

The Olympics and Paralympics are over but the success of the athletes and, indeed, of the Games themselves, are still with us and will remain with us every time we look at the gold medal-winners stamps in our albums. They have certainly helped to boost the profile of stamp collecting in the UK and we hope that this will be one of the lasting legacies of the Games. In this special report Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS, commends Royal Mail for its achievements over the past few weeks and urges the organisation to carefully consider its future issuing policies in order to reap maximum benefit from that success.



## The People's Stamps—First Past, the Post!

By Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games are over. The iconic Olympic Flame that burnt so brightly in the Olympic Stadium at the Olympic Park in East London has now been extinguished.

Much has been broadcast and written about the 'lasting legacy' of these Games. Royal Mails' Olympic and Paralympic Gold Medal Winner stamps and related products have received a significant amount of positive local, national and international media coverage. Much needed new life has been injected into stamp collecting and that's great news for our hobby.

The convention of not showing living people, other than members of the Royal Family on stamps has gone forever. Collecting new Royal Mail stamp issues will never be the same again!

### Welcomed with great enthusiasm

Stamp collectors will have many views as to the subjects they would like to see depicted on Royal Mail commemorative stamps but one thing is abundantly clear. Stamp collectors and non-collectors alike have welcomed the Olympic and Paralympic Gold Medal stamps with great enthusiasm. Thematic collectors have a wealth of new material.

Team GB won 29 gold medals during the London 2012 Olympic Games, against 19 at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The Gold Medal Winner stamps depict 48 Olympians—four of them were double winners, making a total of 44 different gold medallists. 29 were men and 15 women.

Royal Mail announced well in advance that the stamps would be issued in sheetlets of six 1st class (60p) stamps, total value £3.60 per sheetlet, printed as four sheetlets on a A4-sized sheet of thin white card. Stamp collectors and non-collectors were comfortable with this format. Some collected just a single sheet and others a complete sheet of four sheetlets, total value £14.40.

### Six regional printers

The self-adhesive sheetlets was designed by True North and Royal Mail. The template (base sheets)—the concept received Royal Approval—were printed in lithography by the Walsall Security Print subsidiary of Cartor, based near Paris in France. The overprinting was supplied by six un-named regional printers in 'London', 'Swindon', 'Solihull' (near Birmingham), 'Attleborough' (a



Jim Byrne, Branch Manager, pictured outside Harborne Post Office, Birmingham, on Tuesday, 4 September 2012. Mr Byrne is holding the A4 sheet of eight sheetlets of the London 2012 Paralympic Games Gold Medal Winner stamps, issued on 3 September that I had just bought

Cover posted Special Delivery on Thursday 2 August 2012 by this correspondent at Harborne Post Office. This cover, overpaid by 18p, was delivered before 1.00p.m. the following morning, Friday 3 August (Reduced)



market town situated between Norwich and Thetford), 'Preston' (it has been reported that this printer encountered problems) and 'Edinburgh'. The location was included in the left-hand margin of one the four sheetlets in the A4 sheet. This made it extremely expensive for stamp collectors who want one of each type produced.

### Single stamps

Royal Mail announced in advance that the Gold Medal Winner stamps would be available as single stamps from post offices.

My local Harborne post office, one of the chosen 500-plus that received their supplies for sale by lunchtime the day after a gold medal had been won willingly obliged.

When asked about selling single stamps, Branch Manager, Jim Byrne told GSM: 'The counter staff just cut the stamps from the sheetlets using a pair of scissors.' Mr Byrne and Assistant Branch Manager, Julie Haycock, could not have been more helpful to me and arranged for single stamps to be cut from each of the 29 sheetlets as they arrived. Some are cut more higgledy-piggledy than others.





The first two Royal Mail Olympic Gold Medal Winners 1st class stamps used on separate covers, correct postage rate, posted by this correspondent at Harborne Post Office on the day of issue, 2 August 2012, addressed to himself, and handed over the counter to be sent for the special 'London 2012, Olympic Park' handstamp. They arrived on 16 August 2012



The Philatelic counter at Trafalgar Square Post Office, London, pictured during the morning of Sunday, 12 August 2012



Royal Mail London 2012 Olympic Games Royal Mail Gold Medal Winners stamps in date of issue order from left, right then below (Reduced)



The supplies were sent direct to Harborne Post Office from the printer based in Solihull, and often arrived by 8.10a.m. well before the post office opened for business at 9.00a.m.

### No singles at Trafalgar Square

Counter clerks at the busy philatelic counter at the Trafalgar Square post office in London would not sell single stamps when requested. I enquired on three different occasions and was told that they were not available. No reason was given.



## Thematic collections

I decided to include one each of the Olympic and Paralympic stamps in my Great Britain reference collection. Hopefully these stamps will attract many new thematic collectors to our hobby. In fact the stamps look far more interesting when arranged in themes such as athletics, track and field events, cycling, rowing, sailing, equestrian, tennis, boxing, shooting, and so on.

