

Graham Childs is a quintessential English gentleman who has devoted most of his life to the hobby of stamp collecting, as a knowledgeable collector, distinguished auctioneer at HR Harmer Ltd (subsequently Harmers of London), past Chairman of the Philatelic Congress of Great Britain, President of Brighton & Hove PS, and Chairman of the Philatelic Traders' Society, 1996–2000. Instead of retirement and devoting time to his own stamp collection, he accepted the challenging full-time job of Secretary of the PTS and manager of Stampex, as he explained during a wide-ranging exclusive interview with Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS.

'I and the Stampex Committee want to make Stampex the best show in Europe!'

By Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

Peter Jennings: *Did you collect stamps when you were young and do you still collect?*

Graham Childs: I did collect stamps when I was young. My father bought me a collection of Sarawak (the remains of a good collection). My favourite Sarawak stamp is the first issue, with the corner letters 'JBRS', for James Brooke Rajah of Sarawak, issued on 1 March 1869 (SG 1).

'My father was a collector, also my mother and sister! It was in the family. I have not collected for some time.'

Where were you born and brought up and did you go into the stamp business direct from school?

'I was born in Brighton in December 1946. When I left school I went to H R Harmer in New Bond Street. I entered the Melville Competition—and won every cup in all three classes. I was at a Congress—that is when the prize giving took place—and I asked Cyril Harmer if there were any jobs—he replied 'write in'.

'I did and had references from Captain Rogers-Tillstone (a President of the Royal Philatelic Society London), Ernest Hugen and Richard Sheraton (who was then Keeper of the Roll of Distinguished Philatelists)—all well known members of the Brighton & Hove Philatelic Society; I have been a Member since 1957.

How and why did you join H R Harmers, the well-known stamp auctioneers?

'I was interested in auctions and went to many with my father. Harmers was always the name—at that time Mr H R Harmer lived in Hove.'

What in particular did you learn from Mr Cyril Harmer, a doyen of the stamp trade, that helped you throughout your career?

'Cyril Harmer was a great person to work for. I started at Harmers – the wage was £5 per week plus luncheon vouchers – Fred Twining – Head of British Commonwealth was a great teacher – Bill Keller – head of Foreign Stamps was also an expert with so much knowledge.

'I went to New York in the early 1970's



Graham Childs, Secretary, the Philatelic Traders' Society

and worked for Bernard Harmer—at HR Harmer Inc for three years and then returned to London.'

Do you remember the first item you sold as professional stamp auctioneer?

'I started taking auctions in 1976, but only the last few lots in the sale. There were few people in the room. I think the first item I ever sold was probably a lot of United States stamps.'

What was the most unusual stamp or cover you sold at auction?

'Over the years I have sold so many lots—but the 1d. Post Office Mauritius was the most expensive. Harmers of London offered the stamp at an auction during 1992. It sold for £198,000.' (The stamp was bought by the Richard Borek Company and the Borek Foundation in Brunswick).

What particular advice would you give to a stamp collector buying at an auction for the first time?

'When buying at auction – do not be



Sarawak SG 1, with the corner letters JBRS, James Brooke Rajah of Sarawak, issued in 1869.

The 1d. Post Office Mauritius stamp sold at auction by Graham Childs for £198,000 in 1992



scared. Many people think that if they scratch their nose or tug their ear they will end up buying a lot. The best advice when going to an auction is to know exactly the top bid you are going to make. Always arrive on time and view the auction beforehand.'

Are you concerned that stamps and covers are being offered every day on places like eBay that are not in

reality what they purport to be and what if anything is the PTS able to do about the matter for the good of philately?

‘The PTS is aware that items being sold on the internet are not always the real thing. Recently there was a batch of England Winners covers which had forged postmarks. These were removed and the PTS Members were alerted and asked to watch out for them.’

Why did you accept the job as Secretary of the PTS when you could have gone into honourable retirement?

‘I have always been a supporter of the PTS. I was on Council and Chairman. I enjoyed the stamp trade and very much enjoy organising the Stampex exhibitions.’

What are the greatest challenges facing the PTS?

‘The challenge of the PTS is to recruit new members—and keep up to date with modern technology.’

What are the challenges facing the hobby of stamp collecting in Britain today?

‘Sadly, many philatelic societies are folding; this is a shame as they were the backbone of philately. Collectors are getting old but this has always been the case.’

‘The hobby of stamp collection is alive and doing well and there are new collectors of all ages. The Royal Philatelic Society London is increasing its membership.’

‘There are now so many new stamps being issued that it can be an extremely expensive hobby if you want to collect them all. We need to educate new collectors on how to collect. For example help and encourage them to pick a favourite country and to specialise in a particular area or theme.’

Graham Childs paused for a moment and added: ‘New collectors, old collectors, they all need to visit Stampex!’

I am sure that most collectors and dealers would like Royal Mail to give significantly more of the profits made from the sales of new issues and related products back into the hobby. What influence, if any, does the PTS have in this matter?

‘Royal Mail is a vital part of Stampex. Royal Mail is going through changes and challenges. Yes, we would like them to put money into exhibitions, but the PTS has little influence. The privatised Royal Mail may well put more money into philately – we hope so.’

