

THE DE LA RUE 'KEY PLATE' DESIGNS FOR THE STAMPS OF THE BRITISH COLONIES

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The introduction to Stanley Gibbons' British Commonwealth catalogue, under the heading "Colonial Types — Types of the General Plates used by Messrs De La Rue & Co. for printing British Colonial Stamps", illustrates two designs prepared by that firm, known respectively as the "Victorian Key Type" and the "Georgian Key Type".

What is meant by a Key Type design? Briefly, it is a basic design from which plates are prepared for the printing of the stamps of more than one country, where only the title and the value expression differ. There is nothing unique about this. Gibbons' 'Simplified' catalogue lists Key Type designs for France and for its overseas possessions, and for those of Germany, Portugal and Spain, the 'Crown' Key Type of Portugal for use in Angola appearing as early as 1870.

There was good reason for the use of Key Type designs for, in the case of the British Crown Colonies, whilst each colony was responsible for formulating its own stamp requirements, and for bearing the cost of their production it was the Crown Agents for the Colonies in London who were, and still are, responsible for their design and printing. Thus, by using a common design for several colonies, the production costs can be shared among them.

Before discussing the De La Rue Key Types, it should be mentioned that an attempt to produce a Key Type was made in 1851 by Perkins Bacon & Co., who then held the Post Office printing contract. This showed the figure of Britannia seated, with no value expressed and with the country title only appearing at the foot of the stamp. The colour of the stamp expressed its value. Stamps to this design were prepared for Trinidad (1851), Barbados (1852) and Mauritius (1854).

A similar design, but showing the title in a shallow arc over the head of Britannia and with the value replacing the title at the foot, was used for the same three colonies between 1858 and 1859.

Perkins Bacon produced a number of further designs over the next four years, but as each showed slight differences between each colony for which they were used, Bahamas, Grenada and Natal, they cannot truly be called Key Types.

Turning now to the Gibbons' listed Key Type designs, prepared by De La Rue & Co. who had, after 1860, gradually taken over the Post Office contract, the "Victorian" shows the crowned head of the young Queen Victoria facing left within an octagonal frame, with the title at the top and the value in words at the foot. This, the Die I, first appeared in 1879 for Antigua and Nevis, followed over the next three years for Montserrat and Virgin Islands (1880), Cyprus and Turks Islands (1881) and St. Lucia (1882). Five years later, in 1887, one stamp of Natal (SG 106) appeared to this design.

In 1889, a redrawn design appeared showing slight touches to the Queen's crown, the hair 'bun' and throat shading. This is Die II. Stamps to this design were produced for Natal, one stamp, (1889), St. Lucia (1891), Cyprus (1892) and Turks Islands (1893).

After this date the design disappeared except for Cyprus, for which it continued to be used, with successive 'sovereign' heads, uncrowned but with a

small crown suspended above the head, and again facing left, until the 1921-23 issue of King George V. Thus this design had a life-span of just over forty years.

The second Gibbons' listed Key Type is the "Georgian", although, in fact, it first appeared in the reign of Queen Victoria. This is probably the best known of all colonial designs because, altogether, no less than nineteen colonies used it at various times through successive reigns.

The initial design (Die I) again shows the crowned head of the young Victoria facing left within a scalloped octagonal frame supported by side tablets inscribed "POSTAGE/& REVENUE". The title is again at the top, but the value is expressed, variously, at the foot within an elongated hexagonal tablet supported on each side by scroll-work.

This design first appeared in 1889 for the Gold Coast. Seven other colonies used it during the reign of Queen Victoria, the issue of Northern Nigeria not appearing until 1900.

On the accession of King Edward VII, his crowned head facing left, but with a small crown suspended above the head, replaced the head of Victoria. Fourteen colonies, too numerous to specify, used this design during this reign of only nine years.

For the reign of King George V, the only change was the replacement of the head by that of the new king, still facing left, Die I. Fifteen colonies used this design, not necessarily the same colonies as had done so during the previous reign, and all, with one exception, for issues made between 1912 and 1914.

About 1920, the design was redrawn, showing slight retouches to the thick horizontal line either side of the crown, the tops of the side tablets and to the scroll-work at each side of the value tablet. This is Die II and must be carefully looked for when collecting stamps of this design during the reign of King George V. Twelve colonies used this Die II design.

The "Georgian" Key Type survived into the reign of King George VI, whose head now appeared facing right, being used for Leeward Islands and Mauritius (until 1948); and into the present reign, with the Queen's head facing left as before, for the Leeward Islands only. This colony, in fact, issued stamps to this Key Type design in all its forms over five reigns, and when its stamps were withdrawn in 1956, this design had survived for a total of sixty-seven years, a remarkable tribute to its popularity!

A feature of the "Georgian" Key Type, referred to previously, is the variety of expression of the value within the table, five different forms being used. 'Low values' are generally expressed in plain figures in relief on a shaded background, 'high values' in block figures on a plain background, but there are many exceptions. Other varieties occur in the background and in the small inner frame within the tablet. For the Leeward Islands only, the value is expressed in words.

No attempt is here made to associate particular watermarks with Die I and Die II of the "Georgian" Key Type except to quote Gibbons: "Unless otherwise stated in the lists, all stamps with wmk Multiple Crown CA are Die I while those with wmk Multiple Script CA are Die II".

There are at least three other basic designs which, because of their use by, in one case, seven colonies, claim the right to be termed Key Types. These are Types 8/9, 16/17 and 22 of British Honduras, but they are outside the scope of this article. However, a perusal of Gibbons' British Commonwealth catalogue for them and, possibly, others will well reward the collector.