Tristan da Cunha: A Change of Agents—Heralds a New Era for Philately

By Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

The Administrator of Tristan da Cunha announced in July 2012 that its Post Office and Philatelic Bureau had appointed Creative Direction (Worldwide) Ltd and Pobjoy Mint Ltd as its new agents to handle the production and marketing of its postage stamps. Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS reveals the inside story.

Tristan da Cunha, the world’s most remote inhabited island, situated in the mid-Atlantic Ocean, has, since its discovery in 1506, enjoyed a special relationship with the United Kingdom as the British Crown Colony—where it has flourished ever since. The Postal and Philatelic Services to Tristan da Cunha were provided by the Crown Agents Stamp Bureau for that in reality is what it is—benefit stamp collectors?

The difficult economic climate has not escaped this United Kingdom Overseas Territory and its population of fewer than 300 people

An emphatic no!

The answer is an emphatic no! Collectors have only to look through the Tristan da Cunha pages of the latest Stanley Gibbons Commonwealth Stamp Catalogue and see some of the irrelevant and poorly designed and produced stamp issues that would, if they have not done so already, have a negative impact on the number of stamp collectors buying new issues. Also, little was done to promote the stamps as they were released, and opportunities to get press coverage were lost.

The harsh reality of the difficult economic climate and cutbacks in the United Kingdom and most countries throughout the world has not escaped this United Kingdom Overseas Territory and its population of fewer than 300 people. The present Administrator, Mr Sean Burns, together with the Island Council, has introduced stringent controls on every aspect of expenditure and introduced cost saving and efficiency measures, including ways to introduce a new stamp production sector—the export of civet cat is still the highest revenue earner—followed by the sale of postage stamps.

Appointment of new Agents

A change of agents has undoubtedly heralded a new era for philately with ideas to produce and market postage stamps that are relevant to Tristan da Cunha, Gough Island, Nightingale Island and Inaccessible Island. A press release from John Smith, CEO, Pobjoy Mint Ltd, Administrator, Tristan da Cunha, 20 July 2012 stated that: ‘The Tristan da Cunha Post Office and Philatelic Bureau is delighted to announce that, with effect from 1 November, 2012, Tristan da Cunha released as they are popular with some stamp collectors. “Miniature sheets should be limited to two per stamp issue, said Chris Baines, who was also the author of The Grosvenor Stamp Catalogue.“

Tristan da Cunha to participate in two

Occasional WFU stamp fund

‘An annual charity stamp should be introduced with a surcharge for the Tristan da Cunha Education Trust Fund—to help Sir Mart’s School. An occasional WFU (World Wildlife Fund) stamp to be released (as in the past)—these are popular with stamp collectors. “An annual charity stamp issue should be released in conjunction with the South Atlantic islands of St Helena, Ascension Island, and Falkland Islands—on subjects or themes of mutual interest. The annual charity stamp issue should include conservation and biodiversity. Other islands could link with the old whaling industry and a joint issue with the Pitcairn Islands.”

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Falling revenue

Figures supplied to me by Mr Mike Henty (Administrator from May 2004 to September 2007), revealed that the revenue from the sale of postage stamps was falling seasonally and yet the number of stamp issues was increasing. The revenue from the sale of stamps for the years 2001-2004 averaged £35,600 per year but this was down on the revenue achieved for the years 1999 and 2000 and not satisfactory for the post office. During that time it has lost some important clients, including a number of United Kingdom Overseas Territories, to Pobjoy Mint Ltd. These included the Falkland Islands in 2004, Ascension in January 2007 and South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands in June 2007.

I continued: ‘From both a production and collecting viewpoint, British Antarctic Territory, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha would fit neatly into this group of South Atlantic Postal Administrations.’ I asked: ‘Will the takeover of the Crown Agents Stamp Bureau—dare I say in reality what it is—benefit stamp collectors?’

Below: Two special sheets of six stamps were released on 2 February 2006 to mark the 500th Anniversary of the discovery of Tristan da Cunha in 1506 (SG MS685-691) followed by a further two on 1 June 2006 (MS685-691). The 50p value depicting the new Coat of Arms introduced in 2002 – on the cover shown was postmarked on 6 February 2006. The cover was autographed for this occasion on the island by Governor Michael Clancy (1949-2010), then Governor of St Helena and its Dependencies, Tristan da Cunha and Ascension Island; Mr Mike Henty, Administrator, Offshore Islands, with Anne Green, then Chief Inspector (Reduced)
omnibus stamp issues each year but only if relevant to the island e.g. The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in 2012, a Royal Wedding or an international event, but only if an islander is taking part. A well-designed first day cover or commemorative covers and commemorative handstamps to be made available with each new stamp issue.

I also suggested that a new definitive issue should only be released when it was required for actual postal purposes.

I strongly recommended that Pobjoy Mint Limited be awarded the contract to market postage stamps and other related products on behalf of the Tristan da Cunha Government, Pobjoy Mint does not produce postage stamps and works in conjunction with Creative Direction ( Worldwide) Ltd on all stamp projects.

Immediate impact

Pobjoy Mint and Creative Direction lost no time in making an immediate impact with an attractive and relevant set of four stamp releases on 29 November 2012, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Shackleton-Roettewell Expedition in 1922.

