

The Stamps of Hong Kong: The First Hundred Years

By Hugh Jefferies

Hong Kong became a British Colony 175 years ago this month and issued its first stamps in December 1862. From then, until its return to China in July 1997, its stamp issues were some of the most popular and most extensively studied in the 'Part 1' Catalogue. It was one of the first countries to have its own specialist study circle and has a vast philatelic literature. In this article, Hugh Jefferies provides an overview of one of his own favourite collecting areas.

European trade with China dates from the early 16th century, with Portugal establishing a base in Macao in 1557. The majority of this trade was carried out through Canton, where a European settlement was set up, ultimately dominated by the British East India Company. Trade with China was difficult, however, and there were many restrictions, restrictions which the East India Company turned to their advantage by importing opium into China from India. This trade grew rapidly until, in 1839 the Chinese authorities ordered the British to leave Canton, first moving to Macao and then to the relatively underdeveloped island of Hong Kong, which had the benefit of an excellent harbour. After some fighting, the island was formally ceded to Britain under the Treaty of Chuenpi on 26 January 1841, ratified by the Treaty of Nanking in 1843.

The colony was expanded into the Kowloon Peninsula in 1860 and by the 1898 Treaty of Peking the New Territories were acquired under a 99-year lease. In September 1984 the British government agreed to restore Hong Kong to China from 1 July 1997 and on 30 June of that year 135 years of British rule came to an end.

Early postal markings and the first stamps

A post office was opened at Victoria during 1841 using a locally made ornate circular, handstamp inscribed 'POST OFFICE/HONG KONG/1841', followed from 1843 by the familiar crowned-circle types, with Hong Kong hyphenated (*Fig 1*). At this time the post office was under the GPO in London, but it was transferred to local control on 1 May 1860.

Shortly afterwards, the governor, Sir Hercules Robinson, requested a supply of British stamps to be used in Hong Kong, but his request was refused on the grounds that, now it was under local control, it is up to the colony to make its own arrangements for the supply of stamps. Eventually, on 8 December 1862 the first Hong Kong stamps appeared. Printed by De La Rue on unwatermarked paper, there were seven values from 2c. to 96c. Strangely, although all contemporary postal markings showed

Fig 1 The Crowned Circle handstamps—in use before the first stamps were issued



Fig 2 The 1863-71 Crown CC set—almost! I'm still missing the 18c.



Hong Kong in two words, or occasionally hyphenated, the stamps showed it as one word 'HONGKONG'. The stamps were cancelled by a British-type numeral handstamp 'B62'.

For many years the Stanley Gibbons Catalogue listed certain British stamps cancelled with the B62 obliterator but that listing has since been removed as the stamps were never on sale in the colony and were, presumably, postmarked on arrival.

The unwatermarked stamps had only a short life and began to be replaced less than a year later by the same designs printed on Crown CC paper (*Fig 2*). There is a considerable range of shades in this set and all values exist with watermark varieties—inverted, reversed or inverted and reversed—which, since they are invariably quite easy to see are well worth checking for. There are also numerous minor plate flaws to look out for, the best-known of which is the catalogue-listed 'GKON' of HONGKONG' damaged at foot (*Fig 3*) on the 30c. (both vermilion and mauve versions), which occurred at R9/5 of the lower right pane from plate 1. Other things to look out for are the 4c. slate perf 12½ which is a bit of a mystery stamps and the distinctive 96c. olive-bistre, which had a short life and is a real rarity unused and quite a good stamp used.

Early warnings

It is necessary to give a couple of warnings here; firstly, that there are Spiro forgeries of the entire set complete with 'B62' cancellations, and they are all perf 12½. So if you come across a perf 12½ 4c. slate do check that it has a watermark before you buy—the Spiro forgeries were on unwatermarked paper (*Fig 4*).

The second point is that for many years, the SG catalogue included a note to say that prices were for 'average' examples and that fine specimens were rarely met with and are worth considerably more. The note has now been dropped, so the current prices are for

Base photo credit: Roger W. Hong Kong from Victoria Peak 1967

stamps in fine condition—it stands to reason that examples in ‘average’ condition should be substantially discounted in price, but I have to say that I have seen some quite scruffy stamps being offered at substantial proportions of catalogue—these are to be avoided! On the other hand, if you are prepared to be a bit ‘forgiving’ of the odd short perforation tooth or tone spot, you can build up a good showing of these stamps at reasonable cost.

