

Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS, reports from the official opening of Olympex 2012, the special exhibition of Olympic philately being held during the games in the front hall of the British Library. It is pleasing to note the important part which philately plays in the Olympic movement, but he feels that an enjoyable exhibition could have been made even better, had the British Library's own philatelic team been involved in its organisation.



Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS, pictured holding a London 2012 Olympic relay torch outside Birmingham Cathedral. Picture by Carmel Girling

## Olympex 2012: Collecting the Olympic Games

By Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

The historic, spectacular and unforgettable London 2012 Olympic Games have captured the hearts and minds of millions of people in Great Britain and countries throughout the world. Countless words have already been written and there will be many more after the Closing Ceremony on Sunday, 12 August.

### Humble postage stamp

The humble postage stamp has also played a vital role in publicising the Games, although Royal Mail and a number of other postal administrations have issued far too many stamps and related products for them in this correspondent's opinion. Most of the stamps have been completely unnecessary and very few will have seen the inside of a postbox – even a gold one!

There will, however, be postcards and correspondence sent by competitors and officials from the Olympic Village to their families and friends back home, which will be sought after by collectors, in particular by postal historians.

Quite apart from the many unnecessary and superfluous issues with values that do not serve any postal rate in the issuing country, how many of the Royal Mail instant Gold Medal winners stamps will actually be used for genuine postal purposes? But no matter, these Olympic stamps and related produces a relatively inexpensive way of owning a special souvenir that will bring back many happy memories in years to come.

### Memorable

This correspondent encourages stamp collectors and non-collectors of all ages to visit Olympex 2012, Collecting the Olympic Games, a memorable special exhibition presented by the British Library and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in the Front Hall at the British Library, situated near St Pancras International Station. Olympex 2012 is part of the Cultural Olympiad.

There is an opportunity for visitors to experience the excitement and heartbreak of Athens 1896, the first Olympic Games of the Modern Era, London 1908, London 1948 and London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

There is a Collectors' Cabin in the piazza in front of the British Library where visitors can create their own special Olympic Games philatelic souvenir as a vivid reminder of an historic occasion when the greatest sporting event on earth came to London during the summer of 2012.



The Collectors' Cabin in the British Library Piazza

Using objects, including 2500 stamps, original letters and postcards, some to and from Olympians, vibrant posters and artwork, the exhibition traces the way that Olympic iconography has evolved over more than a century, but also how the Games have touched the lives of competitors, public figures and Londoners across the capital.

In addition to the physical memorabilia, fascinating audio interviews with Olympians from the British Library's archives are available to listen to. These include interviews with William (Bill) Roberts, a relay runner who took part in 1936 Berlin Olympics, and Sandy Duncan, runner and later general secretary of British Olympic Association.

### IOC President

President Jacques Rogge said: 'The IOC is delighted to have the British Library as its partner in this exhibition. The Library's international reputation for bringing stories to life makes it the natural home for this fascinating and unique view of Olympic history.'

### Official Opening

During his address at the official opening reception, Gerhard Heiberg, Member of the International Olympic Committee, Chairman of the Olympic Philately, Numismatic and Memorabilia Commission, said: 'The IOC recognizes that Olympic collecting is a means by which knowledge and understanding of the Olympic Movement can be widely communicated. Indeed the Olympic Charter contains specific reference to Olympic postage stamps.'



Gerhard Heiberg, Chairman of the Olympic Philately, Numismatic and Memorabilia Commission, pictured during the official opening of Olympex 2012, when he signed the commemorative cover for this correspondent



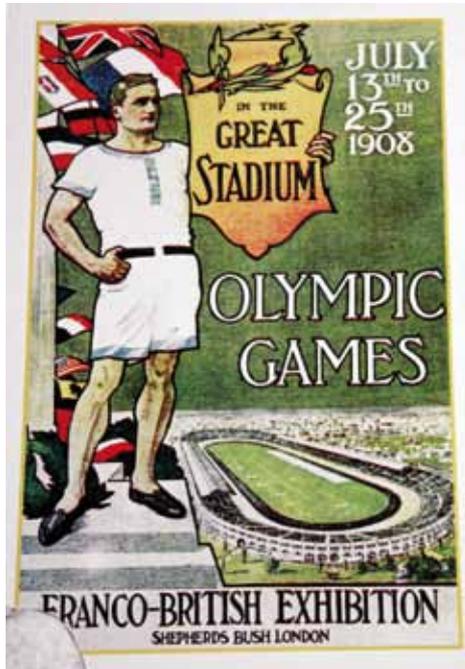
Olympex 2012 commemorative cover, 24 July 2012, limited to 100 covers (Reduced)

Olympex 2012 front of special commemorative card (Reduced)

Great Britain London 1948 stamp designs—courtesy: British Postal Museum & Archive



1896 Olympic Games



London 1908 Olympic Games



London 1948 Olympic Games

'An Olympic philatelic exhibition has been part of the IOC programme at the Olympic Games since 1984, and it has traditionally been focused largely at active Olympic collectors.

