

# The World of Gilbert & Sullivan

Gilbert and Sullivan operetta—a British institution for over a hundred years—is a surprisingly under-exploited topic philatelically, given its international popularity in the English speaking world and the number of eccentric characters from the stories who might be portrayed. But with some licence one can make a very nice little thematic presentation telling the story of the Savoy Operas and their background. What follows is an outline of what could be done.

W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan are very much Eminent Victorians and it is in that era of British history that we must contextualise them. The Victorian Age was the subject of a



four stamp issue by Britain in September 1987 (SG 1367-70) in the design of which behind four portraits of Queen Victoria we see many typical contemporary icons such as The Crystal Palace and the Albert Memorial and famous men such as Prince Albert and Benjamin Disraeli. Queen Victoria herself knighted Sullivan in April 1883 and requested a command performance of *The Gondoliers* to be put on at Windsor Castle by The D'Oyly Carte Opera Company in March 1891, the first such "command" since the death of her beloved Prince Consort, whose death depressed her for so long.



The first big hit for G & S was *H.M.S. Pinafore* in the early summer of 1878, some of the production detail being influenced by Gilbert's visit on 13th April of that year to

Nelson's flagship H.M.S. Victory anchored in retirement at Portsmouth. (SG1189 June 82)

Another British stamp showing a Nineteenth Century coastguard (SG 902 April 72) could easily provide a model costume for the hero of *Pinafore* Ralph Rackstraw—

"A British tar is a soaring soul  
As free as a mountain bird"

or indeed of Richard Dauntless in *Ruddigore*



Compare the uniform in the stamp above with that of the *Pinafore* sailors from an 1879 poster and in Gilbert's sketch of Richard Dauntless (Ruddigore) below



some years later, who  
"shipped, d'ye see in a  
Revenue sloop  
...off Cape Finistere"

Compare it with one of Gilbert's own drawings (using the pseudonym "Bab") below.

Another character from *Pinafore* Little Buttercup, the bumboat woman, could easily be costumed as the "Opera singer" in the April 82 British Theatre issue (SG1186).



The D'Oyly Carte's principal contralto Ann Drummond Grant as Buttercup in a 1950's production

*Pinafore* was so successful that it was shamelessly pirated in the United States within a few months of its British opening and in order to show the American public what an authentic

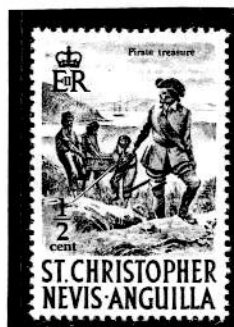
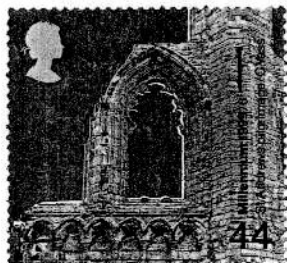
production should look like D'Oyly Carte took a company to America to performance both *Pinafore* and *Pirates* (which premiered in the USA only days after its British first night) in an attempt to establish copyright. The topic of the second great success, then for G & S—pirates—was not without some irony.

*The Pirates of Penzance* is one of the five G.B. issues design by Lynda Gray to celebrate G & S in July 1992 (SG 1624-8) and other British stamps also spring to mind in thinking of this story such as February 93 issue depicting R.L.

Stevenson's famous rogue Long John Silver (SG 1644, not shown), the April 95 Coast issue (SG 1871) and the November 99 issue for the ruined St Andrews Cathedral (SG 2117). The latter two suggest to me the backdrop for Act 1 ("A rocky sea shore on the coast of Cornwall") and Act 11 ("A Ruined Chapel by Moonlight") respectively in typical productions of *Pirates*.



"For I am Pirate King"



Pirates themselves appear on this issue from St Kitts Nevis (SG 206) and the Jolly Roger was one of the subjects of the British Flags issue in October 01 (not shown).

We move from sailors, prominent in the first two wildly successful shows to soldiers in the gentler production of *Patience*, in 1881, full of satire of the mores of the day. The two poets Bunthorne and Grosvenor who vie with each other for the hand of the eponymous milkmaid were based



upon Oscar Wilde (depicted in this Millennium issue from The Republic of Ireland) and Algernon Swinburne. The costumes of the Dragoon Guards can easily be found on stamps depicting military uniforms, like SG 1990 of July 97.

*Iolanthe*, produced the following year is shown in the dedicated British issue, as of course are *The Palace of Westminster* (in GB issues from September 73 SG 939/40 and 75 SG 988) and a theatrical *Fairy in November 85*.



Queen of the Fairies



Private Willis whose song

"When all night long a chap remains  
On sentry go"

opens Act Two is a Grenadier Guardsman (as in the July 83 Uniforms issue, SG 122, not shown).

One now dated allusion in the romantic fantasies of the *Queen of the Fairies* was to a certain Captain Shaw -

"Type of true love kept  
under !

Could they brigade  
With cold cascade  
Quench my great love,  
I wonder !"

