

## *The Embossed Postage Stamps of Natal — 1857-1869*

The first postage stamps of Natal were issued on 1st June, 1857. Great Britain, the first country in the world to issue adhesive postage stamps, had produced its famous 'Penny Black' in 1840, and the Cape of Good Hope had commenced the issue of the equally famous 'Cape Triangulars' in 1853. Unfortunately, while Natal was quite early in the field amongst the world's stamp-issuing countries, its first stamps have never enjoyed the esteem and popularity enjoyed by the stamps just mentioned and by most other 'classic' issues of the world. The reasons for this will become apparent from this article.

There was no properly organised postal service in Natal until the year 1850. In terms of a proclamation dated February of that year, Post Offices were established at Pietermaritzburg, D'Urban, Bushman's River (later Estcourt) and Klip River (later Ladysmith). Previously, such limited postal facilities as were called for had been provided by the various missionaries (mostly American), while between Pietermaritzburg and Durban the proprietors of the *Natal Witness* had provided what they referred to as a 'Private Post established for the satisfaction of our subscribers, and at the same time to afford facilities for communication to the public'. This private post commenced in March, 1846, and was soon being conducted on a regular weekly basis, the tariff being 6d. per sheet. By the time the Government postal service commenced in February, 1850, the tariff had been reduced to 3d. per sheet. With the establishment of the Government service, the private post terminated.

After the opening of the initial four Government post offices, further post offices were opened from time to time. Pinetown and Richmond were opened later in 1850, Verulam in 1851, Howick, Mooi River, Colenso, Weenen and York in 1852, Sterkspruit (later Caversham) in 1853, Greytown in 1854, Umhlali in 1856, Umzinto in 1858, Isipingo in 1859 and many more in the 1860s. By 1870 the number of post offices in the Colony had passed 40 and by 1880 the number was up to 73.

Soon after the opening of the first post offices, rates of postage were fixed under which the prepaid rate was less than the non-prepaid rate — for local letters 1d. per half-ounce, compared with 4d. per half-ounce non-prepaid. There was a preferential rate of 1d. on soldiers' letters bearing the signature of the commanding officer, and this was also the rate for newspapers. On overseas letters the rate was 6d. per half-ounce, this having to be prepaid. On the introduction of postage stamps (on 1 June 1857), prepayment of postage was made obligatory on all letters.

The Colony's first postage stamps were a makeshift issue introduced as a result of complaints from the public. There were four values, namely, 3d., 6d., 9d. and 1/-, crudely produced from the embossing dies of those values which were used at the Natal Treasury for the purpose of stamping

documents subject to stamp duty. For such purposes, a series of embossing dies ranging from 3d. to £25 was in use for impressing on documents such as licences, title deeds, etc. which attracted duty in terms of Ordinance No. 3 of 1850. The dies were normally impressed directly on to the document which required stamping, but for the production of postage stamps the dies were impressed, one impression at a time, on small sheets of rather coarse coloured wove paper, probably ready-gummed, obtained from a local stationer. No means of perforating the stamps was available, so they had to be cut from the sheet with scissors as they were sold. The 3d. stamp was impressed on a rose coloured paper, the 6d. on green, the 9d. on blue and the 1/- on buff paper. In every case the colouring went through the paper. Each value was of a different design, but basically all the designs consisted of the word 'Natal' at the top, then a crown between the letters V.R. (Victoria Regina), and below that the value in words. All this was surrounded, or partially surrounded, by a frame the style of which was different for each value. The dies, or at any rate those used for the production of the postage stamps, were made by B. Wyon of London.

A 1d. value was added to the series early in 1858, the die for this stamp being somewhat smaller than the other dies and not containing the letters V.R.; the style of lettering was also different. It is not known where this die came from, but it was certainly not as well executed as the other dies. At the outset the 1d. die was impressed on blue paper, but later rose paper was used and then buff, presumably to use up stocks of paper left over from the other stamps.

The method of producing the stamps was obviously quite unsuitable, especially as the embossing machine was apparently so constructed that it could emboss only two rows of stamps on the sheet, which then had to be turned round to take two rows on the opposite side. It seems unlikely that the Treasury would have been willing to relinquish control of the dies, so the production of the stamps must have been carried out at the Treasury itself. The appearance of the stamps was poor and, having to be cut from the sheet with scissors as they were sold, their size varied greatly. In a letter written to the Colonial authorities in London on 6 July 1859, the Governor described the stamps as 'a clumsy substitute for the usual postage stamps and prepared with difficulty', and asked that the new stamps which had been ordered on 6 September 1858 should be despatched as early as possible. Actually, the new stamps, of the value of 3d., and supplied by Perkins Bacon & Co. of London, were already on their way to Natal and must have arrived soon after the letter had been written. New 1d. stamps arrived early in 1860, but new 6d. stamps were not received until 1863 — this notwithstanding the fact that the 6d., 9d. and 1/- embossed stamps had been withdrawn, along with the embossed 3d. value, in July 1859.

