

BRITISH COLONIAL AND PROTECTORATE STAMPS

PART 20: MAURITIUS

By Noel Davenhill

In the latest in his series of articles on British Colonial and Protectorate stamps, Noel Davenhill turns his attention to Mauritius – a volcanic island in the south-west Indian Ocean. From the earliest issue of September 1847, when Mauritius was the first British colony to issue postage stamps, he then follows the island's philatelic history up to the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

The volcanic island of Mauritius located in the south-west Indian Ocean is quite close to the French territory of Reunion, which is approximately 550 miles east of Madagascar; the dependent island of Rodrigues lies a further 350 miles east. The first Europeans to discover Mauritius were the Portuguese in around 1507; as their purpose was mainly to trade rather than to settle, there was little activity until a group of Dutch sailors claimed the island as a convenient supply base for Batavia (Java) in 1598. Although there was minimal permanent settlement, widespread hunting of the indigenous flightless Dodo bird contributed to its extinction in the 1660s.

Despite introducing a vital sugarcane industry, failure to expand the economy prompted the Dutch to abandon the island in 1710. Mauritius was claimed by the French in 1715 who named it Isle de France. After years of decline, the appointment of Mahé de La Bourdonnais as governor in 1735 led to the rebuilding of the capital, Port Louis, into a vibrant city, the establishment of a sugar mill and the construction of a road network across the island. French settlement also gave rise to the naming of towns, such as Quatre Bornes, Richelieu and Mahebourg.

During the Napoleonic Wars, Britain gained control of Mauritius in 1810 but allowed the French settlers to remain and maintain the crucial sugar industry on which the economy relied. Crown colony status was granted in 1814.

The abolition of slavery in 1835 led to an influx of Indian labourers to work in the sugar fields. In the mid-1960s, the entire population from the Mauritius-administered Chagos

archipelago was forcibly evicted by Britain to enable the main island, Diego Garcia, to be controversially leased for a US military base. This and the surrounding islands are now the British Indian Ocean Territory. Following a brief period of self-government in 1967, independence within the Commonwealth was granted in 1968.

First issues

In September 1847, Mauritius was the first British colony to issue postage stamps, commencing with the famed 'million-pound' 1d. and 2d. 'POST OFFICE' pair, engraved on copper and printed in Port Louis by watchmaker Joseph O Barnard (*Fig 1* and *Fig 2*). These philatelic gems have generated many myths and several fictional novels. Soon after their release, most 'one penny' denominations were allegedly acquired by the Governor's wife, Lady Gomm, for invitations to her charity ball.

Whereas most of the colony's stamps and postal history are displayed in the Government-owned Postal Museum in Port Louis, the 1847 iconic 'POST OFFICE' stamps are not; they are housed nearby in the curiously named 'Blue Penny Museum' (penny stamps are red!) where many non-philatelic treasures are held. The iconic stamps may be viewed for just ten minutes each hour to minimise damage by excessive light. In 1848, the wrongly inscribed 1d. and 2d. stamps were replaced by new engravings by Barnard with the wording corrected to 'POST PAID'.



Fig 1 The 'Post Office' Mauritius stamps, comprising 1d. and 2d. values, were issued in September 1847



Fig 2 The famous Bombay cover of Mauritius, featuring two Post Office Mauritius 1d. stamps, was sold by David Feldman in December 2017 for 2.4million



Fig 3 No value stamps featuring an image of Britannia were issued in 1858

Subsequent reprintings by Barnard between 1849 and 1859 were followed with a request from the postal authorities for a supply of the Perkins Bacon non-denominated seated Britannia stamps, a design also used by Barbados and Trinidad. In 1858, a shipment of green stamps surcharged 'FOUR - PENCE' was followed with a consignment of similar 'no value' (4d.) green, (6d.) vermilion and (9d.) magenta Britannia stamps (27/29) (Fig 3). Two incorrectly coloured 'no value' stamps in red-brown and blue (30/31) were delivered but not released.

The non-denominated stamps were replaced in 1859 with new 6d. and 1s. denominations. However, the colours were transposed by mistake at the printers, with the 6d. printed in blue and the 1s. in vermilion. The stamps were reissued in their proper colours, dull purple-slate (6d.) and blue (1s.), in 1861. Six examples of each of the errors were hand-stamped with unsanctioned 'CANCELLED' overprints (32, 34). In combination with similar malpractices, this led to the dismissal of Perkins Bacon by the Crown Agents.

Several primitive, locally-printed Victoria portraits (36/44), mainly 2d. denominations, were issued during 1859 (Fig 4). The particularly unflattering image of the Queen was engraved by J Lapirot. The only 1d. stamp was lithographed by L A Dardenne.