- a famous London  
Fire Chief of the time  
who would have used



a fire engine not unlike the one in April 74 issue (SG 951) in his younger days.

The next opera *Princess Ida* (1884) was a relative failure, for all sorts of reasons, one of them being the great heat at the time of its opening which discouraged theatre goers. But in itself it is a convoluted tale, based on Lord Tennyson's long poem "The Princess". Tennyson of course was given a issue to himself in March 92, SG 1609 depicting his more famous narrative poem, *The Lady of Shallot* is illustrated..



Within the text of *Ida* are references to Charles Darwin's "Origin of the Species" Lady Psyche's Act II solo "The Ape and The Lady" plays with Darwinian Theory:

"A Lady Fair, of lineage high,  
Was loved by an Ape in the days gone by.  
The Maid was radiant as the Sun  
The Ape was a most unsightly one-....

While Darwinian man, though well-behaved  
At best is only a monkey shaved"

Darwin featured on British stamps in February 82 (SG 1175/8) had died two years before the opera's production.



Amongst most Savoyards' favourites come three of the next four operas in chronological opera all of which are featured in the GB G&S issue, starting with *The Mikado* (1885).



"Defer, defer  
To the Lord High  
Executioner!"

Possibly apocryphal is the story that Gilbert—having once again had his Magic Lozenge idea rejected by Sullivan—was inspired by the falling of a Japanese sword from his study wall to write a completely new story. He certainly used geisha girls to train ladies of the



Compare the costume of *The Dancer in Japan* SG 984 (1962) with a Victorian drawing of Koko, cheap tailor and Lord High Executioner.



company in how to walk in the Japanese manner, as the recent Mike Leigh film *Topsy Turvey* most amusingly depicts. There are no problems at all of course in finding stamps showing geisha (for the "Three Little Maids") or bizarre Japanese theatrical characters upon whom *Pooh Bah* and *The Mikado* himself must have been modelled.



Richard Dauntless  
hero of *Ruddigore*

*Ruddigore* followed in 1887 with quite similar costumes and settings as *Pinafore* (as mentioned above) and then in the following year Sullivan finally got his chance to write music for a story which is not full of absurdity but a realistic story. Unusually *The Yeoman of the Guard* has a genuine historical setting, The Tower of London as it was in the 16th Century. The Tower itself appears on GB stamp in March 78 SG 1054 and the costumes of the aristocrats in the operetta like Sir Richard

Cholmondeley are much as we see on the GB issue for 350th anniversary of the Civil War (a little later in 1642—51) in June 92 (SG 1622).







*The Gondoliers*, which rivals *The Mikado* for its joyousness was produced in 1889 but set in 1750 Venice, which of course can be found on many stamps along with gondoliers and contadine

The last two operas *Utopia Ltd* and *The Grand Duke* were like their second *The Sorcerer* not much appreciated and Gilbert and Sullivan's relationship did not last into the Twentieth Century, Sullivan dying in 1900, aged 58 and Gilbert outliving him by ten years and dying in a swimming accident.

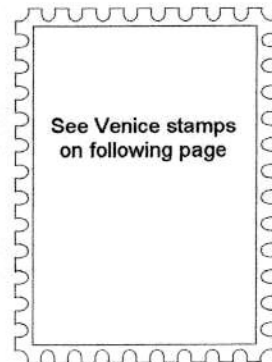
The work of Gilbert and Sullivan undoubtedly cries out for a more generous treatment in stamps than we have seen so far, but no obvious anniversaries for philatelic commemoration occur for quite some time, Gilbert's dates being 1836-1911, Sullivan's 1842 - 1900 and the operettas being produced between 1875 (*Trial by Jury*) and 1896.

So as Ko-Ko might have said :  
 "Here's a how-de-do !"

*Dress rehearsal photo of Marco and Giuseppe Palmieri taken from the author's own production of The Gondoliers for Elgin Operatic Society in March 1999*



*"We're called gondolieri  
 But that's a vagary  
 It's quite honorary....."*





# “The Gondoliers”



Scene – The Piazzetta, Venice,  
The Ducal Palace on the right.



SG 1230 1968 celebrating the death bi-centenary of the painter Canaletto shows part of St Mark’s Square, Venice, part of which scene – “The Piazza” is shown in finer detail in SG 2204 (1993) marking the death bi-centenary of another painter Francesco Guardi

## Act One – Duke of Plaza-Toro:

*As a Castilian Hidalgo of ninety five quarterings I regret I am unable to pay my state visit on horse.....I should have preferred to ride through the streets of Venice; but owing , I presume to an unusually wet season ,the streets are in such a condition that equestrian exercise is impracticable !!*

This 1973 set (SG 1340-44) issued for the Save Venice (from flooding) campaign depicts various aspects of this lovely and historic city...

20 lira The Schiavoni Shore 25 l. The Tetrarchs (sculpture) 50 l. The Triumph of Venice  
90 l Bronze horsemen in St Mark’s Basilica 300 l Piazzetta San Marco