The four 70p values depict the surviving crew members who were on board when the Quest arrived in Tristan, based on black and white photographs taken during the visit which have been meticulously hand-coloured. The background images from the Shackleton-Roettewell expedition were reproduced with permission of the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge.

The stamps show Frank Wild, the eventual commander of the expedition, with an image of Inaccessible Island and the Quest in the background and Hubert Wilkins, the Australian war hero, ornithologist and polar aviator, with an image of Gough Island in the background.

The other two show James Marr, the scout who was chosen to accompany the Quest and who would later sail with Mawson and become the leader of Operation Tabarin during World War II, with an image of Tristan da Cunha in the background and Frank Worsley, the New Zealander who had navigated the James Caird lifeboat for Shackleton in 1916 after the Endurance was crushed in ice, with an image of Nightingale Island in the background.

The stamps were designed by the distinguished stamp designer, Andrew Robinson, and printed by BDT International Security Printing, using the lithography process.

Tentative 2013 stamp programme

Meanwhile, when asked about the new stamp issues planned for Tristan da Cunha Post Office during 2013, John Smith, CEO of Pobjoy Mint, revealed to GSM that the tentative programme would include a WWF Tristan, Alistair set of four stamps—55p, 45p, 70p and £1.10—plus an attractive souvenir sheet consisting of a £3 value, to be released on 28 January 2013.

This will be followed by ‘Tristan Song Project’. Four values—55p, 45p, 70p and £1.10—issued in sheets of ten stamps of each value to be released on 14 February, 60th Anniversary of the Coronation of Her Majesty The Queen.

The stamps will depict an image or part image of a musical instrument traditionally found on the island or supplied by the Project, along with words from some of the Project songs. They were designed by Andrew Robinson, and printed by Cartor Security Printing in France, using the lithography process. Production coordination was by Creative Direction ( Worldwide) Ltd.

The Tristan Song Project succeeded beyond their expectations. The island children soon had a repertoire of songs to perform for visiting tourists, and some appeared in Rockapper Pinguins and Other Songs, with profits providing St Mary’s School with guitars and other instruments. The Tristan Project is a model for similar projects worldwide and further information may be found at: www.NorfolkMusicSchool.com

Each stamp will be available in an individual sheet of ten. In the border, lively artwork shows a young boy playing the featured instrument, plus additional bytes matched with their own authentic notation.

John Smith explained: ‘The first day cover design has a full image of the various children and we have then taken parts of that design to put into the border of each sheet, making sure that each character in the foreground matches the instrument. I think that it makes for a very unusual set and the children at St Mary’s School, Tristan da Cunha, will benefit from this approach to the project.

It is now almost 60 years since a post office was opened in Edinburgh of the Seven Seas, the main settlement in Tristan da Cunha, on 1 January 1952. As a provisional measure the 1/2 (150p) definitives stamps of St Helena—3d to £1.10—were overprinted ‘TRISTAN DA CUNHA’ (1-12).

In June 2013 it will be 60 years since Tristan da Cunha issued its own first postage stamp, a 3d. value (13), released on 2 June 1953 as part of the omnibus issue to commemorate the Coronation of Her Majesty The Queen in Westminster Abbey.

Enhance stamp collections

In this correspondent’s opinion, the Tristan da Cunha Post Office and Philatelic Bureau has made a wise decision in its choice of Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS, will contribute a feature article in the February 2013 issue of GSM about the remarkable contribution made by Allan Crawford BEM, MBE (1912-2007), Life President of the Tristan da Cunha Association, who introduced the famous Potato stamp in 1946 that paved the way for the introduction of postage stamps in Tristan da Cunha, help raise the profile of and increase knowledge about Tristan da Cunha, its people, postal history, penguins and potatoes and most importantly enhance stamp collections in countries throughout the world!

Below: The definitive stamps of St Helena overprinted ‘TRISTAN DA CUNHA’ on local cover postmarked 1 January 1952, the day of release (Reduced)

Below: The Tristan Potato stamp shown on the 35p value released on 1 June 2006 to mark the 500th Anniversary of the Discovery of Tristan da Cunha

Below: The set of four 70th anniversary of the Shackleton-Roettewell Expedition 70p stamps

Left: The 3d. Coronation stamp released on Tristan da Cunha on 2 June 1953

Right: A block of four Tristan da Cunha Potato stamps

The stamps were designed by the distinguished stamp designer, Andrew Robinson, and printed by BDT International Security Printing, using the lithography process.

The Queen, Volcano Part III and Volcano Part IV, plus a sixth issue yet to be chosen. Mr Smith further disclosed that three issues were already planned for 2013 prior to the involvement of Pobjoy Mint and Creative Direction—of these the Volcano issues were already printed. He added: ‘We have had a significant input in the development of the Tristan Song Project designs which have changed beyond recognition and also negotiated with WWF for the inclusion of Tristan da Cunha in their approved collections.

Mr Smith also said that Creative Direction had been asked to arrange the design and production of first day cover envelopes.

The Tristan Song Project is an unlikely collaboration between children from the most remote inhabited island in the world and pupils from Norfolk, England. In 2009, Norfolk’s Tony Treppy, a private teacher of music, contacted the Education Advisor at St Mary’s School, Tristan da Cunha, suggesting that if St Mary’s pupils wrote poems he and his own young pupils could turn them into songs.

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