

100 Years Ago in Mekeel's: **The Cape “Wood-Blocks”**

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(From *Mekeel's Weekly*, July 1 & July 8, 1911, with images added)

How often has some one authoritatively stated that “the last word” has been written on a subject, only to find, perhaps years afterwards, that a comparatively unknown student has recently taken up the supposedly futile search and attained some slight measure of success?

The well-known Cape “Wood-blocks” have always been great favourites with both philatelist and stamp collector: both are not only “Cape triangulars,” but also short-lived provisionals, and therefore even more desirable than stamps of the regular issue.

So much has been written on this subject, that I purpose giving, chiefly to refresh my readers’ philatelic memory, only a very short sketch of the history of these famous local productions.

Early in 1861, the stock of One Penny and Four Pence stamps, printed by Messrs. Perkins Bacon and Co., was running very low; and, the plates being in London, it was considered advisable to provide a temporary issue pending receipt of a regular supply of these stamps.



Uniqued unused 1d vermilion rectangular block of four, Sc. 7

penny stamps on April 5th and the fourpence on the 8th April, 1861”; and the

According to official information, the “wood-blocks” were “urgently applied for, the one



Unused 4d pale bright blue, Sc. 9

printings took place, of the lower value on the 10th, and of the higher value on the 12th of the same month.

These dates, however, are clearly wrong, as copies of both values are known with postmarks dated in the middle of the preceding month. Perhaps “April” was a slip of the official pen for “March.”

Whatever the date, there is no doubt that Messrs. Saul Solomon and Co. of Cape Town, were commissioned to and did engrave on steel, a new die for each of these values consisting of sixty-four separate stereotypes, mounted on a wooden base. From these plates the stamps were printed on laid paper, to the number—I give the official figures:—of 24,000 One Penny and 12,840 Four Pence—the One penny in vermilion, carmine, and brickred, and the Four Pence in pale blue, greyish blue, blue, and deep blue.

In making up the plates, one of the One Penny stereo was included with those of the Four Pence, and a stereo from the Four Pence die



The 4d vermilion color error, Sc. 9f



The 1d pale grey blue color error, Sc. 7d

was fixed on the One Penny plate: consequently each value is known in the wrong colour. The mistakes, as also a Four Pence stereo damaged in its right-handed corner, were rectified, probably just before the final printing, as neither of the errors (nor the damaged Four Pence) is known in the last colour of the other value as given above.

Mr. Castle has expressed a strong opinion that the official figures, like the dates, are inaccurate, and that the numbers of these provisionals were largely in excess of the figures quoted. He bases his argument on the period during which the “wood-blocks” must have been in use—to some extent, of course, in conjunction with the small stocks of the line-engraved stamp then remaining at various post

offices—a period extending from the middle of March until towards the end of May and also on the fact that, assuming the figures to be correct, a most abnormally large proportion of the stamps has survived; and points out that the One Penny, instead of being the commoner stamp, is two or three times rarer than the Four Pence.

What stocks of the regular issue were on hand in March, 1861, we shall never know; but surely Mr. E. S. Gibbons' famous haul of some two million "triangulars" should account for the commonness of these stamps—that is, in comparison with the quantities printed. Is there any record of the proportions of the two values?

It has been stated that a few sheets of each value were found in 1878 at the Graaf Reinet Post Office, and that, on their use being officially noticed, the balance was sent to head-quarters. The gentleman responsible for this statement managed to secure only one copy of each value. What became of the balance officially called in?

In March, 1883, these stamps were reprinted on wove paper, the One Penny in deep red and the Four Pence in indigo—195 sheets of sixty-two and sixty-three respectively of each value, and without the errors and damaged Four Pence. They were intended for distribution amongst the various Postal Administrations throughout the world, and not for issue or sale to collectors.

An attempt has recently been made to work out the number of errors, based on the present state of the two plates and the official figures, which latter, if Messrs. Saul Solomon and Co. rendered a detailed account, could easily have been arrived at after allowing for rectification of the errors, etc. I extract the result of the calculations:—

One Penny: 24,483, in red, and 177 in blue—24,660.

