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AUSTRALIA'S FIRST NOTES: THE SUPERSCRIBED NOTES

Forgotten Printer's Trials Shed New Light

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Research is a long and laborious task often providing a good deal of frustration as long sought after information only becomes available in dribs and drabs, or even worse continues to evade the researcher. Occasionally if one is prepared to persevere, even the most formidable tasks are often gradually resolved or at least they are resolved in part as more facts become known. Very, very occasionally the persevering researcher strikes oil.

Some years ago I contributed a series of articles to the Australian Coin Review detailing the results of an enormous amount of research over the years about that most elusive of the Australian banknote issues: the first series of 1910 "The Superscribed Notes". The results of that research made available for the first time a fairly comprehensive list of what had been issued. The second edition of the Australian Banknote Catalogue published in 1979 included a published list of approximate quantities of each of the Superscribed Notes for the information of collectors of Australian banknotes. Some questions remain to be ascertained particularly the status of the notes which were overprinted on Colonial Bank of Australia note forms, and research continues into that particular aspect as well as in other directions.

Over the time that I was researching that material for a period of some years, I came across a reference which rather puzzled me suggesting that there had been some superscribed notes overprinted in red. All known examples including those held in official collections such as those of the Reserve Bank are overprinted in black and nobody had ever reported seeing a note overprinted in red, though there was reference in an old piece of correspondence in Reserve Bank records to "Red overprints" and one other reference which I saw some time after publication of the articles also made a similar reference.

These references have been a puzzle. No known examples seemed to have survived and yet the suggestion had occurred in two quite separate and distinct places that some such notes might exist though it seemed difficult to

see how this could have occurred because of the known details of overprinting those private banknotes to convert them into the first Australian note issue in 1910.

Two years ago while conducting research into another aspect of the Australian note issue which was entirely separate from the Superscribed notes, I came across a new reference which I had not been able to follow before and after a good deal of correspondence and assistance from a range of sources I finally tracked down the existence of five notes which were tantalisingly described as "specimens of the first note issue". I was eventually able to obtain coloured photographs of these very interesting notes and lo and behold the problem which had puzzled me all those years was resolved.

The photographs revealed the existence of a set of five notes which had been used to try and ascertain the most desirable way to superscribe the notes. These had apparently been overprinted towards the end of 1910, probably in considerable haste because of the rapid need to produce these notes for reasons which are set out in my Australian Coin Review articles and in the Australian Banknote Catalogue. These notes had been used as a trial to investigate three possible colours of overprint: black, red and violet; two different styles of overprint; to compare a horizontal overprint with a vertical overprint, and to examine some other variations regarding serial numbers and general arrangement of the projected overprint.

The five notes in question are all banknote forms from the Union Bank of Australia Limited and the notes had been intended for use in New Zealand and are all domiciled in Wellington. As set out in my earlier articles, there was a shortage of note forms available for overprinting at this time and it was therefore prudent to use equivalent note forms which were not valid for use in Australia, and thus not to deplete the limited supply of note forms which were available to the Note Printer at that time.

The five notes are of the following denominations: £1, £5, £10, £20 and £50 and all

are payable in Wellington on 1st March 1905. The predominant colour of the notes is dark brown which would distinguish them from the corresponding Australian notes from the Union Bank which are black. All are unissued notes, lacking serial numbers and do not bear signatures with the exception of the £50 note where a handwritten "John" has been crossed out. All notes are stamped "CANCELLED" in large letters towards the top lefthand and bottom righthand corners with a violet hand-stamp. Two holes have been punched through each of the spaces where the serial number would normally be expected to appear and holes have also been punched where the signatures of the manager would normally appear, and there are four holes in each of the four lower denominations and three holes in the £50 note in this situation. Similarly in the space which was normally countersigned near the word "Ent.", there are two holes in most specimens with the exception of the £10 note where there are three such holes. The £50 note form alone does not show any other overprint apart from "CANCELLED" and seems to have been left as a control or perhaps held in reserve.

The notes other than the £50 form all show one or more superscriptions which vary from note to note and the £1 denomination shows a messy, almost bewildering range of overprints. Perhaps it would be sensible to consider each note in turn, beginning with the lowest denomination which bears the greatest number of overprints.