Interestingly the design area of the stamp was narrowed slightly, for the new values introduced with the Crown CC watermark, so the 2c., 8c., 16c., 24c., 48c. and 96c. are 19½mm wide, but all subsequent values were only 18½mm between the left and right frames, presumably to make them easier to perforate (Fig 5). For those first seven values the wide-frame designs were retained for the rest of the reign, which is why they often appear to be off-centre.

Surcharges and new values

As with many other colonies in the mid-to-late 19th century, difficulties in communicating with sources of supply in the UK and shipping times back to the local post office meant that temporary shortages and the need for new values as a result of postal rate changes had to be met by resorting to local surcharging.

A number of these were prepared by local printers Noronha and Sons between 1876 and 1880, with 5c. surcharges on the 18c. and 24c., 10c. on the 12c. 16c. and 24c., 16c. on the 18c. and 28c. on the 30c. mauve. Inevitably, varieties occurred and are worth looking out for, but even the basic surcharges may take some time to find with used catalogue prices for those mentioned now ranging between £50 and £150 (Fig 6). New values (5c., 10c. and 16c.) and colour changes for the 2c. and 48c. also appeared on Crown CC paper, before the change to Crown CA began 1882.

By this time the B62 obliterations were giving way to circular datestamp cancellations, so finding nice-looking examples is easier, but many commercial firms at this time were handstamping their stamps to prevent theft. Most collectors view these stamps with firms’ ‘chops’ as being undesirable, but the Hong Kong Study Circle Journal carries frequent articles on them as they develop into a new collecting area. That is the great thing about Hong Kong philately—as soon as one area of collecting seems to price itself out of the range of most collectors, they are ready to seize upon something else to study.

Returning to the Queen Victoria Crown CA stamps, the Stanley Gibbons Catalogue lists them in two sets, those issued between 1882 and 1896 and those issued to conform with the UPU colour scheme in 1900. The earlier set contains another ‘Mystery stamp’, the 2c. rose-pink, perf 12 of which only a handful of examples are known and which is currently priced at £75,000 unused or used. This stamp was controversial for many years, with some experts considering it to be a privately perforated proof, but it has now established itself as one of Hong Kong’s great rarities.



Fig 3 The ‘GKON shaved variety on the 30c.

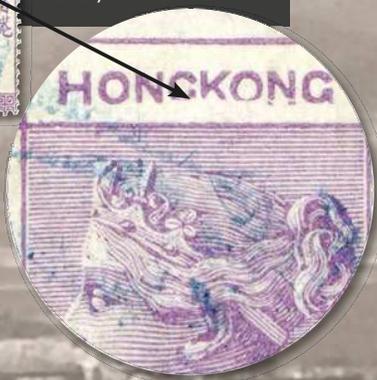


Fig 4 A selection of Spiro forgeries—all perf 1½



Fig 5 The original wide and subsequent narrower Queen Victoria stamps



Fig 6 The Hong Kong Post Office frequently had to resort to surcharging during the mid-to-late 19th century



Fig 7 The first commemorative issue from 1891

Fig 8 Postal fiscal stamps provided the higher values throughout Queen Victoria’s reign



De La Rue surcharged three values (20c. on 30c. 50c. on 48c. and \$1 on 96c.) with new values in English only so these had to be handstamped individually with the Chinese value. During the same period more local surcharges were prepared by Noronha and Sons. The 7c. on 10c. and 14c. on 30c. both include a listed variety, ‘Antique ‘t’ in ‘cents’ at R1/1, which is not illustrated in the catalogue. The normal stamp shows a sharply uplifted ‘tail’ to the ‘t’ but the antique ‘t’ tail is almost flat. There is also a normal ‘t’ with short tail which can be mistaken for the antique ‘t’ so care should be taken when purchasing this variety.

The first commemorative

In 1891 the Hong Kong post office celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Colony by overprinting the current 2c. carmine with a four-line slogan; ‘1841/Hong Kong/JUBILEE/1891’. It received a total printing of only 50,000 and a stated on-sale period of only three days. This very early commemorative stamp (Fig 7) was a good item from the start, compounded by the fact that there are a number of major and minor varieties, which make it even more interesting than it might otherwise have been. To this it should be added that it has now been established that there were two settings of the overprint. Needless to say, there are also forgeries, some of which are quite good.

