

CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY OF THE 1922-37 BADGE OF ST HELENA STAMP*

By Ian Bruce

The powers that be who decide these things have featured the work of many personalities on St Helena's stamps who either never went to the island or only visited a relatively short time.

It would have been nice if the achievement of my island-born grandfather Thomas R. Bruce had been likewise memorialised this year - few other of St Helena's stamps were in circulation for so many years or have as popular amongst collectors as Tom Bruce's design of the George V 1922-37 Badge of St Helena stamp series. Alas, it was not to be because the centenary of this stamp coincided with a far larger event - the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.



Figure 1: George V Stamp Designed by T. R. Bruce

* Previously published: Ian Bruce, 'Celebrating the Centenary of the 1922-1937 Badge Issue of St Helena', *South Atlantic Chronicle* XLVI, no. 1 (May 2022): 3.

I published an account of Tom Bruce's life and the story his design of this stamp nearly two decades ago.¹ There is not much more I can add to his story so I thought I might instead briefly examine a few historical aspects of three elements of Tom Bruce's design – the central ship and rocks copied from the island's Public Seal, the arum lilies drawn to the left and the New Zealand flax to the right.

The Public Seal

The governments of all British Territories have long applied a wax or embossed Public Seal to all their ordinances, proclamations, contracts and other legal and administrative documents. As well described by Edward Baldwin, the purpose of this is to validate and to guarantee the authenticity of documents.² At St Helena, a similar system had operated up to 1834 when governance of the island had passed from the East India Company to the British Crown.

The first British-appointed governor was George Middlemore who arrived at St Helena on 24 February 1836. The earliest document known to have been validated by the Crown's Public Seal was a commutation of a death sentence signed by Middleton on 23 October 1837. Close inspection of the faint Seal showed it was in the name of William IV. Clearly, the island government was forced to use an out-of-date Seal because that monarch died shortly before this date, on 20 June 1837.



Figure 2: William IV Public Seal

The impression of the Victorian Seal (1837-1901) is much clearer to see. The Royal Arms are displayed above an ornamental frame surrounding a picture of a three-masted ship. The Monarch's name is quoted on the top left-hand side. The rocky outcrop is usually said to represent the Black Rocks located near the most southerly point of the island off Manati Bay. Three furling sails can be seen on each of the three masts.



Figure 3: Impression of Victoria Seal

Gilt armorial devices impressed on the front covers of two books [John Charles Melliss's *St Helena; A Physical, Historical and Topographical Description of the Island* (1875) and Emily Jackson's *St Helena* (1903)] are both based on this Victorian seal, although the latter book was published several years into the reign of the next monarch, Edward VII (1901-1910).

An image of the Edward VII Seal in the form of a counterseal (positive impression in relief in metal) has been sourced from the Royal Mint's museum collection. There are several subtle differences from the Victorian Seal, the most obvious being the sails. The Victorian Seal shows furlled sails with a 3:3:3 pattern on the foremast, mainmast and mizzen mast but all later Seals up to Queen Elizabeth have a 4:4:3 pattern. Also, all post-Victorian monarchs were named on the lower left-hand side.



Figure 4: Edward VII Public Seal

Tom Bruce's 1922 Colony Badge stamp was based on the Seal for the next monarch, George V. The following image also comes from the Royal Mint Museum.



Figure 5: George V Public Seal

The proportions of the stamp design are almost identical to this 1910 badge, with the top royal shield being substituted by the king's head. In addition, the lion and unicorn are replaced by a combination of ribbons and flowers. The design was regarded as a great improvement on earlier issues and has proved popular with collectors ever since. However, E. W. Argyle, the author of a number of articles on postage stamps bearing ship images or with a nautical theme, was not so easily impressed. He wrote the following in 1951:

The East Indiaman shown on the stamps of St Helena is only a gross caricature of such a vessel. I can assure them that the ship depicted never sailed! The Colonial Office book "British Colonial Stamps in current use" 1949 (First Edition) has this to say about the design: "The badge depicts a three masted sailing vessel anchored off two rocky headlands called locally King and Queen Rocks. The origin of this badge is not recorded but as the ship is flying the St George's Cross it would appear to date before 1606 when that emblem went out of fashion".

"I think that a vessel of the type shown would have created a sensation in 1606! The stamp designer seems to have had very little knowledge of ship's rigging and as a result we find that the yards are fouled between the masts and shrouds, the gaff of the mizzen mast seems to have gone over-board, the spars of the mizzen have no halyards or braces and surely no East Indiaman had such a streamlined stern".³

I am even less an expert on ship rigging than I am a philatelist, yet even I can see these criticisms were directed at the wrong target, the ship depicted on Tom Bruce's Crown Badge stamp being an exact copy of the image shown on the George V Public Seal.

