firth (born 14 February 1996) was born in Seaforde, County Down. On 31 August 2012 Firth, competing in her first Paralympics, won a gold medal in the S14 classification 100 metres backstroke final. Firth, who has learning difficulties, had only been swimming for three years. A small EiiR lamp box situated at Newcastle Road, Seaforde, Co. Down (fig. 3) was painted gold to mark her achievement.

Michael Gerard McKillop (born 27 January 1990 in Ballymena, now living in Glengormley) is a middle distance runner and competes in the T37 classification, as he has a mild form of cerebral palsy. McKillop won gold for the men's 800 meter T37 with a time of 1:57.22; this was a world record. He also won gold in the 1500m T37 race. The medal for the latter was later presented to him by his mother, Catherine McKillop, an ambassador of Procter & Gamble<sup>2</sup>. A type B EiiR pillar box situated at the Sandyknowes roundabout, Glengormley, Co. Antrim was painted gold for Michael (fig. 4).

There would be one more honour for McKillop who picked up the Whang Youn Dai Achievement Award as one of two athletes who

<sup>2</sup> Michael McKillop was only one of two athletes at London 2012 to receive their medal from a parent. The other competitor was Zara Phillips (silver medal in team eventing) who received her medal from her mother Anne, Princess Royal.

exemplified the best spirit of the Paralympic Games, his dedication to helping and encouraging thousands of school children throughout Ireland being recognised and his belief that all Paralympians should help promote their own sports and serve as role models for the next generation.



fig. 5

Jason Smyth (born 4 July 1987, Derry) is a sprint runner who competes in the T13 classification. Jason won heat 1 of the 100m breaking the world record in a time of 10.54 seconds before breaking the record again in the final where he defended his Paralympic title in a time of 10.46 seconds, the fastest Paralympic 100 metres in history. Smyth equaled his Beijing achievement by winning gold in the Men's T13 200m with a world record time of 21.05 seconds. His postbox, a modern type K is situated at Woodvale Road, Eglinton, Derry (fig.5).



fig 6

The final Irish connection is in the miniature sheet issued in advance of the games on 27 July (fig. 6). The cyclist depicted on the £1.28 stamp is Wendy Houvenaghel (born 27 November 1974 in Magherafelt, Co. Londonderry) who is a member of Team GB. However, Wendy was not in the final team chosen to take-part in the Women's Team Pursuit and caused controversy when she was especially vocal about her exclusion. Her comments to the media included the following:

*"I feel particularly aggrieved that the head coach made the decision to put in a rider who wasn't 100% well on the start line twice. Thankfully the girls did go on to win their race but perhaps had I been allowed to do my job that world record could have been faster."*

*I do feel I have been deliberately omitted from that opportunity that was mine and the opportunity to bring home a gold medal to Northern Ireland. The last gold we had was 40 years ago with Dame Mary Peters. It's a very shocking and upsetting decision."*





fig. 7

The full cyclist design incorporating Wendy was also used in "dummy sheets" during trials of the Gold Medal Winners stamps at Walsall Security Printers prior to the Games (*one of the unissued miniature sheets included in the dummy sheet is shown in fig. 7*). It is understood that it was always Royal Mail's intention with the first dummy sheet to feature an athlete who would not be competing in the 2012 London Games, lest the competitor be jinxed in any way<sup>3</sup>.

One of the dummy sheet trials incorporating the cyclist design (but minus the common wording, Queen's head and imagery of the base sheet) was used as part of the end-to-end testing of the production and distribution process (*fig. 8*).

The gold coloured outer envelopes included an adhesive label with the name of the Post Office Branch and its address, plus the delivery route number and the quantity of dummy sheets enclosed and sheet code GMW-E1. Upon opening the package, a quantity of A4 sheets would be found with a despatch note clearly stating

IMPORTANT: TEST ONLY  
PLEASE DESTROY THE SHEETS

The destruction request was ignored at some offices, as around 40 sheets have been seen on offer through eBay with selling prices between £10 and £65 per sheet.

A final thought. It's a pity that An Post did not paint a postbox gold in Katie Taylor's home town, of Bray, Co. Wicklow to mark her boxing gold.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Cavendish MBE, who featured on another dummy sheet, was not treated to this consideration. Mark failed to win Gold at the Olympics. Prophetically, the dummy sheet included the actual date of his (hoped for) win.



fig. 8

**Acknowledgments:** I wish to thank fellow member John Frazer who supplied the pictures of the gold postboxes situated in Northern Ireland. The information and illustrations relating to the dummy sheets incorporating the Wendy Houvenaghel cyclist design are taken from *Dummy Stamps Newsletter* (Issues 26 & 27) with the kind permission of the author Glenn H Morgan FRPSL. Further details can be obtained by reading the full articles at [www.stampprinters.info/dummystamps.htm](http://www.stampprinters.info/dummystamps.htm)