The consumption of stamps in the Colony in its early stages was naturally very small. The basic rate for local letters being 3d. per half ounce, the 3d. value was the one most used, some 210 000 being sold over the period of about two years during which they were in use. Of the 1d. value 27 000 were sold; of the 6d. value 19 328; of the 9d. value 2 263, and of the 1/- value, 5 601. With the possible exception of the 3d. value, the stamps were thus from the outset difficult for collectors to obtain, especially

as stamp dealers were virtually unknown until the early 1860s when stamp collecting suddenly became a popular hobby. Added to the actual scarcity of the stamps, early collectors seem to have been prejudiced against them because there was some doubt whether they were not revenue rather than postage stamps, while the fact that they were embossed instead of being printed meant that they were very easily damaged. In this connection a prominent philatelist of the time, Judge Philbrick, writing in 1866, referred to 'the wretched indecipherable condition of most specimens of this issue, a set of clear, sharply defined, legible examples being hardly known'. The 9d. and 1/- values were so seldom seen that as early as March 1865 the Editor of 'The Stamp Collector's Magazine' included them in a list of the 15 rarest postage stamps in the world.

It was about this time that a most undesirable development occurred and reference must again be made to 'The Stamp Collector's Magazine', the April 1866 number of which contained the following:

Natal — The dies of the first issue for this colony appear to have fallen under the control of some person who has struck off a number of reprints, on a much thinner and brighter coloured paper than that originally employed. Those noticed to this period are:

one penny — blue  
 threepence — pink  
 sixpence — green  
 ninepence — buff  
 shilling — a bright yellow.

This reprint will not lessen the value of the genuine old issue, but is, in itself, comparatively worthless.

Further reprints were made in 1873 and again in 1893, some of the last-mentioned ones being on wove paper identical in colour, thickness, and in all other respects with the paper used for the original issue. It is not known who was responsible for the earlier reprints, but the indications are that the 1893 reprints at any rate were made with official approval.

What complicates the matter is that, after the embossing dies had ceased to be used for producing postage stamps, they continued to be used for revenue purposes and, at the beginning of 1869, a series of revenue stamps on coloured gummed paper was produced from them (and from two of the dies that were never used for postal purposes) for affixing to documents which attracted stamp duty. In this revenue issue the stamps of the denominations which had been used for postal purposes were produced in colours which approximated to those used for the postal issue. In the case of the 1d. value, it was embossed on no less than four different coloured papers, three of them being similar to the colours of the postage stamps. The revenue stamps of all values were, however, clearly distinguishable from the postage stamps because, firstly, they were on paper which was coloured on the surface only, not right through, and secondly, they were perforated so as to avoid the need for them to be cut from the sheet with scissors as had had to be done with the postage issues. There is no doubt that the revenue stamps were regularly used for the purpose for which they were introduced, but what was undesirable from the philatelic

point of view was that it was an easy matter to trim off the perforations, leaving stamps which, superficially at any rate, were very similar to the rare postage stamps of 1857/1858.

Another interesting thing about the 1869 series of revenue stamps is that, from about 1881 to 1884, when they were apparently still in ordinary use, the Post Office seems to have handled them, or possibly special printings of them, selling them at face value to collectors who wanted them for philatelic purposes and describing them as 'obsolete stamps'. I remember being told many years ago by someone who as a boy had purchased a set of these stamps when they were on sale at the Pietermaritzburg Post Office that they were sold to him on the understanding that they would not be used for postal purposes. The stamps that I was shown were not perforated, so either they had had their perforations trimmed off before the Post Office sold them or they were special embossings that were not sent forward for perforating. These stamps, on surface coloured paper and imperforate, came to be referred to as reprints and this caused confusion with the proper reprints on paper coloured through.

The origin of the various reprints has always been a mystery and who first hit on the idea of making them is not known. Nor is it known whether it was the Natal Government that received the proceeds of the reprints or whether there were one or more individuals who made irregular use of the dies to the benefit of their own pockets. In the early 1930s there was quite a controversy in the philatelic press concerning the reprints and some conflicting statements were made by persons who had been living in Natal during the 1880s and 1890s and who it would appear were in a position to say what had occurred. On reading the various statements, one gains the impression that something was being hidden, and an expert on Natal stamps, writing several years after the controversy had died down, expressed the view that it was unlikely that the real truth would ever be established. With the lapse of nearly another forty years, one can only agree with him.