Four Pence: 12,537 in blue, and 303 in red—12,840.

Five-and-twenty years ago normal "Wood-blocks" were anything but scarce, and the Errors were only a little more than uncommon; nowadays even used "normals" run from £4 to £10 each, whilst single copies of the Errors are creeping slowly but very surely towards three figures. Se tenant with a normal stamp, both errors are now very



1d vermillion parallelogram block of four, Sc. 7

rare, and some eight years ago a block of four (used) in red, one being the Four Pence, fetched £350.

Only one unused Error, a copy of the Four Pence in red, is chronicled—£500 it realized; but I saw, a little over thirty years ago, a very nice unused collection in a “Lallier,” containing (amongst many superb stamps) four unused single “Wood-blocks,” the One Penny and the Four Pence, both in pale red and in pale blue. I was then assured that the stamps were perfectly genuine, and that assurance has very recently been confirmed by the gentleman who then had this collection.

[The 2011 Scott Classic Catalog gives these values:

Scott 7 \$16,500 unused, \$2,650 used;

Scott 7d color error, \$36,000 used (no unused value);

Scott 9 \$40,000 unused, \$3,000 used;

Scott 9f color error \$177,500 unused, \$65,000 used.

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Now for the reason, or excuse, for my article.

In January last I wrote to the Postmaster General of the Cape of Good Hope, asking for certain information; but the courteous reply gave me merely the official quantities of the stamps printed, and the news—so far as I was concerned, but which had in part been briefly recorded, I am now told—that “the wood-blocks from which the stamps referred to above were printed were placed in the South African Museum, Cape Town, in 1901 after being defaced by means of a light line cut across each of the metal plates forming the blocks.”

This was a, perhaps unintentional, but too good to neglect; and I accordingly interviewed a friend of mine who has a valued and influential (and may I add “philatelically intelligent”?) correspondent—Mr. “X”—at Cape Town, to whom a note of my somewhat ambitious requirements

was forwarded. Promptly came a reply promising all possible assistance, and the eagerly awaited information arrived a few days ago.

Mr. "X." duly interviewed the Curator of the Museum, and, after

a preliminary courteous but firm refusal from that official, managed to obtain from him permission to have the exhibit photographed—a permission which has resulted in the excellent illustrations accompanying this article, and which are, I venture to say, of great philatelic interest.

[This article was originally from *Gibbons' Weekly*; when the article was reproduced in *Mekeel's* the illustrations were not reproduced. Nonetheless I will include this portion of the article as it is still useful, albeit not as useful as if we had the illustrations to show you. JFD.]

...Attached to the exhibit in the Museum is a "Card", of which the following is an accurate copy, even to the conclusion, which is not expressed with sufficient clearness to make it quite intelligible to the non-philatelic mind:—

**Original Dies and Stereos from which the 1861
Presented by the Colonial Treasurer.**

Early in 1861 the Stock of 1d & 4d stamps of the first Colonial issue of 1853 (which were engraved and printed in London) became exhausted.

As the original plates were in England, the Government commissioned Messrs. Saul Solomon & Co. of Cape Town to engrave new Dies on steel for the two values. From these Dies 64 Stereos of each value were made and fixed on wooden blocks to form the printing plate (hence the term "Wood Block"). In cementing the Stereos one of the 4d value was by mistake placed on the block containing the 1d Stereos, and one of the 1d among the 4d. In consequence of this,



1d vermilion triangular block of four, Sc. 7

each sheet printed contained an error—4d red and 1d blue.

As only 24,000 of the 1d Red

4d pale milky blue, Sc. 9, with unofficial roulette (seen here as thin lines) tied by a black triangular cancel with "C", "G", "H" in corners of the triangle.

of the 4d

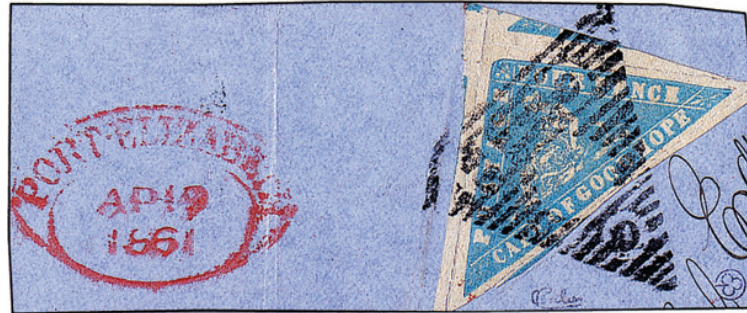
Blue were printed, there can only have been 201 of the 1d errors Blue, and 346 of the 4d errors Red.

