

Western Australia's 'Invert With A Difference' by Gary Watson

Whenever a list is compiled of great philatelic rarities, Western Australia's so-called "Inverted Swan" is invariably thrown into the mix. And for good reason: not only is it an undeniably rare stamp, but it is also one of the most extraordinary and spectacular errors in all of philately.

Despite having been exhaustively studied, it has also been widely misunderstood, and even misnamed. Indeed, though the first example was recorded in 1863 it was only in 1892 that the error was correctly identified as having an inverted frame, rather than inverted centre.

To date only 14 examples - and a convincing fake that fooled everyone for more than 60 years - have been discovered. Only seven of the 14 remain in private hands.

It is a measure of the high esteem in which this stamp has been held that examples have at one time or another graced most of the great collections. A list of one-time owners reads like a "Who's Who" of world philately: Tapling, Crawford, Hausberg, Duveen, Ferrary, Colonel Green, Hind, Lichtenstein, George V, Carol of Rumania, Lilly, Boker etc.

It is not my intention in this article to revisit all the technical studies of the WA 4d Lithograph. The work of Sir Edward Bacon (1895), Chadwick & Purves (1967) and others is detailed by LN Williams in his "Encyclopedia of Rare and Valuable Stamps" (*David Feldman*, 1997) and most notably by Brian Pope in "Western Australia: the 4d Lithograph 1854-1864" (*RPSofV*, 1984).

These same two works provide a detailed provenance of the 14 recorded examples. Again, this information will not be repeated here. However readers will, I am sure, be interested in some additional details provided for the first time in print in this article.

In this regard, I am indebted to Dr Arthur KM Woo of Hong Kong for his contribution to the story of the enigmatic "Inverted Frame" of Western Australia.

Strange Fish Indeed

When one thinks of "inverts", those that come to mind include such striking examples as the American 1869 Pictorials, the Tongan 7½d of 1892 and the 1932 Captain Cook 1d from the Cook Islands. These and others of their ilk share a common characteristic: they are bicolour stamps, printed in two operations between which processes the sheets of paper have been inadvertently rotated through 180 degrees.

The Western Australia 4d invert is remarkable for being a monochrome stamp, printed in a single operation.

Its closest "cousins" in philately are the French *tête-beche* errors, created when one cliché was inverted in error on the stamp plate.

But the WA stamp is an entirely different bird, as only the frame is inverted, not the whole design relative to its neighbours.

How could this happen?

Perkins Bacon's Role

To answer that question, it is necessary to understand how Western Australia's stamps were printed.

The first stamp for the Swan River Colony was the Penny Black printed by *Perkins Bacon* in London. However, this stamp should never have been issued. The Governor had decreed, in June 1852, that

only two rates of postage were required: 2d for "inter-Colonial" letters, and 4d for "foreign letters to any part of the world."! However, he requisitioned only a penny value and a million of them were sent out in September 1853.

Remarkably, the 2d inland rate endured for 59 years, until 1911, when it was reduced to one penny! However, the 4d ship letter rate - for which one might imagine that 4d stamps were required - was raised to 6d in May 1854.

Despite the apparent nonsense of then issuing a second denomination for which there was no need, that is exactly what happened.

According to Pope "someone must have realised that it would be some time before the 6d rate could be introduced and a decision to produce a 4d value instead was taken". Frankly, there is a gap in the logic here but with the orphaned 1d as a precedent who is to say that this is not simply as it was?

At the same time, preparation of a shilling value - for overweight foreign letters - was ordered. Perkins Bacon had sent out the engraved steel plate for the penny value with the original consignment of stamps. However, such an artefact was nigh on useless at the quite primitive government printery. But, though their equipment might have been basic, the colonial printers were nothing if not resourceful. The decision was made to adapt the basic penny design for printing by lithography, that is from a stone.

Lithography 101

In his "Encyclopedia", LN Williams noted "In essence the production of a lithographic print derived from a line-engraved plate is a fairly simple process..." He then proceeds to detail a process of almost mind-numbing complexity and ends with "The stone can then be used again and again and prints taken as required". This, I suspect, is enough of a definition for all but the most technologically minded of readers.

More useful to our understanding of how the 4d "Inverted Frame" came into being is Pope's explanation of the process. The printer firstly made a plate-to-stone transfer of two blocks of 60 (5x12) from the steel plate, producing a so-called "intermediate stone". One block was for the intended 4d and the other for the 1/- value.

Pope continues: "Having decided on an octagonal frame for the 4d, the next step was to draw the proposed design directly onto a small stone and in reverse. An octagonal template was made to match the internal octagon of the frame design exactly. The template was then placed over each of the 60 impressions on the intermediate stone...and the excess portions of the 1d design removed with an acid brush...After removal of the borders...the next step was to take 60 transfers on transparent transfer paper and, one frame at a time, place them around a swan...The end result of this somewhat complicated procedure was a group of 60 4d's on the intermediate stone in reverse."

The final step was to make a normal lithographic transfer of the group of 60 subjects reproduced four times - a total of 240 units - on the "printing stone". The first printing of 100 sheets was made from this stone in July 1854, in the distinctive slate-blue shade.

In August 1854, Alfred Hillman was appointed as lithographer. As related by Pope, on 2nd January 1855 he printed a mere three sheets of 4d stamps, followed three days later by a further 97 sheets.

