

Where the Hell is Heligoland – and What Do We Know About It?

By Stan Cronwall

Well, to begin with, Heligoland is an island – albeit a rather small one only about 2.4 kilometers long by about a kilometer at its widest running from northeast to southwest. It is really an archipelago with an adjacent even smaller island, Dune. It is part of Germany about 40 kilometers north of Wangerooge Island (the who/what?) near the Weser River and about equal distance from the islands at the mouth of the Elbe River.

Your friendly Scott catalog calls it Heligoland, but it is often spelled Helgoland. Either way, it is one and the same by any name.

It has been part of Germany since 1890 when it was acquired from Great Britain in the Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty signed July 1, 1890. Germany gained the small but strategically located two island archipelago of Heligoland which its new navy needed to control the Kiel Canal then under construction and the approaches to the Elbe River. (In any case, these islands were probably indefensible for the British in light of Germany's emerging naval power)

In exchange, Great Britain gained lands in southern Africa that were essential for the construction of the railway to Lake Victoria, and Germany's pledge to not interfere with British activities vis-à-vis Zanzibar.

Anyone looking to begin collecting a country with only a few issues, Heligoland is one for your personal "short list". During the time it was a British possession (1867 to 1890), there were only about 20 postage stamps issued. However, there were as many as eight printings of a single denomination and a large volume of reprints known as the Berlin, Leipzig and Hamburg Reprints. (For more information on the stamps, their reprints, and postal stationery see Wikipedia)



Here is an image of Heligoland Stanley Gibbons #4 stamp issued in 1867-68.

The stamps are embossed with a silhouette of Queen Victoria except for the four highest values which have the Heligoland coat-of-arms. The issues were printed in the Prussian State Printing Office in Berlin and were denominated in the Hamburg Schilling until 1875 when both the German Empire and British values were shown. These are known as the Farthing/Pfennig issues.

Now on to more contemporary times.

For me as a German niche collector specializing in the period 1933-1945 and to a lesser degree in the post WW II era, there are two stamps of interest.

The first is a Nazi-era semi-postal (B 176 stamp on the right) issued August 9, 1940 to commemorate the 50th year anniversary of when the island became a part of Germany. The stamps look to me like a big pile of rocks in a body of water and is described by Scott as "Rocky Cliffs of Heligoland. But it is a whole lot more. Read on . . .



Heligoland/Heligoland had been a German fortress during WW I. After the war, it was disarmed and in theory neutralized. However, in the 1930's the head of the German Kriegsmarine, Grand Admiral Raeder had plans for restoring it as a vital base protecting the approaches to the German navy's North Sea ports. It was ideally positioned for heavy coastal artillery batteries, and as a base for torpedo boats and submarines.

During 1935 - 1936 period, saw construction of the first flak batteries which became operational in 1937. Heavy naval gun batteries were added. The neighboring island, Dune, had both flak and coastal artillery guns as well as two airfields.

In 1940, construction began on the first U-Boat bunkers in Germany. When completed there were three bays with one having the capability of lifting a U-Boat completely out of the water.

Heligoland was honey combed with underground facilities including magazines for weapons, storerooms for supplies, and even a hospital. Additional heavier caliber flak guns were added as well as various radar positions to detect both air and naval enemy units.

On April 18, 1945, the British RAF Bomber Command targeted the islands with more than 950 planes. Anything above ground was devastated, while the underground chambers remained in good condition.

The islands were evacuated shortly thereafter.

Following the war, the British used the islands as a bombing range from 1945 to 1952. At one point, the Heligoland islands were being considered as an atomic bomb testing site. This was ruled out when the Bikini Atoll was selected.

The bigger island entered the history books again in 1947 when the British Navy created one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions ever. More than 6800 tons of captured German munitions were piled up and within the bunkers and set afire. Included were 4,000 torpedo heads, 9,000 depth charges and more than 91,000 shells.

As a result of the April 18, 1947 explosion, part of the island sunk. People living on the nearby German mainland had been advised to leave their windows open to minimize damage from the concussive force, and the shock waves were recorded as far away as Sicily.



On December 20, 1950, two students and a professor went to the off-limits island raising German and other flags. They were arrested, but this began a movement agitating for the return of the islands to Germany. The cause was taken up by the German Parliament and the archipelago was returned to Germany by agreement on March 1, 1952. The Federal Republic of Germany issued a stamp (Scott 690 on the left) commemorating the return on September 6, 1952.

Today, the islands enjoy interest as a tourism site, especially the area around the crater-like depression caused by the 1947 munitions explosion.

***Stan Cronwall** is a member and his collecting interests include Germany: Third Reich 1933-45 and the areas it occupied (stamps covers & cards). He also collects U.S. World War II Patriotic Covers and Cards; Civil War Patriotic Covers (both U.S. and CSA); U.S. Naval Covers; DDR stamps; and, Post WW II Soviet Zone Hitler Head Obliteration stamps, covers & cards.*