

THE CLASSICAL STAMPS OF MALTA⁽¹⁾

by MICHAEL LAWSON

Background to the use of postage stamps in Malta

In 1800 following the surrender of the French the British entered Valletta and they appointed a Civil Commissioner, Captain Alexander Ball R.N., to re-organise the administration of the Island. As one of his tasks he set about improving the postal communications within the Island and the other Mediterranean countries. The result was that the delivery of letters became more regular, and indeed round about 1806 a packet service was established operating between Malta, Gibraltar, Faro, Lisbon and London.

In June 1853 a free internal post, run by the Government, was inaugurated. By March 1858 however it became compulsory for outgoing mail from Malta to be prepaid. Postage stamps had not yet been introduced although of course by now they were some 18 years old in Britain. British stamps therefore were used and these were cancelled in Malta. The M cancellation (that is the oval frame with horizontal lines surrounding a large letter M) was initially used. There is some evidence that this would have been used right through to about 1861 as the very earliest of the first Malta adhesive stamp the $\frac{1}{2}$ d yellow has been found in use up until about June 1861. The more usual hand stamp is however the A25. I shall, during the course of my talk, go into a little more detail on these postmarks. It would be quite wrong however not to mention the wavy line grid. Little is known definitely about this cancellation, but it is presumed by most researchers that it was used on letters coming from the Crimea.

In 1859 a decision was taken to print stamps specifically for local use in Malta. At the same time a decision was made to impose a local letter rate of $\frac{1}{2}$ d per half ounce. As Great Britain had no $\frac{1}{2}$ d stamps at that time it was decided to issue a $\frac{1}{2}$ d postage stamp for local use only and thus was born the famous Malta $\frac{1}{2}$ d Yellow.

In 1883 the Government under William Gladstone was requested by the local administration in Malta to transfer the International Mail Service to their control. Up to this date control was still really with the British Authorities. This transfer took effect as from the 1st January 1885 and accordingly British stamps were no longer valid for postal purposes from Malta after the 31st December 1884. On the 1st January 1885 Malta's first definitive set was issued although it is still possible to continue using $\frac{1}{2}$ d yellows on internal

⁽¹⁾ This is the text of a paper read by Mr. Michael Lawson at the Royal Philatelic Society in London on the 8th January, 1981. Before reading out his paper Mr. Lawson tendered his acknowledgements to the Royal for their invitation and his thanks to Messrs G. Said and Bojanowicz for their assistance.

mail. Relatively few however have been used from that date although the reason for this may well be due to the peculiar shortage of the last printings of the $\frac{1}{2}$ d yellow which I shall talk about a little later on.

My display

I have given much thought to the contents of my talk. Some of you will be Malta enthusiasts with a high degree of knowledge. I hope some however will simply be Philatelists whose chosen interest lies elsewhere and will not wish to hear a technical paper which would perhaps be better aimed at a specialist audience. However the Royal is a Forum for research and knowledge and I will I hope during the course of my talk impart information not generally known or give forth some of my own ideas which will help the specialists in their own researches

I came to the conclusion when preparing for my talk that the subject "The Classical Stamps of Malta" should really be limited to the $\frac{1}{2}$ d Yellow. I have however displayed some sheets of GB used in Malta but have deliberately confined this to stamps on their covers. I have also displayed some of the first definitive set of Malta if only to be able to show what I feel is one of the most beautiful stamps, the 5/-. I will therefore be confining my remarks almost entirely to the $\frac{1}{2}$ d but ask to be forgiven if I draw your attention to one or two aspects of the GB used and also the later Victorian issues.

GB Used in Malta

I have already referred in my opening remarks to the wavy line grid and I am sure most of you will have already noticed and spent a little time looking at what I feel is the most important cover relating to Malta that I have been fortunate enough to come across. It is a seaman's letter from a seaman on H.M.S. Viper, based in Malta, countersigned by the Commanding Officer and sent to Chatham. There are only three known covers with the wavy line grid, one being an embossed 1/- and the other a 1d red. It would seem that the cancellation would have been actually used in Malta on correspondence emanating from the Crimea although it is possible that it was also used on correspondence going out to service personnel in the Crimea.

