



# The Welsh Space Programme



Those of us over a certain age will remember the Space Race in the late 1950s and the 1960s; that battle between the USA and the USSR to be the first in all things outside the Earth's atmosphere. The first orbiting satellite, the first living creature to be launched, the first complete orbit, the first spacewalk, the first use of a toilet in space. Yuri Gagarin will always be remembered as the first man into space. However, these two super-powers had well oiled-publicity machines issuing the press releases for the world's press, to get one up on their rivals. What is less well known is the contributions made by smaller countries, such as Wales. Does the fact that the Welsh had an adventurous and ambitious, albeit short-lived, space programme surprise you? Though its achievements were not widely publicized, it does feature in two of Malcolm Pryce's excellent Aberystwyth novels, and has generated a small but eagerly sought philatelic output.

While the USSR was still sending dogs into orbit (remember Laika? If not read *From Aberystwyth with Love* for the Welsh connection) Wales was training monkeys for missions into outer space. Not only that, but these little monkeys had been trained to communicate by sign language. The most famous was Major Tom, a capuchin who achieved the rank of Monkeynaut First class and who received the Medal of the Hero of the Cosmos; sadly this was posthumous. His last frantic message spelled out "Please can I have some more oxygen, I don't think there is much left". He left behind a wife, Cleopatra, and a son Mr Bojangles who featured in *The Incredible Lightness of Being in Aberystwyth*. A stamp commemorating his monumental flight on the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1961, just three days after and over-shadowed by Gagarin's historic flight, was sold as a commemorative label, and was also used on post from the departments involved in the space missions.

Next is the Welsh regional commemorative pair, released 1971, depicting the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's (on the left), and Major Tom's historic flights. Covers were prepared for the stamps postmarked 12<sup>th</sup> April for Gagarin's anniversary and 15<sup>th</sup> April for Major Tom's. However serious collectors will seek out those that have both frankings, a service that was only available through the philatelic desk at Aberystwyth main post office.

Later Welsh space flights took off from the launch pad on Abracadabra Atoll, part of the Welsh Indian Ocean Territory (more from there to come soon possibly). In 2001 a 25c commemorative was issued celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the last launch there. This issue is of somewhat validity. The space programme had populated the reefs and islets of the WIOT with scientific, technical, administrative and military personnel, shepherds and bards., and there was quite a busy postal service to and from the islands. However after the launches ended the resident and non-resident population of the entire territory (excluding the cannibalistic land hermit-crabs there) rarely rose above zero. So while there were regular stamp issues from 1956-1970, when the airbase closed, this was the only stamp emanating from the territory for some 23 years.

You may wonder about the charity labels for the Enoc Enoc's Foundation with these space programme stamps. Enoc Enoc's was set up to help gentlemen in distressed circumstances to earn a living as barrel organ men. According to Malcolm Pryce they were guaranteed to earn a living because people would give you money if they liked you, and if they didn't would pay you to go away. The illustration shows one such gent stepping out from Enoc Enoc's with his new monkey to start his new life. The defunct space programme was a source of monkeys for the organ grinders. Cleopatra, wife of Major Tom, ended up with Gabriel Bassett, a man with a hidden past who need the services of the Foundation. But to find out if she was ever reunited with her Mr Bojangles you'll have to read the book. The labels were used during the 1970s and were sold for 2p each. It is estimated they raised enough money for 10 barrel organs.