

# Picture perfect?

The first pictorial definitive series from a major British colony, issued by New Zealand in 1898, had two different printers, three different platemakers and four different papers, not to mention famous errors and perforation varieties. Was this the ultimate turn-of-the-century collectable?

In New Zealand, as elsewhere in the British Empire in the 19th century, the monarch's head was the basis of most stamp designs. So the first pictorial definitive series from one of the major colonies, issued in 1898, was always sure to grab the public's attention.

But there were additional reasons for the immense contemporary and subsequent interest in this issue.

It stemmed partly from the public design competition launched in 1895, offering cash prizes, which was intrinsically linked to the government policy of encouraging new settlers and promoting tourism.

It was augmented by the decision to switch production of the stamps from London to Wellington, where local efforts to print and perforate these designs satisfactorily introduced considerable complexity to the series.

And finally, of course, the stamps' superb engraved views of New Zealand's flora, fauna and scenery not only captured the Victorian imagination but remain popular with thematic collectors today.

## Setting the scene

Issued on April 5, 1898, the series initially comprised 13 values from ½d to 5s, with 13 designs by different artists in a variety of formats.

Mountains and water were the most popular subjects among the competition winners, with the ½d purple-brown and the 5s vermilion depicting contrasting views of Mount Cook, the 1d blue and yellow-brown showing Lake Taupo and Mount Ruapehu, the 2d lake illustrating Pembroke Peak and Milford Sound, the 2½d blue showing Lake Wakatipu and Mount Earnslaw, the 5d sepia displaying Otira Gorge and (in an unusual inset) Mount Ruapehu, and the 2s grey-green offering another view of Milford Sound.

The 4d bright rose and 9d purple



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ABOVE: The first printing of New Zealand's 1898 pictorial definitive series, by Waterlow in London, included stamps in no fewer than five different formats. Illustrated here (in correct proportion to show the differences) are the ½d purple-brown, 5d sepia, 6d green, 2s grey-green and 5s vermilion





ABOVE: The stamps were the result of a public design competition launched in 1895, and hundreds of unadopted essays have come onto the collectors' market in recent years

illustrated the white terrace and the pink terrace respectively on the shores of Lake Rotomahana, tourist attractions which had been buried by a volcanic eruption in 1886.

Indigenous birds decorated three stamps, in the shape of the huia on the 3d yellow-brown, the kiwi on the 6d green, and the kea and kaka on the 1s vermilion.

And the oddity of the series was the 8d indigo, which featured a Maori war canoe and an imperial crown within the loops of a figure of eight.

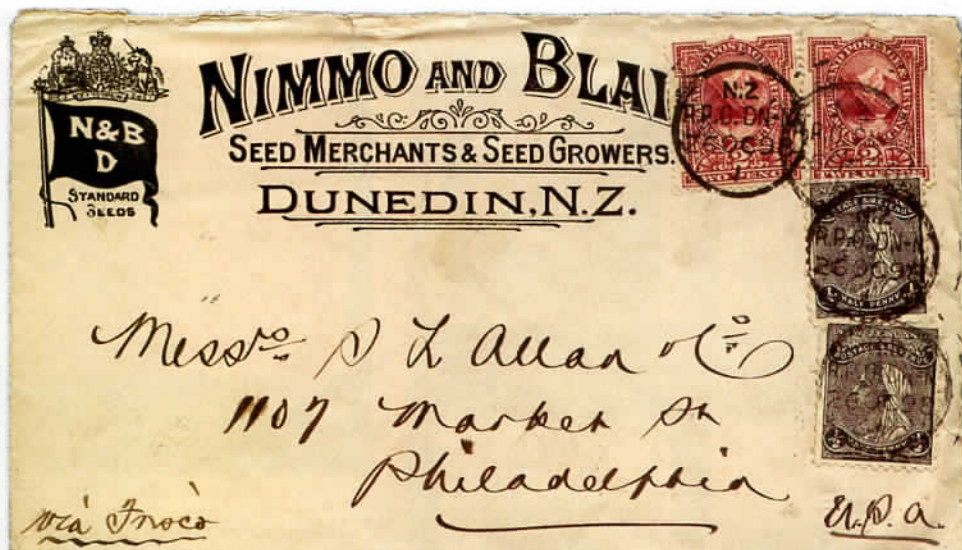
It is difficult to see how all these values correlated with the postage rates of the day, which suggests that the scale and quality of the issue owed as much to political pressure as it did to postal necessity. But it would remain current for a decade, undergoing four distinct phases of production.