You will see that there are illustrations of the M and A.25 cancellations on cover. Some of these are quite attractive multiples and I would draw your attention to some of the frankings that can be found on them. The forwarding agents would impress their own hand stamp and indeed an attractive collection can be built up of the hand stamps of the various forwarding agents. There is on display a nice strike of the so-called "Keyhole" franking. You will see also a nice strike of the Malta Ship Letter franking. Mail was sometimes conveyed between Malta and Britain by private ships who would affix their own franking. Postage would still have to be prepaid for transport of a letter from the docks to the address in England.

I have shown one or two examples of G.B. used in blocks. These are in fact quite scarce particularly in good condition. Of particular note there is the well known K variety on the 1864 1/-. If you look at the letter K on the top right hand stamp you will see that there is a white circle.

Foreign Stamps used in Malta

It would be amiss of me not to mention briefly stamps of other countries which would have been posted on non-British ships en-route to Malta. They would normally have borne the stamp of the country where the ship was owned or registered and on arrival at Malta the stamps would have been cancelled with a Malta Post Office A25 cancellation and in later years with a Malta cancelled date stamp, sometimes a paquebot cachet. Although not strictly speaking stamps of Malta some of them themselves would have been considered classic, particularly the early French stamps.

Halpenny yellows

I now come to the real substance of my talk and the display this evening of the ½d Yellow, the Classical Stamp of Malta. I shall preface my remarks with a word of explanation on the numbering of the stamp according to Stanley Gibbons Catalogue. Until about two years ago Stanley Gibbons numbered the ½d Yellow from 1 to 19 and in building up my collection I followed this. There has been considerable debate over the years about the cataloguing of the ½d Yellow and whether variations in shade should merit a separate classification. I do not wish to enter into this debate although I do see logic in the argument that only a variation of colour (as opposed to shade) or perforation or water mark or paper should warrant a separate catalogue number. The shades of colour were usually as a result of a different printing and I personally feel that the stamp should either be classified as Said has by only 9 separate catalogue numbers or alternatively, if it is to be printing, then the full 30 printings would have to be listed (or 29 depending on the view which one takes of the pale buff on unwatermarked white paper which I discuss later).

On the 30th April 1859 an order was sent to the Crown Agents for the Colonies who in turn then commissioned Messrs de la Rue & Co. to proceed with the engraving of a die and to print the stamps. It is thought that the designer is J.F. Joubert de la Ferté who had produced some 11 die proofs of the Queen's head and these are found in a book bearing his name. The seventh one which was prepared by him in March 1859 was used for the Malta ½d which in fact shows that a design was not specially commissioned for Malta. The next one in the book which he prepared in 1862 was used for the 1885 issue. The first consignment of stamps was sent from London to Malta in August 1859 but were not issued to the public until the 1st December 1860.

It is here worth recounting the various stages in the preparation of the stamp. The first step is the preparation of the design, known as an Essay, they would have been submitted to the Postal Authority and either accepted or unaccepted and marked accordingly. If accepted they were usually marked "approved" and may have been dated and signed by the official to whom they were submitted for approval. I have not however come across any Essays "approved" or otherwise which relate to the ½d Yellow although they do exist for the 1885 issues. Once accepted the engraving of the approved design was made on specially prepared steel plates. The surface of these plates had been carefully polished and then softened to enable the engraving to be carried out. The engraving would have been obviously in the reverse and it is known as a die. During the course of preparing the die, proofs were taken to check the progress of the die. These proofs were known as "progressive proofs" and when completed were known as the "die proofs". At this stage a complete proof was made and marked "before hardening" which was then submitted for final checking and approval. The plate was then hardened and the further proof marked "after hardening" taken. An impression of the die was then transferred to a Transfer Roller and then subsequently from the Roller to the printing plate. The plate was made by impressing on the sheet of steel or copper the required number of impressions of the stamp (i.e. the Die) in rows.

