

Thematic Philately

John Hayward, Vice Chairman of the British Thematic Association, explains what Thematics are all about

This article will look at the origins of thematic collecting and its subsequent development. It will also cover how to go about choosing a theme or subject and then developing the chosen theme via the whole range of philatelic material available. Something will be mentioned of how to identify and where to obtain the material and of the thematic organisations that can assist the thematic collector.

Origins of Thematic Collecting

Thematic collecting as its name suggests is all about collecting by theme or subject (topic in the USA), rather than by country or geographical area. Surprisingly, it has been around for at least a century although it has only burgeoned since WWII. In the early 20th Century a few stamp collectors made the design on the stamp the focus of their attention. As designs of stamps gradually became more varied from simple heads of state definitives, so collecting by the design increased. Animals, plants and birds provided the most material to collect. After WWII thematic collecting really took off in Europe and the USA especially when it was realised that completion of a specific country or area was becoming impossible and that other philatelic material could be added to the collection to make it more interesting, e.g. postal stationery, handstamps, metermarks, booklets, etc. (figure 1). Indeed, nowadays the range of collectable material may also include telegrams, perfins, postcards, private illustrated envelopes, postage paid indicia (figure 2) and much more.

Choice of Theme

It has to be said at the outset that pure thematic collecting is not bound by any rules. Thematic collectors do whatever gives them the most satisfaction. What you collect is entirely up to you, the collector. The choice of the theme is solely yours as is the range of material you want to collect. If you just want to collect stamps on your theme, then do so, or you could collect all material except postcards. Alternatively you could collect all material up to or after a certain date. Your wallet or purse may dictate this anyway!

Most thematic collectors will tell you that they decided to collect their particular theme because it links in with their occupation, studies, hobby or social interests. So, if you work in the oil industry why not collect oil or petrol (figure 3) as your theme, if you are a chemist then collect pharmacy or a court official then collect the law or justice. If you are retired you could collect your previous occupation or your hobby or social interest. Your hobby may be stamps, so stamps on stamps could be the solution (figure 4), or it could be steam trains, sport or music. There will be plenty of material on these last three themes, but it would be as well to limit oneself to certain steam trains, to just one sport as opposed to sport generally and to one composer or form of music.



Figure 1



Figure 2 Postage Paid Indicium



Figure 3 Metermark for Petrol



Figure 4

Postal services is a most interesting theme and stretches back over the centuries, so it would be best to collect one aspect of the postal service, say by horse (figure 5) or during wartime. One particularly well known thematic collector who had received a heart transplant uniquely chose a theme personal to himself – the heart.

It is not just a question of one's pocket being deep enough, but the huge amount of material available for say football or the Olympics does mean you should limit the period involved or perhaps just to one Olympiad or even to one competition. Be careful also that there is not too little available on your chosen theme. For instance, for a famous person who greatly interests you there may be very little available philatelically.

The great bonus in collecting a particular theme is that you do not have to worry about obtaining items that were issued contemporaneously as your theme. For example, should you choose David Livingstone (1813-1873) as your theme, there is probably no philatelic material available from his lifetime unless you are prepared to pay a fortune for letters from or to him. However, there is a veritable mine of inexpensive material available on the great man from the latter part of the 20th Century to date.

Developing the Theme

Variety is the spice of life so far as thematic collecting is concerned. Collecting only stamps on a theme is fine for some, but to make the collection that much more interesting all the different types of philatelic material from as many countries as possible should be collected. You will not just enjoy hunting down all this material, but it may be that only an item of postal stationery or a handstamp rather than a stamp captures the particular event or circumstance you want to illustrate regarding your theme.

Starting with stamps though, the collector should not forget that they come in all sorts of formats including miniature sheets, local stamps and with printing on the selvedge and reverse. Your theme may not be depicted in the stamp within the miniature sheet, but in the surrounding printing (figure 6). Stamps are often overprinted or surcharged and the overprint or surcharge may illustrate part of your theme (figure 7). Cinderella material which includes local stamps should not be forgotten as a thematic source for one's collection (figure 8). The selvedge to a sheet of stamps may include an advertisement or illustration (figures 9 and 10) relevant to your theme. The reverse of a stamp may carry an underprint or an adhesive label that fits your theme perfectly (figure 11).

