

**WEST AFRICA STUDY CIRCLE**  
(The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, Nigeria, St. Helena, Ascension)

ASCENSION ISLAND'S POST OFFICE 1922 - 24

- control transferred to St Helena

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1923 ESSAYS FOR PROJECTED STAMPS

Based on information extracted from Colonial Office and Treasury Papers at The Public Record Office, Crown Agents records at the British Library, De La Rue archives at the National Postal Museum and Post Office archives.

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## ASCENSION ISLAND'S POST OFFICE 1922 - 24

On the nineteenth of June 1922 the Governor of St Helena informed his Executive Council that the Admiralty was to hand over control of the island of Ascension to the Colonial Office. It was to become a Dependency of St Helena, the Governor being responsible for law and order, the Post Office, and the Registration of births, deaths and marriages. The Eastern Telegraph Company would look after medical arrangements and the food supply. Thus ended many months of negotiations.

The Admiralty had taken over Ascension in 1815 as a precaution against the island being used to mount the rescue of Napoleon, held prisoner on St Helena. After his death in 1821 the navy found it useful to retain the island as a base for ships looking for slave traders, as a sanatorium for sick sailors and later as a coaling depot. Gradually these needs came to an end, the last condemnation of a slave vessel in West Africa being in 1864.

By 1922 oil was replacing coal as the fuel for naval vessels and the range between refuelling had increased. The Admiralty was looking for financial savings and saw little value in keeping the garrison and installations on Ascension. A further saving would be on the subsidy that they paid annually on the mail service.

There was some confusion in timing the handover. A notice in the St Helena Gazette gave the twelfth of September as the day for St Helena to assume control but a later Notice stated that the previous Notice should be read as the twenty seventh of October. The muddle so exasperated the Colonial Office that there is a wry memo from Sir Gilbert Grindle dated 9.1.23. 'It confirms my conviction based on 25 years of experience that the only way to get a satisfactory Ordinance from St Helena is to send out a draft complete to the last comma'.

Earlier in the year the Colonial Office had asked the General Post Office in London for a Report on the postal arrangements in Ascension and they wrote the following:

GENERAL POST OFFICE. LONDON. E C 1

17th February 1922

Dear Mr Headlam,

As promised, I send you a statement regarding the financial position of the Ascension postal service.

The trading account of the Agency for the financial year ended 31 March 1921 shows a deficit of £368.

The revenue amounted to £239, mainly from the sale of stamps.

The expenditure amounted to £607, of which £500 was for the conveyance of mails, the remainder being for salaries, overhead charges etc.

This does not represent the full deficit on the service, as the Agency is not charged with the cost of the mail service from the United Kingdom, but only with the cost of the call in the homeward direction, and, further, during the year only nine calls were made instead of the full number of 13.

A full estimate would be as follows:

Cost of four weekly service to Ascension; (13 calls at £90 a call)	£1170
Cost of four weekly service from Ascension; (share of £150 paid for four weekly calls at St Helena and Ascension, say 13 calls at £56 a call)	730
Cost of Agency (salaries etc.) as stated in 1920 - 21 Account	107
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	£2007
Deduct postage collections, etc, in Ascension (£240 as per 1920 - 21 account) and similar collections in the United Kingdom estimated at £360	600
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	£1407

Of this £60 x 13 = £780 borne by the Admiralty.

cont.

The arrangements as regards the mail service are: A call is made by the Steamships of the Union Castle Company on the homeward service once every four weeks for which a total sum of £150 is paid per call. £56 of this is regarded as appropriate to the Ascension call.

In the outward direction a call is due to be made at Ascension once in every four weeks for which £90 is paid. (This is in addition to a payment of £150 a call for a call at St Helena). £60 of the £90 is paid by the Admiralty and £30 by the Post Office.

The arrangements by which the cost of the call on the outward voyages by the Admiralty dates back to 1903, when the call was instituted by the Admiralty to give speedier communication between the Island and the Cape and to allow of the transmission of stores to the Island from the United Kingdom. Before that time there was only the call in the homeward direction and the mails from the United Kingdom had to be taken out to St Helena and brought back from there by the next ship.

An average mail consists of 9 bags out and 6 bags home; and from the Post Office point of view there is not the slightest justification on a revenue basis for the expenditure on the mail service.

As the Colonial Office seems to be desirous of maintaining the service for Administrative reasons on its present basis there seems to be good grounds for maintaining that the Colonial Office vote should be charged with at least as much as the Admiralty vote has borne in the past. If the Establishment on the island is reduced the postage collections will not amount even to the small sum at present collected and the deficit will be so much the greater.

