

Bill Hedley FRPSL

The FEPA president talks to Tina Jackson about what the organisation's role entails, the benefits of exhibiting, and why philately is so much more than merely a pastime



Philatelists don't come more distinguished than Bill Hedley, the President of the Federation of European Philatelic Associations. But for all that, he was drawn into philately in the same way as many of *Stamp Collector's* readers. Like many of his generation, Bill collected stamps from the age of six and was encouraged to continue it at school. 'It was a wonderful way of discovering the world,' he says.

But rediscovering his passion for philately later in life was when Bill's stellar trajectory in the stamp world began.

'The album disappeared into a cupboard until my elder son was given an album and some stamps for Christmas in the mid-80s and – helping him to sort them out – I rediscovered my interest,' he explains. 'I then joined the excellent Royal Tunbridge Wells Philatelic Society and began to learn about the range of philately and how you could do virtually anything with it.'

Bill's previous work as a historian meant that he was naturally attracted to postal history. 'That has been my focal point ever since,' he says. 'My first

step into organised philately was to join the committee of the local society, of which I first became Secretary and then President. I joined the Royal in 1998 and, after retiring, I began to work in the RPSL Archive which was a wonderful education in philatelic history.'

In Bill's world, philately is much more valuable than a mere pastime. 'I am allergic to the word "hobby", because I think it devalues philately. We don't usually talk about golf as a hobby – as my father used to say, "It's not a religion; it's more important than that"!'.

By 2015, Bill became even more deeply involved when he was invited to take the helm of FEPA. 'One thing led to another and I became much involved with the international dimension of philately through the *London 2015* exhibition,' he says, modestly. 'Even so, I was surprised to be approached at the *Stockholmia* exhibition as to whether I would be interested in succeeding José Ramón Moreno RDP as President of FEPA. After a good deal of heart-searching I agreed and was elected at the FEPA Congress in Monte Carlo in 2019.'

FEPA, which was set up in 1989, is an international organisation that brings together the national philatelic federations and associations of 45 countries in Europe, which for this purpose includes Lebanon, Israel and Egypt. The Association of British Philatelic Societies is the UK member. 'FEPA's job is to support its members in promoting philately in Europe,' explains Bill. 'It does this mainly by sharing information, promoting innovation and cooperation, supporting exhibitions and rewarding exceptional achievements.' FEPA's supreme body is the annual Congress at which each member has one delegate. Day-to-day management is conducted by a board of seven members from different European countries.



FEPA is one of three Continental Federations that are associate members of the FIP (the world organisation for philately).

Information is shared by posting news about European philately (and beyond) on the FEPA website (www.fepanews.com). Newsletters are also sent out fortnightly by email. 'We also produce *FEPA NEWS*, the Journal of European Philately, twice yearly,' says Bill. 'It records events and developments in the previous six months, looks forward to future plans and publishes articles on developments in philately and in the world of research. So far as we can we try to give an airing to new thinking in the scope and practice of philately and to update readers on how the latest developments in digital technology may affect philatelic organisations. Obviously, this also influences our efforts to promote innovation and cooperation between members, for

Bill presents the FEPA Medal for Exceptional Service to Organised Philately to Bernard Jimenez (France), Liberec, October 2022





example on virtual exhibitions or on the use of social media as a philatelic tool. Some Members are already very well-advanced in these fields, but others are not and can benefit by learning from others' experience.'

FEPA rewards exceptional achievements by awarding medals to individuals each year for outstanding service to philately and for philatelic research and study, and Certificates of Appreciation to societies and clubs. 'This year, for example, a Certificate of Appreciation was awarded to the Stamp and Postcard Group in Uddingston near Glasgow who have successfully adopted an innovative approach to bringing the benefits of philately to all age groups in an informal, low-cost setting, an achievement that we wanted to recognise,' says Bill.

Bill and FEPA play a proactive role in promoting philatelic exhibitions.

'FEPA does not organise exhibitions – that is a job for the national members,' he says. 'But it supports its members by giving Patronage or Recognition to exhibitions they are organising if they ask for it. Patronage means that the exhibition will be organised in accordance with the FEPA Regulations for Exhibitions, with advice from FEPA, and that all FEPA Members will be invited. Recognition means that the national organisers will set

FEPA Board at the 2022 Congress in Liberec, Czech Republic

the regulations which can be for a national exhibition only, or one with some international participation, and that FEPA will support them by giving publicity to the show. At the other end of the spectrum, FEPA may give Recognition to a world exhibition organised with FIP Patronage in a European country. The most recent example of this was IBRA in Essen, Germany, last May.'

