

# British Colonial and Protectorate Stamps Part 13: North Borneo

By Noel Davenhill

This month, in his series on British and Colonial Protectorate stamps up to the Elizabethan era, Noel Davenhill focuses on North Borneo. Located in the China Sea and administered by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company from 1881, North Borneo's first postage stamps were released in March 1883. However, as Noel reveals, a series of unethical schemes among the company's stamp issues was to badly affect their reputation with stamp collectors.



Fig 1 The 1883 2c. brown was North Borneo's first stamp issue



Fig 2 Larger format 50c. and \$1 stamps were added in June 1883



Fig 3 The requirement for more denominations resulted in surcharged stamps being issued in 1886



Fig 4 Cancelled-to-order imperf remainders were supplied directly to philatelic dealers by the BNBC



Fig 5 'BRITISH' was added to the country name inscription in 1886



Fig 6 'POSTAGE & REVENUE' were added to the inscription on lower values from 1888



Fig 7 Larger format, higher denomination stamps were issued in 1889



Fig 8 A number of questionable surcharges were applied between 1890-92



As indicated by its name, this country is located in the northern part of Borneo in the China Sea, bordering Brunei and Sarawak to the south-west and Indonesian Borneo in the south-east. This former British Protectorate, including the offshore island of Labuan, was administered by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company (BNBC) from 1881 until 1946 when Crown colony status was proclaimed. The territory was renamed Sabah in 1963 when it became a state in the Malaysian Federation.

## First issues

The first postage stamp issued in March 1883, was a 2c. brown printed in London by Blades, East & Blades (Fig 1). This and subsequent issues featured the Company's coat of arms. In June 1883 the need for additional values led to 'eight cents' surcharges in words on 2c. stamps from two different type fonts (2/3). Later in the year, they were supplemented with matching 4c., 8c. and larger-format 50c. and \$1 denominations (Fig 2).

New printings of 2c., 4c. and 8c. values, plus additional 1/2c., 1c. and 10c. stamps, were placed on sale in 1886. Soon after their release, 1/2c. and 10c. stamps were overprinted 'and Revenue'. A requirement for more denominations was met with distinctly different 3c. on 4c. and 5c. on 8c. surcharges (Fig 3).

Many collectors were deterred from North Borneo due to a series of unethical schemes devised by the BNBC. Amongst them were surplus sheets, sometimes imperf (remainders), either mint or cancelled with barred 'postmarks', sold directly to dealers (Fig 4). Large numbers of cancelled-to-order stamps, frequently found in auction sales of old collections, were prepared in the company's London office using a hand-held device. They are listed by most catalogues (but not Stamps of the World) in a third column at much reduced prices. Another dubious practice was the prolific release of surcharged

stamps with little or no relevance to postal requirements. Some were applied in London, whereas others produced locally in Sandakan were the source of frequent type font 'errors'.

## British North Borneo

From 1886-87, existing stamps, plus additional 25c. and \$2 denominations, were modified by adding 'BRITISH' to the country's name (Fig 5). From 1888-92, 'POSTAGE & REVENUE' captions were introduced to lower values, including new 3c., 5c. and 6c. stamps (Fig 6). Higher denominations redrawn to include the changed wording were supplemented with larger format \$5 and \$10 stamps (Fig 7).

Several questionable surcharges in different settings and various type fonts were applied to 4c., 5c., 8c., 10c. and 25c. stamps (51/65) from 1890-92 (Fig 8). Significant changes occurred in 1894 with a set of stunning engraved pictorials from



Fig 9 Waterlow printer's sample specimen stamps of the 1894 pictorials



Fig 10 In 1895 a large number of \$1 values were surcharged 4c., 10c., 20c., 30c. and 40c. to meet postal needs



Fig 11 Modified frames in 1897 incorporated panels showing Chinese and Malay lettering



Fig 12 4c. surcharges with differing typefaces were added in 1899 (left) and 1904 (above)



Fig 13 Following a change in North Borneo's status, a 'BRITISH PROTECTORATE' overprint was applied 1901-5

1c. to 24c. inscribed 'State of North Borneo'. Images in two colours closely resemble 'collector-oriented' stamps from Mozambique and Nyassa which were administered by a Portuguese chartered company. These and the North Borneo stamps were printed by Waterlow & Sons (Fig 9). The revised name also appeared on the last \$5-10 stamps to be printed by Blades, East & Blades.