Arum Lilies

In addition to the portrayal of the Arum lily on the 1922-37 Crown Colony stamp, this flower also features in later issues - 1984 (50p), 1994 (12p), and 2006 (30p) postage stamps.

Hibbert suggested the flowers drawn to the left of the central shield were Easter lilies (*Lilium longiflorum* or St John's lilies) but this is wrong – the elongated flowers are clearly meant to be Arum lilies (*Zantedeschia aethiopica* or *Calla ethiopica*).⁴ This is not the first time St Helena's Arum lilies and Easter lilies have been confused, exactly the same error having been seen in a recently published book⁵



Figure 6: Arum Lilies, *Zantedeschia aethiopica* or *Calla ethiopica*

Arum lilies were noted as growing at St Helena as early as 1771 by Daniel Solander when he and Joseph Banks arrived for a few days towards the end Captain Cook's first voyage aboard the *Endeavour*.⁶

Mellis accurately wrote that the Arum lily originated from the Cape of Good Hope and suggested it was used as pigfeed.⁷ Given the poisonous nature of the tubers due to the presence of calcium oxalate, its use as pig food might be doubted. However, it is certainly true that early South African settlers knew the plant as "pig lilies" after seeing wild boars rooting up and eating the tubers. Maybe those animals were simply desperate for food because the settlers found it necessary to steep the tubers in boiling water before they could be fed to domestic pigs.⁸ Perhaps this practice was seen and then replicated at St Helena with imported plants. If so, it would not be surprising if they were thrown out as useless, took root and spread around the island

Although it is an imported plant, the Arum lily is often described as St Helena's national flower. As early as 1879 an article by Professor James Mackintosh wrote, "The arum lily is accounted, for some reason, the emblematic flower or badge of St Helena, and is a conspicuous element of church decoration upon festal occasions".⁹

The Arum lily has been used extensively over the years as a decorative flower, a famous example being the decking of Jamestown with the flowers when the Queen Victoria's son the Duke of Connaught visited in October 1910. However, it is an imported plant and several campaigns have been launched in recent decades to replace it as the national flower by the endemic St Helena Ebony plant.

This campaign highlights the bureaucratic mindset of the modern island. Although prominently reported by the two local newspapers in the weeks leading up to a debate by the government Legco in January 2012, they published not a single word on the subject for the next two years. It was apparently decreed that although the Arum lily has for over a century been regarded by St Helenians as their national flower, this was never officially sanctioned by the island government. That means there never was a national flower. Nor will there ever be one – not until it has been formally sanctioned and recognised as such.

Flax

Hibbert wrote rather vaguely about the plant drawn to the right of the central shield of the 1922 stamp, merely describing it as “[..] one of the many flowering plants for which the island is famous”. In fact it is the New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*). This is by no means the most obvious of St Helena’s flowers, typically taking five years before throwing out yellow-orange blooms. On the other hand, it is St Helena’s most prominent plant, covering many acres of land and memorialise a defunct industry that ended more than half a century ago.



Figure 7: Phormium tenax in flower

There is room for only a few aspects of St Helena’s flax industry to be described here. It is not known when the plant was first brought to the island. It has been suggested that it arrived as early as 1792 when Captain Bligh arrived from his second voyage to Tahiti.¹⁰ That seems unlikely because he neither called at New Zealand or Norfolk Island where the plants originally grew nor did he say that he offloaded more than breadfruit, mountain rice seed and sago at St Helena.¹¹ Likewise, a letter to Joseph Banks listing the plants transported by Bligh made no mention of flax.¹²

William Roxburgh listed *Phormium tenax* during his visit to St Helena (1813-14) in just one location – the 119-acre garden of West Lodge, owned by Charles Sampson.¹³ From there the plant must have spread rapidly across the island because by 1851 an island newspaper reported it as “growing wild and with great luxuriance in every part of St Helena”.¹⁴ In later years, New Zealand’s Chief Fibre Expert C. J. Fulton said flax had mainly been grown as hedges around St Helena’s fields, especially in exposed areas.¹⁵

The London-based Colonial and Foreign Fibre Company set up a flax mill near Jamestown’s wharf in 1874. The company went into liquidation in 1880 and closed all its worldwide operations, including the mill at St Helena. The mill stripped the leaves down to its fibres, a process that is accompanied by a high-pitched whine, rather like a sawmill, the noise of which must have dominated Jamestown over the years it operated. The location was logistically absurd - after harvesting in the island’s interior, the cut flax was taken down to Jamestown for stripping, then returned back to drying fields in the interior before being transported all the way back to the mill in Jamestown for compression and tying into bundles for onward shipping.

