Putting your stamp on history

A small but significant number of stamp collectors all over the world specialise in an unusual but varied subject: the petrochemical industry. One collection, by Professor Chris Coggins, of Luton, England, tells the story of the global oil industry through the ages. Jill Wedge was invited to a viewing.

In the late 1970s, Chris Coggins got interested in 'thematic' philately – or to the lay person, he began to collect stamps on a particular theme.

The oil industry was his chosen specialism, catalyzed by his career in waste management.

Today, Coggins' collection boasts thousands upon thousands of oil industry stamps, postcards, coupons and labels. He's even got UK motorist's petrol ration books issued during the OPEC crisis years in the 1970s.

Many of his tiny treasures carry the BP logo and the collection in its entirety traces the fascinating story-by-pictures of the global oil industry from the early part of the last century.

Coggins is not alone in his interest. There's even a specialist association. The Petroleum Philatelic Society (PPS), headquartered in California, sends a regular newsletter, The Petro-Philatelist, to its 100 members in 40 countries, many of whom probably work, or once worked, in the oil industry. One member, former BP employee Graham Boutle, who led the former BP Philatelic Society in the 1970s until he retired in 1990, is the PPS president.

Petro-themed stamps began to occur frequently in the 1930s. Until then most countries used only the image of their monarch or figurehead on stamps and 'thematics' began to be widespread in the mid 20th century. The UK, for example, didn't print thematics until after the Second World War.

Until as late as 1960, only 36 countries were known to have issued stamps carrying a petro theme, with only 400 varieties recognised as having a relationship with the industry. But bringing the story up to date, almost all nations have now produced at least one of the staggering 4,000-plus stamps issued with a petro-theme.

Some of the oldest known petro-theme stamps were produced by Azerbaijan in 1919. Occasionally stamps appear in Coggins' collection almost by accident. For example, all stamps issued by Romania until recently pictured an oil derrick as it actually appears on the country's national flag. Although some devotees think to have these in your collection is akin to cheating! Likewise, those petro-stamps produced by African countries specifically for overseas sale are also viewed as less desirable than the 'real' thing.

Commemorative stamps have been frequently issued to mark important events in the oil industry such as the first oil discovery in Nigeria in 1956, offshore in Abu Dhabi in 1958 and in the UK North Sea in 1965.

Oil also features on stamps, which commemorate other non-petrochemical landmarks in history in a roundabout way. A series of stamps produced in Holland to mark the turn of the millennium is a good example of this. The Dutch public were asked to vote on the century's most memorable events. They chose as one of the subjects the time in the 1970s when OPEC placed oil embargoes on The Netherlands and the country's government banned private driving on a Sunday. An empty motorway illustrates the subject perfectly.

While the majority of stamps issued show exploration, derricks, tankers and pipelines, a few take an environmental stance such as the issue by the tiny British island of Lundy, which is famous for its commemorative stamps. Lundy published the first stamp to mark an example of oil pollution in 1967 after the Torrey Canyon spill.

The earliest examples in Coggins' collection show the BP logo in an advertisement on the cover of a 3 shilling book of UK stamps issued in 1929. Full ones fetch in excess of £300. He also has some similar booklets from New Zealand dated 1954, 1956 and 1957 and one from Algeria in 1955.

The BP logo often appears as sponsor on sporting stamps such as on the jersey of cyclist Tommy Simpson on an Ajman, United Arab Emirates, stamp from 1969. Tour de France and Formula One commemorative stamps often carried the BP logo throughout the 1970s and '80s. It also crept into landscape shots. A wide-angle photograph used on postcards and stamps in the '70s of Piccadilly Circus, London, shows a large, neon, green and yellow logo.

A 1978 commemorative 'energy' issue shows a BP Forties platform, which the artist based on photographs from BP's own library. BP commissioned a limited issue first-day cover for internal use, and the company was also involved in the commercial production of another commemorative Forties Field first day cover.

And while Coggins' collection illustrates the changing face of the BP logo over the years, there's still no stamp issued with BP's latest brand image, the Helios logo.

However, standard issue national stamps as we know them, could become a thing of the past. With the onset of digital technology, users may soon be able to design their own over the internet and simply print them off.

Value is a subject often raised but according to Coggins, petro-stamps themselves aren't that valuable, with examples fetching anything from one or two pounds to a couple of hundred at the most. It's the rare errors that creep into the stamp-making process which create exceptional value. So, a petro-stamp with a printing mistake, for example missing a colour or out of register, are the ones to look out for. Also, printer's proofs often carry a higher price tag than the stamps themselves.

For readers interested in estimating the value of their own collections, regular catalogues are published. But bear in mind that catalogue prices are often a third or even two-thirds higher than what the stamp would actually realise in a sale!

l Jill Wedge has been a journalist for 20 years and now specialises in writing for and editing employee and customer publications for major corporates.

Anyone wishing to find out more about petro-stamp collecting can join The Petroleum Philatelic Society International by writing to treasurer Feitze Papa at 922 Meander Driver, Walnut Creek, CA 9598-4239, USA, or to secretary Chris Coggins at 174 Old Bedford Road, Luton, Beds LU2 7HW.