Modern Architecture Although modern architecture often gets a poor press from the traditionalists, Britain is fortunate to be home to some of the most exciting building projects of recent years. The very cream of these are represented in the new stamps issued this month, as Dave Warriner reports.

ARCHITECTURE WEEK is a national celebration of everything that is good about contemporary British architects. Falling between 16 and 25 June, there will be opportunities to enjoy walks, talks, exhibitions, films and visits to new buildings and architects' practices, together with a new set of Royal Mail special stamps issued on 20 June.

The issue kicks off with London's 30 St Mary Axe (1st class). Popularly known as 'the Gherkin' because of its shape, it was designed by Foster and Partners, who also worked upon the Greater London Authority Building and the redevelopment of the Great Court of the British Museum. Aside from its unusual shape, this building was designed to be extremely environmentally efficient. The building's aerodynamic shape generates wind pressure differentials, which maximise natural ventilation through the six spiralling light wells that also flood the interior with natural daylight, while the completely double-glazed interior is cooled with air extracted from the offices. Inside the double skin of the façade, computer-controlled blinds intercept solar gain, so that this heat can be reclaimed or rejected according to the building's environmental needs. Unlike other tower blocks, the very top floor is not given over to lift machinery, but to a restaurant and bar with unparalled views over London. Believe it or not, the only piece of curved glass in this building is the lens that caps the roof of the restaurant.

The Maggie's Centre (42p stamp), at the Ninewells Hospital in Dundee, is one of the network of Maggie's Centres which help in managing the emotional and physical support of people living with cancer together with their carers, family and friends inside their thoughtfully designed environments. The Canadian architect Frank Gehry was a friend of Maggie Keswick Jencks, the founder of the Maggie's Centre network. This Centre in Dundee, for which he waived his design fee, is his tribute to Jencks, following her death from breast cancer in 1995. Famed for buildings that include the Bilbao Guggenheim, this is Gehry's first work in the United Kingdom.

There are two key elements to this building's exterior. The Tower, inspired by a lighthouse and the concertina stainless steel clad roof, based on a woman's shawl in a Vermeer portrait. Centred on a communal kitchen, the centre has a flexible room plan, with an information library, a large relaxation area for group work and two smaller rooms for individual support. The building carries Gehry's signature feature of having very few straight walls. ▸

Selfridges, Birmingham
Architects: Future Systems

Downland Gridshell, Chichester
Architects: Edward Cullinan

An Turas, Isle of Tiree
Architects: Sutherland Hussey

The multi-award winning Selfridges Birmingham (44p) was designed by London's Future Systems. Their intention was to create a new landmark for Birmingham that would become a catalyst for its urban regeneration rather than just a new place to stock up on the latest fashions, even though the exterior was partially inspired by Paco Rabanne's chain-mail dresses. The fluid shape of the building recalls the fall of fabric over a body as it rises from the ground, to be drawn in at the waistline, before it curves out and over to form the roof. The exterior is studded with 15,000 shiny aluminium disks that reflect changes in the weather, and even on a foggy day the building has certainly changed Birmingham's skyline. The fluid lines of the exterior form are equally matched by the organically shaped internal atrium which stretches across an open floor plan, criss-crossed by a cat's cradle of escalators.

The Downland Gridshell (50p), designed by Edward Cullinan, is the new home of the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum. The Downland Gridshell is one of a very small number of such structures in Britain, and its method of construction is quite unique. A very high degree of carpentry skills went into its fabrication, emulating, but not imitating, many of the more traditional timber-framed buildings that the Museum is home to. As much of the building material was oak laths, during construction the architects collaborated with the Green Oak Carpentry Company. To prepare the oak laths for use, any defects were removed and the resulting pieces were finger-jointed together into standard lengths of six metres. Six of these pieces were then joined to form 36-metre laths. The diagonal grid of laths was then formed flat on top of a supporting scaffold. The edges of the grid were then lowered and the grid bent into shape, until the complete shell was formed and secured to the edges of the timber platform above the basement. The grid is a double layer, with two laths in each direction, combining the required flexibility with sufficient cross section for strength. Another layer triangulates the grid to increase its stiffness. The laths are connected at the grid nodes with steel plates and bolts. The building incorporates three workshops for carpentry, building, plumbing, roofing and

The Deep, Hull
Architects: Terry Farrell & Partners

Below: A view of An Turas (64p). The architects Sutherland Hussey worked in collaboration on this project with Jake Harvey, Donald Urquhart, Glen Onwin and Sandra Kennedy. The structural engineers were David Narro Associates. Photograph by Peter Mackinven, courtesy Sutherland Hussey Architects.

wheelwrighting conservation and restoration. A classroom allows for practical workshops for up to 12 people at a time to learn traditional crafts and construction skills that are no longer taught in the modern building industry, but are desperately needed by the conservation sector.

An Turas (64p stamp), which means a journey in Gaelic, is a ferry shelter located close to the pier, on the windswept Isle of Tiree in the Hebrides. This structure was designed by the Edinburgh architectural practice Sutherland Hussey with the intention that it should reflect some of the island's qualities. This has been achieved with the use of materials sympathetic to Tiree's traditional buildings, like the whitewashed walls and the black-felt roof of the bridge. The building consists of three parts. Passengers enter through a whitewashed passage that is open to the sky, but sheltered from the wind, before proceeding to the black-felt roofed bridge, enclosed to the sky but open to the rocks and sand of the beach below. Finally they reach an enclosed glass box, with a panoramic view looking out across Gott Bay and beyond.

The Deep (72p) at Hull's Sammy's Point, where the Humber joins the Hull River, presented a different set of problems for architect Terry Farrell and Partners. Billed as 'the world's only submarium', the Deep is home to thousands of sea creatures, including seven species of shark. The main tank, which contains 2.5 million litres of water and 87 tonnes of salt, is the deepest in Europe at 10 metres, and visitors can take a lift ride to view the creatures that survive at different levels of the ocean. A £45.5 million Millennium Commission Lottery project, The Deep consists of two buildings: the visitor attraction, which also houses the University of Hull's research centre and, on its western edge, the much simpler linear Business Centre building. Sitting at an extreme point in the landscape the visitor centre rises like a wave, to reinforce the graphic function of the building. The exterior resembles an eroded rock-face with its organic lines and the windows set within recesses in its irregular strata. The roof is treated in a similar fashion so that the building is read as a three dimensional object rather than a series of two-dimensional planes •