Reprinting of the embossed stamps seems finally to have ceased with the 1893 series of reprints. According to Stanley Gibbons's *Monthly Journal* of January 1894, this happened as a result of representations made to the Postmaster General by some collector in Pietermaritzburg. The dies were apparently not defaced until very much later — about 1930 — but are now held by the Postmaster General in Pretoria. The defaced revenue dies (i.e. the ones not used for the production of postage stamps) are in the Natal Archives in Pietermaritzburg. With so many reprints in existence, there has always been a tendency from the earliest days to assume that any unused embossed stamp of Natal must inevitably be a reprint. While this is not correct, the well-known London stamp dealers and publishers of the leading British stamp catalogue, Stanley Gibbons Ltd., have always had a note in their catalogue (an annual publication) indicating that, because of the existence of the reprints and the difficulty of distinguishing them with certainty from the originals, they do not quote any prices for unused stamps of this issue. I think the same applies to other leading stamp dealers throughout the world, and most catalogues, wherever they are published, do not mention prices for the unused stamps. When such stamps change hands, therefore, they would almost certainly do so at a

nominal price that would represent only a fraction of the value of a used stamp.

The value of the used stamps depends very much on their condition; i.e. whether they are of good appearance and free from defects such as tears, creases, trimmings, etc. Stanley Gibbons' prices, which range from £150 for the 3d. stamp to £3 000 for the 9d. stamp, are for stamps in fine condition. Stamps in poor condition — for example, if they are of a small size (and particularly if the design is cut into), or if they are torn or creased or thinned — would be worth very much less. On the other hand, stamps on original envelopes or letters could be worth much more, again depending on the general condition of the stamp and cover and what postal markings are on the cover. It follows, therefore, that whenever envelopes or letters of this nature are discovered, the proper course is to consult an expert philatelist or dealer. Under no circumstances should any attempt be made to remove the stamp from the envelope and it is most important that the whole envelope — front and back — should be retained intact. If there is any letter in the envelope, that too should be retained.

It should be mentioned that many of the embossed stamps were not cancelled with postmarks as in the early stages only the Pietermaritzburg, Durban and Ladysmith Post Offices had steel cancelling stamps. The other post offices usually cancelled the stamps by writing the name of the post office across them. At the outset, the cancellor at Pietermaritzburg took the form of a horizontal oval containing 'Post Office P.M.Burg' without any date. The one at Durban consisted of a small circle containing a crown at the top, 'Natal' at the bottom and, in between, the month and date of the month. There was no mention of the year or of the name D'Urban. The Ladysmith cancellor was on the lines of the one at Pietermaritzburg.

It was mentioned earlier in this article that, after two rows of stamps had been embossed on a sheet, it had to be turned round for embossing of two more rows on the opposite side. This meant that the two middle rows were upside down in relation to each other, resulting in vertical pairs of the stamps being, to use the appropriate philatelic term 'tête bêche'. Very few tête bêche pairs have survived, and only of the 1d. and 3d. values. There is a fine tête bêche pair of the 3d. stamps in the Hurst collection of Natal stamps in the Durban museum.

Forgeries of the Natal embossed stamps are known, the most dangerous ones being those produced by adding forged cancellations to the reprinted stamps. As mentioned previously, the paper used for some of the 1893 reprints was virtually identical with the original paper—it may even have come from the old stocks of that paper — and about 1895 quite a number of reprints, particularly of the 9d. value, bearing faked cancellations were noticed. It is inevitable that some collectors will have been deceived by these forgeries and no doubt some of them are still in existence.

It would certainly be very interesting if one could see a complete collection of the various series of reprints — i.e. 1866, 1873, 1881/84 (the trimmed down revenue stamps) and 1893 — and compare them with the original stamps. It is most unlikely, however, that such a collection would exist.

While the use of the embossed postage stamps finally ceased in 1860



Types of embossed stamps as used in Victorian Natal.

when the new 1d. stamps printed by Perkins, Bacon & Co. arrived, there was a brief period in 1869 during which one of the 1d. embossed revenue stamps issued at the beginning of that year was allowed to be used for postage. The stamp in question was embossed on yellow surface coloured paper and was perforated. Why it should have been used for postage is not clear, but its use for this purpose should in any case have ceased in August 1869, when a proclamation was published under which only stamps bearing the inscription 'Postage' could be used for postal purposes.

The stamps that replaced the embossed stamps were of the design known to philatelists as 'Chalon Heads', i.e. containing the head of Queen Victoria from a painting by a well-known nineteenth century artist, A. E. Chalon. They were beautifully produced stamps and, with their various 'Postage' overprints resulting from the legislation mentioned in the preceding paragraph, form an interesting series. Fortunately there are no reprints of these stamps to contend with.

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