

The millennium in 48 'easy pieces' Philip Parker outlines



THIS MONTH sees the first issue of Millennium Stamps – four works of miniature art which launch Royal Mail's very special 'super set' of 48 stamps. In total, 48 leading image-makers have contributed to this, Royal Mail's largest ever commissioning of artwork, in the footsteps of past great Post Office commissions, such as Benjamin Britten and W H Auden for the immortal film *Night Mail*, and Abram Games and Enid Marx for stamp design.

What is interesting about the project is its democracy – as it unfolds throughout the year, a Royal Academician will sit next to a master weaver; a silversmith next to a distinguished documentary photographer; a woodcut engraver next to a collage artist. Stamps are a great leveller.

But why these 48 subjects? Why this particular approach?

Recognising that the millennium is the commemorative period, Royal Mail wanted to create a stamp programme that stood out and contributed to the national celebrations. The Special Stamp programme has a reputation as a principal commemorative collectible as well as a national institution; what was created had to be, by definition, 'extra special'.

The decision to attack the millennium in a meaningful way was made early in 1997. A pro-

gramme over two calendar years was considered beginning in 1999 which would concentrate on the past 1000 years. Work progressed on several fronts over the spring – desk research to determine the key events and personalities over the millennium; conceptual research to create a framework to link such events together; design research to consider suitable approaches.

Initially, half a dozen different conceptual approaches were generated and debated. These ranged from the perhaps more obvious such as issuing 10 sets in the year and allocating a century a set, to the more abstract, including an A-Z of the millennium (A for atom, B for bicycle, C for computer, D for democracy, etc).

To prevent the research 'drowning in a sea of dates', some ground rules were formulated: that the stamp approach would seek to be emotive and try to make history relevant to today; and that it would seek to be inclusive, so that there would be something for everyone in the UK, that it would explore both continuity and change through the millennium.

As is often the case with ideas, two or three merged together and the 'Tales' concept was born in July. The inspiration for the tales idea came from tackling the problem of making history less abstract, particularly for people who had perhaps

the architecture of Royal Mail's millennium stamps for 1999

not collected stamps before, and so entice new collectors to purchase the stamps as a memento of the millennium, for themselves or as gifts.

A thought experiment was proposed to try and make history more immediate. For example, consider the life of a soldier over the last millennium. Clearly, warfare has changed: from medieval conflict to the pike and musket era of the Civil War to the global conflict of World Wars to today, where in a post Cold War era the role of the armed forces is redefined. The technology and organisation of, say, a soldier's life has changed, but surely the emotion experienced remains the same. This could be traced through contemporary sources. The epic poem, the *Brus*, charted something of the events of the Scottish war of independence, contemporary handbills and letters recorded events in the Civil War, the writings of the war poets in the First World War trenches brings home the sacrifice and pathos, and contemporary accounts of British peace keepers in the Balkans would give an insight into today's role. This was the literary basis for the idea of a Tale. It is a story of continuity through the millennium (the profession of the soldier) as well as a story of change (the manner and extent of warfare).

A tale such as this could be applied to different areas to provide a way to look across the centuries and feature how life has changed; but also look at history from the viewpoint of today, and eke out those events, inventions and creations that have shaped the way we are. Hence it could have more relevance to the public. Hence there could be an inclusive feel. Rather than producing a high political commentary of kings and politicians, an inclusive idea of history was followed, and the names of the tales: Patients, Workers, etc, try to encourage this inclusivity.

Desk research eventually proposed, as you might imagine, hundreds of possibilities, but these were reduced to around 18 different conceptual areas, such as 'health and medicine', 'science', 'the fine arts'. Early research included a meeting with Lord Baker of Dorking (former Home Secretary), who was developing his pro-

posed Museum of British History. The Museum's remit would be very much like the stamp programme's: to present history in an accessible, and yet stimulating way. Chief historical adviser to the project was Jeremy Black, Professor of History at the University of Exeter who was recommended. Black was contacted and, shortly before the general election in May, his advice was sought on initial concepts. Although specialising in the 18th century, he lectures widely on all historical areas, and in particular focuses on the 'inclusive' rather than high political commentary which Royal Mail wanted to address.

