

# Great Barrier Island's Pigeon Post

*From Mekeel's Weekly, January 4, 1900*



No stamps of recent issue have enjoyed the celebrity of those of Great Barrier Island. By reason of the novel purpose which the stamps serve, they are distinctive in the eyes of philatelists, while a sensational, and for a time, successful counterfeiting of the first stamp issue attracted added attention to the stamps.

A plethora of pigeon posts whose first and chief office, viewed from this distant view-point, seems to be the issue of stamps, is now threatened; a second company has already issued stamps and we are told that other pigeon posts will soon come into operation. We shall concern ourselves with reciting a few of the details of the working and the stamps of the original pigeon post whose specimens are listed in the standard catalogue. The information is collected from the data kindly furnished by Whitfield King &

Co., Ipswich, England, and from the *Auckland Weekly News*; our illustrations are reproduced from this paper.

The first issue of Great Barrier Island was in use for a comparatively short time; all the remainders of this one shilling blue stamp were secured by the enterprising firm of Whitfield, King & Co. These stamps have been placed on the market at a reasonable price by the firm in question; these stamps should not be confused with the "canceled" specimens that were counterfeited in Canada and offered for a time in the stamp papers at a low price.

As a text for the illustrations of this article, the following is taken from the *Auckland Weekly News*.

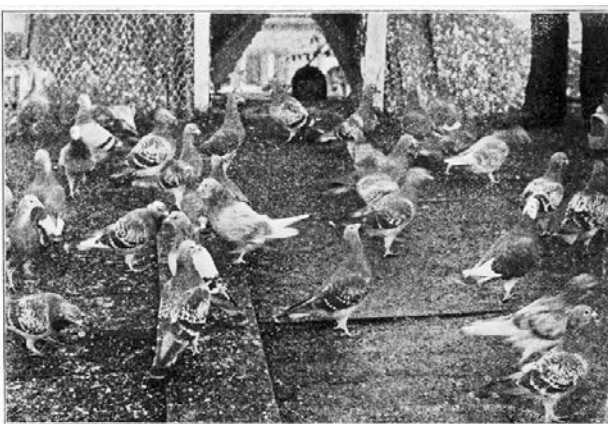
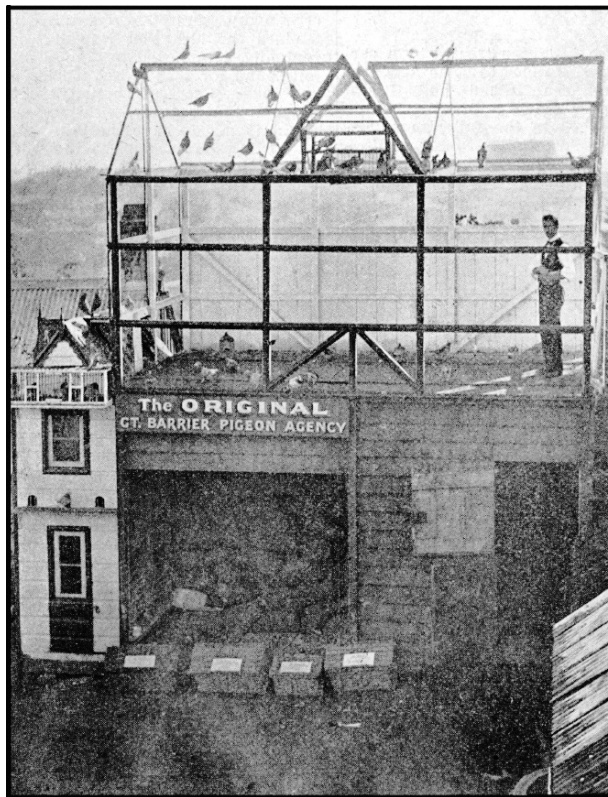
The first message ever flown from the Barrier was dated May 14, 1897, and was carried by Mr. Parkin's bird. Since then the service has steadily progressed, and other competitors have, by its success, been induced to enter the field. On April 27, 1898, Mr. Parkin's interest was taken over by Mr. S. Holden Howie, of Newton Road, a very successful breeder of homers, who has ever since conducted the service.