'For London 2012, we wanted to take a slightly different approach. We are aiming to reach a broader audience, and to make the exhibition more accessible to the general public, both in a physical sense, and in the manner in which the exhibition is designed and displayed. We want to give an Olympic experience, and to tell the Olympic story to as many people as possible during the Games.'

### China Post

Mr Heiberg acknowledged the vital help given by the China Post Group. He said: 'China Post Group actively supported the Beijing 2008 version of Olympex, known as Olympic Expo. Following the success of that event, China Post made a donation to the IOC, to establish a fund to support the conduct of Olympic philatelic exhibitions at future Olympic Games. Olympex 2012 is the beneficiary of that fund.



Mr Zhang Yafei, Vice President, China Post Group pictured during the official opening of Olympex 2012

'China Post Group has also sponsored the very comprehensive Catalogue of the exhibition, of which you have received a copy. Guests this evening will also receive as a gift, an album of Olympic stamps, especially produced by China Post Group to commemorate Olympex 2012.'

Mr Gerhard Heiberg concluded:

Right: Front cover of 'Collecting' the Inspiring Games, Official IOC Product, produced in Chinese and English by the China National Philatelic Corporation (Reduced)



Right: China Post imperforate miniature sheet, issued to celebrate the handover of the Olympic Games from Beijing to London (Reduced)



Below: Sir Philip Craven MBE, Member of the IOC and President of the IOC Paralympic Committee, pictured during the official opening of Olympex 2012



'Postage stamps are small, but powerful communicators. I am sure you will leave the exhibition this evening having gained some new information about, or insight into, the Olympic Games.'

### Unofficial historians

During his opening address, Sir Philip Craven MBE, Member of the International Olympic Committee and President of the International Paralympic Committee, said: 'It is important to emphasise that the Olympic and Paralympic Games are not simply about sport. They are about values, standards and beliefs that are given expression through sport, and which apply equally to all facets of life. The Cultural Olympiad is an important means of communicating this message.'

'Collecting increases knowledge and awareness of the Olympic Movement among all those involved and, as collectors love to share their passion, amongst those with whom they come in contact.'

Sir Philip Craven concluded: 'Collectors become unofficial historians for the Olympic movement and undertake detailed research into Olympic history in order to validate their collections. This is invaluable work for the Olympic Movement. It is significant that most of the material in the exhibition comes from individual collectors, rather than from institutions such as museums. This demonstrates the Olympic spirit actively at work at the grass roots level.'

## Spoil the enjoyment

There is much to commend about Olympex 2012 but there also things that will spoil the enjoyment of stamp collectors and non-collectors alike. In particular, the Perspex used on the front of the frames causes the light to reflect on some of the album pages on display and makes it very difficult to see the stamps and covers clearly or read the information about the material.

Asked if the British Library had any plans to replace the Perspex with non-reflective glass or something similar, a British Library spokesperson responded by email, dated Monday 30 July: 'In order to ensure the security and preservation of the material on display, and to meet the conditions of lenders, the material is displayed behind Perspex. The Library does not have plans to alter this display method during the run of the exhibition.'

The spokesperson added: 'People can get a much closer look at the exhibits using the sophisticated multi-media touch screen displays where not only individual pages, but individual stamps can be magnified to full-screen size. The multi-media displays also increase the exhibition's appeal to a general audience, particularly younger visitors.'

It is clear that some of those responsible for staging the exhibition at the British Library have little knowledge about philately and how important it is for stamp collectors to have an opportunity to see the actual stamps and covers rather than illustrations, however clear.

## Not consulted

GSM was perplexed to discover that David Beech MBE, FRPSL, Head of the Philatelic Collections, or his colleague Paul Skinner FRPSL, Philatelic Curator, were not consulted or involved in the planning of this high profile philatelic exhibition. Neither of them was present at the press preview or the official opening on Wednesday 24 July. Their philatelic knowledge, expertise and many contacts would have been invaluable.

GSM asked the British Library why these two acknowledged philatelic experts were not involved or had been invited to be present to answer questions about the philatelic aspects of the exhibition.