FEPA also gives international accreditation to judges for FEPA exhibitions and adopts an innovative approach to the guidelines for judging exhibits. 'For example, we have recently

produced guidelines for the evaluation of Narrow Theme exhibits (1, 2 and 3 frames) and have initiated a discussion regarding the judging of Literature exhibits,' says Bill.

In Bill's experience, no matter where they come from, philatelists have more similarities than differences, and love to share their interest with like-minded souls.

'Wherever I have been, philatelists are remarkably similar,' he believes. 'They appreciate the value of life-long learning, and they are generally very sociable. They are always on the lookout for a new angle on an old subject, or for a new theme to stimulate their imagination. They like to share their knowledge and are pleased to welcome visitors. If there is a barrier it tends to be language but – if you can break through that – it is never difficult to recognise a philatelist.'

The approach to exhibiting can vary between those who favour a more traditional method and others who may be willing to be more experimental, for example in the use of non-philatelic materials. 'However, all recognise the importance of a rigorous approach to achieve the best results,' says Bill. 'Most European countries have a more formal structure to the national organisation of their philatelic societies than is the case in the UK, reflecting the legal basis on which they exist. Society meetings can also follow a different format. In Hungary, for example, I visited a local society that met at 5.00pm on Monday afternoon, everyone sat round a table and exchanged stamps and there were no

Jury team at work at the IBRA exhibition in Essen, May 2023



frames and no formal display.’

What does Bill think we can learn from the approaches to philately seen in other countries?

‘We could be more open to the idea of external participation in our exhibitions than we have been,’ he says. ‘We could also build on the recent trend to hold exhibitions in a wider range of locations, and we could be less rigid, for example, in how society meetings are organised. Do they always have to follow exactly the same format? Should we aim to cater for a range of tastes? Are we making the best use of technology to improve the quality of meetings?’

On the other hand, Bill believes we have much to offer other countries. ‘The UK’s standing in the world of philately is very high. Which other country won two international Grand Prix awards at a single World exhibition last year? We have also shown that we can adapt to changed circumstances very quickly when we must. The introduction of Zoom meetings during COVID was an excellent case in point. As well as learning from others we can provide leadership in promoting cooperation as we have in the past (the UK played a leading role in creating FEPA).’

Is it fair to say there is a disconnect between exhibitors and more general stamp collectors?

‘Not really, though I would prefer to use the term “philatelists” than “stamp collectors” as philately covers much more than stamp collecting,’ insists Bill. ‘All collectors can organise their material in the way that suits them best. There is no “right way”. Competitive exhibiting is an optional extra that has many advantages but, as in any other competitive field, it can only work if participants follow some rules. Many collectors, including exhibitors, prefer to display their collections outside the competitive framework in a way that suits them rather than to be constrained by exhibition rules and guidelines. Nothing wrong with that.’

What would he say to encourage collectors to try exhibiting?

‘As the late, great Francis Kiddle once said to me, “The best way to learn about your collection is to exhibit it”,’ says Bill. ‘By going through the essential work in preparing the exhibit, the exhibitor will discover a lot about the material and how it can best be used to cover the



storyline set out in the title.’

Exhibiting is also a challenge to the exhibitor to demonstrate a complete understanding of the subject and to present it clearly and consistently to others. ‘This is put to the test by experienced judges, who have gone through the same process themselves, and who will look at how well the exhibit meets the challenge against a set of criteria and at how it could be improved, either by bringing in new material to enhance the story or by presenting the story more clearly,’ says Bill. ‘Contrary to widely-held opinion the judges’ job is to help the exhibitor rather than to sit in judgement, and the most important part of their work is the feedback. The most satisfying thing for a judge is to see that an exhibitor has listened to advice and that the exhibit has consequently improved.’

The image philately has to the wider world is an ongoing concern for Bill.

‘Regrettably, public knowledge and understanding beyond the philatelic world about the range of philately and the benefits it can bring is very limited in a way that is not the case, for example, with art, music or a myriad of other activities,’ says Bill. ‘Ask any taxi driver about philately and, if you are lucky, it will be “something to do with stamps”.’

