

Stamps: reading

To celebrate National Stamp Day, 6 May, we interview Penelope White. She has one of the largest private stamp collections in the UK.



Why do you collect stamps?

Because of my name! My parents call me Penelope but everyone else calls me Penny. When I was at school my teachers sometimes changed my name from Penny White to Penny Black. They said it was the name of the very first stamp in the world. I thought that was great! I wanted to know more about stamps so I started to collect them. I think both the history of stamps and their designs are very interesting.

What did you find out about the history?

Well, the Penny Black was first sold in 1840 and it was very popular. It cost only one penny and so poorer people could send letters too. More people wanted to read and write now, which was a good thing. Another good thing was that the new Post Office had a savings bank so for the first time people could save their money.

What about their designs?

The Penny Black itself had a large picture of Queen Victoria on it. The everyday stamps in the UK still have just a picture of the King or Queen on but sometimes there are stamps for special occasions. For example every December there are special Christmas stamps. We often have stamps to remember important people. The person who has been on most stamps is Sir Winston Churchill who was the prime minister during the Second World War. The next person is Christopher Columbus, the Italian born explorer who discovered America. We also have beautiful stamps with animals and birds, or flowers on – I think they're all lovely!

What about other countries?

After the UK the next country to have stamps was Brazil in 1843 and then Switzerland. They were followed by the USA and Mauritius in 1847 and then France and Belgium in 1849. The first country to have self-adhesive stamps was Sierra Leone in 1964. The stamps were in the shape of the country. The second country was the Pacific Island of Tonga but this time the shape of the stamp was a bunch of bananas!

What's your favourite stamp?

That's easy – the stamp the Nicaraguans made in 1900. The design included a picture of Mount Momotombo on it. The artist wanted the stamp to look more interesting so he painted the mountain with lots of smoke coming out of it. The Americans wanted to build a canal through Central America and they had to choose between Nicaragua or Panama. When they saw the stamp they decided that Nicaragua was too dangerous and chose Panama – but in fact the mountain is completely safe!

What's the most expensive stamp in the world?

In 1885 a 14 year-old Swedish boy found a yellow *Tre Skilling Banco* stamp. He knew it was unusual (they are usually green) and he sold it for seven kroner. In 1996 it was sold for an incredible £1,400,000. That stamp, unfortunately, is not in my collection!