A much more refined portrait was introduced for the first perforated stamps introduced in 1860 with 1d., 2d., 4d., 6d., 9d. and 1s. value, which were produced by De La Rue (Fig 5). In 1862, a final printing of the Perkins Bacon 6d. and 1s. 'Britannia' issues, now perforated (54/55) (Fig 6), preceded colour changes in 1863 for the current 6d. and 1s. portrait stamps (50 and 53).

De La Rue's portrait stamps were reprinted from 1863–72 with Crown CC watermarks and included several colour changes and additional 10d. and 5s. values (Fig 7).

Emergency surcharges

The urgent need for a ½d. denomination in 1876 required local surcharges on 9d. and 10d. stamps (76/77). Recurring shortfalls in 1877 called for further ½d. on 10d., 1d. on 4d. and 1s. on 5s. surcharges (Fig 8).

During 1878, the ever-increasing number of sugarcane workers from India may have prompted the change to decimal currency based on the rupee and Mauritius cents (Fig 9). Nine stamps, from 2c. to 2r.50 were issued in 1880 (a 4c. value was issued in 1879), each showed the Queen's



Fig 4 Several locally printed stamps bearing a portrait of Queen Victoria were issued in 1859



Fig 5 Perforated stamps printed by De La Rue appeared in 1860



Fig 6 The final Britannia issue printed by Perkins Bacon were the perforated 6d. and 1s. stamps released in 1862



Fig 7 De La Rue portraits from 1863 included some colour changes, such as a 1d. bistre and a 9d. yellow-green

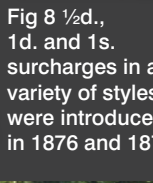


Fig 8 ½d., 1d. and 1s. surcharges in a variety of styles were introduced in 1876 and 1877



Fig 9 Surcharges in cents and rupees were issued in 1878

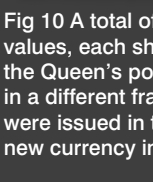


Fig 10 A total of nine values, each showing the Queen's portrait in a different frame, were issued in the new currency in 1879

portrait in a different frame (Fig 10). From 1883–94, several denominations appeared with Crown CA watermarks; higher postal rates required colour changes with additional 1c., 15c. and 16c. denominations and the withdrawal of the 13c., 17c., 38c. and 2r.50 values. Leftover stocks of redundant sterling stamps were overprinted 'CANCELLED' for sale to the philatelic trade.

While awaiting replacements from London in 1883, sheets of redundant 17c. stamps were locally surcharged '16 CENTS', in distinctly different typefaces (Fig 11), or 'SIXTEEN CENTS' by De La Rue (112/15). Several denominations were also surcharged '2 CENTS' in 1886, 1887 and 1891 (Fig 12). These were followed in 1893 with 'ONE CENT' surcharges on the 2c. denomination overprinted in London and on the 16c. value overprinted locally in Port Louis.



Fig 12 A 2c. surcharge was applied on various denominations between 1886 and 1891. These included a 2c. on 4c. where the surcharge was applied twice, once upside down



Fig 11 16c. on 17c. surcharged stamps were issued in 1883 while replacements were awaited from London

From 1895, the Queen's image was gradually replaced with six 1c. to 18c. Crown CA watermarked stamps featuring the colony's coat of arms in a shield with four symbolic emblems comprising a sailing ship, palm trees, key and a star (Fig 13).

In 1898, an enhanced badge incorporating the motto 'Stella Clavisque Maris Indici' (Star and key of the Indian Ocean) appeared on a larger format 36c. denomination to belatedly mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (Fig 14). The only other colonies commemorating the occasion were Barbados, British Guiana and Leeward Islands. Surplus sheets of the stamp were reissued in 1899 and again in 1902, with provisional 15c. and 12c. local surcharges (135, 163). A 6c. on 18c. definitive surcharge was released in 1899 (Fig 15).

The birth bicentenary in 1899 of previous governor, Mahé de La Bourdonnais, was marked with an ornately designed 15c. stamp framing his portrait. It was overprinted for Express Delivery use in 1903 (Fig 16).

Following a 4c. on 16c. surcharge in 1900 (Fig 17), 18 modified 'arms' stamps from 1c. to 50c. with Crown CC watermarks were issued 1900–5. UPU requirements were met with colour changes.

To allow fiscal usage, larger format 1r., 2r.50 and 5r. values were additionally inscribed 'POSTAGE & REVENUE'. Residual stocks of six obsolescent 4c. to 2r.50 stamps (157/62) with appropriate vertical overprints were also issued for dual use (Fig 18). In 1902, provisional 12c. surcharges on 18c. and 36c. stamps were placed on sale. Eight 'Arms' definitives from 1c. to 1r. with Multiple Crown CA watermarks were issued from 1904–7 (Fig 19). Postage revenue inscriptions were added to a redesigned set of low-value 'Arms' stamps in 1910 (Fig 20); these were supplemented with the first and only series to portray King Edward VII (Fig 21). The 5c., 12c., 25c., 50c., 1r., 2r.50, 5r. and 10r. values were issued just six weeks before his death.

