When he was three years old, Louis Braille accidentally stabbed himself in the eye and subsequently lost his sight as infection spread to both eyes. While at the Royal Institution for Blind Youth in Paris, Louis was introduced to sonography, a writing system developed by Charles Barbier. Aged about 12 at the time, he spent the next three years simplifying this system to create the system that now bears his name. Louis Braille went on to become a respected teacher at the Institution, before contracting tuberculosis and dying in 1852. Two years after his death, his writing system was officially recognised in France. Today, Braille is the standard form of reading and writing for blind people all over the world.

Braille
Louis Braille went on to become a respected teacher at the Institution, before contracting tuberculosis and dying in 1852. Two years after his death, his writing system was officially recognised in France. Today, Braille is the standard form of reading and writing for blind people all over the world. France issued a 55c. value depicting Louis Braille on 4 January 2009, the actual date of the anniversary. Thematic collectors in particular are delighted that many countries released just a single stamp, at a valid postage rate, rather than superfluous and unnecessary sets that included high values and other values seldom used for postage. Some countries cleverly included Braille in the design, and particularly striking is the sheet of 12×44c. stamps issued by the Netherlands on 10 January 2009.

Notable absentees
Sadly, some of the world’s largest postal administrations did not mark the occasion, including The United States of America, Canada, Russia and China. Among other notable absentees were Royal Mail, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.


Among countries in Europe that commemorated the Louis Braille anniversary were: Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Vatican City. Stamps were also issued by Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The Irish 55c. stamp issued on 23 January 2009, features an eye created with a series of dots, representing Braille as a system that extends the senses through the organisation of a minimal form. ‘Eire’ and ‘55c.’ are also reproduced in Braille.

Among the countries in Africa producing special stamps were: Algeria, Kenya, Morocco and Senegal. In the Middle East: Iran and Syria. Stamps from Asia included India, which issued a stamp and a special stamp booklet, Korea and Macau (China). From South America and the West Indies stamps were issued by Brazil, Peru, Cuba and Barbados.

Guide Dog for the Blind
A Guide Dog for the Blind has been shown on several stamp issues during the past few years. These included the USA in 1970, New Zealand in 2006 and Canada Post in 2008. Ireland issued a stamp to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind in 2006. South Africa issued a Prevention of Blindness stamp on 20 November 2005.

Many special events were held in the United Kingdom during 2009 to raise funds and awareness of blind literacy by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB). Mr Richard Brewster, a Vice President of the RNIB, a stamp collector and Master of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, gave me an exclusive interview for GSM during January 2010.

This special report by Peter Jennings, FRPSL, FRGS, includes an exclusive interview with stamp collector Mr Richard Brewster, a Vice President of the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), and Master of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers.

Distinctive postage stamps were issued last year by postal authorities throughout the world to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Louis Braille, in Coupvray, a small village outside Paris, on 4 January 1809. These stamps, seen by millions of people, have significantly helped to raise the profile of literacy for the blind.

When he was three years old, Louis Braille accidentally stabbed himself in the eye and subsequently lost his sight as infection spread to both eyes. While at the Royal Institution for Blind Youth in Paris, Louis was introduced to sonography, a writing system developed by Charles Barbier. Aged about 12 at the time, he spent the next three years simplifying this system to create the system that now bears his name. Louis Braille went on to become a respected teacher at the Institution, before contracting tuberculosis and dying in 1852. Two years after his death, his writing system was officially recognised in France. Today, Braille is the standard form of reading and writing for blind people all over the world.
Douglas Gumbley

Interestingly, I first encountered the Worshipful Company of Stationers, when I read a captivating article ‘The Genesis of Aerograms’ published in the March 1969 issue of The Aero Field. The article included a letter sent by Mr F Lunn, a sub-postmaster at Wroxall Post Office, Ventnor, in the Isle of Wight, to the editor of The Sub-Postmaster.