### London printing

The first phase is known as the London printing, because both the plates and the stamps made from them were produced in the United Kingdom by Waterlow & Sons before being shipped to New Zealand.

These are widely agreed to be among the finest recess printings made in this period. The engravers made a superb job of the dies, which were then transferred to the plate by a transfer roller, and the paper used, which had no specific name and no watermark, was ideally suited for the reproduction of detailed engravings.

On the other hand, there were several curious features of the



ABOVE: Advertising cover of October 1898 using two of the 2d pictorials along with existing 'Second Sideface' definitives. The new stamps were so popular that the postal authorities restricted supplies and urged postmasters to use up stocks of the preceding issue

*'Even as the issue was going on sale, a correction was being requested to a spelling error on the 2½d value'*

London printing, which fuelled the colony's determination to produce subsequent printings locally.

One was the strange variety of stamp formats. There were at least five distinctly different shapes (in marked contrast to the standard size and double size specifications laid down for the design competition), which inevitably created watermark and perforating challenges.

Another unnecessary difficulty was added by the surprising decision to make one value, the 1d, a two-colour design. One of the stamps which would be required in the largest numbers thus required two plates, and two runs through the printing press with careful registration.

Finally, there was a spelling error, with the name Wakatipu



ABOVE: The spelling error on the 2½d value, where 'Wakatipu' was mistakenly engraved as 'Wakitipu', was quickly corrected

RIGHT: Registered cover posted to Venezuela on August 5, 1903, bearing three different pictorials for a total of 1s 3½d in postage (four times 2½d, plus 3d for registration and 2½d for the advice of receipt service), with an AR rectangular handstamp in green







ABOVE: The issued 1898 1d blue and brown, illustrating Lake Taupo

ABOVE: Colour trial for the 1899 4d, with the colours reversed

ABOVE: The issued 1899 4d, with the colours in the same combination as the original 1d

ABOVE: The unique 1903 4d with inverted centre, postally used with a Picton postmark

mistakenly engraved as 'Wakitiipu' on the 2½d value! A correction was being requested even as the issue was going on sale, although Waterlow accomplished this impressively quickly and the replacement stamp was on sale only one month later.

## First local printing

All the same, these 'Waterlow initiatives' made it easier for the Government Printing Office in Wellington to take over the printing of the stamps, after ordering a new set of plates.



LEFT: The 1900 1½d addition to the series was intended to be printed in khaki, but is most commonly found in chestnut or brown

## MARKET VALUES

So many stamps bought at the time went straight into collections, even in multiples, that none of the basic stamps are scarce, although some of the high values are catalogued at up to £200 mint.

Some perforation and watermark varieties are much more expensive, however, and condition varies greatly across the entire series.



ABOVE: A block of four of the 6d rose-carmine from the second local printing, showing the rare compound perforation 14 x 11, and single 8d blue which is imperforate at the top

These 'colonial plates', which were sent to New Zealand within a year, incorporated several changes. Waterlow had been asked to swap the designs of the 1d and 4d values, which clearly implied new dies, and to make the ½d, 1d and 2d all the same size, so that plates of 240 impressions could be created instead of the previous 120.

In what would become known as the first local printing, there would also be colour changes. The ½d switched to green and the 1d red, in accordance with Universal Postal Union guidelines, while the new, smaller 2d became violet and the 6d later turned red.