Throughout Queen Victoria’s reign, the highest face value postage stamp was \$1, higher postage rates being covered by the use of larger size ‘Stamp Duty’ adhesives, listed as ‘postal fiscals’ in the catalogue (Fig 8). The main concern with these is to ensure that you are buying stamps that have done postal, rather than fiscal duty. Here, it is better to have stamps with the ubiquitous ‘B62’ obliterator than the neat black ‘Hong Kong/Paid All’ cancellation, which, in black, was only used fiscally.

King Edward VII

For the King Edward VII stamps, first issued in 1903, a more ornate design was chosen, with most values being printed in two colours, giving a much more colourful aspect to the album

page than could be achieved by the rather drab Victorian stamps which preceded them (Fig 9).

As with most colonies, the initial Edward VII set was printed on Crown CA paper, but these began to be replaced by new printings on Multiple Crown CA the following year. Then, in 1906, most values were reissued on chalk-surfaced Multiple Crown CA paper, and then from 1907 some were re-issued in new colours, giving, in effect four different sets for the ten-year reign.

The watermarks are generally quite easy to see on the ordinary paper stamps (Crown CA or MCA), but much more difficult on the MCA stamps on chalk-surfaced paper, so this is a good identification feature of the latter stamps. It is well known that De La Rue's original chalk-surfaced paper had only a thin coating, but that they soon realised that better results could be achieved with a thicker application. Some Hong Kong stamps can be found with both thick and thin chalk-surfaced papers, but I have not studied this in any depth.

King George V

The design of the Edward VII definitives, which was retained for the George V set first appearing in 1912, had the country name clearly in two words 'HONG KONG'. The 1912–21 set was on Multiple Crown CA and all values except the top \$10 value were reissued on Multiple Script CA paper between 1921 and 1937 with a couple of colour changes in the early script period resulting in scarce low values.

Much of the interest in this set lies in the plate flaws of which there are quite a few minor ones and three which have made it to the catalogue. It may seem odd that the cheapest of the three, by quite a long way, is on the most expensive basic stamp; the 'Broken flower' on the 25c. Multiple Script CA (126a) (Fig 10). This is because it occurred on the stamp next to the top marginal plate number and was therefore saved in quantity, while the others, the Broken crown on the 1c. and the Broken character on the 4c. both occurred mid-sheet, so fewer have been preserved. The Broken character on the 4c., by the way, may be found in varying states. Look out also for Broken Crown flaw on the 2c., whose position is currently not known (as far as I am aware). One day that too might make it into the catalogue.

Talking of making it into the catalogue. I recall in my student days going into a stamp shop and being offered the 2c. green Multiple Script with inverted watermark for a shilling. Inverted watermarks were not listed in the catalogue at the time, but I remember thinking that a shilling would only buy me half a pint of 'best' so I'd take the risk. Now it's catalogued at £110—so who says stamps aren't a good investment!

George V's reign came to a close with the Silver Jubilee set, the Hong Kong issue being printed by Bradbury Wilkinson and therefore having the potential to find that printer's plate flaws. So far, only the 5c. value is known with the 'Extra flagstaff', but the 'Lightning conductor' can be found on both the 3c. and the 5c. (Fig 11).

King George VI

For the George VI definitive the Hong Kong Post Office went back to the Queen Victoria



Fig 9 King Edward VII brought a change of style—and to a certain extent, a change of name, with Hong Kong now written as two words



Fig 10 The King George V 'Broken flower'—a nice positional flaw

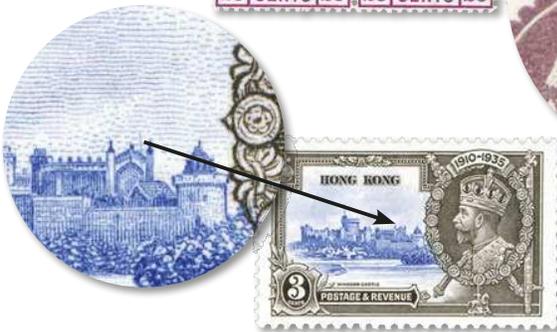


Fig 11 The Silver Jubilee 3c. with 'Lightning conductor' variety



Fig 12 King George VI plate flaws on the 15c. and 50c.