The letter outlined how Douglas W Gumbley, a Guernseyman, invented and designed the Iraq Air Mail Letter Card and registered it at Stationers’ Hall in London, on 15 February 1933, under his own copyright. On 30 January 1967, The Registrar, Gordon P Wells, wrote to Mr Lunn as follows: ‘With reference to your letter of 26th instant, the following are the details of the registration made by Mr Gumbley. I shall be obliged if you will kindly remit 5/-, the search fee, in due course.

‘No 4206. Date of Entry: 15 February 1933. AIR MAIL LETTER CARD. Date of First Publication: 11 February 1933. Proprietor of Copyright: DOUGLAS WILLIAM GUMBLEY, Alwiyah, Baghdad, Iraq, and The East India United Service Club, 16, St James’ Square London. Publisher of work: Bradbury Wilkinson & Co Ltd of New Malden, Surrey.’ It was signed by the Registering Officer, Reginald T Rivington, and dated 17 February 1933.’

Through the help of Mr Lunn I had the privilege of spending a day, Saturday 19 February 1972, with Mr Douglas Gumbley, then 91 years old, at his house at Sandford on the Isle of Wight. I included this fascinating story in my book Aerograms published in 1973 by Picton Publishing. Mr Gumbley signed my ‘specimen’ copy of his Iraq Air Mail Letter Card.

Stationers’ Hall

Many years later, I purchased the original copy of the entry in the Register at Stationers’ Hall given to Mr Gumbley in 1933. During September 2009 I showed this to Mr Richard Harrison, former Managing Director of Harrison & Sons Ltd, the world-famous security stamp printers based in High Wycombe, and Past Master of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, who explained that Mr Reginald Rivington, a
solicitor, was Clerk of the Stationers’ Company, 1916–1957, and Master in 1960. He was born in 1881 and died in 1971.

Now the philatelic world knows a little about the man who registered the world’s first airletter.

Harrison and Sons, Stamp Printers

The company, known to generations of philatelists as Harrison & Sons of High Wycombe, was founded by James Harrison in London in 1750 and, until 1997, traded under the name of Harrison. Harrison produced postage stamps for more than 100 countries.

Richard Harrison, Managing Director of Harrison & Sons, security printers, and of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers

The firm printed its first stamp of Great Britain in 1881 depicting the embossed head of Queen Victoria for use on telegram forms, this was followed in 1911 by a contract for the definitive stamps of King Edward VII. Harrison printed most of the stamp issues of Great Britain from the King George V photogravure definitive issue of 1934 until the 1980s.

In 1997 the De La Rue (DLR) group purchased Harrisons and, almost overnight, centuries of tradition were washed away as the company changed its name to De La Rue Security Print.

The last Great Britain commemorative issue under the Harrison name was The Queen’s Beasts issue—released by Royal Mail on 24 February 1998 to mark the 650th Anniversary of the Order of the Garter—that had been printed in readiness the previous year. The Machin definitive issues continued to use the Harrison imprint in the margins, due to the high costs involved in changing the cylinders. They gradually changed over to a DLR imprint from late 1998. So ended a great era in British security stamp printing.

Enjoyed collecting stamps

The present Master, Richard Brewster, revealed that he has enjoyed collecting postage stamps over many years. He said: ‘As a small boy my father first introduced me to the hobby at around the time of the Coronation of HM The Queen in June 1953. He gave me an album of British Empire stamps. I remember in particular the stamps of Great Britain, Australia, Canada and India, among others.’

‘I come from a family of stamp collectors. My late father, David Brewster, and my grandfather, Clement Brewster, both collected stamps of Great Britain and the British Empire. In my teens I lapsed as a collector in my own right but I was always very conscious that my grandfather and my father had collections of stamps in albums. I also remember that they both had many envelopes stored in desk drawers, that were full of stamps that needed to be soaked off.’

Ironically we sat at his desk in the apartment on the top floor of Stationers’ Hall, that is reserved for the Master during his year in office. This magnificent hall is situated in Ave Maria Lane, a stone’s throw from St Paul’s Cathedral.