Why were only three sheets produced on the 2nd? Pope's masterful summary is at page 11 of his monograph. Briefly, a fault occurred on the printing stone, requiring it to be replaced. Hillman had recourse to the intermediate stone where he noticed damage on the last transfer in Row 8. He repaired this unit by replacing only the frame, but this was carelessly applied upside-down!

The new printing stone was then prepared and, because this required four transfers from the intermediate stone, the "Inverted Frame" actually occurred four times on each printed sheet.

Pope considers that Hillman's second printing of 97 sheets resulted in the issuing of 388 (97 x4) examples of the error. The mistakes were corrected before the next printing.

This hypothesis is strongly supported by the fact that 14 examples of the error would equate to a credible survival rate of 3.6%.

A Dramatic Discovery

This might have been the end of the story but in 1978 Perth dealer Wim Smits received a phonecall from a person who said he had two stones for printing stamps.

We can only imagine Smits' amazement and excitement when one of the stones turned out to be the intermediate stone for both the 1/- and the 4d, including the famed "Inverted Frame"!

A quarter-century on and Smits recounts how, having bought the stone, he offered to exchange it for items in the collections of the *Western Australian Museum*. However, what was offered was worth much less than he had paid for the stone. Subsequently, David Feldman was visiting Melbourne and Wim - who represented the Swiss firm in Australia - consigned the stone to Feldman for auction.

This extraordinary item was included in Feldman's *Ameripex* sale at Chicago in 1986. Wim Smits recalls that at the auction someone stood up to object to the sale taking place and the stone was withdrawn.

Feldman subsequently re-offered the stone at auction in Switzerland. Perhaps not surprisingly it failed to sell. After all, a slab of limestone is not the easiest item to mount on an album page!

Ironically, however, a private sale to the *Western Australian Museum* was concluded for the sum of, from Wim's memory, SFr100,000.

[As an aside, the other stone bore the original drawing for Hillman's 6d design of 1857. I was privileged to offer this stone in 1988 and it too was bought by the *Western Australian Museum*.]

The Roll-Call

It is appropriate to proceed from the sale of the lithographic stones to seeing what has happened to the "Inverted Frames" themselves.

As noted, 14 stamps and a skillful fake - plus a mere fragment being part of a defective strip - are all the examples that remain of the "Inverted Frame".

Considering that the 4d stamps would virtually all have been used for "foreign" letters, it should be no surprise that all were discovered abroad, mostly in England. Despite this, seven examples, or half the total, have been repatriated to Australia. Of these four are currently in institutional collections, one in Perth and three in Sydney. One other is believed to be in a private collection in Perth.

There is an "Inverted Frame" in the Royal Collection; Tapling's example reposes in the *British Library*; and the first example discovered awaits de-accession from the *National Museum of Ireland*.

A quick count confirms that seven of the 14 are currently off the market, a sad state of affairs for present and future collectors.

Fortunately the other half are believed to still be in private hands. Amazingly, three of the seven, plus the fake and the famous fragment, are all in the exceptional collection formed by Hong Kong medical practitioner Dr Arthur Woo.

Prior to Dr Woo's splurge on "Inverted Frames", the only person to have owned more than one example was Australia's first prominent lady collector Miss A. Vickery. Both her stamps were acquired in the mid-1930s and passed by bequest in 1942 to the *Australian Museum* in Sydney.

Those familiar with Williams' first census, repeated by Pope, might take issue with this last statement, remembering that the profligate New Yorker "Colonel" HER Green was credited with ownership of two "Inverted Frames". However, one of Green's stamps was that now known to be a fake, the frame having been skilfully painted-in. Williams now calls his one-time "X" example "Limbo I".

At the 1986 "Isleham" auction in New York it sold for the equivalent of £31,000 before being adjudged a dud. To "save face", the auctioneer Robson Lowe "bought it in" for an undisclosed sum, believed to be a lot less than the hammer price. This item was subsequently acquired by Arthur Woo in the late 1990s.

The highest price achieved at auction for an "Inverted Frame" is almost a dead-heat between two examples sold in Switzerland in 1979 & 1981.

At the *Robson Lowe (Zurich)* sale of John Gartner's collection of Western Australia, his "Inverted Frame" fetched SFr242,000 (at the time equating to £67,222). This stamp was acquired privately by Dr Woo in late-1994. Two years later the example formerly owned by Baron von Ferrary was sold by *David Feldman* for SFr236,250 (£66,549). This is also believed to still be in private hands.

My last record of an "Inverted Frame" being offered at auction is the specimen once owned by King Carol of Rumania. This stamp was sold privately by Melbourne dealer Simon Dunkerley in October 1992, on behalf of local collector Norman Godbold. The buyer was retired Danish Consul Mogens Juhl of Sydney. Juhl knew he had terminal cancer but was determined to acquire an "Inverted Frame" as the centrepiece for his WA collection. The price, reflective of a less buoyant market at the time, was a relatively modest \$60,000.

Juhl died less than a year later. His collection was lotted by the author and sold by *Macray Watson Auctions* on 19/10/1993. The "Inverted Frame" fetched \$63,250. The buyer was Arthur Woo, who flew to Melbourne to make his first acquisition of an "Inverted Frame".

What if a cut-square example of the "Inverted Frame" was to come onto the market today? The record prices of 1979 and 1981 might be under pressure, especially if the doctor from Hong Kong were to decide to increase his impressive holdings!