design, with 'HONGKONG' in one word, substituting the head of the new King in the place of his great grandmother. This set has been studied in considerable depth and a fine study was published by the Hong Kong Study Circle in 1992, written by former *GSM* author, Nick Halewood (now editor of the *HKSC Journal*) and David Antscherl, which should be the first source of reference for those interested in delving deeper into this fascinating set. Suffice it to say here that there are numerous printings and shades and a number of plate flaws, not all of which are catalogue listed (Fig 12).

During its currency of course Hong Kong was occupied by Japan and most of the stamps were safely hidden until liberation. The dollar values were looted, however, and were replaced by stamps in new colours after the war to ensure that the Post Office was not out of pocket! In fact, the colours were just shuffled around with the old \$1 colour moving to the \$10 and all the others moving down one, so the old \$2 colours became the new \$1, the old \$5, the \$2 and so on.

Prior to the issue of the George VI stamps there was a shortage of 5c. stamps (at that time the George V 5c. violet No. 121), so the 5c. revenue stamp was authorised for postal use between 11 and 20 January 1938 (Fig 13). Needless to say, there was considerable demand for this stamp used 'in period' and local forgers were happy to supply. The *SG* catalogue mentions one Victoria 'first day' postmark without side bars between the rings, but there is another one, also 'Victoria 11 JA' in which the left stroke of the 'V' of 'VICTORIA' is not parallel with the top of the left-hand side bar. There are a number of other differences too, but I think this is the most obvious.

Japanese occupation

The Japanese attacked Hong Kong on the night of 15/16 December 1941 and the colony finally surrendered on Christmas Day, the 25th. When the post office reopened on 22 January, Japanese stamps were on sale. As the catalogue explains, the postmarks on Japanese stamps used in Hong Kong may be identified by a combination of light horizontal bars in the segments either side of the date panel and three stars in the lower part of the datestamp. The only catalogue listed stamps are the three surcharges prepared specifically for Hong Kong and issued in April 1945 (Fig 14).

The Japanese surrendered on 30 August 1945 and initially mail was carried free with an octagonal handstamp inscribed 'HONG KONG/1945/POSTAGE PAID' (Fig 15). Stamps were reintroduced on 28 September, including the perf 14½x14 emergency printings of the 2c., 4c., 5c., 30c. and 50c., which had been done by Harrison (4c.) and Bradbury Wilkinson, using De La Rue's plates following the bombing of the De La Rue works and distributed to the London trade in 1941.

More commemoratives

George VI commemoratives for Hong Kong comprised the typical Coronation set of three, a very attractive set of six pictorials to mark the centenary of British occupation in 1941 (Fig 16) and the very far from typical Victory pair, now credited to El Wynne-Jones and WE Jones, who had worked on the design while interned by the Japanese. This was followed by the standard Silver Wedding pair and the UPU set of four.

The Silver Wedding \$10 was the subject of heavy speculation in the late 1980s and is still by some way the most expensive stamp in the omnibus set. At the time of the greatest demand, buying advertisements appeared in the philatelic press for other Silver Wedding high values in the same carmine colour as the Hong Kong stamp (such as Montserrat and Seychelles). Presumably these were being 'doctored' to turn them into Hong Kong stamps, but I have never seen an example of one. It's something to be aware of though.

Before leaving King George VI it is worth mentioning the varieties which are worth looking out for. There are a number of unlisted minor flaws on the definitives as well as those which have achieved catalogue status. The extra stroke flaws on the Victory pair and the 'Spur on "N"' on the 10c. Silver Wedding can be found if you look, but the 'Crack in rock' on the UPU 80c. is a real rarity, which I am still looking for.

Queen Elizabeth II

All of these, along with the 1953 Coronation stamp of 1954 showed 'HONG KONG' in two words, but when the first Queen Elizabeth set appeared it was back to a single word, as in the George VI set for which the duty plates had been retained, albeit reformatted to suit a new sheet size, changing from two panes of 60 to a single sheet of 100.