Mr Brewster continued: ‘I gave up collecting stamps, but came back to the hobby years later when I helped my father to try to sort out the family collection in the 1990s, following his retirement. After his death in 2008, aged 90 the family attempted to value the collection by looking at the prices in the Stanley Gibbons British Commonwealth Stamp Catalogue.

‘It is an interesting old collection but unfortunately many of the stamps were used and not in first class condition and this meant that it had greater interest than it did value. For this reason we decided to keep it and my nephew George, now aged 17, who is also keen on stamp collecting, has now inherited the collection.’

Opportunity missed

Asked if he liked the stamps issued to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Louis Braille, shown to him by this correspondent, Mr Brewster replied without hesitation: ‘I am most impressed, but extremely disappointed that Royal Mail did not issue any stamps to celebrate this important anniversary. A special issue of Royal Mail postage stamps depicting Louis Braille would have helped to raise the profile and vital work of the RNIB. I am astonished and disappointed that this opportunity was missed!’
Richard Brewster explained that he is a third generation Chartered Accountant having followed his father, David, and his grandfather, Clement, into the family owned practice Pridie Brewster. He then went into industry, working in a small quoted company, called Giltspur, 25 per cent owned by Maxwell Joseph. When he sold Giltspur I looked to buy into a listed company but it had to be a very small one for me to be able to afford to buy a controlling interest. In 1983 I acquired 50 per cent of David S Smith which had one factory in South Wales printing cigarette packets. By 1993 it had grown to be the largest UK owned producer of corrugated boxes and remains today a market leader in attractive parts of the corrugated packaging sector. Between 1993 and 2006 I have run and part owned several other printing businesses the last of which was Interbrandpro, which became the largest printer of beermats in the world.

‘In 1989 the Worshipful Company of Stationers invited me to give their Annual Lecture on the subject of the Future of the UK Paper Industry. In the same year I became a Liveryman and 20 years later I was elected Master. It’s a full-time job,’ he smiled.

Mr Brewster, paused for a moment: ‘After I was elected Master of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers on 7 July 2009, and installed in the Great Hall, I announced my choice of RNIB as the Master’s charity for my year in office.

‘People encounter blind or partially blind people every day. In fact you and I both wear glasses. We are in fact partially sighted! The RNIB is a charity people can easily relate to. The management promised our employees that for every pound they raise at each of our locations the company would match it. Throughout 1990 the magnificent sum of £125,000 was raised through the fundraising efforts of the employees. The company matched the total and a cheque for £250,000 was presented to the RNIB.’

Gala dinner
The Company is supporting their Master by holding a Gala Dinner called Mid-Summer Night’s Dream at Stationers’ Hall on Monday 21 June 2010. This will bring together Shakespeare’s connections with the Stationers and their objectives of helping improve literacy, as well as their long tradition of charitable giving. A great auction will be run in the lead up to and on the night as part of the campaign to raise £50,000 to buy one hundred Talking Books, at a cost of £500 per book.

This correspondent has agreed to prepare and donate a special display with the title: ‘Louis Braille Bicentenary, 1809–2009, on Stamps’. The ten album pages will be displayed at Stationers’ Hall, and included in the auction.

The Blind PMG
How appropriate it would have been if Royal Mail had researched and included a Louis Braille stamp in its 2009 stamp programme, because Henry Fawcett, Postmaster General in Gladstone’s government, 1880–1884, initiated an effective agenda of administrative and organisational reforms within the Post Office. He introduced new services aimed at widening the use of postal services among the population. William Fawcett, 1833–1884, was, like Louis Braille, blind.

Determination
Tragedy struck in 1857 when on a shooting trip with his father. Both father and son suffered from weak sight and cataracts ran in the family. By accident Mr Fawcett senior discharged his shotgun towards his son Henry and the shot blinded him permanently. Like Louise Braille, his determination enabled him to overcome his disability and pursue an outstanding academic and political career. An important article: ‘The Man for the Post – Henry Fawcett and Postal Reform’, by W Iain Stevenson, FRGS, FRPSL, was published in the December 2001 issue of The London Philatelist, the journal of the Royal Philatelic Society London.