Yours sincerely.

Co 369/127891

(signed) E L Ashley Foakes.

The decision to transfer the contribution formerly paid by the Admiralty to the Colonial Office was the subject of correspondence between them and the Treasury. The latter wrote on May 31st to the Colonial Office asking that this should be agreed and for their observations should additional expenditure arise. The reply dated June 19th agreed that the St Helena Government would assume responsibility for the payment of the Steamship service maintenance. Crown Agents would pay the General Post Office £1,750

'or such smaller amount as represents the actual cost of maintaining the existing service' from St Helena Government funds from the date of transfer of the island. The Postmaster General agreed and so the actual arrangements for the mail service continued to be made between the Company and the Post Office.

It was realised in St Helena that the issue of stamps could provide the key to achieving a surplus of revenue over expenditure on the Ascension accounts and the Colonial Office recognized that a substantial surplus could end the Grant-in-aid to St Helena, at least for some years. Consequently the estimates for the next few years turned on estimates for the sale of postage stamps. The Governor was even encouraged to ask for an increase in salary. The Eastern Telegraph Company paid £2,000 a year for its occupancy of part of the island and the total expenses were about £2,500. In 1924 total revenue was £4,581.7.8. about double the expenditure on the island, but that was the year of the introduction of a new stamp issue.

Before St Helena assumed control the Chief Clerk visited the island and the first part of his Report to the Governor concerns the Post Office. It is dated 28.8.22. and reads:

'My first action was to select, with the assistance of the Commandant and the E T C Superintendant, Mr Maining, a suitable place for a Post Office. The room selected is at present the Paymaster's office which is situated on the ground floor of the R N Club. I brought with me all the necessary forms and a supply of Postal Orders. The E T C Purser, W A Drew, is to be Postmaster. I have gone thoroughly into and explained the use of the various forms, postal rates and form of general account that will be used between the St Helena and Ascension Offices.'

Formerly Naval officials received

Paymaster-Commander responsible for running the Office	£30 p.a.
1st Assistant	15 p.a.
2nd Assistant	5 p.a.

A later section lists the furniture required as 1 large and 1 small safe plus the furniture at present being used.

(signed) A Hands

The control of the Post Office was legally established by the application of The Post Office Ordinance No 1 of 1898 of St Helena to Ascension.

The introduction of postage stamps was the subject of extensive correspondence between the Governor and the Colonial Office. In a Despatch of May 25th 1922 he proposed that 'the Ascension Post Office will really be a branch of the Post Office here' and 'that certain values of our stamps be overprinted Ascension'. This was agreed in a Colonial Office draft of June 28th and a further draft of that date approved that the stamps of Ascension were to be subsequently printed of the same design as the new issues of St Helena. However, proposals for a different design were soon to be made.

One matter that had to be settled was what proportions of a despatch of stamps were to be sent to the two islands. This was more than an administrative concern as two St Helena officials had since 1893 enjoyed commissions on the sale of stamps to dealers and, no doubt, looked forward to even more if the stock was held on their island. Governor Peel wrote for advice on August 31st 1922

'The Chief Clerk and Postmaster are allowed a commission of 1¼% each on stamps sold to dealers outside the island and in this connection I would be glad to receive your ruling as to whether I am correct in assuming that commission at this rate should be paid to these officials on sales effected through the Crown Agents.' [ Crown Agents had started direct sales to Dealers in 1921 ]. 'The authorisation of the payment of this commission is contained in Lord Ripon's Despatch No 2 of Jan 6th 1893'. The matter was finally settled on December 16th by the Colonial Office. There was to be no commission on Orders direct to the Crown Agents but the officials could enjoy their fees if an Order came to the island and was passed on to the Agents. The actual proposal was first made by Winston Churchill in a memo of October 4th.

As a decision had not been taken about the commission, a large proportion of the first overprinted stamps was sent to Ascension and this was the subject of criticism by H E C Merrick who made a tour of inspection and wrote a Report dated 8.1.24. In Section 24 he turns to the Ascension Post Office;

'In the course of examination of Post Office accounts I took notice of the arrangements made by the Government for the Post Office at Ascension which, as you are aware, possesses its own issue of stamps. It appears that, with the exception of the few retained at St Helena for sale to collectors, the whole stock of these stamps is kept by the Superintendent of the Electric Telegraph Company at Ascension. At the time of inspection this stock amounted to over £4,000 in value which at the present rate of sale would suffice for ten years at least.'

