

SOAPBOX

The internet should be the ideal place to buy stamps, but not everything in the world wide web is rosy, says Malcolm Goyns

In 2008 I returned to stamp collecting after 15 years away, and I was delighted to find that many dealers and auction houses had websites, and that eBay has become such a huge market for trading philatelic material.

After all, the internet is incredibly useful to sellers, as a means of attracting as wide a clientele as possible, and to buyers, as an excellent way of seeing what is available and comparing prices.

However, I soon realised the situation is not quite as ideal as it first seemed.



ABOVE: eBay is a great way to shop, but beware of dodgy practices

DANGERS OF eBAY

I have become increasingly uneasy about using eBay to purchase stamps, for a variety of reasons:

- Although rumours persist that you can buy unmounted mint Penny Blacks for a few pounds in these internet auctions, this is an urban myth. The reality is that there are many forgeries and fakes masquerading as the genuine article.
- You are very exposed to unscrupulous sellers, with little chance of being able to return items that are not what you expected from their descriptions. As a consequence, I would never buy anything for more than £50 here.
- Suspicious practices abound. On a couple of occasions, I have got involved in a bidding war which I felt was getting out of hand, and stopped bidding, only to be e-mailed after the deadline, told that the winner of the auction had refused to complete the purchase, and asked if I would like to enter another bid. This made me wonder whether the person I had been bidding against was connected to the seller, and was just trying to drive up the price for him.

WEAKNESSES OF DEALERS' SITES

Restricting your business to dealers you know you can trust is much safer, but many dealers' websites are by no means as good as they might be. Here are a few of the problems I have encountered:

- Some sites offer only a written description of a stamp, with no illustration. In other cases there is an illustration but it cannot be enlarged to allow a detailed study of the stamp. An image is vital in the case of older issues, and I have had to go to the trouble of sending stamps back because important aspects such as poor centring were not mentioned in the description.
- I had one case where a stamp was illustrated, but the example sent to me by the dealer was a different one, of a poorer standard. That is very bad practice.
- Certain dealers continue to advertise a stamp for sale when it has already been sold. This is a waste of everyone's time.
- Different types of material are often listed together, for example mint and used, so buyers who are interested in only one of these states need to do a lot of trawling through the site to find what they want. Better organisation or improved searchability is needed to satisfy buyers.
- Some sites do not offer an electronic means of payment, and expect you to send them a cheque, or phone them with your credit card details. In the modern world, this is not what most customers would expect.
- Some sites exist only as a home page, with a message stating that it is under construction. This strikes me as being fairly pointless.

It is quite possible to provide a user-friendly website – the Covent Garden Stamp Shop's is a good example – but most dealers' sites have irritating weaknesses.

Maybe the Philatelic Traders Association could provide guidelines to their members on the best way to do it?

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