

LETTER BOXES AS A THEME Glenn H Morgan FRPSL

Thematic collecting in Great Britain is very much in the ascendancy. Even the so-called 'traditional' stamp collector is now just as likely to form a collection based on geology or goats, as he is on the Cape of Good Hope or modern British Machines.

There has been a tendency in the past for the thematic collector to hide his light under a bushel and even be embarrassed to admit to fellow philatelists that he collects by theme. Those days have now thankfully gone. One of the main reasons has to be the success of the British Thematic Association. Members of the BTA have taken magnificent strides in bringing this branch of our hobby to the notice of everyone. Also, the twice-annual Thematica stamp shows, pioneered by the late John Fosbery and the London and Provincial Stamp Club, have greatly added to interest.

The bug bit me many years ago, choosing as my theme the Letter Box. I have reached vermeil level and was once the proud recipient of the *Link House Thematic Trophy* at Stampex and the winner of the coveted *O'Neill Trophy* awarded by Stampa over the water in Dublin. This article details the kind of material that is available to collect as part of your theme.

There is still a tendency for many collectors to think that only stamps should be included in a collection or exhibit. If this is how you wish to collect, then that's perfectly fine. Nobody must ever tell you what should go into your albums – this is for you to decide. However, if you ignore items like those that will be detailed below, you will be missing out on a wealth of material that will enhance the interest of your theme and the value of your collection.

STAMPS. These are the obvious starting point when deciding what to collect by theme and despite my comments above are still important ingredients. The material is fairly readily available for some themes, but the letter box has taken extensive research in stamp catalogues from around the world to find suitable items, as items are not always obvious, with Christmas issues being an example of an apparently unrelated theme to look into.

If you have access to a library, such as that run by the National Philatelic Society, do be sure to check out the foreign catalogues, as very often they contain pictures or data omitted from the likes of Gibbons, Yvert or Scott. I have now identified hundreds of stamps that directly relate to the letter box theme and many others that fit into the story.

Stamps only exist after considerable preparations, so try and get hold of original artwork, essays, proofs, colour trials, perforation variations and issued errors. They do exist for most themes and add such a lot of interest to a collection, but avoid the philatelically inspired proofs and colour trials items that were created for the collector and not as part of the production process.

POSTAL MARKINGS. It was rather surprising to find so many cancellations relating to the letter box. Quite a lot of special handstamps have been used down the years, very often philatelically generated admittedly, but still most pictorial and attractive. Operational hand and machine cancellations have not been neglected either, including slogans such as 'Post Early for Christmas' and 'Everyone's Shopping by Post These Days', which depicted a letter box. There are Victorian handstamps that are valuable additions, while the many privately produced cachets make a colourful chapter in a collection, although are rarely suitable for exhibition purposes.

The oldest marking in my collection was applied by the GPO Window-men who took letters over the counter long prior to the establishment of the roadside letter box. Who says that thematic collecting is all about pretty pictures?

STAMP BOOKLETS. From 1971 our own Post Office produced a whole series of booklet cover designs depicting the various types of letter box used in Britain and proofs and uncut inverted blocks of the covers exist in my collection, adding variety and uniqueness to the pages. The basic booklets still cost mainly under a pound, but the proof material by its very nature is far scarcer and much more desirable, but not always costly.

POSTAL STATIONERY. Britain has yet to issue any stationery where the stamp element depicts my theme, although they did once appear on a Christmas airletter design. This has not stopped the likes of Sweden, Australia and Hungary from adding such items to my album sheets, though, and most attractive they are too.

I hope that this short article has proved that there is a lot more to thematic collecting than perhaps initially meets the eye of the uninitiated. However obscure your potential theme might be, it should be possible to acquire sufficient material to produce a decent collection, or small exhibit.

I have found that one of the greatest requirements to enable progression of a theme is an abundant source of non-philatelic reading material to enable you to learn about your subject in depth. Read everything that you can put your hands on, for it has been my experience that the more obscure, lesser known facts about letter boxes have come from such sources as old copies of the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch* magazine, by way of example.

So, good luck with your thematic collecting and, above all else, enjoy it!