Research into modern historical interpretations occurred in parallel to determine the contemporary view of history. From this came an understanding of the importance of a number of themes. One was an appreciation that in the past, British history has been synonymous with English history, and that the interaction of the component parts of the UK was important. Another was an appreciation that British culture has evolved greatly over time, particularly through the influx of people into these shores, as well as the waves of emigration where British ideas were exported around the world. Hence the idea of a set on migration (*Settlers' Tale*) became vital. Similarly, the story of the democratisation of society has fuelled so many social and political changes in the last two centuries that it could not be excluded. Hence a *Citizens' Tale*. Other areas were also deemed essential – the human impact on the landscape (*Farmers' Tale*), plus British invention, fine art as well as popular culture (*Entertainers' Tale*) and an appreciation of the spiritual significance of the millennium (*Christians' Tale*).

To cut a long, long story short, the desk research, tales framework and the idea to issue 12 sets in a year (making it more like a regular magazine) met and, with a great deal of distilling, a matrix of 12 tales and a selection of subjects for each over chronological time periods took shape. Some subjects commended themselves as being difficult to overlook (Isaac Newton's contribution

to science), others came out of the very considerable research (the early Norman migration to the Scottish lowlands). Four subjects for each set were debated and determined, but the matrix was so constructed that to change one subject had implications for those around it.

The subject matrix is rather like a spider's web, remove one strand and other areas start to unravel. For example, *Inventors' Tale* does not include that great British (or rather Scottish) gift to the world: television. However, since TV is such a major determinant of modern culture it had to be included. Hence in *Entertainers' Tale*, a dalek from *Dr Who* is featured as the metaphor for the cult nature of TV – a premier form of entertainment which has the power to bring people together. To have lost TV from this *Tale* would have forced a rethink of the *Inventors' Tale*.

And the word 'metaphor' is a potent one. Royal Mail has created a matrix, or rather a mosaic of the millennium. It presents original interpretations of 48 major influences that have shaped the way we are today: how we think and what we do, who we are and how we express ourselves as a nation. The 48 are each metaphors for wider eras of change and impact on the world, rather than a list of the top 48 people and events of 1000 years. No doubt throughout 1999 we will be deluged with colour supplements giving their own spin on the top 48, or 100, or 1000 events of the millennium. However, Royal Mail hopes that the statement it has created with the unfolding programme will stand apart as a significant contribution to the nation's celebrations, as a major work of arts patronage and talking point for philatelists around the world. Where else, for example, could you acquire fine art prints of 48 top image-makers, covering 1000 years of experience, and all for well under £20? Or for free when received in the post?

So, in this way the architecture of the programme took shape, a period of fervent activity in the latter half of 1997, followed by detailed research over the next months as the remaining few holes were filled and ideas strengthened. And the year 2000 beckons, demanding a similar, but different approach. Continuity and change reign ●

1998 Definitives checklist



We hope this list will prove helpful to collectors in completing their collections. Please read the following notes carefully. We quote British Philatelic Bureau order numbers (prefixed TB, DS, etc) as given on Bureau stock lists. Some stamps were issued only in books and can be bought from Royal Mail only in complete books.

Low Value Definitive and Country stamps

Printers D, De La Rue Security Print Ltd; E, Joh Enschedé Stamps; Q, The House of Questa Ltd; W, Walsall Security Printers Ltd. Unless otherwise stated stamps are gravure printed, have PVA gum, perforation gauge 15 x 14 (with ellipses at lower left and right sides) and two phosphor bands. Dates quoted are those the stamps were first available from the Philatelic Bureau; in some cases stamps were reported on sale earlier elsewhere

Wilding definitives

10 March 20p light green, phosphor band left, W ● 20p light green, phosphor band right, W ● 26p rust, W ● 37p rhododendron, W