The industry was revived in 1907 with the opening of a government-run mill at Longwood. The decision to develop this new industry followed the War Office’s closure of St Helena’s garrison, one of the last sources of income for many islanders. Governor Gallwey recklessly

processed the island's entire crop of flax in the first two years ignoring the fact that plants took at least three years to regrow or reach maturity. As a result, operations were disrupted for several years despite efforts by Gallwey and his successor, governor Cordeaux, to encourage widespread and indiscriminate plantings. Neither showed great regard to either the island's already limited capacity to produce its own food or to the destruction of endemic species, especially in the Peak district. The island came close to starvation towards the end of the First World War. In his 1918 report back to the Colonial Office Cordeaux disclaimed all responsibility for the island's inability to feed itself, claiming all blame should be directed at greedy landowners.

Near collapse was faced in 1938 with the closure of eight flax mills because of an inability to compete against world prices of alternative fibres. Thereafter, the island government operated a system of minimum guaranteed prices. New Zealand suffered the same problems, virtually ceasing exports from this time, but St Helena's flax industry struggled on for almost another 30 years as the world's only exporter of Phormium tenax fibre.

In the long term, the social impact of the flax industry was negative. It provided jobs for hundreds of St Helenians, but they were paid very little whilst the wages of other islanders, in both private and public sectors, were pegged to the flax industry. In addition to subsidising the flax mills this forced the island government to subsidise the cost of essential imported foods. The demand for increased wages led to industrial disputes on an unprecedented scale from 1958 onward. Eventually in 1965, the island government decided to bite the bullet, simultaneously scrapping food subsidies and raising its own salaries. This decision was taken with the full and certain knowledge that it would kill off the flax industry because the flax mills could only increase wages by running at a loss.

The story commonly told that the flax industry was destroyed by the British Post Office's unthinking decision to switch from made from New Zealand flax to plastic mailbags is a myth.¹⁶ As result of a recommendation first made about 1913, the British Post Office only used mailbags made from hessian fibre after the First World War. At roughly the same time as it switched to plastic mailbags in the 1960s, the Post Office certainly switched from flax string to rubber bands to bundle letters prior to delivery, but twine only ever represented a small part of St Helena's total flax exports. The Post Office myth may have started from a 1984 newspaper report.¹⁷

¹ Ian Bruce, 'Thomas R. Bruce - The Life of a Saint (1862-1956)', *Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena*, 2008, 3–20; <https://tinyurl.com/4j664tny>.

² Edward Baldwin, 'A History of St Helena's Public Seal.', *Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena*, no. 41 (2012): 19–25.

³ 'Sea Breezes' XI New Series (June 1951).

⁴ Edward Hibbert, *St Helena: Postal History and Stamps* (London: Robson Lowe, 1979), 75.

⁵ Donal P. McCracken, *Napoleon's Garden Island* (Kew: Royal Botanic Gardens, 2022), 270.

⁶ Roy Anthony Rauschenberg, 'Daniel Carl Solander: Naturalist on the "Endeavour"', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 58, no. 8 (1968): 39, <https://tinyurl.com/yc223jhd>; Phil Lambdon, *Flowering Plants & Ferns of St Helena* (Newbury, Berkshire: Pisces Publications for St Helena Nature Conservation Group, 2012), 463.

⁷ John Charles Melliss, *St Helena: A Physical, Historical, and Topographical Description of the Island* (London: L. Reeve & Co, 1875), 341.

⁸ James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Mauritius and South Africa* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1844), 73; <https://tinyurl.com/yckzza3a>.

⁹ James Mackintosh, 'A Glimpse of St Helena', *Ballou's Monthly Magazine* 59, no. July-December (1879): 552–56; <https://tinyurl.com/4bkmytkr>.

¹⁰ G. B. Norcliffe, 'Role of Scale in Locational Analysis; the Phormium Industry in St Helena', *Journal of Tropical Geography*, 1969.

¹¹ Ida Lee, *Captain Bligh's Second Voyage to the South Sea* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1920), 210.

¹² Annabel Tudor, 'Rule Britannia: Britain, Breadfruit, and the Birth of Transoceanic Plant Transportation' (Florida, Rollins College, Hamilton Holt School, 2011). URL: <http://tinyurl.com/n7f4gew>

¹³ McCracken, *Napoleon's Garden Island*, 299.

¹⁴ 'New Zealand Flax', *St Helena Advocate*, 27 November 1851.

¹⁵ "New Zealand Flax in St Helena, Interview with Mr Fulton," *Marlborough Express*, Vol XLII, 31 March 1908, 7. URL: <http://tinyurl.com/pfqk8c2>.

¹⁶ 'P/30/4853: Mail Bags: Proposed General Use of Hessian Bags.' (London: The British Postal Museum & Archive, 1913).

¹⁷ Rory Coonan, 'The Depressing Truth Behind Island's "Toy Town" Facade', *The Times*, 4 April 1984, 30.