The public perception is that stamp collecting is a foggyish pastime. ‘If they know anything at all about it, most

Bill receives a medal on behalf of FEPA from Dr Pavol Lazar, President of the Union of Philatelists of Slovakia, at the BRATISLAVAFILA 2023 exhibition, June 2023

people’s vision is of a lot of old men with magnifying glasses – hardly an image that’s going to bring in the crowds,’ remarks Bill. ‘Commenting on the latest issue of barcoded stamps in Britain on 1 August 2023, the *Times* opined that “the market in amateur stamp collecting has collapsed, as has the habit of letter-writing... Perhaps it is true that philately will get you nowhere.” I am sure most philatelists would disagree, although it is undeniable that the habit of letter-writing has declined to virtually nothing. However, the *Times* leader is symptomatic of a widely-shared opinion that philately is not “cool”, a perception that philatelic organisations have done very little to counteract.’

It does not have to be like this, insists Bill. ‘We could start to draw attention vociferously to the benefits that philately can bring. I have already mentioned that it provides endless opportunities for life-long learning which is generally recognised as a means of improving happiness and wellbeing. As we all know it is also a highly sociable activity where people from every background, who might otherwise never meet each other, naturally treat each other as friends. And it offers the collector endless opportunities to enjoy the “thrill of the chase” as he or she tries to improve their collection, not to mention the pleasure of selling a collection from time to time as interest moves on to another topic.’

He also points out that philately is

not a world apart. 'Everything about it relates to one or more aspects of the wider world, whether historical, technological, economic, scientific, cultural or whatever. The point is that, when people who are not interested in "stamps" as such become aware that philatelic material can improve their understanding of other subjects in which they are interested – family and local history, military history, social, economic and cultural questions, for example – they may begin to understand its relevance to them and take an interest in it.'

The exhibition at the Royal Philatelic Society London presented by Alex Haimann in July on the 'Anglo-Zulu War 1879' provides an outstanding example of what can be done to broaden the appeal of a philatelic exhibition. 'It included an exceptional collection of philatelic material from the campaigns but alongside that was a vast range of military and other materials that brought the story to life in a way that attracted many other groups besides philatelists. It was also very well promoted, mainly through videos on YouTube which are still being viewed and could pass one million by the end of this year. This is a level of attention that has, so far as I know, never previously been reached by a philatelic organisation in Europe. It demonstrates that successful engagement with the wider public and with academic researchers is possible and that philately can have a successful future if it is prepared to broaden its horizons and adapt to change.'

As Bill sees it, the future for philately is not all doom and gloom.

'Much can be placed on the positive side of the balance sheet,' he says. 'The philatelic market is strong. There is an expanding use of digital technology and philatelic research and publication is thriving. Philatelic exhibits have achieved standards never reached before and philately's reach is wider now than ever. There are plenty of grounds for optimism.'

However, future success will depend on ability to adapt to change. 'It is surely inevitable that digital technology including artificial intelligence will have an ever-expanding influence on how philately develops, as it will in every other field of life,' says Bill. 'In particular, access to data and information is immeasurably easier now

Presentation to Uddingston. George Henshilwood, Secretary of the ABPS, presents the FEPA Certificate of Appreciation to Gordon Shepherd of the Uddingston Club, June 2023



than it was in the past, and presumably this trend will continue. This means that new ways of organising philately will continue to evolve rapidly, while older ones will only survive if they are able to change with the times.'

Bill believes there's a likelihood that postage stamps will fall out of use completely or be digitised in ways that will have profound implications for collectors. 'Unless it remains in being as a nation's "business card", time may be up for the traditional postage stamp except as a historical study for collectors,' he says. 'This raises the question of whether there will be new collectable commodities to replace it. Perhaps they

are even here already, and we have not yet recognised them.'

But Bill believes that philately has too much to offer to be consigned to history. 'Personally, I am sure that philately has a bright future as it is such an absorbing pastime and a fascinating field for study. I would like to see it emerging from the shadows as part of a wider theme – the history of communications – that could extend into many other fields and attract a new generation of collectors and researchers. Philately has shown in the past that it can adapt to change and broaden its range, even if that is sometimes slower than we might wish, and I am sure it will continue to do so.'

BILL HEDLEY - A SHORT PHILATELIC BIOGRAPHY

- Current: President of the Federation of European Philatelic Associations (FEPA) since 2019.
- Member of ABPS Exhibitions and International Committee since 2011.
- FEPA and FIP international juror.
- Treasurer, Cinderella Stamp Club
- Previous: Chairman, London 2015 EUROPHILEX Organising Committee
- Secretary, Royal Philatelic Society London, 2013-2015
- Chairman, RPSL Museum Committee, 2015-2019
- Chairman, ABPS Exhibitions and International Committee 2017-2019
- Main Philatelic Interests: Postal History of Hungary and Austria
Early postal history of Venice