Both the original Dies and the Stereos have been rendered useless by transverse cuts across them. The impressions exhibited are reprints from the original Dies, and are not genuine Dies.

From the photograph and "card" we learn, or are confirmed in our belief in several details with regard to the method employed in the production of these provisional stamps; also the welcome news that further reprinting is absolutely impossible. The quantities stated to have been printed are evidently intended as "round figures," but the numbers of the errors do not appear to have been very carefully calculated, and no mention (naturally, perhaps) is made of the Four Pence with damaged corner.

The One Penny plate was originally composed of sixty-four separate stereos, arranged in four horizontal rows of eight pairs each, grouped so that the last stamp in the top row and the first stamp in the bottom row have the apex at the angle. The wooden base is 268 mm. long by 147 mm. wide, the space occupied by the casts being from 258-1/2 to 260-1/2 mm. by from 133 to 135-1/2 mm.

Now the end stamp in each of the last two rows is missing, the corresponding stereos having probably been removed just prior to the third printing (in brickred); the marks in the cement on the block, showing where they were fixed, could be plainly seen.



The process of making stereos not admitting any variation, except such as are attributable to slight flaws (e.g. air-bubbles or cracks), or irregularities in trimming the edges of the casts, there is difficulty in identifying single copies or even pairs, except in those cases where an accident has happened to a stereo, at a corner as a rule.

The stamps which have lost more or less of a corner are the sixth in the top row, the ninth in the next row, the thirteenth in the third line, and the second and thirteenth in the bottom row. The last, as I have seen from a strip of reprints from this part of the sheet, shows a fairly clean cut across the end of the white ornament, the projecting piece of metal on (or corresponding with) the left edge evidently being too low to print....

It is fairly obvious that, in order to “place” the error, it is necessary to have more than a pair, because not only has the error itself been removed, but its immediate neighbour has probably been shifted, and possibly been raised from its place or even moved away; and, in this respect, the unique block of four (three of 1d and one of 4d) has given the necessary clue. If my readers will kindly turn to page 261 of Vol, XI of *The London Philatelist*, where this block is illustrated, they will see that a corner of the extreme left-hand stamp has been broken off. On turning this block, so that it becomes a vertical strip, with the print from the damaged stereo at the bottom, and comparing it with the similar strip composed of the thirteenth and fourteenth stamps of the two middle rows, I think they will agree with me that the Four Pence, error, was the thirteenth stamp in the second row on the sheet of the One Penny.

The bottom two stamps of the vertical strip of four agree exactly with the thirteenth and fourteenth stamps in the third row, but allowance (as I have hinted) must be made in comparing the two damaged corners, because the metal of the stereo—cut slantingly downwards, as could be seen from the original photograph—prints as if cut straight across. Apart from this, the pair containing the mutilated stamp does not coincide with any one of the other similar pairs on the sheet.

In testing this statement, the relative positions of the error and of the other stamp forming the pair must be disregarded, and some allowance made for the heavy printing, which is very noticeable on comparing the margins of the lower pair of the strip as photographed from the stamps, with those of the stereos.

From the fact that there are two spaces on the plate as it now exists, it is clear that two One Penny stereos have been destroyed. Stereos are of a comparatively soft metal, or alloy, and, being thin, will not stand any rough handling.

Not being able to identify any one of the stereos now on the plate as having originally been the error on the Four Pence plate, I suggest that it was damaged in removal, and that a similar fate befell the stereo forming a pair with the adventitious Four Pence—that one was undoubtedly moved, as can be seen by comparing the two strips, even if it was not damaged—and that the spaces were filled by substituting the cast from the now vacant places. Perhaps one or other of the adjoining pair, also apparently moved in order to reach the error, was damaged.