The British Library spokesperson replied: 'Olympex 2012 is curated by the IOC and the philatelic items featured are not from the British Library's collections. With the exception of unique items from the Olympic Museum's 1896 collection, all the exhibits are from individual private collectors from Britain and overseas.'

'The British Library contributed the oral histories, the film clips and the multi-media support, plus the necessary expertise to mount an exhibition such as Olympex 2012.'

'Three of the exhibitors were present at the press event and launch to deal with both the philatelic aspects, and how the exhibits tell the chosen aspects of the Olympic story. The British Library's Sports curator was present at both events to answer any broader enquiries about the Library's sporting and Olympic collections across all formats.'

## IOC

Did the IOC Olympic Philately Commission ask the British Library if it would stage this exhibition? The British Library spokesperson responded: 'The IOC, acting on the

recommendation of the IOC Philately, Numismatics and Memorabilia Commission, asked British Library if it would be the venue for the exhibition. The British Library was very pleased to accept.'

Asked why and how Mr Robert Farley, Chairman, the Society of Olympic Collectors, became involved, GSM was informed: 'Mr Farley is a member of the IOC Philately, Numismatics and Memorabilia Commission. As a United Kingdom based member of the Commission, he was appointed by the IOC as Chairman of the Organising Committee for the Exhibition.'

'The IOC invited the Society of Olympic Collectors, as the largest Olympic collecting club in the United Kingdom and member club of the Federation Internationale Philatelie Olympique (FIPO), to provide exhibits and also volunteers.'

Asked how Olympex 2012 is being funded, the British Library spokesperson replied: 'The exhibition is funded by the IOC, which has provided the exhibits and staging costs. The British Library has provided the venue. China Post has funded the free catalogue/guide.'

GSM then enquired who exactly is responsible for, running and staffing the Olympex Collectors' Cabin situated on the piazza in front of the British Library. The British Library spokesperson replied: 'The Olympex 2012 Organising Committee is responsible. It is manned by the two principal curators of the exhibition and volunteers mainly from the Society of Olympic Collectors.'

Finally, GSM asked: Why did the British Library not have one of the Royal Mail post boxes that have been painted gold at the entrance to the exhibition, situated in the Front Hall, at the British Library?

The helpful British Library spokesperson, Evie Jeffreys, Media Officer, Public Programmes and Creative Industries, replied by email: 'The Collectors' Cabin was considered a suitable location and special arrangements have been made with London Special Handstamp Centre for secure transmission of collector covers for cancelling.'

## Olympic 2012 SmartStamp

'In addition to the Olympex 2012 handstamp there is a special Olympex 2012 SmartStamp, whose design has been approved by the IOC, and this can only be made available at the Cabin.'

## The Chavasse twins

The Chavasse twins, two famous English brothers, accomplished athletes and both Oxford Blues were selected to represent the United Kingdom in the 400 metres at the London 1908 Olympic Games. They gained no medals.

Neither of the Chavasse twins is mentioned in Olympex 2012. One of them, Captain Noel Chavasse VC and Bar, was shown on a Royal Mail stamp included in the 150th Anniversary of the Victoria Cross issued on 21 September 2006. The engaging stamps were printed *se-tenant*, as horizontal pairs (SG 2662).

For the record, Christopher Chavasse became the Anglican Bishop of Rochester.

The wording on the 64p Chavasse stamp is as follows: 'Bar TO VC FOR ARMY DOCTOR. Rescued wounded from no-man's land.'

Captain Noel Chavasse, RAMC has been posthumously awarded a second Victoria Cross in recognition of his gallantry in tending British casualties at Passchendaele.

## 'Self-sacrifice beyond praise'

'Capt Chavasse, an accomplished athlete, won his first VC on the Somme. He ignored the constant bombardment of machine guns .... artillery, helping the injured .... the threat of poison gas and...' the rest of the wording on the stamp is obscured by a fine picture of Capt Chavasse.



The Chavasse Twins – Christopher and Noel pictured in 1907 after being awarded their Blues



Royal Mail stamp showing Noel Chavasse VC and Bar

Pictures by Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS unless otherwise stated

Olympex 2012 runs until 9 September 2012. Admission is free. Opening hours are: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday: 10a.m.–6p.m. Tuesday: 10a.m.–8p.m. Saturday: 10a.m.–5p.m. Sunday 11a.m.–5p.m.

The Collectors' Cabin runs until 12 August and reopens between 28 August and 9 September for the Paralympic period. Opening hours are: Monday–Saturday: 10a.m.–4p.m. Sunday: 11a.m.–4p.m. For further information see the Olympex 2012 website: [www.bl.uk/olympex2012](http://www.bl.uk/olympex2012)