George V

Diminishing supplies of Edwardian stamps were gradually replaced from 1913–21 with eight similar King George V 'Imperium' key and duty plates from 5c. to 10r. (196/204) (Fig 22). Mauritius and Seychelles were amongst the few Crown colonies to avoid the imposition of War Tax stamps during the 1914–18 conflict.

Multiple Script CA watermarks were introduced from 1921–26 as King George V portraits on 1c. to 20c. stamps were temporarily replaced with an unexpected revival of the long-lived 'Arms' design (Fig 23). Increased postal tariffs were reflected with several colour changes.



Fig 13 The colony's coat of arms in a shield was depicted on a set comprising six values from 1895



Fig 14 Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was marked with a large-format stamp featuring an enhanced badge incorporating the island's motto



Fig 15 The Diamond Jubilee stamps was reissued with a local surcharge in 1899 (15c. on 36c.), along with a 6c. on 18c. surcharge of the 'Arms' design. In 1902 the Jubilee stamp was reissued again with a 12c. on 36c. surcharge. This issue can be found with the surcharge inverted



Fig 16 A 15c. stamp was issued in December 1899 to mark the birth bicentenary of the previous governor, Mahé de La Bourdonnais. This was overprinted for Express Delivery use in 1903



Fig 17 A 4c. on 16c. surcharge was issued in 1900



Fig 18 Vertical overprints were applied in 1902 to allow for fiscal use



Fig 19 The 1904 'Arms' definitives comprised eight values from 1c. to 50c.



Fig 20 'Postage Revenue' inscriptions were added to a redesigned set of low-value 'Arms' stamps in 1910



Fig 21 The only series to portray King Edward VII was issued in 1910, with some of the values being issued weeks before his death



Fig 22 King George V stamps in the 'Imperium' key plate appeared from 1913



Fig 23 The long-lived 'Arms' design reappeared during the reign of George V



Fig 24 A specimen example of the large format 50r. issued in 1924

An unprecedented large format 50r. (222) was added in 1924 (Fig 24). The reappearance of King George V key plates from 1921–34 included several die and colour variations (Fig 25). Shortages in 1925 resulted in the brief reappearance of locally surcharged 3c., 10c., and 15c. stamps.

George VI

The Crown Agents' omnibus 1935 Silver Jubilee (Fig 26) and 1937 King George VI Coronation issues preceded definitives from 2c. to 10r. in 1938, which were very different from the pictorials issued by almost all Crown colonies and protectorates. Whereas many collectors expressed disappointment when Mauritius and Leeward Islands retained De La Rue key plates, specialists rejoiced at the prospect of numerous plate flaws, shades, paper and perforation varieties, especially during the war years (Fig 27).

Omnibus stamps created throughout the King George VI era commemorated Victory in Europe, the Royal Silver Wedding and the 75th anniversary of the UPU. Four attractive images from Bradbury, Wilkinson in 1948, belatedly marked the centenary of the acclaimed 1847 'POST OFFICE' stamps (Fig 28).

De La Rue's veteran key plates were supplanted in July 1950 with 15 monochrome photogravure 1c. to 10r. pictorials printed by Harrison (Fig 29). A similar North Borneo series was released simultaneously. Designs for both issues attracted praise and criticism from collectors and locals.

My favourite Mauritius stamps must include the striking image of Rempart Mountain (5c.) and a painting by French artist Descourtis from the acclaimed 1788 romantic story of *Paul et Virginie* (20c.), from the pen of Bernadin de St Pierre, who created the fictional survivors after witnessing the dramatic shipwreck of the slave vessel *Saint Geran* off Mauritius in 1744. In 1598, Dutch sailors landed on the south-east coast at Grand Port (2c.) now renamed Vieux Grand Port. An updated coat of arms (10r.) is flanked by a Dodo and Timor Deer supporting sugar canes.