Handstamps, special cancellations, postmarks and cachets of all kinds applied to the post are a rich source of thematic material. These can even go back to the 18th Century. A very popular feature of thematic collecting are town postmarks related to one's theme. Many towns for instance are named after famous people or a geographical feature. Sporting connections abound like Bowler (cricket), Wembley (football) and Golf (golf) and there are even registered labels for mobile post offices at sporting events and exhibitions (figure 12). There are handstamps and special cancellations in abundance from all over the world on every



Figure 5



Figure 6
Racing Car in Selvedge



Figure 7
Overprint for
Car Races



Figure 8
Dutch Local
Town Post



Figure 9 Advertisement for Toothpaste in the Selvedge



Figure 10 Postal Services in Selvedge

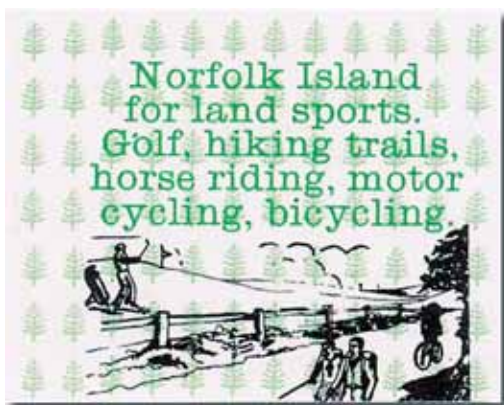


Figure 11
Self-adhesive Label
Showing Leisure Pursuits



Figure 12
Mobile PO at Bicycle
and Motorcycle Show



Figure 13
Handstamp for Sailors,
Soldiers and Police

conceivable theme. They start in earnest in the 1920s and increase dramatically after WWII (figures 13 and 14). Cachets are postal markings applied to mail either by a special stamp to denote a particular service or its failure, or by hand. There are a great number of these (figure 15), but they do add interest to a thematic collection.



Figure 14
Fight Against
Pollution

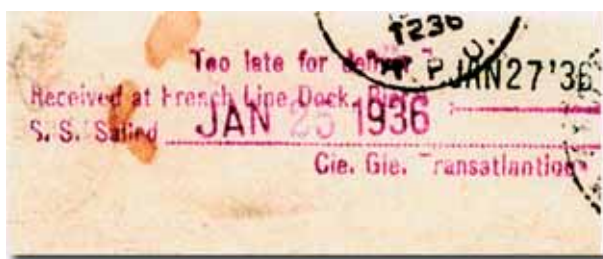


Figure 15 Too Late for Delivery Cachet

The much maligned and humble metermark is also a rich hunting ground for the thematic collector. Metermarks with words only appear from the 1910s onwards. Illustrated metermarks appeared from the mid 1920s. They abound from the economically developed countries like Germany, France, UK and USA (figures 16-18), but are very thin on the ground from Third World countries.



Figure 16 Chain Manufacturer

Postal stationery starts around 1870 although the Mulready cover of 1840 is considered as postal stationery and can be used for several themes displayed in its illustrations. For thematic collectors several features of postal stationery are of interest. The imprinted stamp itself, the picture on the front at the left or on the reverse (figure 19), or the advertisements it contains on the outside or inside (figure 20). The advertisements can be numerous and tracking down one's theme amongst them can become a daunting though challenging task particularly in a foreign language. It should not be forgotten that postal stationery comes in a variety of formats, e.g. envelopes, postal cards, letter sheets, air letters, airgrammes, etc.



Figure 17 Christmas

Much akin to postal stationery are telegrammes – a form of postal communication and therefore eminently collectable by the thematic collector. Many telegrammes from the 1920s onwards carry advertisements or illustrations ideal for thematic collectors (figures 21 and 22).



Figure 18 Insects

Booklets from their very early days around 1900 up to the present reflect an enormous variety of themes. The theme may be depicted on the front or back cover, both inside and outside (figure 23), on the stamps themselves or on the interleaves protecting the stamps (figure 24). Advertisers are plenty as are illustrations.



Figure 19 Road Safety



Figure 20
Numerous Themes are Covered in the Adverts



Figure 21
Telegramme—Cinzano Advert



Figure 22 Telegramme
—Various Sports—



Figure 23

Postcards are regarded by many as non-philatelic as they are not issued by a post office, but that is no reason for a thematic collector to refrain from collecting them. You may collect what you like and postcards just add that extra bit of variety and interest to a collection (figure 25). They come in vast numbers though on some themes and it may be as well to limit oneself to just a few in the collection perhaps to a particular event or a period in time. Maximum cards, where the picture, postage stamp and handstamp all depict the same subject, represent a specialised area of collecting postcards.