## SG catalogued as single stamps

Asked how the Olympic and Paralympic Gold Medal Winner stamps would be catalogued by Stanley Gibbons, Hugh Jefferies, Catalogue Editor, said: A decision has been taken that each stamp will be listed singly with a separate SG catalogue number e.g. SG 3342. The sheetlets of six Olympic stamps will each be catalogued under the single stamp with a sub-number e.g. 3342a.'

## Gold post boxes

Members of the public have been captivated not only by the actual stamps but by post boxes that have been painted gold in honour of the gold medallists in their home towns throughout the United Kingdom. It mattered little that some post boxes were painted gold in the wrong locations as this only attracted yet more local media coverage and interest.

GSM is the leading philatelic magazine for collectors and this article is written from that view-point. The philatelic trade, particularly well-known first day cover producers have had to invest a lot of money up front and therefore will have a completely different perspective on the matter.

## Paralympic Games

Royal Mail, the government-owned postal service, originally stated that it would not be featuring gold medal-winning Paralympians on individual stamps.

Royal Mail issued a special 'Welcome to the London 2012 Paralympic Games' miniature sheet consisting of two X1st and two X£1.28 values, on 29 August 2012, and also announced that it would produce a set of six 1st class stamps after the Games finished on 9 September.

## Bamboozled

That was until the media accused Royal Mail of discrimination against the Paralympians. Royal Mail allowed itself to be bamboozled into doing a dramatic last-minute U-turn following pressure by the 'political correctness' lobby, instead of sticking to its original plan. It left first day cover producers tearing their hair out and stamp collectors and non-collectors adding more new stamps by the day.

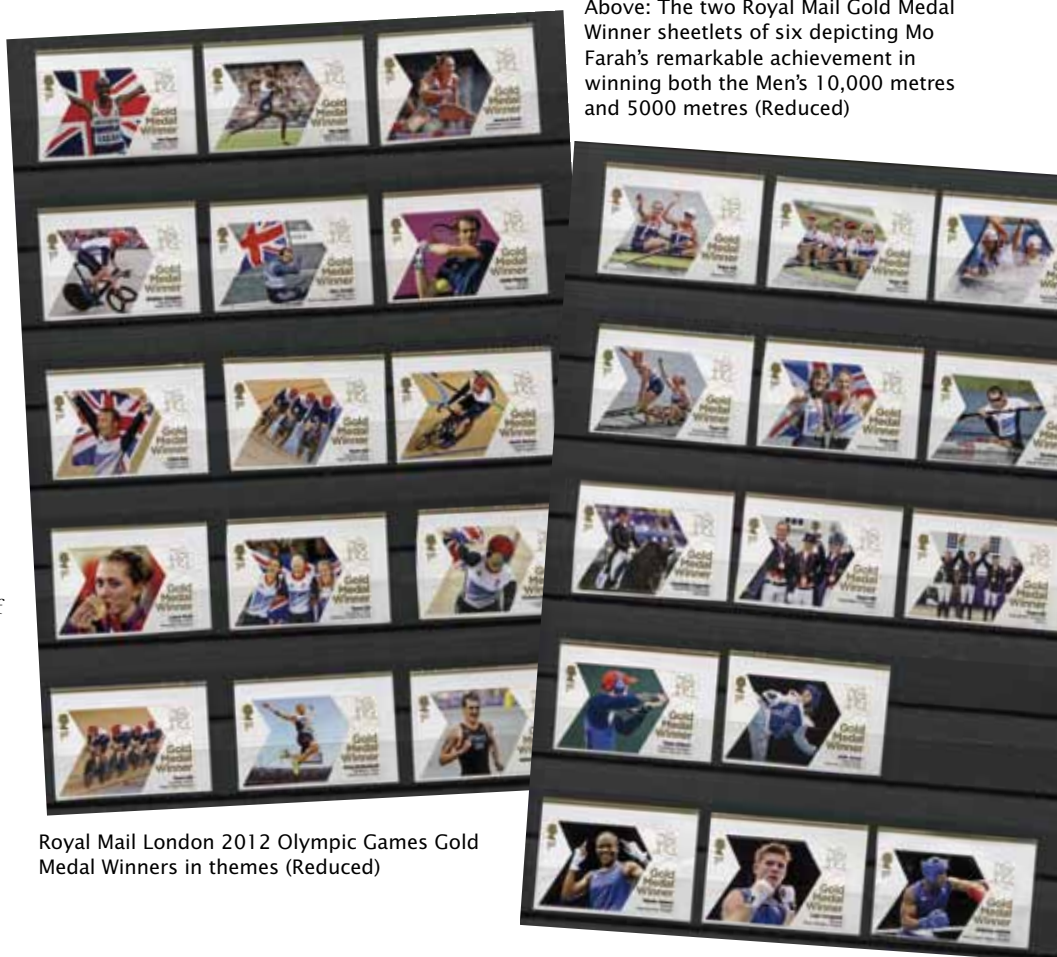
## The 'right thing to do'

Press Association, in a news story 'Stamp Honour For Paralympians', put out on 15 August, quoted Andrew Hammond, Managing Director of Royal Mail Stamps, as saying that the celebration of Britain's victorious Paralympians was the 'right thing to do.'