A few afternoons ago one of the *Weekly News* staff paid a visit to Mr. Howie's loft, and gathered some interesting particulars, which we are illustrating this week. The loft is the largest in the city, and the appointments are complete and ingenious. Entering the breeding-house shown in the illustration, Mr. Howie picked up from one of the nests what looked like a handful of fluff, with the remark, "I have sold that for £5", and the visitor was immediately impressed with the conviction that a first-class pigeon loft must cost something to run. The breeding-house, like all other parts of the loft, was scrupulously clean, and everything was in spick and span order.

Passing up the yard, the proprietor gave a shrill whistle, and pulled a string, and immediately there was a noisy fluttering of wings and the occupants of the loft—some 80 or 90 healthy looking birds—came flying down, and entered a cleverly-contrived trap. As they were being fed they were indeed a pretty sight; fluttering and calling as each handful of food was thrown on them. Each bird has a distinguishing number, and underneath the wing has "Original Great Barrier Pigeongram Service", and number of bird, together with Howie's address, stamped, so that even if a bird were blown out of his course, or were lost, he could at once be identified and returned to the owner.

Although the trap by which the birds enter the loft when bringing a message is a very neat piece of work, the proprietor intends to have an electric trap fitted up, and as soon as the bird arrives the fact will be made known by a bell ringing in the house.

Mr. Howie has agencies at Okupu, Port Fitzroy and Whangaparapara,



at the Great Barrier; and his birds also fly from Marotiri, one of the Hen and Chicken Islands where the Marotiri Copper Syndicate's property is situated. Asked as to the number of messages the birds carried, he said the average would be about 15 to 20 a week, and in one week he flew as many as 107. As everybody knows, the messages are written on tissue paper and tied round the leg of the bird, as shown in one of the illustrations, and when the bird arrives at the loft it is secured, the message is removed stamped, and delivered at once.

The paper refers to the stamps in the following words:

The reproduction of the stamps used in the service make interesting pictures, and we might mention that the proprietors are constantly receiving applications for these unique specimens from all parts of the globe. The first stamp ever carried from the Barrier was used by Mr. Howie's service, and came on a message that was sent in October last.

Mr. Howie was the first person to use a stamp for the purpose of carrying messages by pigeons, this method having originated with his service. After the message is written and rolled round the bird's leg it is fastened and kept in position by means of the stamp. This is a more humane way of fastening the message, and is much preferable to the old system of using string

or cotton. The price of the stamp is 1 shilling, which entitles anyone to the use of a bird for the purpose of carrying a message.

As we have said, Whitfield, King & Co. were so fortunate to secure the remainders of the one shilling blue of the first issue upon its retirement in favor of the second stamp of different type and color; consequently, when canceled stamps of the first issue were offered for sale by dealers in America, the firm had well-grounded suspicions that all was not right with the stamps. In the *Weekly* dated October 12, 1899, the following, which, while in the nature of an expose, gives much information about the stamps and their suggestions, appeared:

The discussion on the status and collectibility of the Great Barrier Island stamp has developed a side issue that is quite sensational. The canceled stamps have been offered in this country so freely that the “canceled-to-order” suspicion was excited in the most unsuspecting mind. It has now come to pass that the canceled specimens generally offered are no more than counterfeits; if after a consideration of the following letter from Whitfield, King & Co., Ipswich, England, there are any grounds on which to combat this conclusion we should be glad to come to the rescue of such of our advertisers, who have no doubt been imposed upon, in offering the used stamps. We confess that there seems no chance to successfully appeal from the verdict of Whitfield, King & Co.; and in consequence, the advertisers, when convinced of their mistake, will see, no doubt, the propriety of making restitution to those who have bought the stamps. The following letter is from Whitfield, King & Co., Ipswich, England, who have the monopoly of handling the unused Great Barrier Island stamps of the first issue:

“We have noticed in your paper and several others quite a number of advertisements of used Great Barrier Island stamps, first issue, which have puzzled us not a little, as we have a guarantee that we hold every specimen



Color examples of the stamps illustrated in the 1900 article

that was only genuinely used, and that the number of the latter was only about 300; from the nature of the use of these stamps, it is extremely unlikely that any quantity of these would get into the hands of dealers; in fact, with all our opportunities, we have been able to secure only three used copies on original paper.

