

Mad for Machins

The specialist and dealer John Deering is

JOHN DEERING LIVES and breathes Machins; he would probably also eat and drink them, were it not that eating and cooking are another passion. This love for the Machins developed early in life, when John was only 10, thanks to his parents moving to the West Country, and buying a village store – with a post office. The stamp collecting bug had already bitten at the age of five, despite no other family members collecting (apart from his father as a schoolboy). In those early days, it was approvals that appealed, with their big and brightly coloured specimens.



Seeing all the new issues in the post office stock stimulated John's inquisitive mind – it was the early 1970s with decimalisation in its infancy. The special issues were fine, but it was the technical aspects of the Machin definitives that intrigued.

Simultaneously stirring was his dealer instinct, making up approval books to circulate among the members of the school stamp club. Then, when 15, glandular fever struck, confining John to bed for several weeks: he spent the time reading stamp magazines, pondering over the classified advertisements – clearly there was a living to be made from stamp dealing.

Up and running Over the next two years, the die was cast. With moral support from his parents, and more tangible financial help from a bank, he was up and running, quite literally, attending every stamp fair possible. Gradually, however, the fascination of Machins took hold, encouraged by the fact that material was readily available, and there for study as it was issued. Collecting earlier material is fine, but can anything surpass the thrill of undertaking your own original research?

By his late teens John had become a specialist Machin dealer, discarding stamp fairs in favour of mail order. He was fortunate, for at home his bedroom was so large, half served as an office. In its formative years the business did not provide a living: John worked part-time on a farm, under-

taking anything from hay-making to driving a tractor to earn his 'pocket money'. But nothing could equal the thrill of quietly working alone in his office surrounded by stamps, buying and selling. As soon as possible, the farm work ended. Mail order meant price lists, and John has always contended that these should be works of reference, many still being consulted years after they were first issued. In a similar vein, he always ensures

that stamps sent to clients are fully annotated, so that their new owners can immediately identify what has been sent.

The Machins In 1988 John married Carolyn, and they moved to Cullompton in Devon. Five years later they moved to their present home, in South Molton in North Devon. This spacious house has an annexe, enabling John to keep his home separate from his office, and understandably this is called 'The Machins'.

One possible downside of dealing is that a line has been drawn under the personal collection: it is not easy to deal and collect the same material. It's not necessarily a disadvantage: there is still the excitement of discovery, and discussing one's findings. Has any stamp issue ever been studied at a greater technical level? That said, a new discovery is not always sold on immediately. Often a purchase is retained for a while so that it can be enjoyed and admired, and after a few months is eventually offered for sale. However, a reference collection of some material is maintained, especially of items that are difficult to distinguish.

There are personal collecting interests besides Machins, notably the Great Britain high values since 1955. One aim is to form a collection based on elephants, another of John's loves.

Long days However, it does come down to the fact that John is mesmerised by the Machins. He works between eight and twelve hours each day, studying, checking, meticulously recording the

interviewed by Richard West

information, then sharing it with others. In fact, some 50 per cent of his time is spent in research; the rest is left to buying and selling. He is proud of the fact he is recognised as one of the few true experts on the Machins, and is a member of all the related specialist societies.

When it comes to catalogues and handbooks on Machins, and there are several, John cannot recommend any over the rest. He consults them all, for each has invaluable information. His advice to other collectors is to invest in them all.

Having devoted so much time to studying this issue, does he feel it is time for the Machin to be retired? His answer is a most definite 'no', believing that this beautiful concept should be retained for the next monarch. Nor does he believe Royal Mail exploits the issue's popularity, apart from its inclusion in prestige stamp books, as the many changes are there for operational purposes, the market not being driven by collectors' demands.

New audience In contrast he feels that Royal Mail will find any excuse for a special issue. However, he does like some designs: for example, an issue such as Fruit and Veg can help bring stamps to the attention of a new audience. He believes that the Smilers concept could be expanded to a much wider non-philatelic market. Generally speaking, he feels the market for GB material is particularly strong at this time, the strongest it has been for a long time. Rising prices are encouraging growth, which is fine as long as it remains steady and does not lead to speculation. New people are joining the hobby, younger people, although not necessarily young people. That many today appear to have more disposable income is clearly a help.

What is changing is the way business is conducted. The internet is opening up new markets, bringing with it a shrinking world. John is currently perfecting his own website.

Many will view a John Deering price list with disbelief. The level of detail is incredible – but reassuring that someone is prepared to devote the time and patience to ensure all is studied and recorded today, for the collectors of tomorrow ●



Some of the Machin stamps from which John Deering makes his living. John can be contacted at The Machins, PO Box 2, South Molton, Devon EX36 4YZ; telephone 01398 341564; email machins@johndeering.demon.co.uk

A few questions put to John Deering

Apart from your price lists, how else do you share your knowledge with others? In 1984 I started a column called 'Machin Watch' in a magazine called *Stamp News*. When that ceased publication, John Holman asked me to continue the column in *Gibbons Stamp Monthly* of which he was then editor, and I have been writing for the magazine ever since.

Does Carolyn help you in the business? She works in local government, mainly in IT, but is always keen to help out at the office, and has met many of my collectors at exhibitions. She has her own interest, a horse, which she bought recently.

We have not seen you at many exhibitions recently. Is there a reason? We have gone through five very difficult years, with family bereavements, two spells in hospital for myself, while Carolyn was involved in an accident, then a year later suffered a brain haemorrhage, from which she has fortunately made virtually a full recovery. We are both now fit and on form.

Is it boring, working alone so many hours each day? I enjoy my own company, and do have an assistant. In fact, I am now seeking more help. I enjoy music while I work, almost anything from the past 40 years, and some popular classical music.

What do you enjoy when you are not working? I love food, and so adore cooking. One of my ambitions is to participate in a residential cookery course, and maybe to own a restaurant, although not to be the chef. I am a stamp dealer, after all. One of my specialities is rack of local lamb, and I particularly enjoy steak stuffed with stilton, a good curry, or a traditional roast.

Do you find time to take holidays? We are not really holiday people, although we have enjoyed visits to the Kruger National Park in South Africa, where I could indulge my passion for elephants. We adored Venice, and would love to visit Iceland.

Any other ambitions apart from Iceland and a restaurant? I have an obsession to do everything properly, so I wish I had more energy and that there were more hours in the day. I would love to be up-to-date in my office, and to improve my stock even further. With any luck, I will still be dealing until the day I drop.