However, the key distinguishing feature common to all stamps of this printing was the use of thick, soft Pirie paper, usually without a watermark but in the case of the ½d, 1d and 2d with a faint Double-Lined NZ & Star watermark.

Released on various dates from May 1899 to May 1900, all values were perforated 11, with one exception: the new ½d is also found perforated 14 (or 14 x 11, or 11 x 14).

## Extra value

Providing further evidence of the government's dissatisfaction with Waterlow is the fact that the one new value required for the series, a 1½d, was commissioned from a New York platemaker, Parsons Bros.

Patriotically inscribed 'The Empire's Call', it depicted New Zealand troops serving with the British army in the Boer War, in total contrast to the domestic scenery and wildlife of the existing designs.

Issued in December 1900, it was supposed to be printed in khaki, to reinforce the military theme, but it was immediately obvious that in practice its usual shade was chestnut or brown; a genuine copy in the

BELOW: Most values in the pictorial definitive series can also be found used as revenues. This piece from a court document of 1907 shows a fee of £1,058 12s 9d having been paid using (trimmed) pictorial stamps of 2s and 9d, together with dedicated revenue stamps with values of 10s and £1,058







khaki shade is rare, and typically commands a premium of 60 times the more common colours!

#### Paper trials

In December 1901 and again in January 1902 the Government Printer experimented with thinner, harder papers, using the 1/2d value only.

The first trial used Basted Mills

ABOVE: The 1/2d value switched from its initial purple-brown colour to green in 1900, to comply with UPU regulations



ABOVE: Marginal blocks of the 3d brown and the 1s orange-red from the fourth local printing of 1907-08, showing the distinctive plate numbers of the new plates supplied by Perkins Bacon

paper with a double-line watermark, and the second used Cowan paper with no watermark. Examples of both are difficult to find.

#### Second local printing

With the addition of a Single-Lined NZ & Star watermark, it was the Cowan paper that was to become the norm for New Zealand stamps for decades to come, starting with what is known as the second local printing,

introduced in April 1902.

This used the same 'colonial' plates as before, but, as the perforating machines became old and were replaced, more and more of the stamps were perforated 14 rather than 11. Some values can even be found with compound perfs 11 x 14, or with no perforations at the top.

Although it is difficult to be certain, it is likely that it was some disruption in supplies that resulted ▷



ABOVE: Die proof of the 1898 5s from the Waterlow archive book



ABOVE: Plate proof and colour trial for the resized 1d of 1900, eventually issued in crimson





LEFT: A marginal block of the four of the 2d purple from the second local printing, showing an example of New Zealand's very idiosyncratic and scarce 'mixed perfs'. A machine with perforation gauging 11 was used to correct a misaligned horizontal perforation of 14

ABOVE: The only known example of mixed perfs on cover, affecting a pair of the 1/2d green

in two interesting paper varieties.

In July 1902, the 6d was printed on a distinctive paper known as Lisbon Superfine, after the words which appear once on each sheet as a watermark; as most stamps in each sheet have no watermark, they are easily confused with stamps on unwatermarked Pirie paper, particularly as both are perforated 11.

In December 1902, the 2s appeared on laid paper, with its distinctive vertical ribbing.

## Unique error

The rarest and most famous stamp in the pictorial series also came from the second local printing.

An entire sheet of the 4d blue and brown, perf 14, is thought to have

BELOW: A block of the 1/2d from the second local printing of 1902-07, overprinted 'Official' with two styles of plate number, a hand-scratched '2' and a set of small strikes to the right of it



been printed with its central vignette inverted in 1903, but only a single example has ever been found, clearly postmarked in Picton.

Certified by the Royal Philatelic Society London in 1931, after which it was sold at auction for £61, it was bought for approximately £50,000 by the New Zealand Post Office in 1998 and now resides in the National Museum in Wellington.