This morning, we have received from Mr. William Brown a specimen which he has received from \_\_\_\_\_, and we are no longer puzzled, for this is a forgery, probably a photo-lithographic transfer. We send you an unused and the obliterated forgery for comparison. The latter is very fairly done, but the letter L of ‘special’ projects beyond the tablet below in the ornamental border; in the genuine, it does not project. Paper, ink and perforation are also different, and the width of the border is also against it, as the originals are set so closely together that a margin such as is seen on the forgery would show part of the adjoining stamp. Instead of a single specimen of the genuine, we send a whole sheet of 18, as the comparison can more easily be made. Reprints cannot exist, as we have a guarantee that the stamps, etc., have been destroyed. As these forgeries have been so freely advertised in America, we think that you should at once give publicity to our discovery. It is very possible that they may have come from New Zealand.

A comparison between the canceled forgery—for, in the face of the evidence adduced, such it must be—and the genuine submitted by Whitfield, King & Co., Ipswich, England, shows many points of variance, but the salient differences have been given. Perhaps the dealers who have been selling the obliterated stamps can give information as to where the stamps came from, etc.

These stamps, with good reason, are now supposed to have come from Canada, where they were counterfeited.

### GREAT BARRIER Island.



Just received a consignment of the rare 1 shilling blue, first issue of this interesting stamp. FINE USED COPIES (selling in England at 3 shillings each)—

Our price, only **25c. each.**

Order at once.

**DOMINION STAMP CO.**

6 Beaver Hall Hill, Montreal, Canada.

The offending counterfeit, advertised in an August, 1899 issue of *Mekeel's*

There is certainly one, not to say two, legitimate stamps issued by Mr. Howie's company, and Whitfield, King & Co., Ipswich, England, are the holders of all the stamps of this issue, with the exception of about three hundred that were used.

In the *Monthly Journal* for August, 1899, is the following paragraph on Whitfield, King & Co.'s coup:

Messrs. Whitfield, King & Co. appear to have got into correspondence with the proprietor of the Pigeon Post for the purposes of obtaining supplies of the stamps, in the course of which they obtained detailed information as to the circumstances under which the post was established, and they further entered into a business engagement with reference to the sale of stamps in them. In a copy of an agreement which they have shown us, duly drawn up by a firm of solicitors at Auckland, it is stated that the owner of the post “has for some time past been a breeder of and dealer in Homing Pigeons, and in his capacity as such has instituted and maintained a system of communication known as ‘The Original Great Barrier Island Pigeongram Service’ with the island, situated some sixty-five miles northeast of the said city of Auckland, known as the Great Barrier Island, by means of Homing Pigeons despatched at intervals from the said island and the public generally”. It is further stated that the adhesive stamps have been issued and “are actually in use at the present time in connection with the said system”. And the owner of the post also “agrees to continue to maintain said system as now maintained by him until there shall be telegraphic communication with said island”.

Whitfield, King & Co. have sent for our inspection an original used pigeongram message which is written on tissue paper about eight inches long and one and one-half inches wide; the stamp, which is of the second issue, is canceled: The “Original Great Barrier Pigeongram Service”, in two lines. The message is dated Great Barrier, May 19th.

See additional article, pages 14-15



1899 Is green-blue overprinted “Pigeongram”, tied by violet “The Original Great Barrier Pigeongram Service” double-circle handstamp on entire “flimsy”, message reads, “Pigeon on its way to you from (...) Barrier conveying mail”, docketed “left Barrier 9-30 am, 4/8/99”, 1986 BPA certificate. [Note the article states 1-1/2" inches wide, a dimension that appears to correspond with a folded document. JFD.]

# Viewing the Feldman Pigeon Post Auction

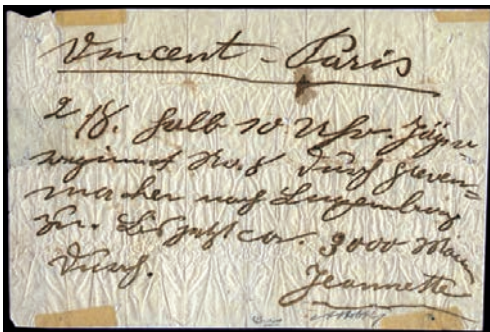
by John F. Dunn (From *Mekeel's & STAMPS*, October 26, 2007)

Continuing our viewing of the Feldman Fall auction series, we now turn to an excellent section of Pigeon Posts. That section is part of an All World sale that was held between October 2 and October 6. As we went to press the sale had not yet been completed, but we can provide prices realized for the first half and presale estimates for the Great Barrier Islands. And, as always, our emphasis in these 'viewings' is not on monetary value, but on the interesting or unusual nature of the items selected.

