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Peter Thy, P.O. Box 73112, Davis, CA 95617-3112, USA, thy@kronestamps.dk

Forged British Bechuanaland Newspaper Wrappers

by

Peter Thy and John Inglefield-Watson

A recent survey of known essays and proofs for Bechuanaland postal stationery revealed a surprisingly large total of 46 different types and major variants. These are all parts of private collections. An additional much limited number of essays and proofs is known to exist in public collections and archives. Despite the large quantity, only three of these essays appear to have been made for the production of the Bechuanaland newspaper wrappers. One of these is in the Tapling Collection of the British Library. Literally none of these essays identify the printer and overprinter or include approval markings. Therefore, few can unambiguously be identified as genuine.

Because essays and proofs provide important information about the production and printing of postal stationery, their existence and documentation are of considerable importance. Here we describe and discuss two wrappers overprinted 'British Bechuanaland' and believed to be forgeries. The main point of the discussion is to present the forgeries and to illustrate the ambiguity involved in distinguishing between essays and forgeries.

The first of the wrappers in question was made by overprinting the 1/2d greenish slate stamp on 1881 Cape of Good Hope wrappers (Figure 1). The overprint was made in two lines with red ink using 3 mm tall, sans-serif, lower case letters (Figure 2). The 'Bechuanaland.' is 25.5 mm long, including the full stop, and dissimilar to the overprints used on the issued wrappers and other stationery also overprinted by W.A. Richards, Cape Town; red ink was used in 1889 on a 1/2d wrapper (WR 5; H&G E5). However, there is strong similarity to the black overprint on a Cape of Good Hope registration envelope overprinted in 1887 probably by the same printer (RE 4; H&G C2). The two overprints are shown in Figure 2. Both overprints were done with the same type, including a rather unusual large full stop. The forged overprint is wider spaced resulting in 'Bechuanaland.' slightly longer (25.5 mm) than for the genuine overprint (25 mm). It can also be seen that the forged overprint is poorly aligned with 'Bechuanaland.' sloping up toward the full stop. Another observation is that the 'a's of the forged overprint appear more condensed than the genuine 'a's. It is thus clear that there is differences, despite small, between the alleged forged and the genuine overprints. A very similar overprint as used on RE 4 exists on a postcard essay (PC E(5)). This overprint again is poorly aligned, but otherwise identical with normal 'a's.

The forged wrapper received a 1985 certificate from 'The Royal Philatelic Society of London' with the opinion of the Expert Committee stating: "...the item submitted as Bechuanaland 1885. H&G No. 1. 1/2d grey newspaper wrapper - red overprint - BRITISH BECHUANALAND - unused - has Forged Overprint." A request for additional information from the RPSL Expert Committee revealed that their worksheets do not contain further information. The present Chairman of the Expert Committee, however, points out that the typeface is similar to that used for RE 4 (P. Pearson, personal communication, 2001). The argument is, therefore, that the wrapper has a forged overprint based on that typeface. The Expert Committee did not consider that it might have been an essay for a non-issued wrapper done at the same time and in the same print shop where the registration envelope was produced. As pointed out here, the wrapper is forged because of small differences in the type used and not because it never was issued.

The other alleged forged wrapper was made by overprinting the 1/2d red-brown stamp on a 1889 British wrapper (Figure 3). The overprint was made in two lines with black ink using 2 mm tall, serif, lower case letters (Figure 4). The 'Bechuanaland.' is 16.5 mm long, including the full stop. The British wrappers issued in Bechuanaland were overprinted by De La Rue in London using a typeface very different from that normally employed by W.A. Richards in Cape Town. However, the typeface used on the forged wrappers is typical of that used by W.A. Richards. If the forged wrapper was an essay made in Cape Town, the use of a British wrapper appears unlikely. On the other hand, the used typeface was widely in use at the turn of the Century and also likely to have been available at De La Rue, although perhaps not often used. W.A. Richards made several very similar 'British Bechuanaland' overprints on Cape stamps and stationery. Two issued postcards were overprinted 'British Bechuanaland' with 'Bechuanaland' measuring 15 mm (PC 4, without full stop; H&G 1b) and 17.5 mm (PC 2, with full stop; H&G 1a) long. Four issued wrappers were likewise overprinted with 'Bechuanaland' 14 mm (WR 1 and WR 2, without full stop; H&G E1 and E2) and 17.5 mm (WR 5 (red ink) and WR 6, both with full stop; H&G E5 and E6). Thus the length of 'Bechuanaland.' of the forged wrapper differs from any of those used on the issued stationery. This observation by itself do not justify defining the wrapper as forged and not an essay. The main reason is the unlikely use of a British wrapper in Cape Town. This wrapper has to our knowledge never been submitted for an expert opinion.

To put this in perspective, the three alleged essays known to exist were done by overprinting the same type of 1/2d Cape wrapper. The first two of these were done by overprinting the stamp in two lines using (1) large serif capital letters 2.5 mm high and (2) small serif capital letters 1.5 mm high. The last essay occurs in the Tapling Collection and was done using tall, thin sans-serif block capital letters 2.5 mm high with 'BECHUANALAND' measuring 18.5 mm. None of these overprints matches the issued wrappers, nor the alleged forgeries, and offer no clear evidence, such as printer and archival markings, to suggest that they actually were essays.

