
Life saving imagery on postage stamps

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Introduction

We are all familiar with the postage stamp, they come in a wide variety of sizes, images and value. In 1837 an English schoolmaster (Roland Hill) invented the adhesive postage stamp and subsequently created a uniform postage rate based on weight which made the prepayment of mail postage possible. While early stamps were a one colour picture of the King or Queen of a country they have morphed into colourful, vibrant depictions of the world around us. It is estimated that there are currently over 500,000 different stamps which have been produced.

The imagery used on stamps is varied, it depicts significant events in a country's history, honours those people and organisations who have contributed to the richness of their culture; they sometimes depict those tragedies where the whole nation mourns, and some are fun, depicting popular culture such as people or scenes from movies. This iconography builds a country's character and helps define what is considered important, reflecting those ideals for which a country celebrates its own uniqueness.

Aim

This presentation explores the use of life saving imagery on postage stamps from across the world.

Method

The definition of lifesaving use for this paper revolved around those acts (such as rescues) or items which are or can be used to help save a life, this may include but is not limited to items such as lifejackets, lifebuoys, boathooks, rescue boats. While other items such as lighthouses, communication devices, and bridges all provide a role in reducing drowning deaths they were not included in this round unless expressly stated they were used as a lifesaving or rescue device.

Also included were stamps depicting lifesaving organisations, drowning incidents and those aquatic activities related to lifesaving. However first aid and medical stamps not directly related to an aquatic environment or organisation were also excluded (i.e. there was no water involved or they were being undertaken by a non-aquatic organisation).

Results

To date 102 stamps from 36 countries have been found. The earliest date is from Romania in 1931, which was issued as part of a five-stamp set about boy scouts and depicts a boy scout carrying a young child out of the water to a waiting mother. The money raised from stamps was used to help pay for a Boy Scout Exhibition in 1931 in Bucuresti. It is also interesting to note that throughout the year lifesaving and scouting has been linked on postage stamps reflecting one of Lord Baden-Powell's original skills for scouts. There is a wide diversity of the images and purposes of the stamps including: people being rescued from floods (e.g. Algeria 1969) – often the money raised from these stamps was used to compensate victims of the flood; the removal of dead bodies following the 1997 sinking of the MV Bukoba ferry in Tanzania where over 500 people died – the stamp is a memorial to those who died in the disaster and the rescuer who had the job of removing the dead; stamps depicting significant events in an organisations life, such as the 150th Anniversary of the formation of the HM Coastguard in 1972, the 1963 lifeboat conference at Edinburgh, 75th Anniversary of Royal Life Saving in Australia in 1966, or the 250th anniversary of General Eliott who in the image is directing rescue operations at the Great Siege of Gibraltar (Gibraltar 1967).

Discussion

Each stamp provides a unique insight into the perception of lifesaving around the world, from the heroic acts of rescue to the equipment used. As organisations involved in the promotion of lifesaving we should not underestimate the positive and important impact that stamps can and do play in promoting our work. We should continue to seek opportunity to promote the important role of lifesaving via the humble postage stamp.

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