Later on De La Rue introduced a new process which again involved the use of a steel die but which was struck on a lead sheet creating a lead mould. Proofs were taken before and after the die had been used for striking the mould in order to check for damage and these proofs are marked "before striking" or "after striking" as appropriate. It should be further mentioned that de la Rue put impressions from the dies into their own striking book usually with dates, plate numbers and various other references or instructions that would have been written in manuscript.

I have been able to find a colour die proof of the ½ Yellow which is on glazed card. I also have a proof in black but there is nothing to indicate whether it would have been the die proof itself or simply a cut down proof at one of the later stages. I have been told of the existence of a die proof dated

21st June 1859 and also of one marked in pencil "after hardening" June 28/59 but have not had the opportunity of actually seeing these.

In my collection I have endeavoured to show with the $\frac{1}{2}$ d Yellow, as indeed I did with all issues of Malta stamps, the progressive stage of the stamps so far as I could, namely by starting with Essays (where I was fortunate enough to be able to acquire copies) then the progressive die proofs, die proofs and then finally the stamp itself. The specimen overprint is however something that should be mentioned. Copies of the final stamp when issued were sent to the U.P.U. for distribution to member countries shortly before the actual issue so that they may be aware of the stamps. These were overprinted specimens or later on from about 1930 they were perforated but this did not of course apply to the $\frac{1}{2}$ d Yellow. There are several varieties known of this overprint as additional copies were obviously sent to the U.P.U. when there was a change of colour. The first $\frac{1}{2}$ d on blue paper has the overprint in two slightly different sizes. Later on in 1870 and also subsequently in 1874 the word "cancelled" appears instead of "specimen". These cancelled stamps were for use by the U.P.U. I show in my collection an imperforate specimen which was a plate proof. It is not clear whether this was for use simply by de la Rue or the Malta Postal Authorities or whether in fact it went to the U.P.U. for them to approve the colour, probably round about 1874.

The first issue was on what was known as Blued Paper without watermark. I show an imperforate copy which must have been a proof as there is no evidence to show that any of the sheets actually issued were imperforate. I also show an imperforate on white paper which is believed to be unique. It has a Crown CC Watermark and probably is the 1863 (fourth printing) and again I would submit that it is probably a proof rather than an error. The first cancellation used was the M obliteration and I am lucky enough to have the only recorded pair on cover and indeed this cover must be considered the Classic Entire of Malta. As it is unfortunately undated there is no explanation as to why the pair was used. I would be delighted to hear from anyone who can give me any information on this rarity. Dated covers of SG1 are extremely rare and only about a dozen have been recorded. It is presumed that the M cancellation was only used during December 1860 as the 19mm single ring Malta cancelled date stamp was used from the 3d January 1861. Multiples of SG1 are extremely scarce. Blocks of four are known and I have calculated that there are in fact about six extant. Of these however three that I have come across are in poor condition. Pairs are equally as scarce. There is one large multiple block of ten. When I first came across it in Geneva in 1978 it was severed in two places although when it recently appeared again in London some restoration had been carried out.

The next printing was in August 1861 and, according to the De La Rue invoices, a third printing was in September 1862. This is where there is much debate as it is generally agreed that the second printing in August 1861 was brown orange and the third printing in September 1862 was either buff or pale buff. It is clear from the stamps that I show in my collection that there were buff coloured stamps in use as early as the 2nd April 1862 as I show a pair on cover and also a single both dated with that date. This is some five months before officially the buff and pale buff stamps with no watermark on white paper were issued according to the De La Rue invoices. I further show some singles dated 24th February 1863 and 2nd May 1863 which I feel can be distinguished from the two covers I exhibit a little further in the collection and which are dated 1st May 1863 and 30th May 1863 and which I am happy to agree are what was formerly known as SG₄ and what are generally now accepted as being the third printing. I find it difficult to accept that these earlier stamps are variations of the brown orange that was issued in August 1861. They are too distinct. It seems to me that there was a pale buff issued sometime between August 1861 and September 1862 and this stamp is the printing that was formerly catalogued by Stanley Gibbons as SG₂ and is now catalogued as SG₃(A). I would argue therefore that there are 30 printings and not 29, excluding of course the printing in 1884 in green.