The World-wide Pigeon Post section opened with what is thought to be the earliest civilian message sent by pigeon in Austria. This 1879 flimsy (so-called because of the thin paper used) sent from one pigeon fancier to another, then forwarded within Brünn in small envelope with 2k yellow tied on the reverse. The cover sold for \$2,850 (converted from Euros on the October 2 date of sale.)



Much of the Pigeon Post mail was sent during war time as a way to send messages that could escape enemy detection. This next flimsy was part of a lot of four pieces sent in 1914 by four different French agents to a secret address, "Vincent-Paris," reporting on German incursions into Luxembourg. These rare items realized \$13,647.



Next we see another example of military usages, in this case an item from a French Army in Algeria April 1906 Experimental Flights collection of 14 items including 12 flimsies flown between various locations in Algeria, nearly all with "Gouvernement General de l'Algerie" circular cachets of the "Direction des Affaires Indigenes", plus the pictured pictorial flimsy with the letterhead of the agent conducting the experiments, realization for the lot, \$12,824.



This next lot is a 1904 submarine salvage flown message, on a British "H.M. Naval Pigeon Service" form with a message



from the *SS Belos* taking part in the salvage of sunken submarine "A1" which had collided with the *SS Berwick Castle*. The message relates to receipt of birds from "pigeon loft" and is the only message from this event in private hands. The lot realized \$598.

From a collection of 13 items from India, we view this first Indian Pigeon-gram, carried from Asansol to Calcutta by the pigeon "Lonesome." The lot sold for \$684.

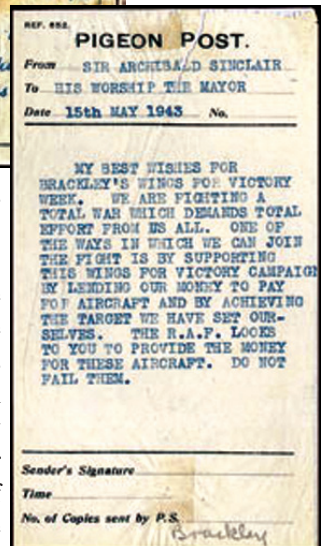


Instead of wartime messages, this next lot carried a message of Peace. It was sent from Cape Town, South Africa, in 1919 stating "Just a line through the air as a memento of the Peace Celebrations." (Note the red bakelite tag from the pigeon's leg



attached in the upper left.) This lot realized \$1,218.

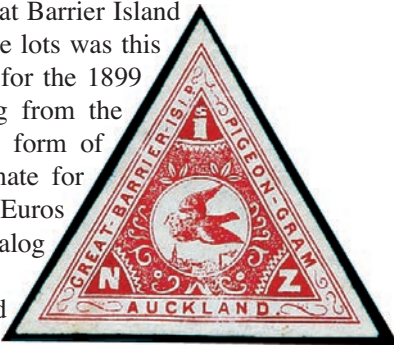
From a lot with three different unused WWI pigeon service forms, we see another purpose for which the pigeon post was used—as promotional items. In this case it is a 1943 flown flimsy with a typed message from Sir Archibald Sinclair to the Mayor of London asking for support for the



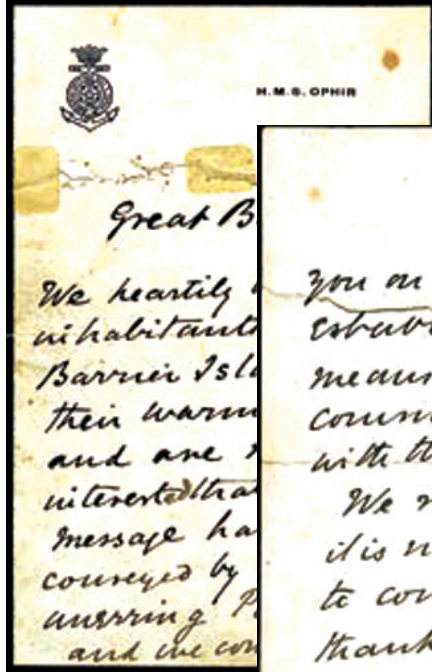
“Wings to Victory” campaign. The lot sold for \$1,282.

A separate section within the auction was devoted to the popular New Zealand Great Barrier Island Pigeon-Grams. One of the lots was this unique imperforate essay for the 1899 1 shilling value, differing from the issued stamp only in the form of denomination. The estimate for this lot (converted from Euros on August 31, when the catalog was printed) was \$2,047.