All this, however, is supposition, and there is nothing to be gained by discussing alternative transpositions, the final and definite selection from which is unimportant, even if interesting, in comparison with the (I hope and think, correct) “placing” of the Four Pence error.

The plate of the Four Pence was made up in a manner similar to that of the One Penny, with this exception, that on the sheet of stamps it was the first in the top row and the last on the bottom line which had the apex of the triangle at the corner. The wooden base measures 270 mm. by 150 mm., and the casts occupy a space of from 268 to 270 mm. by from 138 to 141-1/2 mm., and there is now a single vacancy at the extreme right-hand lower corner.

As the Four Pence stamp with damaged corner, showing some five or six parallel white lines in place of the usual ornament after “FOUR PENCE” is missing from the sheet of reprints, it is clear that it, and only it, was permanently removed, and it is equally clear that the Four Pence er-

ror, from the One Penny plate, is now somewhere with the other stamps of the same value. Fortunately, it is possible to identify the Four Pence “error” when printed in blue, for immediately above the space between the “A”, and “P” of “CAPE” there is a clearly defined dot appearing in white on the stamp, and in colour on the illustration; and there is



a slight, but distinct blur, just after the word “HOPE.” Further, the edge of the base of the stereo seems to have been slightly damaged. This is indicated by

Using the pdf magnifier you should be able to see the dot, touching and just below the horizontal line above “Cape of Good Hope” (arrow). As for the “blur” after “Hope”, I do not see it, but perhaps you will. JFD.

a dark mark (shadow) in the illustration [again, Mekeel’s did not have the illustrations from the Gibbons Weekly article], and can be easily seen in the Four Pence, red, as a dark (over-inked) line just above the comparatively lighter edge of the print. The original Four Pence error is now, I maintain, the tenth stamp in the first row of the sheet of that value, the tests I have given being clearly visible in that stamp only.

My suggestion is that the One Penny error, was the tenth stamp in the top row—else why, on rectifying the mistakes, was the Four Pence “error” placed there? And that the stamp from the damaged stereo was the inner one of the last pair on the sheet, and has been replaced by the original corner stamp, else why are there distinct marks of another stereo having once been in the place now occupied by the “unpaired” cast at the corner?

Of course, it may have been the other way round, and the damaged stereo may have been in the top row, and the error at the corner, but I can trace a resemblance in the unevenness of outline, between the Four Pence stamp found se tenant with the One Penny error, and the ninth stamp in the first row, though identification is very difficult; and it seems more probable that the workman would transpose as far as possible the errors before removing (or

perhaps noticing) the damaged stereo. There is this also to be noted, that the pair of stereos immediately above the solitary corner cast has been removed, but why it should be necessary to remove three in addition to the one to be discarded is a question I cannot attempt to answer. However, until a block of at least four, including the error, has been found, I fear it will be impossible to locate the position of the One Penny blue and consequently the place occupied by the defective stamp. The discovery of a block containing the latter would equally assist. Can any one of my readers oblige?

The stamps on both plates are so irregularly placed that the correct arrangement of blocks of four at least, or of strips of not less than three, should be possible, but there seems to have been considerable method in the irregularity. One can find some particular block of four, or strip of even six, almost exactly duplicated in another part of the sheet, and this apparent duplication is sometimes so very marked that I spent several hours measuring and otherwise testing the arrangement, in the belief that the plates had possibly been made up of repetitions of a number of casts and not of separate stereos. That belief, however, proved to be unfounded.

In conclusion, I wish to tender my thanks to all those who have intentionally (or otherwise!) assisted me, and I hope that any erroneous conclusions which I have drawn may be more than compensated for by the publication of [the factual information and the photos in the original article]. I have

done my best with a subject which, for fairly obvious reasons, is one that can adequately be dealt with by only a limited class of philatelists.—*Gibbons' Weekly*.



4d pale bright blue pair, Sc. 9, tied by triangular cancel with "C", "G", "H" in corners of the triangle.