## Mixed-perf rarities

An unusual story concerns the emergence of the so-called 'mixed perfs' by early 1907.

Even today these cause considerable confusion, partly because the term 'mixed' is unhelpful: these are not irregular perforations, but corrections applied to badly misaligned perfs.

Previously, poorly aligned strikes of the perf-11 machine had been corrected by further strikes of the same machine. These double perfs are regularly found from the first local printing, and less frequently from the second local printing.

But in this case, misaligned strikes of the perf-14 machine were corrected with a realigned strike of the perf-11 equipment. Thus, a single side of the stamp will show perforations of both 14 and 11, approximately parallel to each other.

Mixed-perf stamps (needed as a pair or a bigger block for certain identification) are as scarce as compound perforations in mint condition, and rarer used. Only one example is known on cover.

Why bother correcting a damaged sheet, especially as it often involved gumming selvage 'patches' on the back, over the misaligned perfs, to prevent the stamps separating in the wrong place? A likely explanation is that supplies of correctly watermarked paper were limited, and accounted for sheet-by-sheet.

## Third local printing

The fourth and final phase of production of this series started in March 1907, when the government ordered new plates for four values from Perkins Bacon in the UK.



ABOVE: Distinct shade differences exist in all the stamps, as in these examples of the 1s. Some have acquired high catalogue values, even though the printers never aimed for great consistency





In the case of the ½d this was a simple replacement, for a plate which was showing wear, but in the case of the 3d, 6d and 1s the new plates were a different size. They were now identical in size to the ½d, so that the intended introduction of comb-perforating machines would be suitable for all the most commonly used values, with 240 impressions per sheet.

As it happened, the bi-coloured 4d was suitable for comb-perforating in sheets of 80 without a change to its format, as shown by the printing of February 1908, although this stamp is truly difficult to find.

Of the eight smaller-format stamps in the series, only the 8d remained at its original size throughout its lifespan.

### Overprints

Some stamps in this series were overprinted for use in Pacific Islands that came under New Zealand administration: Aitutaki, Niue and Penrhyn from as early as 1901, and briefly Samoa during World War I.

Examples used on commercial mail are very desirable, as are perforation varieties and manuscript (hand-scratched) plate numbers.

Starting only in 1907, some stamps were also overprinted 'Official' for use on government department mail. Values other than the ½d and 2d are rare on official covers, but the stamps themselves are not scarce as they were put on sale from main post offices. □

ABOVE: The 3d value overprinted for use on the Pacific island of Aitutaki, also showing double perfs at the foot

## WATERLOW'S SAMPLES

Even though it quickly lost the contract to print the issue, Waterlow & Sons liked to use the New Zealand pictorial designs for promoting its capabilities.

So-called 'sample stamps' were printed for the benefit of potential customers in South America and elsewhere, probably in 1898-99, with the original designs but in colours quite different from the issued stamps.

Waterlow also displayed miniature sheets of nine, overprinted with the name of the firm and with holes punched through them to prevent fraudulent postal use, at the 1910 Brussels Exhibition.

It is not known whether the New Zealand government approved this promotional use of its stamp designs.



ABOVE: Waterlow & Sons miniature sheet of nine 'sample' stamps produced in 1910

*'Of the eight smaller-format stamps in the series, only one remained at its original size throughout its lifespan'*

## JOIN THE CLUB

The New Zealand Society of Great Britain, which will shortly celebrate its 60th anniversary, has around 300 members.

It holds regular meetings in London, the midlands, the north-west and Scotland, as well as a bi-annual residential weekend.

Other benefits of membership include the society's bi-monthly journal *The Kiwi*, access to its extensive library, an annual auction and circulating packet.

To find out more, contact the Honorary Secretary.

Tel: 020 8657 4566. Or visit [www.nzstamps.org.uk/nzsgb](http://www.nzstamps.org.uk/nzsgb)