The recent 2012 Autumn Stampex at the Business Design Centre in Islington was a big improvement on past years. What particular plans to you



Graham Childs - age 10 with his stamp collection

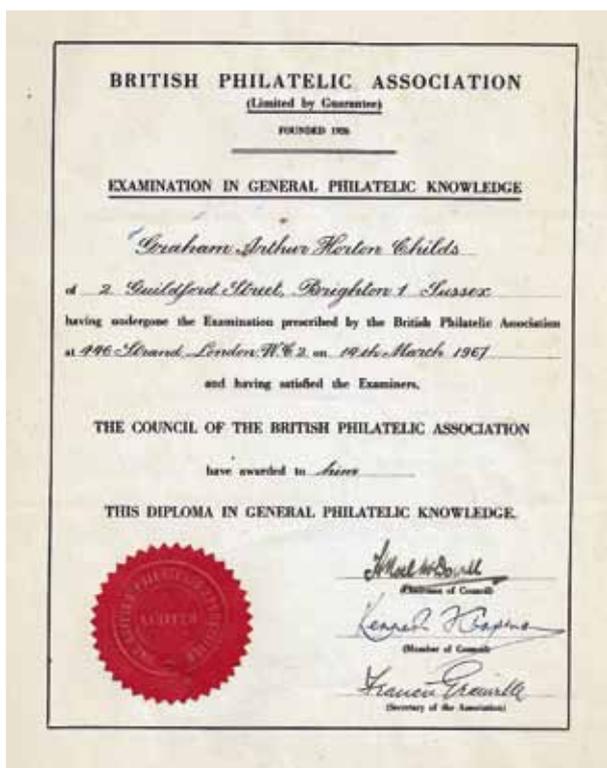
Right: Inscription on the first prize in the Junior Melville Memorial Competition, 1957



Illustrations on this page courtesy of Graham Childs

Below: Graham Childs - winner of the Senior Class Melville, 1964

An early certificate from the BPA, 1967



have to continue to bring in more well-known dealers and auctions houses, particularly from abroad?

‘The Autumn Stampex re-vamp went well. The ‘new look’ Village Green was much more inviting.

‘The Stanley Gibbons Stand was most impressive. All the Stands looked good and inviting to visitors. We are trying to get more overseas dealers and auctioneers to Stampex. They make a difference with new stocks, which the visitors like.

‘There will be more improvements at Spring Stampex 2013 (Wednesday 20 to Saturday 23 February) to make it look even better, including the addition of some Postal Administrations.’

Do you have plans to bring in more of the dealers who in the past only did the now defunct Philatex at the Royal Horticultural Hall in Victoria? If yes, will these dealers be situated in the Gallery Bays at Second Level?

‘There will be more ex-Philatex dealers at Spring Stampex and most will be in the Gallery Bays. Also, there will be chairs in the Gallery Bays, as many dealers and collectors like to sit and browse. Health and safety regulations will not allow us to have chairs on the main floor.’

What was the general response from dealers and collectors that the Royal Mail stand was situated at the back of the main floor, rather than near the main entrance as in past years and have Royal Mail themselves commented on the results achieved at their new location?

‘One reason to move Royal Mail to the back of the mezzanine floor was to draw collectors through the venue. It was felt that many people buying at the Royal Mail did not visit the other stands. Dealers were happy and no doubt picked up some business. Many dealers had a very good show—the new standholders made little difference to the regular firms.’

Were you as surprised at the lack of visitors attending Autumn Stampex on Thursday 27 September, in particular as Royal Mail released the ‘Memories of the Olympic and Paralympic Games’ issue on that day - or do you think it was a case of over-kill by Royal Mail with the Olympic and Paralympic Gold Medal Winner stamps and collectors just felt enough is enough?

‘The lack of visitors calling at the Royal Mail Stand during Autumn Stampex 2012 was disappointing. There has been much for the new issue collector to buy. Royal Mail tells me that the Post & Go Machines are very popular.’

I know that a significant number of PTS members were aggrieved at the way the London 2015 Europhilex Stamp Exhibition, to be held at the Business Design Centre in Islington during May that year, was foisted on them with little or no discussion or involvement. I understand that you have been in discussion with the organisers in the hope resolving these major difficulties. What, if any progress have you made in resolving matters to the satisfaction of the PTS?



Above: Stampex, September 2012

‘The PTS were unhappy about not being told about the London 2015 Europhilex Stamp Exhibition. The PTS are now talking to the organisers and we hope to report soon that the PTS backs the show.

‘The trade have always felt that they were paying for Judges to be flown in for exhibitions, hotels, lunches and grand dinners, all paid for. However for 2015 this is not the case—the trade side will pay for itself and the exhibiting side the same.

‘The PTS are keen to join the Committee and have a say in what goes on. With the lack of shows around the world London is ideally placed for an international. The Business Design Centre is now a well-known venue.

‘Stampex will still hold two shows at the BDC during 2015. There will be exciting displays and hopefully a number of new dealers.’

Finally, at the end of this wide-ranging interview, do you have any particular points that you would

like to make?

‘I have been involved in philately all of my life. I am a past President of the Brighton & Hove PS, where I was Programme Secretary for many years. I was Chairman of the Congress Committee for 17 years — organising the Annual Congress that moves around the country.

‘I was Chairman of the PTS at a difficult time in its history, 1996–2000, but with the then Council managed to turn it around. I went to my first Stampex in 1965. Next year, 2013, Stampex celebrates its 60th Anniversary.’

Graham Childs added: ‘I am working closely with Chris King (Vice-President of the Royal Philatelic Society London) on the Exhibiting side and he has lined up specialist societies displays for future shows. I and the Stampex Committee want to make Stampex the best show in Europe—I believe that we can do it!’