



Great Britain, Queen Elizabeth: 1994 Christmas 19p with misaligned colours, unused. Stanley Gibbons' December; £110.



Turks Islands: 1881, strip of three 1/2 on 1d, unused. Sold in Stanley Gibbons' December Postbid sale for £110.



Australia: Sydney Bridge 5s, fine unused. Stanley Gibbons' December; £275.



New Zealand: 1949-1958, £3.10s, unused. Stanley Gibbons' December; £550.



Cape of Good Hope, Mafeking: 3d stamp depicting Baden Powell, fine used. Stanley Gibbons' December Postbid sale, £700.

Introduction to Stamp Collecting by Brenda Greysmith

Attractive and visually appealing, stamps offer the collector enormous scope and diversity. But to develop a sense of their values, says Brenda Greysmith, you'll have to do your homework, researching designs and the complexities of issues, franking marks and perforation irregularities.

Thousands of new stamps are issued each year, many created with skill and artistry, and showing a fantastic variety of designs. But while this diversity adds to their appeal, it can also be confusing, so it's sensible to limit your focus to a particular subject area - stamps from just one country, for example, or those with a single theme such as footballers, flowers or animals.

Be thorough in your research: the more you know, the more likely you are to spot a bargain. To help you learn, there are numerous information sources, including several specialist magazines and a wide range of books and catalogues. Many of these publications are produced by the philatelic company Stanley Gibbons, established in 1865, whose catalogues have become renowned as indispensable reference works. The Stanley Gibbons shop in London's Strand is a great place to browse the huge range of philatelic books available, and the stamp counter there claims to have books containing more than five million stamps.

On a smaller scale, there may be a specialist shop in your own locality, or the occasional stamp exhibition where you can meet experts and see many thousands of stamps. There could even be a stamp club nearby, which can be a source of swaps as well as information. And from the comfort of your own home, it's worth checking the many Internet sites to see what's on offer and current market values. The website run by Sandafayre, for example, has an excellent search facility and is frequently updated, and of course Stanley Gibbons' site is a must.

Once you feel confident, buying stamps is relatively easy. Many thousands are bought by mail order: dealers will send you (often on approval) anything from select packets of mint sets or high-value single stamps to tea chests full of examples from around the world. In the last few years, sales via websites have been building, facilitating purchases and making the stamps market truly international. Stanley Gibbons, for example, has monthly sales alternating between its Postbids, offering between 3,000 and 4,000 single stamps or sets, and the more recently established Collections and Ranges sales. Both are available via the Internet, and the company still runs room auctions at its saleroom in Drury Lane. Its online and postal-bid auctions tend to feature lower value or stamps that are not in tip-top condition, while its saleroom auctions usually have more specialist, higher value items, or collections which are not quite so easy to sell online.

Making a quick profit from stamps should not be the main aim of the beginner. You'll probably have to invest a fair bit and buy good examples which are going to be valuable in five, ten or fifty years time. To recognise those good examples, there is much to learn. The price of a single stamp, for example, can go from less than 1p to many thousands of pounds, depending on rarity and condition. At a Stanley Gibbons auction a couple of years ago, for example, one of Britain's rarest postage stamps, a King Edward VII 1904 sixpenny overprinted IR, was sold for £92,000. Value also depends on whether the stamp is 'fresh' (as when issued), 'with adhesive' (has been glued), 'used' (sent through the post) or a 'first day' issue. In addition, a tiny variation in perforation can mean the difference between a stamp being run-of-the-mill and being of great value. So it's important to find out about printing methods and stamp design.

As a beginning, you can purchase starter collections (Stanley Gibbons offers them from £360) and interesting examples can often be purchased for well under £200. For example, an 1888-93 4d stamp from Zululand went for £110 in Stanley Gibbons' December online sale, while an Australian 1926-30 4d sold for £27. And there are bargains to be had, once you know what's what: in that same sale, an 1840 1d black sold for £32, although catalogued at £200 in the Stanley Gibbons Collect British Stamps 2003 edition.

If even these prices seem daunting, it's worth remembering that the least expensive way to start collecting stamps is to soak interesting examples off the post that comes to you and your acquaintances. This method may bring back childhood memories, but it's still valid. Keep the whole envelope if looks interesting or has unusual markings; if not, trim the paper away taking care not to damage the perforations. Float the stamp face up in a saucer of cool water and, once the glue has dissolved, slide the stamp off the paper and carefully rinse the back with clean water. To dry it, place the stamp face down on white paper towels and flatten out any curling by placing the stamp under a heavy book when completely dry.

Stamps are fragile and easily damaged, so it's important to handle them carefully: avoid pointed tweezers or your fingers, instead use rounded, all-purpose philatelic tongs. These and other basic tools, are easy to find and inexpensive but you might like to also acquire such items as a magnifying glass, a gauge to measure stamp perforations and watermark detector fluid which makes temporarily visible the marks on some stamp papers.

To store stamps safely, keep them in boxes, folders or albums made of acid-free material. Traditionally, stamps have been attached to paper album pages with hinges, (small rectangles of gummed paper) and many an enthusiast still uses this system. However, avoid albums which are either flimsy or designed to have stamps mounted on both the front and back of each page (the stamps can get tangled). It's more difficult to rearrange stamps in fully-bound paper albums than it is in albums with a cover and individual pages, or blank acid-free album pages punched for binders. Least flexible are the albums with pre-printed squares for specific stamps, usually with an illustration or a description, and perhaps maps and information about the country featured.

Plastic albums are also available, but check that they are of archival quality; if not, the plastic may have oil-based softeners which can leach out and damage the stamps. Although they can be more expensive than paper albums, good quality plastic ones have several advantages: those with self-adhesive mounts or pages allow you to slip the stamps into a plastic strip and to rearrange the collection very easily. This type of album is also best for unused stamps, as they should not be glued to hinges.



Great Britain, Queen Victoria: 10s, scarce, used. Sold in Stanley Gibbons' December Postbid sale for £300.



Austria: 1936, anniversary of the assassination of Dr Dollfuss, scarce, used. Sold in Stanley Gibbons' December Postbid sale for £350.



Gibraltar: £5, unused, fresh colour. Stanley Gibbons' December, £425.



German Post Offices, China: 1900, Foochow Provisional 5pf on 10pf, scarce, used. Sold in Stanley Gibbons' December Postbid sale for £200.



Great Britain, Queen Victoria: 1d, used. Sold in Stanley Gibbons' December Postbid sale for £32.



Liechtenstein: 1935, Arms of Liechtenstein 5f, unused. Sold in Stanley Gibbons' December Postbid sale for £150.