

# THE STAMPS AND POSTAL HISTORY OF BIAFRA



A display given by Robert Seaman  
to  
The West Africa Study Circle  
on  
Saturday, 4 March, 1995  
at 41 Devonshire Place, London

## THE BACKGROUND

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I expect that some of you on reading the title of this display in the Secretary's recent notes, wondered how it would be possible to fill more than a few frames from the stamps listed in Gibbons Part 1 under the heading Biafra. At one time, Gibbons listed nearly a page of Biafra material but, following representations made by members of the West Africa Study Circle, about half of those listed were reduced to footnote status. On the other hand, there are some stamps on display today, which were bought over the post office counters in Biafra, that are not listed in SG but I hope that th opportunity will arise for the 'Red Book' to be updated shortly.

At its height, Biafra, which comprised the eastern part of Nigeria, was the home of some 14 million people, who were cut off from the rest of the world by the Nigeria army, the Niger River and the seaboard. Notwithstanding the civil war, which started on 30 May, 1967, commerce continued and an efficient internal postal service operated as normally as possible, bearing in mind the circumstances. For most of the time from May, 1967 to January, 1970, there was no external post but an airmail service was set up in October, 1969, via Gabon. Some mail got into Biafra and was despatched from there before that date but it was on a somewhat spasmodic basis.

The expatriate community, mainly British, American, Dutch and French, continued to go about their business for some months but by August, 1967, virtually all businessmen had left, following advice given by the various high commissions. Wives and non-essential personnel had departed earlier but representatives of the churches stayed on right through the war period.

Biafran stamps are offered by the trade and through auctions from time to time. They are usually unused or cancelled to order with a large round datestamp from Umuahia, which has not been found on any normal mail from that town. Virtually all the material displayed today is from four original sources:-

- Standard Bank of West Africa (my employer)
- Barclays Bank, Port Harcourt (mainly the cachets)
- The late Archbishop Cecil Patterson, who bequeathed to me some of his postal history (including most of the Nigeria overprints on cover)
- A Catholic priest, Father R. Maher (nearly all the military mail)

My collection comprises too much material to carry conveniently and it has been necessary to omit some of the postal history material, although all the important items have been included in this display.



## THE STAMPS

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### FRAME 1

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Starts with a map, then a sheet showing the stamps currently on sale in eastern Nigeria at the time of the start of the War.

Sheets 3 to 12 show the values of these definitives which were overprinted in Biafra by the Government Printing Department. Printing numbers are given at the bottom of each sheet.

### FRAME 2

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The higher values of the overprinted issue are shown. Of particular interest are the 1/3d value with the four line erasure and with a colour missing in the overprint (both ways). None of these varieties is listed in SG.

### FRAME 3

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The final two values of the overprinted values are shown here, including a 10/- with a three line erasure. There follows examples of the second definitive issue with all recorded colour errors. The final sheets show some of the Children in Chains set. The 4d value with green and orange missing is probably the most difficult stamp of all the Biafran sets to obtain. The imperforate proofs are also seldom seen.

### FRAME 4

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The Children in Chains set continues, including the miniature sheets. Then the Pope's Visit to Africa set is shown. Here the printer produced progressive proofs, full proofs and specimens. There were probably only one or two sheet done of each. Also of note is the 3/- value of the Pope's issue with the wrong background colour.

FRAME 5

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The miniature sheets of the Pope's issue in wrong colour starts this frame. This is followed by three remarkable sheets, showing that the Biafra Posts and Telegraphs Department had attempted to comply with UPU regulations by sending examples of their stamps to other countries, in this case Zambia. Biafra was, of course, not a member of the UPU. It is thought that they would have sent this letter to not more than six 'friendly' countries but the unused strikes of the Biafran cachets appear to be the only examples known.

Sheet six of this frame starts the 'philatelic' issues which have been reduced to footnote status in SG. There are some interesting varieties. and, as they are seldom seen in their entirety. I use this as an excuse to display dubious material!

FRAME 6

AND

FRAME 7

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The balance of the 'philatelic' issues are shown in these frames.

## THE POSTAL HISTORY

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### FRAME 8

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This frame shows examples of covers used in Biafra which have unoverprinted Nigerian stamps. The first item is used on 30 May, the date of declaration of independence by the eastern region.

### FRAME 9

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A further four sheets of Nigerian stamps, including the use of postage dues, because of the shortage of stamps.

