

TIPS FOR BUYERS and SELLERS

There are no hard and fast rules for buying and selling stamps as each person will have their own set of 'rules/guidelines' so this paper is based on my own experiences, and those of close friends from whom I have gleaned knowledge over many years. You may not agree with my opinions which I fully accept but please take this for what it's worth and if it helps then this has been of benefit.

The one simple 'rule' I follow is 'Whatever I expect as a buyer is the same as I should expect to provide as a seller'.

There are clearly more buyers than sellers so I will deal with buying first.

BUYING

There are 4 x main sources from which we can buy stamps namely:

Online via the Internet.
Auctions – Postal and or Public.
Exchange Packets.
Face to face with the seller.

INTERNET

Buying on the internet can be, and often is, fraught with danger so caution is required. Without 'tarring those who sell on the internet with the same brush' some sellers ask ridiculous prices for the stamps that they are selling, which can often be accompanied with vague and/or misleading descriptions and may overstate the true worth of the stamp. Scans do always paint the true picture. For anyone who is interested in shades then unless the seller provides all the stamps that were issued for a particular denomination a scan is unlikely to convince me that the stamp is, for example, Blue or Ultramarine. For those who collect Unmounted Mint (UM) stamps a scan of the gum side should be provided by the seller – do not take their description of Mint Never Hinged (MNH) or Unmounted Mint (UM). Remember that not all sellers have a good philatelic knowledge so before you buy anything check their feedback ratings, number of feedbacks received, combined postage for multiple purchases and refunds if stamps do not arrive or are returned as 'not as described', damaged etc. Over time you will recognise the 'trusted' sellers. There is nothing worse than fighting tooth and nail to get a refund. If they state refund are not applicable then my advice is 'avoid them like the plague'.

Many 'dealer's on the internet are not actually dealers in the true sense of the word and possess little knowledge. These 'dealers' tend to provide very little in the way of a description. 'Set of 4 x Mint stamps' is not a description!!

Sellers who provide a comprehensive description tend to be the more successful as they build up a 'hidden 'trust' with buyers.

Many of the earlier issued Mint stamps are subject to gum toning or oxidization as a result of climatic conditions. Some stamps however only come with 'brown streaky gum'. The Bermuda 'Key Plate' KGV stamps has many printings. The Pre-war issues are all on thick streaky gum. During WWII there was a shortage of gum so wartime issues and beyond are on thinner, whiter gum. You simply cannot get a pre-WWII Bermuda Key Plate with thin white gum. Stamps that are subject to oxidization tend to be those for the Far East, India, Malaya etc. Describing this gum is 'one person's interpretation' so 'light even tone gum' might be much darker than your expectation of 'light'.

Used stamps tend to be easier to verify as you can see the cancellations and where shades exist a full date, if displayed, may help you determine which issue is for sale. For example, if a stamp was first issued in 1938 (catalogued @ £1) and a later printing was issued in 1946 (catalogued @ £10) and the seller claims that the stamp is the latter and is selling it for £3 then a date stamp of DD, MM 1943 should convince you that the seller has got this horribly wrong!

Used stamps are however more susceptible to 'closed tears', thins, missing or blunt perfs and staining.

Do not buy the first one you see that you need – conduct a thorough search as often as not the last page in the search criteria will have the same stamp at half the price you might have paid had you bought the stamp you saw on Page 1 of your search criteria. Rushing to buy does not always bring benefits.

The key phrase for internet buying is 'Caveat Emptor'!

EXCHANGE PACKETS

I have found that the packet circuits are a good source for the cheaper stamps which are hard to obtain from elsewhere and many buyers will purchase low priced stamps to replace existing poor copies or replace Mounted Mint (MM) with UM copies.

The seller may not have access to catalogues or an extensive philatelic knowledge. I have lost count of the number of times a stamp is the 'better' value i.e. different shade, perforation, paper type, watermark variety, listed flaws etc than is annotated in the book.

One of the main advantages is that you get to see and inspect the stamp before you actually buy it.

AUCTIONS

Many buyers who bid on auctions do so using the 'postal bid system'. Auctions in Scotland are few and far between so I am always a 'Postal Bidder'. Auction houses are, for the most part, extremely reliable.

Some auction houses sell on behalf of sellers and may only do a random check of the descriptions that the seller provides. If the description is incorrect then auction houses will refund you the cost of the stamps you have bought and be very apologetic for the 'error'.

Many auction catalogues will have pictures of the more expensive or rare items and be more than willing to elaborate on the description provided in their catalogue.

As a general rule 'collections' are not subject to refunds.

FACE TO FACE

For those who are able to go to Stamp Fairs and Shops the dealers are generally speaking well known and trusted and thus are very helpful. After all they are trying to make a living so a friendly approach is a vital part of their business. Most dealers will allow you to search for the stamps you need and round the cost down when you come to pay. Most will give you their business card that will/may have a website address which you can access from home in slower time.

Finally the serious collector who may specialise in a particular country or era then they are more likely to have an extensive knowledge of their collecting interest and therefore can speak with authority when dealing with the seller. The more the seller appreciates your expertise then the more likely it is that they will find what you want.

SELLING

As a seller your 'reputation' is under scrutiny as the last thing you want is customers who are not happy with what they have purchased from you and if you sell stamps on a regular basis then losing customers is clearly to be avoided at all costs.

The description of your stamp(s) is all important so below are some guidelines that I have followed for many years both as an Auctioneer and part time dealer on internet sites. At the beginning of this article I pointed out that whatever you expect as a buyer you should expect to provide as a seller.

Simple things like the year of issue, catalogue numbers, catalogue value and then more detail on the overall condition, any faults are essential. Do not try to 'overegg' your stamps by making them out to be better than they actually are but at the same time do not undersell the item. Stamps that are Pre 1935 rarely come as UM yet some buyers will 'scoff' at far from perfect stamps that were issued 100 years or more ago. Tell it as it is.

For most of us Philately is a hobby not an investment. You may however have surplus stamps that you wish to sell. The same options for buyers exist.

This is by no means a slur on dealers but I have heard on many occasions a dealer who is approached by a member of the public who is armed with a collection or a few sets of decent stamps that they inherited from a relative and wishes to sell. The following phrase 'the stamp market is very depressed at the moment and it will be very hard for me to sell most of the stamps in this collection' is often heard. Whilst some of that is true the dealer has to make a living and does not want to tie up their capital in stamps that are 'as common as mud', and thus are unlikely to sell. They will recognise the 'decent' items and offer a rock bottom price for those. The other stamps are, to them, more or less worthless.

As a general rule access to catalogues is a must but these are expensive, not always up to date and world simplified catalogues are, in my opinion, not really worth the paper they are printed on. Catalogues that pre-date the 1970's are however far more reliable as they tend to list all the different issues, shades, errors & varieties. Foreign catalogues, whilst written in a foreign language and priced in local currency, are often a much better source of accurate information.

The Internet also can help especially with very modern issues that may not be in the Gibbons catalogues or if they are listed in the Appendix, but maybe in Michel, Yang, Yvert etc. As a past Auction Secretary I used the internet a lot for getting a 'ball park' selling price for stamps that I simply could not find values for.

I hope that this is of some use and whilst some may take issue with some of the detail provided, please remember these are opinions and examples gained from 30+ years of philately.