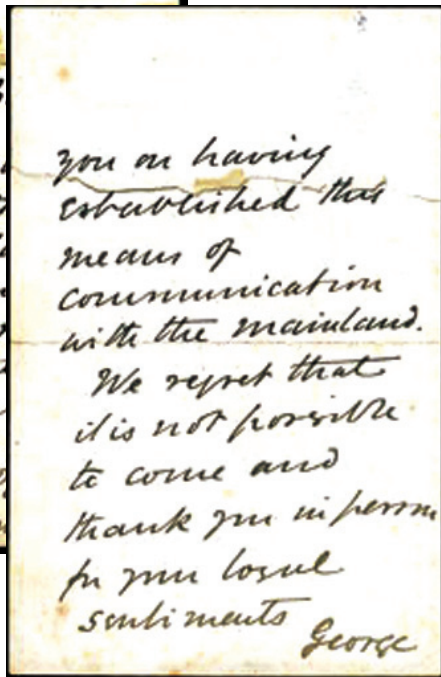
The next lot I selected for viewing is an original



In this lot we see the 1899 1 shilling “Marotiri Pigeon-gram” overprinted stamp tied to the unique flimsy



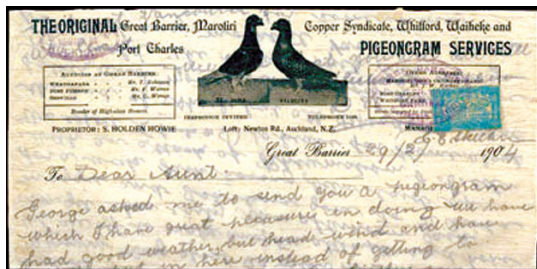
letter from the then-future King George V on black-bordered



H.M.S. Ophir stationery (in memory of the late Queen),

headed “Great Barrier Island” (during his Royal Visit) and stating, in part, “We...are much interested that your message has been conveyed by the unerring Pigeon and we congratulate you on having established this means of communication...”. Signed “George”. This important showpiece was estimated at \$2,047.

The Great Barrier Island 1899 Fourth Issue, 1 shilling “Pigeon Gram” stamp is seen here tied by a

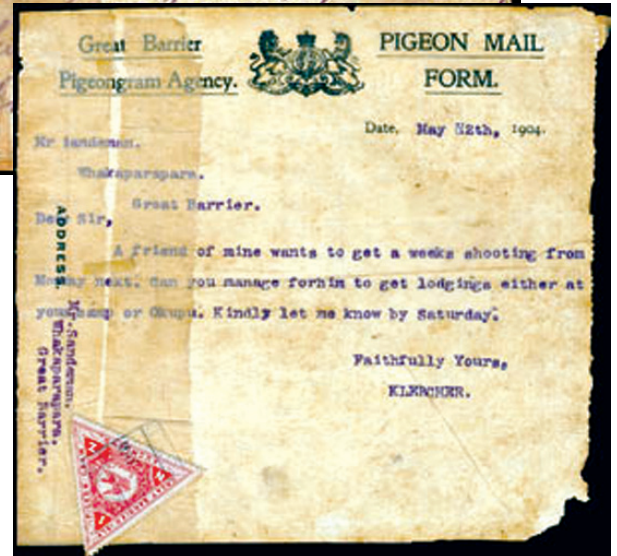


stamp is seen here tied by a 29 Feb. 1904 oval violet date stamp to a printed flimsy form, also with an

S.H. Howie oval cachet of receipt at top left. Accompanied by the original cover of transmittal and sent on to London, it is one of the few New Zealand pigeongrams that can be shown to have traveled abroad. As such it was estimated at \$2,729.

sent on the day of issue of this stamp. (Not part of this lot, we also show an example of the stamp.) The message written entirely in the hand of agent J.W. Mackay notes this was “the first pigeongram from Marotiri...” Described as “an important world airmail rarity of the highest order”, it was estimated at \$20,470.

Finally, we look at a matched set of flown flimsies bearing the two 1899 Triangles. The bottom flimsy from Auckland



to Whangaparapara (May 12, 1904) franked by 6d, asks if a room could be arranged for a “week’s shooting”; the top is a reply (May 14, 1904) franked by 1sh confirms that reservations have been made. This probably unique pair was estimated at \$4,094.