

BRITISH WEST AFRICA STUDY CIRCLE

The 1906 overprints on The Gambia's Two and Six Penny and Three Shilling Stamps

At the end of March 1906 the Postmaster of The Gambia, Mr. F.B. Archer, made formal application to the Governor of the Colony for the overprinting of 5,000 of each of the current 2/6d and 3/- stamps. This request arose from a shortage of the half penny and one penny stamps, a deficiency that had been foreseen a few weeks previous and which had led the Governor to seek permission from the Secretary of State for the Colonies for such an overprinting should it be needed.

The work was carried out by the Government printer and the sheets returned to the Treasury from which the Postmaster was to draw stock as required. The stamps were issued to the public under conditions laid down by the Governor, and the remaining stock was withdrawn when fresh supplies arrived from Crown Agents later in the month.

Overprinted stamps are found for most of the Colonies and when we consider problems of supply - a repeat order took on average six weeks - and limited finances which led to the holding of small stocks, it is not surprising that supplies of a particular value were occasionally depleted. In this case the Governor was satisfied that the deficiency had arisen from a genuine underestimate of demand, and at first no suggestion was made that the issue was in any way improper.

It appears that two issues led primarily to the Enquiry of 1909. Speculation had developed in the stamps and comments were made in a paper called 'Truth'. It seemed that postal officials had been making considerable sums of money through selling the overprints. Copies of 'Truth' were shown to the Colonial Office and one article which is preserved in their records reads: 'The surcharge in this case was a self-evident 'fake' for the benefit of collectors, since the office already had a halfpenny stamp in issue, and its postal business is absolutely insignificant. The operation described above, therefore, seems to be fake upon fake. It is certainly disgraceful that this sort of thing should be done in public offices under the jurisdiction of the Crown. Not only should it be stopped, but enquiry should be made as to who pockets the profit on these tricks.'

The Colonial Office left it to the Governor to enquire more fully into the affair though they considered the article had no validity whatsoever. To say that the postal business was 'absolutely insignificant' was clearly inappropriate for a Post Office that in 1906 dealt with 65,000 letters, 7,257 postcards, 24,000 newspapers, circulars and 2,000 parcels. Nevertheless, the Governor, Sir George Denton, decided to set up a Committee of Enquiry into the circumstances under which the overprints had been authorised, issued, and disposed of, and this Committee met during the summer of 1909. The Original Report, the evidence of all witnesses, together with the papers that were called for, are filed in the Public Record Office, Reference C O 323, 551, 2938. It even includes the page taken from the Statement of Stamps and Postcards dealt with by the Colonial Postmaster during the month of March

that shows the deficiency and which led to the overprinting of the stamps. The Papers will have been classified under the former 50 years' rule and it seems unlikely that they have previously been examined. No doubt the general conclusions were made public at the time but the correspondence, which shows for example that the Governor himself bought two sheets of each value, must have been closed to public inspection.

The Committee's Report runs to eight pages of foolscap to which are attached various documents. They found that the issue was properly authorised and arose from a genuine miscalculation. 5000 of each value were overprinted in the first place and the Post Office was required to keep note of all purchases over the value of one shilling. The first instalment arrived at the Post Office on the afternoon of April 10th and in all a total of 4440 penny and 3720 half penny values were sent from the Treasury to the Post Office.

Many people in the Colony tried to obtain quantities for the purpose of speculation and the orders concerning recording larger purchases were not always followed. By the Saturday stocks were temporarily exhausted and the Postmaster used the official stamp 'prepaid' for mail sent that day to Sierra Leone per the S.S. Boulamia. No further issue was made to the Post Office until April 17th when a second instalment was authorised.

The Committee found that the Manager of the Bank of West Africa was able to purchase a large number of the stamps issued and that the Post Master himself bought considerable numbers from local people. A letter from the Governor to the Colonial Office states that Mr. Archer disposed of these at considerable profit.

The new supply was received from Crown Agents on April 24th and none of the overprints were issued from the Treasury after that date. There were then 500 penny and 1220 half penny stamps remaining. On May 23rd 232 further penny stamps were overprinted and a total of 732 of each value was sent to the International Bureau for distribution to member countries of the Universal Postal Union. These do not appear to have been overprinted with the word Specimen. A balance of 490 half panny stamps remained. The Governor enquired whether it would be in order to sell these locally or to dealers. He comments 'At the present moment I am told they would easily realise 2/- each locally and, as the English stamp dealers have, so far, not been able to purchase any, more, no doubt, could be obtained for them if tenders were called for. I need hardly point out that if the surplus stock be destroyed the value of the stamps already issued to the public will be increased.' The reply was that there was no objection to their being sold at not less than their face value. However the Committee of Enquiry found that the 490 stamps were destroyed on October 16th in the presence of a specially constituted Board.

One result of the Enquiry was that Mr. Archer, the Postmaster, was transferred to Northern Nigeria at a reduced salary. He was replaced by a Mr. C. Gwyn who came from Nigeria. A general reprimand was issued to postal officials who might have been involved in speculation. It was considered in London whether the Governor might be censured for purchasing more stamps than he needed for postage but as he had been quite open about this

and had given copies away to friends, it was decided to say nothing directly to him.

Apart from the special printing of the 232 penny stamps for the U.P.U. it appears that all the printing was done in one operation. The shades of black found in the overprint seem then to be due to the quantity of ink used. The Committee noted that the printer split the sheets of 120 into 60s 'for ease of printing' but they throw no light on Dalwick's statement that the 2/6 and 3/- stamps may have been withdrawn lest fraudulent surcharges should be applied to them. The fact that during the shortage mail was sent bearing a 'Prepaid' mark is interesting and possibly some of this survives without the owners being aware of the circumstances.

The whole issue can be summarised by a table:

	<u>1d. value</u>	<u>½d. value</u>
Sold by the Post Office	4440	3720
Issued by the Treasury but not received by the P. Office	60	60
Sent to U.P.U.	732	732
Destroyed		490
Total Printed	<u>5232</u>	<u>5000</u>

The Committee was unable to find out what had happened to the 60 stamps of each value referred to above: the signature in the Treasury books that acknowledged receipt had been forged to resemble that of the Assistant Postmaster. The Committee was also unable to explain the two ½d values that exceeded the 5000 printed.

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Footnote: As the word surcharge suggests an extra or additional sum, I have preferred the term overprint when referring to these stamps.