Then follow five sheets showing either manuscript postage marks or straight line rubber stamp endorsements. Of particular interest are the cover with a manuscript receipt for 1d, used in conjunction with a 3d stamp and the covers with the straight line PAID stamp, also used in conjunction, which is thought to have been borrowed from the local railway station. These last two covers are the only examples known to me.

Finally in this frame are three covers which were returned to the senders because of the suspension of international mail services to eastern Nigeria

### FRAME 10

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This frame commences a display of the cachets. There were three; 2d for the printed paper rate or to meet the next stage of an ordinary letter (6d), 4d for the ordinary letter and 1/4d for the registered letter. The cachet was usually struck in violet but is sometimes seen in black. This frame has examples of the 4d from various post offices, all in violet. Of note is the fact that cancels were used which did not have the word 'Nigeria' on them or, if they did, it had been erased.

### FRAME 11

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This frame continues with the 4d struck in violet and shows two early covers where the cds clearly shows 'NIGERIA', which is unusual.

FRAME 12

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This frame has the 4d in black, and an example of the 2d, also in black, used on a printed paper rate cover. There then follow the 2d and 4d used together, some in black, three examples of the 1/4d, one struck in black, and a combination cover with the 2d and 1/4d to meet the postage on an overweight registered letter. I have recorded about 20 of the 2d value and 7 of the 1/4d (including one proof shown in this display) but only one combination 2d-1/4d.

FRAME 13

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This frame shows covers with the 1968 definitive set. Of interest is the re-use of envelopes and handmade envelopes, showing a shortage of stationery in Biafra. The locally produced cheque, with stamp duty, would have been viewed with some suspicion by the British Bankers Association!

FRAME 14

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The balance of the covers with the 1968 issue, including the 1/- value, which is seldom seen commercially used.

FRAME 15

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This frame has examples of the Nigeria overprints commercially used. They are very scarce and were produced in minute quantities for a country with 14 million people. They were not available in all parts of Biafra. The 2d and 4d are very scarce and are used in multiples on some covers.

FRAME 16

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The first seven sheets continue the overprints. Of particular interest in this frame is the 1/- on cover, which is undoubtedly rare, and the 1/3d of which I know of no other example used on cover. All these covers have the correct postage, as indeed do virtually all the covers on display. The final five sheets show the third definitive issue, which has high values. This issue seems particularly scarce commercially used. There are two covers with the high values, philatelic but could not be used any other way.



FRAME 17

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This frame shows the use of mixed issues, a situation which does not occur much in other countries. Of particular in this frame are the first two covers with 3d stamps and the scarce 2d cachet, altered to 1d, to make up the 4d rate. I have seen no other examples.

FRAME 18

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The mixed issues continue and of interest here are the several examples of covers with both overprinted and unoverprinted Nigerian definitives. They are scarce.

FRAME 19

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The first seven sheets end the mixed issues and include no less than two examples with the rare 1/- value.  
The final five sheets have examples of the local commercial meter marks and also Government meter marks, erased or altered from 'Nigeria' to 'Biafra'.

FRAME 20

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This frame starts with the Children in Chains issue, of which I can display no commercial examples. Then follows the Pope's issue. Of note are the miniature sheets, which SG at one time said had never been in Biafra. These examples, cancelled at Ihiala, suggests that they were on sale at that post office. The last sheet is what appears to be a commercial cover, posted on the day before the Biafran army surrendered.

FRAME 21

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This frame has examples of the Active Service mail. All military regiments were allowed free mail and most had their own cachets. Of note are the two covers from the Commandos.

FRAME 22

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A further selection of military mail is show here.

FRAME 23

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The final selection. Of particular interest here are the three cover from the Biafran air force and the two covers from the Biafran navy, one of which is from the Naval Hospital.

FRAME 24

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This frame shows official (non-military) mail, firstly with manuscript endorsements and later with local rubber stamps.

FRAME 25

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The first nine sheets show privately carried mail. Sheets 1 and 2 are covers written by the parents of the late Archbishop Patterson, sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Enugu, by private bag and addressed and put into the Biafra mail. The final three sheets have Biafran censor marks.

FRAME 26

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The first two sheets have Biafran postage due marks. The first cover has Biafra stamps on the back actually used as postage dues. The remaining sheets are airmail covers. The first cover is one of the few that got out of Biafra before October 1969. Of the remainder, the locally produced airletters, with the Rising Sun but no name of the country, are seldom seen and the used example to Ireland is the only one known to me. It is interesting to note that the British and Irish postal administrations accepted the Biafran stamps, whilst the Biafran postal authorities charged postage due!