Many of us like to collect stamps on commercial or first day of issue covers. The former may be the only way to obtain a stamp on cover as a first day cover may not exist. The latter may be a means of obtaining a special first day of issue handstamp (figure 26). These are well worth collecting from a thematic point of view. Indeed, some stamps commercially used on cover may be quite rare and thus enhance the collection.

There are many illustrated commercial covers produced privately by manufacturers, commercial outlets (figure 27), shops, organisations etc., which, although like postcards are not philatelic, are nonetheless collectible—they fall in the social philately category. They can make a fine display as some of them are beautifully designed and fill that spot in a thematic collection that explains part of a story the collector has been wanting to tell for years (figure 28).

There are many other forms of philatelic material available for the thematic collector. What about watermarks? Pineapples, roses and anchors have been used over the years. Perfins, used by commercial outlets mainly for security reasons, are a good source of thematic material (figure 29). The more recent postage paid indicia (PPIs) should not be overlooked either. Then there are artists drawings, essays, proofs (figure 30), specimens, not to mention errors, etc., the list is almost endless. Yet this only goes to show that the postage stamp is simply the starting point for any thematic collector who wants to have a really worthwhile collection.

Where Does One Start?

This is a very good question, having chosen one's theme. Obviously you have to start with a checklist of some sort of what is available on your theme. It is nigh on impossible nowadays to wade through stamp catalogues of the world looking for stamps on a particular theme because there are thousands of stamps and then there are the items not in catalogues—where do you go to find out about them? There are a number of thematic societies based in the UK, e.g. Bird Stamp Society, Scout & Guide Stamp Club, Ship Stamp Society, etc., who supply checklists to their members. There are also thematic catalogues published by Stanley Gibbons and Domfil by Afinsa (Spain). Stanley Gibbons has published several



Figure 24 Belgian Congo Booklet Interleaf



Figure 25



Figure 26

thematic catalogues in its "Collect Stamps" series, such as Birds, Chess, Fish, Fungi, Railways, Ships and Motor Vehicles. These are all very good starting points. The American Topical Association has available for purchase by its members a large number of handbooks on many topics plus thematic checklists of stamps. The catalogue numbers used in each instance though are Scott and the handbooks and checklists may be somewhat out of date.

Keeping up to date on new issues of your theme also needs to be considered. *Stanley Gibbons Stamp Monthly* is recommended for details of new issues. Also the German catalogue publishers, Michel, operate a subscription service where details of new issues may be obtained online. Some of the specialist thematic societies provide details of new issues.

Ascertaining what is available other than stamps on a given theme is not so easy. Some of the specialist thematic societies do have lists available for items like handstamps or booklets. Otherwise it comes down to collectors hunting down material for themselves via dealers or auctions, through fellow collectors of the same theme or even from looking at thematic exhibits at local and national events. Local stamp fairs are often a good starting point. Many stamp dealers have stocks of thematics including postcards and once you become known to a dealer they will often keep items on one side for you. Some dealers offer new issue services for various popular themes and this is a good way to keep up to date. There is one downside to buying stamps on a given theme though. You may have to buy a set of three or four stamps or even more to obtain the one stamp you require as many dealers will not split sets. A good way to dispose of the unwanted stamps is via your

local philatelic society's stamp packet.

Finally, the book *Handbook of Thematic Philately* by W.E.J. van den Bold published by James Bendon Ltd., PO Box 6484, Limassol, Cyprus, in 1990 is to be recommended to all thematic collectors and the British Thematic Association, will be able to assist with thematic collecting generally (Membership Secretary, Peter Denly, 9 Oaklands Park, Bishops Stortford, Herts. CM23 2BY).

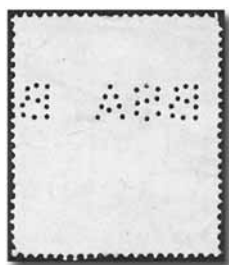


Figure 29
Birmingham
Small Arms Perfin



Figure 27 Banking Theme



Figure 28 Commercial Advert



Figure 30 Proof