Merrick goes on to say that it is undesirable that such a stock should be held by a purely honorary official. It would be difficult to say who was accountable if a deficit was revealed. His recommendation was that the main stock should be held on St Helena, an imprest of £150 worth of stamps being held on Ascension. A Colonial Office memo accepted the conclusions but considered the sum could be larger than £150.

Mr Drew, the Postmaster, was probably quite unprepared for the volume of business that came to Ascension from stamp collectors. Colonial Office records contain a copy of a letter that he wrote to the Managing Director of the Electric Telegraph Company

Purser's Office,  
Ascension Island.

May 17th 1923.

Sir,

With reference to applications for Ascension stamps.

As all requests for stamps are addressed to the Postmaster, I of course, have to accept them and sign for those that are registered. (Many official communications come through the registered post from other Postal Authorities etc, I am therefore unable to refuse them).

Having accepted and opened them, I have to read them through to verify the contents.

If the request is a reasonable one (from the point of work involved) I deal with them here.

Those involving much work I re-seal, number and send on to St Helena to be dealt with there.

Up to date I sent there 138 letters containing nearly £300. This does not include numerous requests for information, such as full particulars and description of issue.

The last three or four mails have brought packets containing in some instances 20 to 30 registered envelopes already addressed, stamped and marked for registration, with a request that they be registered from Ascension. Many of the envelopes have 5 or 6 stamps affixed.

As this involves a good deal of clerical work (each envelope means two separate entries in the registration records) I have sent these packets to St Helena.

The applicants frequently omit to enclose envelopes for the return of the stamps and they invariably give very detailed particulars of what is required, such as,

'well centered specimens'      'perfect specimens'

'with marginal paper attached showing number of plate'

and even send separate sketches showing how and where they want them stamped and also asking for dates of cancellation to be varied.

I am enclosing copies of some of the requests received by the last mail. The underlining is mine.

Some of the dealers require 200 to 300 stamps. It would take a considerable time to attend properly to such orders.

I have sold here in five months over 13,000 stamps valued at over £230. This is exclusive of stamps sold for parcels post.

Yours faithfully,

Sd. W A Drew

Purser

Co 247/194

The stamps overprinted Ascension had been ordered in quantities of 1,000 sheets of 60 multiples for each of the nine values and the expectation was that they would soon be sold to dealers and collectors. For this reason as many shilling stamps were ordered as pence stamps. In the Estimates for 1923

there was an assumption that the stamps would be sold and a new issue required that year. However, the stamps did not attract collectors and commercial sales were very small. The Colonial Office had always doubted the optimistic predictions made from St Helena and during 1923 pressed the Governor for details of stock held.

Apart from the two low values of ½d and 1d the great majority of the stamps were unsold and there was no prospect that they would ever be sold. The Governor wrote to the Colonial Office on November 23rd:

The Castle  
St Helena

No 83

My Lord Duke,

I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your despatch No 50 of the 27th August requesting to be informed of the probable date of exhaustion of the overprint issue of Ascension stamps.

2. I enclose here a return showing the number of sheets of each value held at St Helena and at Ascension from which it would appear that these stamps are likely to last for some years.

3. The bulk of the stamps at Ascension are kept in the custody of the Magistrate.

4. It was originally thought that the fact of Ascension becoming for the first time a Crown Colony having a stamp of its own would result in large sales to dealers, but this hope has not been realised.

5. I shall be glad to know your views as to how long the present issue should continue in use.

6. I regret the delay in furnishing information about the stamps which is due to time occupied in communicating with Ascension.

I have the honour to be etc

C<sub>o</sub> 247/193

W J J Arnold. Acting Governor.

Stock of Ascension postage stamps.

Details attached.

## Stock held at St Helena

Denomination	No of Sheets
½d	65. 1/60
1d	419. 3/60
1½d	528.11/60
2d	508.16/60
3d	596.51/60
8d	659.20/60
1/-	643.55/60
2/-	656.23/60
3/-	742.10/60

## Stock held at Ascension

Denomination	No of Sheets
½d	74. 1/60
1d	67. 43/60
1½d	204.22/60
2d	86. 7/60
3d	165.48/60
8d	184. 4/60
1/-	184.31/60
2/-	232.25/60
3/-	187.45/60

## Summary of stock on 23.11.23.

½d	139. 2/60
1d	486.46/60
1½d	732.33/60
2d	594.23/60
3d	762.39/60
8d	843.24/60
1/-	828.26/60
2/-	888.48/60
3/-	929.55/60

## Numbers of sheets printed

½d	993	1d	988
1½d	997	2d	970
3d	994	8d	1001
1/-	976	2/-	981
3/-	1015		

Crown Agents had sold  
£520 of these stamps to  
dealers and then sent their  
balance to the Colony.