Large numbers of \$1 stamps (83) were overprinted in 1895 with 4c., 10c., 20c., 30c. and 40c. surcharges to meet postal needs (Fig 10). Whereas many provisional 4c. and 10c. stamps were legitimately used, it seems that philatelic sales were a major factor for most of the others.

Frames were modified in 1897 to incorporate panels to show Chinese and Malay lettering (Fig 11). Additional 4c., 10c. and 16c. denominations were also printed. Colours on 2c. and 4c. stamps were initially reversed and then corrected in 1900. Whereas both 2c. colours (94/95) were placed on sale, full sheets of the original 4c. green (98) were only sold directly to dealers.

Design mistakes on stamps printed by Waterlow were unusual. However, incorrect 'postal revenue' (18c.) and missing 'postage & revenue' (24c.) inscriptions were, this time, possibly the result of requests by BNBC to 'hurry up' the delivery date. This theory is reinforced by the astonishingly fast appearance of corrected replacement stamps (110/11).

In 1899 the Company authorised 4c. surcharges for surplus sheets of 12 denominations from 5c. to \$10. The exercise, repeated in 1904 with another series of 4c. surcharges, this time applied locally with an alternative typeface, was unlikely to have met legitimate postal requirements, implying the scandalous scheme was clearly, yet again, aimed at the philatelic market (Fig 12).

**British Protectorate**

More changes to the State's name were reflected from 1901 to 1905, with 'BRITISH PROTECTORATE' overprints on definitives (Fig 13). They were replaced in 1909 by a series of new designs with



Fig 14 The 1909 pictorials, inscribed State of North Borneo, included two birds unknown in the country



Fig 15 A 'provisional' 20c. on 18c. surcharged stamp was in use from 1909 until 1919



Fig 16 New bi-coloured stamps in 1911 retained the company's emblem



Fig 17 A British Protectorate overprint was used on obsolete denominations in 1912

the revised title (Fig 14). Soon after being released, it was revealed that the 12c. and 24c. stamps featured birds (Palm Cockatoo and Dwarf Cassowary) unknown in Borneo. The 4c. depicted a 1878 conference chaired by the Company's director W C Cowie to discuss boundary changes with North Borneo's nominal ruler, the Sultan of Sula.

In September 1909, just weeks after they were issued, revised postal charges prompted the withdrawal of the now redundant 18c. stamps. Why it was decided to return sheets of 18c. stamps to Waterlow in London for surcharging is unclear because it would more economical to have the changes done in North Borneo. The 'provisional' 20c. on 18c. (177) remained on sale until 1939 – an astonishing decision made by the philatelic-conscious BNB Company (Fig 15)!

In 1911 new bi-coloured 25c. to \$10 stamps retained the Company's emblem



Fig 18 Local surcharges issued in 1916 replaced a consignment of 2c., 4c. and 20c. stamps lost at sea

(Fig 16). Sheets of obsolete \$5 and \$10 denominations (85b/86), dating back to 1894, were overprinted 'BRITISH PROTECTORATE' in 1912, again almost certainly aimed at the philatelic market (Fig 17).

Local surcharges on existing 3c., 6c. and 12c. stamps (186/188) were authorised in 1916 to replace a consignment of 2c., 4c. and 20c. denominations which were lost at sea (Fig 18).

Base image credit: The British Library-Map of Borneo, c1885, Identifier: 001735810



Fig 19 A symbolic Maltese Cross was used as a charity overprint from 1916

A series of almost 60 unprecedented charity overprints and surcharges commenced in 1916. In the first of three issues, a symbolic Maltese Cross overprinted in vermilion and carmine was applied to current denominations from 1c. to 25c. (Fig 19). Whereas both overprints are catalogued, the use of two shades was probably fortuitous rather than planned. Many sets were auctioned to aid war charities or sold directly to dealers, leaving relatively few for postal use.

