

Living People on Stamps

For Royal Mail's *Stamps and Collecting* Website

Postal administrations increasingly depict living people on stamps. This brings problems in cases where revelations later come to light. Is it worth taking that risk in order to bring a contemporary feel to our stamp programme?

With major events such as sports wins, major discoveries or inventions, Royal Mail has to decide whether to produce an issue depicting a recognisable portrait of the hero while they are still alive. This is a difficult decision to make because it might later be made known that the person had done something deemed by some as socially unacceptable.

The subject of people on stamps has traditionally generated strong feelings, especially among older collectors. Some still believe that only Royalty should appear as living people on stamps and that commoners should be excluded until long after their death, as had generally been policy.

Royal weddings of recent years failed to generate outcry when the participants became divorced. There were no angry scenes of people returning their stamps and demanding a refund at Post OfficesTM, so perhaps society is more tolerant of the weaknesses of others. Even disgraced sporting heroes are treated similarly, as Greece found out when the 2004 bronze Olympic win of Leonidas Sampanis was marked with a digitally-printed sheetlet within 24 hours of his achievement. A week later his drug-taking was revealed and his medal - and the sheetlet - was immediately withdrawn. This created great excitement with Greek collectors and the sheetlet commands a substantial premium, but did anyone blame the Greek Post Office for issuing Sampanis stamps? It seems unlikely.

We can reveal here that the National Portrait Gallery set was to have included two high-achieving and well-respected living Britons, but we played it safe and chose not to proceed. Do you believe that our decision was correct, or were we being overly cautious? Perhaps you are totally against any living Britons appearing on your stamps and can explain to us why?

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