In view of Merrick's comment that the bulk of the stock was held on Ascension, it is possible that the totals for the two islands had been transposed on the listing given by the Acting Governor:

It was now necessary to decide whether to go ahead with the projected new issue. The Governor pointed out that the overprint plate had been destroyed but clearly it would have been possible to make another and so continue with the same stamps. However, the Colonial Office disliked overprinted stamps and undoubtedly a new issue would generate further revenue from dealers. Average monthly sales of stamps in Ascension were £25 according to a letter from St Helena dated May 15th 1923, though Drew's letter, previously quoted, shows that this had gone up to over £40 a month.

The Governor made a fresh suggestion in a letter dated September 26th 1923 when he sent his Estimates for the next year:

'It was hoped to have realised a much larger sum (£3250) from the sale of Ascension stamps than has actually been the case, in fact it is not hoped now to realise more than £1450 this year. In view, however, of the fact that an entirely new issue of Ascension stamps will probably be made next year, the revenue from this source has been placed by the Treasurer at £2,500. I enclose with this despatch 2 designs, No 1 and No 2, for the new issue of Ascension stamps. These designs have been drawn by Mr Hands, the Chief Clerk, and either would seem very suitable for adoption. No 1, owing to its somewhat novel character, would appear to be more likely to appeal to the fancy of collectors. It represents the distinctive features of Ascension from a Geographical and Zoological aspect.'

The first design for a Penny stamp showed a view of the island as a central vignette with below a turtle and to each side at the foot a sooty tern or wide-awake as the birds were known locally. Above the vignette was the King's head and on each side were the words Postage Postage. The design was an attractive one. The second design was for a Halfpenny with a larger vignette showing Green Mountain, the highest point on the island. The value was shown in a shield rather than in a scroll as on the first design. This too was well balanced. These designs survive in the St Helena Governor's Correspondence CO 247/193. They are in pencil and black ink. [Illustrated]

The Colonial Office sent the designs to the Crown Agents for their views, with the comment that they saw no objection to a pictorial stamp. The reply from Herbert Smith dated October 26th was not encouraging: 'I don't think you will make any money by having an entirely new design for Ascension. The cost of production, simply substituting 'Ascension' for 'St Helena' would be about £400 and of a new design about £100 more'. The response of the Colonial Office is summarised in a memorandum: 'In view of the large receipts accruing to dealers from sales to juvenile collectors whose fancy is more likely to be caught by the picturesque, I should have thought that we should obtain more revenue from an entirely new and picturesque issue. It would appear, however, from the attached minute that Crown Agents are of a different opinion and as

an entirely new design would cost £100 more and in view of the uncertainty of the dealers' attitude perhaps we had better resist the temptation and adhere to our original intention'. This view was agreed on January 23rd 1924.

On the same day a reply was drafted to the Governor concerning another proposal that he had made, namely that there should be a range of values to a pound. The idea was firmly resisted: 'As stamp duties payable in St Helena are not applicable to Ascension it can hardly be argued that the denominations in excess of 3/- were in reality required for any other purpose than for obtaining revenue from dealers and collectors. I consider it highly important that the denominations of a new issue should be restricted to such as can be justified on the strict grounds of postal and revenue requirements.' (signed) J H Thomas. Although Mr Thomas' views prevailed it is significant that again the order for new stamps was for 1,000 sheets of 60 multiples for each of the 11 values, an order that bore no relationship to postal demand. In the ten years for which the issue was valid, it was only necessary to re-order the ½d, 1d and 2d values. A new value, the 5d, was introduced in 1927. The stamps were despatched on July 16th 1924 and according to Gibbons were on sale on the 20th of August.

Numbers despatched - sheets of sixty stamps:					
½d	1,019	3d	1,015	1/-	1,004
1d	1,033	4d	997	2/-	1,000
1½d	1,010	6d	1,006	3/-	1,027
2d	922	8d	987		

The Ascension Post Office was now established as a sub-office of St Helena, its business being under the control of that island's Government which dealt with orders of stamps and other postal materials. Mr Drew was paid £30 a year for his services with a further £20 for his assistants. As the correspondence quoted in this article shows, the sale of stamps was mainly for philatelic use. Except in the year of a stamp issue, the postal revenue was quite inadequate for paying the cost of the mail service; nevertheless, it made a substantial contribution towards Ascension's revenue.