A special postage stamp would be a simple, yet permanent way to honour the considerable and far-reaching achievements of the blind Postmaster General, Henry Fawcett, and with the engaging Louis Braille commemoratives issues, it would capture public attention and promote and provide literacy for the blind. The RNIB website has much useful information: www.rnib.org.uk
Clothed in the Livery

On Tuesday 1 December 2009, I was greatly honoured and privileged to be Cloathed in the Livery of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, by the Master, Mr Richard Brewster, during a short but memorable ceremony in the Court Room at Stationers’ Hall.

My Sponsor, Richard Model, a distinguished publisher, Liveryman of the Company, and Deputy Master of the Worshipful Company of Bowyers, placed the gown round my shoulders. He introduced me to the Master, the Upper and Under Wardens, during the ceremony, held in the presence of the Court. My wife Stella was present as my Witness.

A little more than two weeks earlier, on Monday, 16 November 2009, I was Admitted as a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, in a short but impressive ceremony at Stationers’ Hall. I was amazed and delighted by the speed of my Cloathing as a Liveryman. One of the requirements to become a Freeman of a Livery Company is that a candidate has to be a Freeman of the City of London. My ceremony took place at the Guildhall in London on 2 June 1993, the 40th Anniversary of the Coronation of HM The Queen.

Stationers’ Company

The Stationers is one of the City Livery Companies; so named because of the distinctive clothing (or livery) entitled to be worn by the original craftsmen practising their trade as members of a guild.

The Company dates from 1403, when text writers, illuminators, booksellers, bookbinders, suppliers of parchment, pens and paper permitted to join one Company. 1403: Text writers, illuminators, booksellers, bookbinders, suppliers of parchment, pens and paper permitted to join one Company. 1476: Caxton brings printing to England. 1557: Royal Charter granted by Queen Mary Tudor. 1606: Livery granted by Court of Aldermen. 1666: Abergavenny House purchased by the Company for use as a Hall. 1673: Present Hall completed on the same site. 1710: First Copyright Act: Registration at Stationers’ Hall ensures copyright entitlement.

Stationers’ Hall is a Grade I listed building, close to St Paul’s Cathedral. Completed in 1673 after the Great Fire of London, the Hall’s suite of three imposing, inter-linking rooms makes it one of the most sought after venues in the City.

GSM readers interested in attending the Gala Dinner mentioned in this article, or providing valuable lots for the charity auction on behalf of the RNIB, should write to Mr Richard Brewster, The Master, The Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, Stationers’ Hall, Ave Maria Lane, London, EC4M 7DD.

Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS, pictured with his sponsor Richard Model, Liveryman of the Company, after he was Cloathed in the Livery of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, on 1 December 2009

Who decorated books, to form a guild. Later printers began to join and in 1557 the craft association was given a Royal Charter and became a livery company. The Newspaper Makers’ Company amalgamated with the Stationers in 1933. The Stationers is number 47 of 108 on the list of Livery Companies, in order of precedence.

The Company’s historic records from 1554 to the present day are remarkably complete and form the single most important archival source for the history of the English book trade. Notable dates include: 1403: Text writers, illuminators, booksellers, bookbinders, suppliers of parchment, pens and paper permitted to join one Company. 1476: Caxton brings printing to England. 1557: Royal Charter granted by Queen Mary Tudor. 1606: Livery granted by Court of Aldermen. 1666: Abergavenny House purchased by the Company for use as a Hall. 1673: Present Hall completed on the same site. 1710: First Copyright Act: Registration at Stationers’ Hall ensures copyright entitlement.

Stationers’ Hall is a Grade I listed building, close to St Paul’s Cathedral. Completed in 1673 after the Great Fire of London, the Hall’s suite of three imposing, inter-linking rooms makes it one of the most sought after venues in the City.