Again these letterpress stamps are deserving of greater study than is possible to demonstrate here, but I must just sneak in a mention of their replacements, showing the Annigoni portrait of Her Majesty which appeared in 1962. In my opinion Hong Kong



Fig 13 Postal use of the 5c. fiscal stamp in 1938 (Reduced)



Fig 14 Japanese occupation set on cover, showing the distinctive Hong Kong postmark (Reduced)

Fig 15 Liberation cover (Reduced)



Fig 16 The attractive Centenary set and the Silver Wedding 10c. showing the 'Spur on "N"' variety



is the only Commonwealth Country which issued its most attractive set of definitives in the 1960s (Fig 17).

Back of the book

Hong Kong also has one of the more extensive 'back of the book' listings in Part 1. Apart from the postal fiscals and Japanese occupation stamps already mentioned, there were stamps surcharged in 1879 by Noronha and Sons for use on postcards (Fig 18); the booklets containing Edward VII and George V stamps are comprehensively listed in the catalogue and the postage due stamps are of an attractive design not used anywhere else (Fig 19), although, as John Griffith-Jones' recent book shows, they were at least considered for Zanzibar.

The most extensive listing, however, is of Hong Kong stamps used in the British Post Offices in China and Japan (Fig 20), but these are well covered in the Catalogue and many were illustrated in an article on Hong Kong Postmarks, published here a few years ago.

For many years Hong Kong stamps were sold at these post offices at the local rate of exchange, but the Chinese Dollar devalued in relation to Hong Kong currency, making it possible to purchase Hong Kong stamps more cheaply in China and bring them back to the colony to sell at a profit. To overcome this, the entire set on Multiple Crown CA paper was overprinted 'CHINA' for sale at the treaty ports (Fig 21). The set on Multiple Script CA paper was issued in March 1922, but in November the offices closed, leaving the British naval base at Wei Hai Wei as the only place they remained on sale, until that office also closed in 1930. Thus the Script CA 'CHINA' overprints used at offices other than Wei Hai Wei are worth looking out for and keep an eye on the 'CHINA' 50c. in particular, catalogued from £1.50 on Multiple Crown CA paper, but £300 on Multiple Script.

Further possibilities

I hope this brief run through the stamps of Hong Kong has shown that it is a subject worthy of greater attention. The early postal history has been priced out of reach of most of us, but it is still possible to put together a representative used collections, provided that you are not too fastidious about condition, while always trying to find the best you can afford.

If you have been inspired, the first job is to buy a copy of the latest *Stanley Gibbons Hong Kong Catalogue* and join the excellent Hong Kong Study Circle, then try to obtain a copy of the standard work on the colony by F W Webb, reprinted a few years ago by James Bendon with helpful additional features. For the postmark enthusiast, *The Postal History of Hong Kong* by Ted Proud is also a 'must have' guide.

With all this information available, you might well wonder whether there are still opportunities for the newcomer, but new discoveries are constantly being made and while outgoing correspondence has become prohibitively expensive, letters addressed to Hong Kong can be picked up much more cheaply (Fig 22), and, with its huge commercial mail outgoing covers of the Elizabethan period are plentiful, still relatively inexpensive and full of potential (Fig 23).



Fig 17 Queen Elizabeth stamps of 1954 and 1962



Fig 18 The 3c. on 16c. yellow postcard stamp



Fig 19 Hong Kong's distinctive postage due design



Fig 20 A selection of Treaty Port cancels on Hong Kong adhesives



Fig 21 The 'CHINA' overprints introduced in 1917

Fig 22 'Inwards' covers are still within reach – the '6' in circle handstamp on this cover is a postman's beat 'chop' (Reduced)



Fig 23 There is plenty of potential too in more modern covers (Reduced)



Further information and reading

The Hong Kong Study Circle: Membership secretary and Journal editor, Nick Halewood, Midoricho 1-9-204, Ashiya-shi, Japan 659-0042.
 F W Webb OBE FRPSL, *The Philatelic and Postal History of Hong Kong and the Treaty Ports of China and Japan*, reprint with additions, James Bendon, Limassol, 1991.
 EB Proud, *The Postal History of Hong Kong, 1841-1997*, Proud Bailey, 2004.
 Nick Halewood and David Antscherl, *A Study of the Hong Kong Definitive Adhesives of King George VI*, Hong Kong Study Circle, 1992.