Queen Elizabeth II

The omnibus 10c. Coronation stamp was succeeded in 1953–54 with most King George VI designs repeated with The Queen's portrait surmounted by the royal crown, which was omitted from the earlier series (Fig 30). The previous 10c. Transporting Cane design was replaced with a 15c. Historical Museum,



Fig 25 The King George issues from 1921 to 1934 included several die and colour variations



Fig 26 Mauritius was included in the omnibus issues for the Silver Jubilee of 1935



Fig 27 The King George VI De La Rue key plates for Mauritius included numerous plate flaws, shades, paper and perforation varieties



Fig 28 The centenary of the 1847 'Post Office' stamps was marked by four stamps in 1948



Fig 29 The 15 monochrome photogravure pictorials released by Mauritius in 1950 attracted both criticism and praise from collectors and locals



Fig 30 New pictorials for the reign of Elizabeth II were issued from 1953

Mahebourg, stamp. The 10c. differs from the previous 4c. by presenting a close-up view of Tamarind Falls. The small but significant latitude error on the earlier 12c. is corrected on an identical 60c. map and Dodo image. New printings of 10c., 60c. and 2r.50 stamps with Multiple St Edwards Crown Block CA watermarks (314/16) were issued from 1963–65.

Fifteen superb bird paintings by D M Reid-Henry were issued in 1965 (Fig 31). Higher denominations of Harrison’s photogravure multicolour images from 2c. to 10r. depict extinct species, highlighted by the iconic Dodo, which was last recorded in the 1660s. Reprintings of 5c. and 35c. with a sideways Multiple St Edwards Crown Block CA watermark (340/41) were released in 1966–67.

The road to independence

Local elections in anticipation of imminent independence were preceded with four new bird images in 1967. Three months later, the entire definitive series was placed on sale with ‘SELF-GOVERNMENT 1967’ overprints (Fig 32). In marked contrast, the much greater achievement of independence in March 1968 was proclaimed with two uninspired symbolic designs on six stamps (Fig 33).

Non-overprinted bird definitives reappeared later in 1968 with unexplained colour changes for the 2c., 3c., 15c., 20c., 60c. and 1r. denominations (370/75). Comparable marine life definitives from Harrison were released on 12 March 1969, exactly one year after independence (Fig 34). The 18 2c. to 10r. stamps are notable for many printings comprising an unprecedented complex range of upright/sideways/inverted watermarks, ordinary, glazed, chalk-surfaced paper, different gum types and numerous missing colours!

Other than six Crown Agent’s omnibus issues from 1963–66, excluding the WHO issue which was declined by Mauritius, non-definitives were restricted to a single issue in 1961 portraying Queen Elizabeth and King George III to mark the establishment in 1811 of a British post office (Fig 35).

Although my collection was wound down a few years after independence, the historical definitives of 1978 were just too interesting to overlook. Many creative themes document significant memorabilia ranging from European settlement to independence, including ancient maps dating from 1573–1783. Also shown are scenes of early colonisation, first coinage, a letter card commemorating the future King Edward’s visit to Mauritius in 1901 and an invitation envelope to Lady Gomm’s charity ball bearing a one penny 1847 ‘Post Office’ stamp (Fig 36).



Fig 31 The higher values in the Bird pictorials of 1965 all featured extinct species, including the Dodo



Fig 32 In 1967 the Bird definitives were overprinted ‘SELF-GOVERNMENT 1967’



Fig 33 Independence in March 1968 was marked by six values in two designs



Fig 34 The Marine life definitives issued in March 1968



The 15r. and 25r. respectively feature the Independence Day flag-raising ceremony and portraits of the new nation's Governor General and Prime Minister.

In 1982, unsold stocks of six denominations were astonishingly overprinted with 10c., 20c., 50c., 1r., 1r.50 and 5r. postage due surcharges (D14/D19). When these were issued however, use of postage due stamps had all but ceased, indicating little purpose for the overprints other than to generate philatelic revenue.

Plenty of challenges

There is abundant scope for collectors of postmarks to seek out interesting material; especially challenging are early Rodrigues cancellations from the dependency's only post office operating from 1861 at Port Mathurin (Fig 37). Additional postal facilities have been opened in recent years. Relevant articles by Steve Pendleton and David Horry appear in *GSM* in April 2007 and December 2010.

For information on Perkins Bacon stamps overprinted 'CANCELLED', fiscal stamps used for postage and Express Delivery overprints refer to Commonwealth and British Empire catalogue.

My grateful thanks for advice provided by Mico Antoine, President of Mauritius Philatelic Society, and to Stanley Gibbons and Hugh Jefferies for providing images.



Fig 35 A special commemorative issue in 1961 marked the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the first British post office in Mauritius

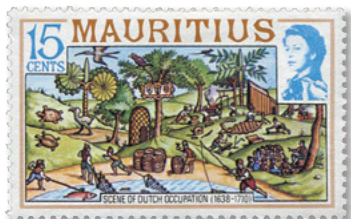


Fig 36 Historical definitives in 1978 illustrated key moments from the past

There is abundant scope for collectors of postmarks to seek out interesting material



Fig 37 Look out for Mauritius stamps cancelled with the 'B65' of Rodrigues, they are especially challenging

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