

How About Stamp Face Values Denominated in Potatoes?

By Stan Cronwall

We all know about revenue stamps of various kinds where both federal and state government agencies have slapped taxes on such things as cigarettes, playing cards, transfer and sales documents, and even agricultural products.

But, have you heard about a country where the face value of their stamps was denominated in potatoes?

It is true, or at least one man tried to make it happen.

Long time ago, a very small and isolated country called Tristan da Cunha was visited by a Norwegian Scientific Expedition.

First let us learn more about Tristan. It is part of the most remote inhabited archipelago in the world, in the south Atlantic Ocean about 1500 miles from the nearest inhabited land, Saint Helena. Tristan is the largest of the island group. It was first sighted in 1506 by a Portuguese explorer who gave the islands his name.

The island group was first named on British Admiralty charts and formally annexed by the United Kingdom in 1816 ruling them from the Cape Colony in South Africa. In 1938, Great Britain declared the islands to be a dependency of Saint Helena creating the British Overseas Territory of Saint Helena and Dependencies.

We now pick up the potato story in 1937 with the Norwegian Scientific Expedition arrival December 7 on Tristan. In route via Cape Town, the crew captain recruited a British engineer, meteorologist and topological surveyor Allan Crawford who would go on to be regarded as the foremost authority on Tristan.

On the right are four Tristan da Cunha stamps showing scenes from the Expedition. These were issued on December 7, 2017 which was the 80th anniversary of the Expedition's landing.



The 70p value shows Allan Crawford at work.

On March 29, 1938, a whaling ship arrived to retrieve the Expedition crew of 13. Their field station and most of the remaining equipment was left behind for the Tristans.

During WW II, Britain established a weather station on Tristan. Crawford made later visits to the islands working as a meteorologist at the weather station and recognized that there was a demand for stamps from both philatelists and passing ships wanting souvenirs from what was being called "The Loneliest Inhabited Island in the World".

He decided to develop and produce a stamp or “sticker” for the islanders to use on their letters. In the early rough designs, Crawford and his draftsman artist recognized that they did not have permission to use the King George head so instead they used the British Union Flag.

Also, the Tristan islanders had no money and would be unable to purchase the stamps. However, during WW II they had used potatoes as currency with 4 potatoes equaling one old penny (1d). This “currency” was added to the designs.

Crawford and his artist came up with nine designs, each with a penguin and a value of 4 potatoes. They had 20,000 sheets made, each having 35 stamps. The stamp/sticker soon achieved fame as a souvenir from passing ships and collectors around the world. It was nicknamed “the potato stamp”

In 1946, these designs were used as part of a petition for stamps for Tristan submitted to the United Kingdom Postmaster General for consideration as a legitimate postage stamp.

On the right is the Tristan da Cunha souvenir sheet issued April 8, 2015 for the “Potato Essays.”

The petition was denied.

In 1952, the islands got their first postage stamps which were Saint Helena definitives overprinted “Tristan da Cunha.”

Here are the Saint Helena overprints for use on Tristan:



Now, you more than you ever wanted to know about Tristan da Cunha and the stamps that were denominated in potatoes. As they say on the web – TMI,

Any questions? Yes . . . you in the back row . . .

Stan Cronwall passed away in October 2019. He authored a number of Post Boy articles and quizzes still in the queue for publication. His collecting interests included Germany: Third Reich 1933-45 and the areas it occupied (stamps covers & cards). He also collected 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.