In August 1918, values to \$10 were overprinted, this time with a two-line 'RED CROSS TWO CENTS' caption (214/34) (Fig 20). Just two months later, the levy was doubled with a second overprint showing the Red Cross emblem and 'FOUR CENTS' surcharge (235/52). As the addition of 4c. on all denominations increased the cost of even a 1c. stamp to 5c., it was little wonder that postal sales were minimal. There were also fewer than anticipated sales of the previous 2c. surcharges following the loss at sea of two consignments by enemy action.

To publicise a significant event in Singapore, 14 stamps from 1c. to 50c. were overprinted 'MALAYA-BORNEO EXHIBITION 1922' by the Government Printer in Sandakan (Fig 21). A complicated overprinting technique is likely to have contributed to the many type font errors which were claimed to have been intentional by cynical collectors.

In 1923 a two-line 'THREE CENTS' surcharge was applied in very bold typeface to the 4c. definitive of 1909 (164) (Fig 22).

New printings of definitives were placed on sale from 1925–28 to restore stocks depleted by the recent surcharges and Malaya-Borneo overprints. Also reprinted was the long-lived 20c. on 18c. surcharge of 1909. Apart from shade differences, these stamps may be identified by a perforation change to 12½. A new 3c. (163) was added to replace the 1923 provisional surcharge (276). Many of the 16c., 24c., \$1, \$2, \$5 and \$10 printings with little postal function were offered to dealers at discounted prices.

Waterlow definitives to 1918, including overprints and surcharges, were plagued with minor perforation differences thought to have been caused by the use of irregular pins. Most are listed in the catalogue despite little interest from general collectors.

The BNB Company's 50th anniversary was commemorated in 1931 with eight extra-large pictorials from 3c. to \$5 (Fig 23). Three different images of the coat of arms were depicted on the \$1, \$2 and \$5 stamps.

### George VI

A less aggressive policy was adopted in 1939 with the introduction of 15 new-style pictorials from 1c. to \$5 (Fig 24). The series included a 20c. denomination finally replacing the 1909 surcharge (177). Most



Fig 20 A charitable levy for the Red Cross was first introduced in August 1918



Fig 21 In 1922 a range of stamps received a special overprint to publicise the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition



Fig 22 A bold 'THREE CENTS' surcharge was added to the 4c. definitive in 1923



Fig 23 Extra-large pictorials released in 1931 to mark the 50th anniversary of the BNB Company included stamps depicting the Company's coat of arms



Fig 24 15 new pictorials produced by Waterlow and Son were released in 1939



Fig 25 Two different type fonts were used for war tax overprints applied in 1941

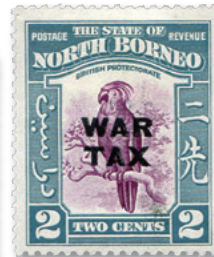


Fig 26 A BMA overprint was used during British Military Occupation following liberation in 1945



Fig 27 A GviR Royal Cypher was added after North Borneo became a Crown colony. Obliterating bars changed the name to 'NORTH BORNEO'



of the topical designs were different except for a surprise inclusion of the alien 1919 Palm cockatoo (2c.) and repetition of the magnificent Orang-Utan portrait (10c.) from the 1931 anniversary series. The BNB Company's coat of arms was retained for three higher denominations.

War tax overprints in two differing type fonts were applied to 1c. and 2c. stamps in 1941 for compulsory use on local and overseas mail (Fig 25). Following occupation later in the year, available stamp stocks were seized for overprinting in Japanese characters.

After liberation in 1945, new printings required to supplement remaining stamp



Fig 28 As a Crown colony, North Borneo was able to participate in the omnibus Royal Silver Wedding (1948) and 75th UPU commemoratives (1949)

stocks were overprinted BMA for use throughout Sarawak and Brunei during British Military Occupation of these territories (Fig 26). Similar overprints were provided for Sarawak but not for Brunei.

In recognition of becoming a Crown colony in 1946, new printings of 1939 definitives were overprinted with the GvR Royal Cypher and obliterating bars to change the title to simply 'NORTH BORNEO' (Fig 27).