£1 Note

The predominant colour of this note is printed in a black-brown shade and the central background vignette is printed in red. It bears a range of overprints:

- (a) horizontal overprint in black, showing "AUSTRALIAN NOTE" in capital letters (as in the finished and issued notes), with one set of serial numbers at the top left of the superscription: B092510, and at the bottom right B999902. There is no ornamental motif.
- (b) vertical overprint (as in the issued note), in black, in capital letters with B092513 above left and B999905 below right.
- (c) vertical overprint in black, capital letters, B09251(?4) above left and B999906 below right. There are no ornamental motifs.

- (d) vertical overprint in red, with "Australian Note" in cursive script, with serial numbers A157889 above and A143380 below. Again there are no ornamental motifs.

In the cursive script design, the Coat of Arms is placed between the words "Australian" and "Note", none of which is underlined. There is also one isolated "B" printed in the lower margin of the note about an inch and a half from the lower right hand corner which seems to have no connection with any of the other overprints, and there is a second free floating "B", this time inverted, just to the right of the portrait vignette at the five o'clock position. The reason for these two free-floating "B's" is unclear.

The reason for the two seemingly similar overprints (b) and (c) is probably explained by the different positions of the superscription on the note – the first (b) has the upper serial number, the Coat of Arms and AUSTRALIAN NOTE overprinted on the brownish black part of the note (below and including the Queen's portrait), whereas the second such overprint (c) is more centrally placed on the reddish background and stands out much more clearly.

This £1 note form is the most interesting item of the series in that it has the widest number of overprints, but taken together they make for a very confused looking note, and also it is fairly clear as to why the red overprint was not proceeded with against the red background of the £1 note and the dull brownish orange of the £10 note.

£5 Note

This note with a brownish black border has a pale dull green background colour. On this note there are no horizontal overprints, but two vertical overprints in different colours and in different styles.

- (a) The first is a purplish overprint with cursive script which lettering makes the superscription much lighter in appearance than the alternative capital letter overprint. The serial number above is A434836 and below A465027(?A465737), and there are no ornamental motifs.
- (b) A vertical overprint in black in the capital letter style, this time including decorative motifs balancing the serial numbers above and below. The serial number above is

A09999 (five digits) and below is A099991 (six digits).

The ornamental motifs on these notes are similar to those used on the finally issued notes, though the lower motif on this particular note is larger than the upper one. A truncated version of the lower motif seems to be that of the finally issued note (Type One) as described in the Australian Banknote Catalogue.

£10 Note

The basic note is again printed in a black-brown colour with a background colour of dull brownish-orange. There is only one overprint on this note. The superscription is black and is vertical with the cursive script design of overprint. The serial number above left is A434817 and below right is A465008, and again there are no ornamental motifs.

£20 Note

The predominant colour of this note is again brownish-black with a very pale mauve background. The superscription is black and in the capital letters style. The upper serial number is A09999 (five digits) and below is A099990 (six digits). Ornamental plugs are again in use and appear to be similar to those already noted on the £5 note. The upper one is the smaller of the two motifs even though it is embellished with small additions both before and after, than the motif finally used in the issued notes. The lower motif is of the familiar one used on issued notes though here it is made wider by the presence of small additions on each side. The superscription on the £20 note most nearly equates to the superscription as finally issued, apart from alterations to the placement of the serial numbers and to the ornamental motifs and to the general arrangement and balance.

These five notes provide a most interesting record of the various possibilities which must

have occurred to the printer when he was suddenly asked to produce a superscription on a range of differently coloured and designed notes. The undue rush was due to the haste engendered by a Government determined to carry out its pre-election promise with the result that this work was hurried through at as great a rate as possible. What these trial printings show us is that the printer looked at the possibilities of a horizontal or a vertical superscription (and remember that the earlier Queensland Government notes which were a precursor to this later issue had been vertically superscribed).

These experimented overprints also looked at the question of three possible colours of overprint, that is black, red and violet; two different sorts of script: capital letters and cursive script; the serial numbers particularly with regard to their length and position and some variations of the ornamental motifs which were used to balance the arrangement of the serial numbers. The £1 note is rather a mess and probably reflects further the shortage of note forms on which the printer was able to experiment, and I suppose it is to his credit that he was able to make his various decisions on the basis of these four individual note forms.

As far as is currently known these specimens are the only such trial printings known to exist. It would seem fairly unlikely that further specimens are held in various archives, but the possibility must remain that other copies could turn up, though this set of notes does seem in its own way to be a fairly complete series in itself. The publication of information about this fascinating material is a further step in the elucidation of that most interesting of all Australian note issues; the first series issued by the Commonwealth of Australia – the Superscribed Notes.

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