This raises the question: If it was the right thing for Royal Mail to commemorate the GB Paralympic achievements in this way, then why did it not announce this months ago?!



Above: The two Royal Mail Gold Medal Winner sheetlets of six depicting Mo Farah's remarkable achievement in winning both the Men's 10,000 metres and 5000 metres (Reduced)



Royal Mail London 2012 Olympic Games Gold Medal Winners in themes (Reduced)

## Different formats

The Royal Mail London 2012 Paralympic Games Gold Medal Winner stamps were issued in sheetlets of two 1st class stamps, total value £1.20, with eight sheetlets printed in an A4 sheet.

## Logistical challenge

Royal Mail was faced with an extremely complex printing and logistical challenge. As a result of so many gold medals being won on some days the stamps were put on sale as soon as they had been printed and delivered.

Royal Mail has said that it is 'delighted' to have issued stamps to recognise Great Britain's Paralympic champions. It is the first time that a set of stamps has been issued to celebrate Paralympic gold medallists by the host nation.

## Questions for Royal Mail

A useful exercise for Royal Mail executives would be to ask itself what it was about the Olympic and Paralympic stamps that captured the attention of the public. Was it because the stamps were available the next day? Was it





The two 1st class stamps from the Royal Mail 'Welcome to the London 2012 Paralympic Games' miniature sheet, used on separate covers, posted by this correspondent at Harborne post office on the day of issue, 29 August 2012. They arrived on 1 September 2012 (Reduced)



Royal Mail Olympic Gold Medal Winner stamp commercially used on an envelope addressed to my wife Stella Jennings from a non-stamp collector friend who lives in Ferndown, Hampshire (Reduced)



The first Royal Mail London 2012 Paralympic Games Gold Medal Winner sheetlet, 'PGMWA Issue date 31 August 2012, Printer location Solihull.' The stamp is numbered PGMWA1 (Reduced)

because the events depicted were of national importance? Was it because of the pride generated in Great Britain about hosting the Olympics? Was it because the stamps were genuinely attractive and became more and more collectible as the days went on?

These and other questions and their answers should be the subject of a major rethink by Royal Mail and its Stamp Advisory Committee. Instead of obscure subjects with only a small minority interest, however worthy, commemoratives maybe should reflect subjects with a major franchise. A relevant example of this is the Christmas stamps which are widely sold and have been successful for many years to the point of running out at post office counters in some years.

Royal Mail should build on the success of the Olympic issues – perhaps as unexpected as the success of the whole GB Olympic enterprise of 2012 – and produce what the public clearly wants. Start with a clean sheet of paper and think outside the frame!

### Interested and excited

My wife Stella, a non-stamp collector, bought two sheetlets of each of the Olympic and Paralympic stamps day-by-day as they were released for sale. Asked by GSM why she did this, Stella replied: 'I bought one set to keep, as I wanted to make a collection of an event about which I had been interested and excited since I was a child.'

'The second set was because I wanted to use the stamps on letters, cards and parcels to my friends – although this is difficult to do with the stamp labels you get at post offices on parcels, unless you make a fuss! It

was fun to walk to our local Harborne post office every day and meet the staff. They were also getting enthusiastic and building up a clientele of people who, like me, ordered and called in for their stamps every day.

### Bold initiative

'Discussions would start up in the queue about whether we would be back the next day and how many sheetlets we would be buying. Even about whether we would be there on Sunday after Church to pick up our stamps. This was not about having first day covers sent weeks later from Royal Mail Talents House, Edinburgh, this was about the excitement generated by the Olympics and reflected by Royal Mail's bold initiative.'

Stella added: 'It would not have been such a good experience if our local post office had not been among the chosen 500-plus that had the stamps delivered the day after a gold medal had been won. It also depended on events—there would have been no fun to be had at all without our successful Olympians and Paralympians who ensured our daily trips to buy their stamps!'

### Adopt conservative approach

Royal Mail has made big money out of philately during 2012 but where does it go from here? This significant profit from the sale of Olympic and Paralympic stamps, sheetlets and related products will have to carry Royal Mail through what are likely to be many philatelic lean years ahead.

Indeed, Royal Mail needs to be extremely careful about its future stamp issuing programme. Ideally it should adopt a far

more conservative approach and only release seven or eight new commemorative issues a year, limited to a maximum of four or five stamps at the most and of values necessary for postal purposes. There should only be one or two miniature sheets and one prestige stamp booklet a year from now on.

### Hang up their tweezers

Royal Mail should be warmly congratulated for stimulating interest in stamp collecting with its innovative Olympic and Paralympic Games stamps and related products. But unless it now takes immediate action to significantly reduce its new issue programme for the rest of 2012, 2013 and beyond, then stamp collectors will say enough is enough and hung up their tweezers as far as new issues are concerned!

Post Script: Let me end with this controversial thought. In reality, the two 1st class Royal Mail Olympic and Paralympic Games definitive stamps, issued on 5 January 2012, would have been quite sufficient for postal purposes without any commemoratives!