From the fourth printing in April 1863 watermarked paper was used. Initially the watermark was Crown C on white paper with perforation 14. In May 1878 and January 1879 a new perforating machine was introduced. (14 x 12½) perforating the stamps close to the margins and doing away with the wings but by November 1879 they had reverted to perforation 14. This continued right the way through until 1882 when the Crown CA watermark was introduced.

I am not attempting this afternoon to give you an analysis of all the various printing. The excellent work produced by the Malta Study Circle which in turn made use of material produced by the various researchers sets out details of all the 29 printings of the ½d Yellow and the one printing which is in green but not the pale buff that I argue was an additional printing in 1862.

There are considerable varieties known although I have not attempted to deal with them either in my display or this talk. Most of them relate to very minor flaws but do provide interesting research much of which has been capably reproduced by the Malta Study Circle in publication. There are however the main variety of watermarks namely inverted and reversed and where these are known I have attempted to obtain copies and these are displayed. A reverse watermark can be found on the 8th printing (formerly known as SG₅) and both inverted and reversed will be found on the 11th printing (formerly SG₁₀ or 11).

Particular mention should however be made of the rough perforation 12½ introduced in May 1868 and also what I feel is one of the more attractive of the colours, the golden yellow introduced in January 1874. Whilst mentioning this stamp there is an interesting post mark in my collection on one of these stamps which I have been unable to identify and any assistance would be most welcome.

In my collection I have endeavoured to keep a balance between multiples and covers. What has been interesting is that with one or two of the printings which are quite common on cover it has been very difficult to come across multiples and vice versa. The stamps which are common in multiples are often quite scarce on cover. Perhaps the most obvious of these are the last two printings in 1884. These are extremely common in all sorts of multiples and there are several sheets known. Try and find good used copies however and you will see what I mean that copies on covers are extremely scarce. There is an explanation that has been given to me which I will recount to you for what it is worth. Apparently the majority of the sheets of the stamps were purchased by a mail order company. I am told that in fact it was for the distribution of advertising matter in England as there had been an increase in postal rates there which made it cheaper to post from Malta but this I have not been able to substantiate. However before the mailing took place there was a fire at the premises where the stamps were held. Which were destroyed. The stamps however had been kept in some form of fire-proof box and were discovered subsequently. As a result over the years vast quantities of these stamps appeared on the market and indeed I believe that they were purchased at one stage by a well known name within the stamp world who has systematically over the years put them out on the market at appropriate intervals. Certainly however sheets are constantly appearing and the stamp is nearly always found in unmounted condition but very few used examples appear.

Those of you who have already viewed the display would have noticed some covers with multiples. I show three covers with five stamps on them which I believe are the largest known multiples. There is also a block of the 1866 printing which is one of the only two used blocks that I have come across.

Finally I have in the collection what may or may not be a genuine copy of the perforation 12½ x 14. The Royal collection has an unused pair but there is no record of the stamp ever being issued. I hesitate to say that my copy is genuine although there have been reports of its existence. It may

however be that it is my copy to which reference was being made. Since there has apparently never been any attempt to market the stamp and it is the only one which anyone seems to have come across it may well be that a copy did slip out.

I have endeavoured to give you some of the background to the stamps in my display and at the same time hope that I have not said anything too controversial. I rather fancy that agreement will never be reached on the number of printings, and indeed there will always be arguments between collectors and dealers alike on the classification of some of the colours.

Finally I would again like to thank the President of the Royal Philatelic Society and his Officers for having invited me to give this display and to the Secretary Mr Griffiths for the assistance that he so kindly gave. To all of you I extend my thanks for having troubled to come and listen to me and I hope that what I have said would have been of some interest.