Crown colony status enabled participation in omnibus Royal Silver Wedding and 75th UPU commemoratives issued respectively in 1948 and 1949 (Fig 28).

Photogravure pictorials from 1c. to \$10, printed by Harrison & Sons, were issued in 1950 (Fig 29). Widespread criticism greeted the generally inappropriate photographs selected for several designs. A more successful choice was the vibrant image of a cheerful Bajau Chief (20c.). A view of Mount Kinabalu on the 1c. was a disappointing successor to several earlier stamps. Other inadequate designs were 3c., 5c., 8c., \$1 and \$5 denominations – see if you agree! A more effective \$10 stamp featuring the colony's emblem, was modified to include Mt Kinabalu. The letter 'T' was added to the vessel's sail to acknowledge the role of Australia's liberating force during the 1941 siege of Tobruk. The historic Atkinson Clock Tower (50c.), erected in 1905 to honour a highly regarded district councillor, remains a revered landmark and tourist venue. A spelling mistake ('Jesselton') on the first printing was corrected in 1952.

### Queen Elizabeth II

The omnibus 10c. Coronation stamp issued in 1953 was followed up with a repeat of the unpopular definitives adapted to portray the Queen and placed on sale intermittently from 1954 to 1957 as required. Although widely sold in collectors' packets, there was little postal demand for the 1c. until 1959, when it became a useful 'make up' stamp for revised charges (Fig 30).

While administration was ceded to the Colonial Office in 1946, the British North Borneo Company's 75th anniversary was marked in 1956 with 10c., 15c., 35c. and \$1 stamps featuring designs reminiscent of earlier Waterlow printings (Fig 31).

Pictorials issued in 1961 ranging from 1c. to \$10 continued with topics reflecting previous definitives (Fig 32). Waterlow was the printer until 1962, when production was taken over by De La Rue after purchasing Waterlow's banknote and stamp printing business.

The final Crown colony stamp was a 10c. omnibus to mark the Freedom from Hunger campaign in 1963 (Fig 33); it was issued just weeks before North Borneo joined the Federation of Malaysia as the State of Sabah.

The series overprinted SABAH in 1964 incorporated new DLR printings to supplement leftover sheets of 4c., 5c., 20c. and 35c.–\$10 denominations. They were replaced in 1965 by general Malaysian designs.

### Japanese occupation

Japanese occupation stamps are excluded from this review, as are postage-due labels. There must have been a colossal number



Fig 29 The 1950 George VI pictorials included a mix of relevant designs, such as those used for the 20c. and \$10, and some woefully poor theme choices, such as those on the 5c. and \$5



Fig 30 The unpopular definitives from the reign of George VI were adapted for the reign of Queen Elizabeth



Fig 31 The 75th anniversary of the British North Borneo Company was marked by a special issue in 1956



Fig 32 The printers of the new pictorials issued for Queen Elizabeth in 1961 changed from Waterlow to De La Rue in 1962



Fig 33 A final Crown colony stamp was issued in 1963 just weeks before North Borneo became the State of Sabah

of underpaid items to justify almost 90 catalogued postage due issues!

### Labuan

Stamps were produced for the offshore British colony of Labuan in 1879 until the postal service was taken over by BNB Company in 1890 (Fig 34). Thereafter, the name Labuan was added to several North Borneo designs (Fig 35). From 1902 specific stamps from 1c. to \$1 captioned 'LABUAN COLONY' were available until being replaced in 1906 with Straits Settlements stamps (Fig 36). Labuan became part of the Crown colony of North Borneo in 1946 and of the Malaysian state of Sabah in 1963.

To learn more about the very complex North Borneo and Labuan issues consult the relevant SG catalogue.

I sincerely thank Ray Price for his useful assistance in preparing this article.



Fig 34 Stamps were produced for the offshore colony of Labuan until the BNB company took over in 1890



Fig 35 Once under the control of BNB, the name Labuan was added to North Borneo designs



Fig 36 From 1902 until 1906, Labuan colony stamps were available