The obvious question is clearly why the two wrappers illustrated here are judged to be forgeries and not essays? And why the two essays illustrated in our book, and the one in the Tapling Collection, are judged to be essays and not forgeries. The fact is that we cannot verify the claims for certain. If any of these were submitted for expertizing, it is conceivable that they will receive the judgments that they are forgeries.

The overprint on the first forged wrapper is very similar to an overprint on a presumed issued registration envelope (not known used). Only small differences in the lettering and alignment allow us to suggest that the wrapper a forgery. Despite this, the possibility remains that the overprint was an essay for an unadopted wrapper that after proper alignment and perhaps replacement of faulty type was adopted for the issued registration envelope. The overprint on the second forged wrapper was done on a British wrapper with typeface similar to one at the time often used by the Cape of Good Hope Government Printer (W.A. Richards) on several issued British Bechuanaland stationery items. The use of a

British wrapper and a overprint style typically used by the Cape Government Printer is the main reasons for suspecting a forgery. The overprint is difficult to attribute to an established security printer like De La Rue. The known overprint essays are dissimilar to those on any of the issued wrappers and other stationery. For these, there is simply no evidence to suggest otherwise than they are essays for not adopted designs.

Note:

The catalogue numbers quoted are from 'Thy, P. and Inglefield-Watson, J., The Bechuanalands and Botswana Postal Stationery, British Philatelic Trust.' The book is expected to be published sometime during 2002. The H&G numbers are after the Higgins and Gage Catalogue.

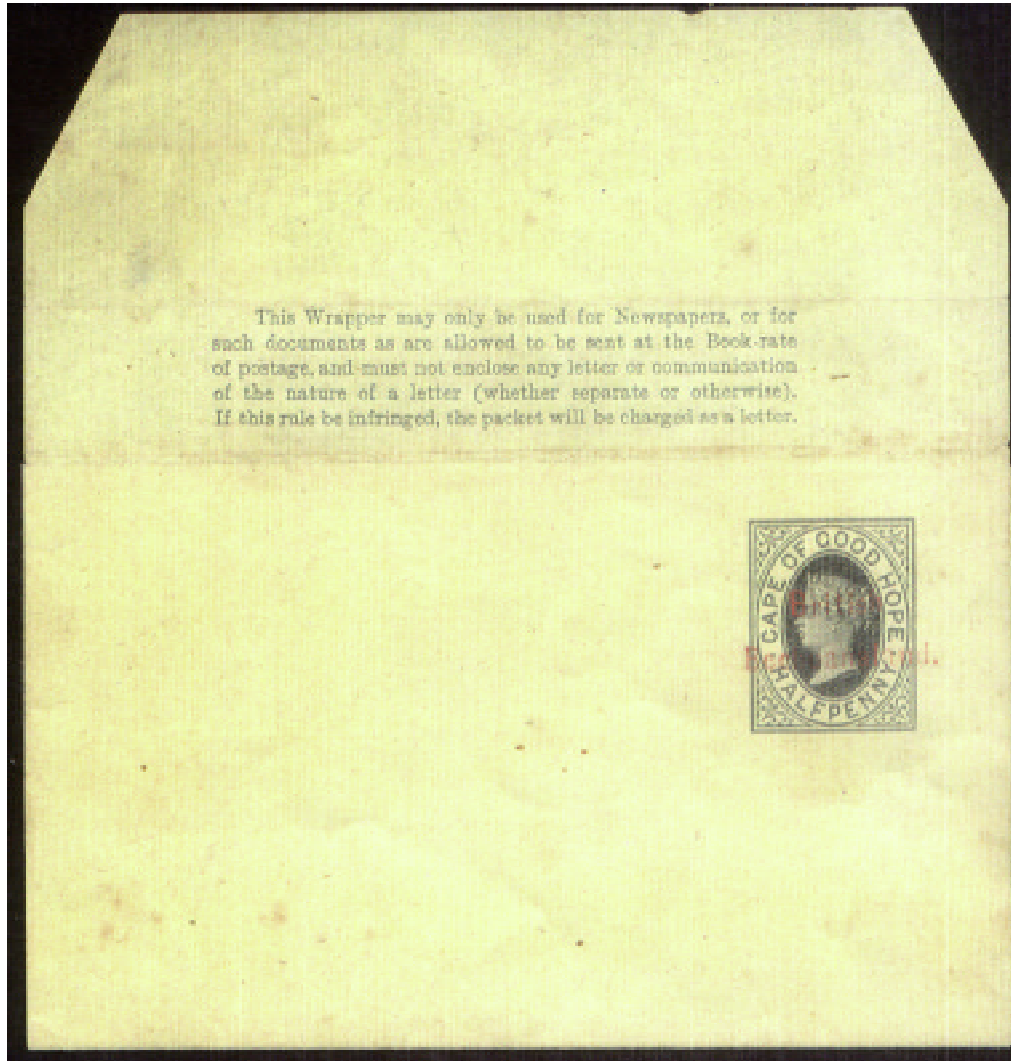


Figure 1. Half penny Cape of Good Hope newspaper wrapper with forged red 'British Bechuanaland.' overprint.



Figure 2. Forged overprint on wrapper (upper) and genuine overprint on registration envelope (RE 4; H&G C2) (lower).

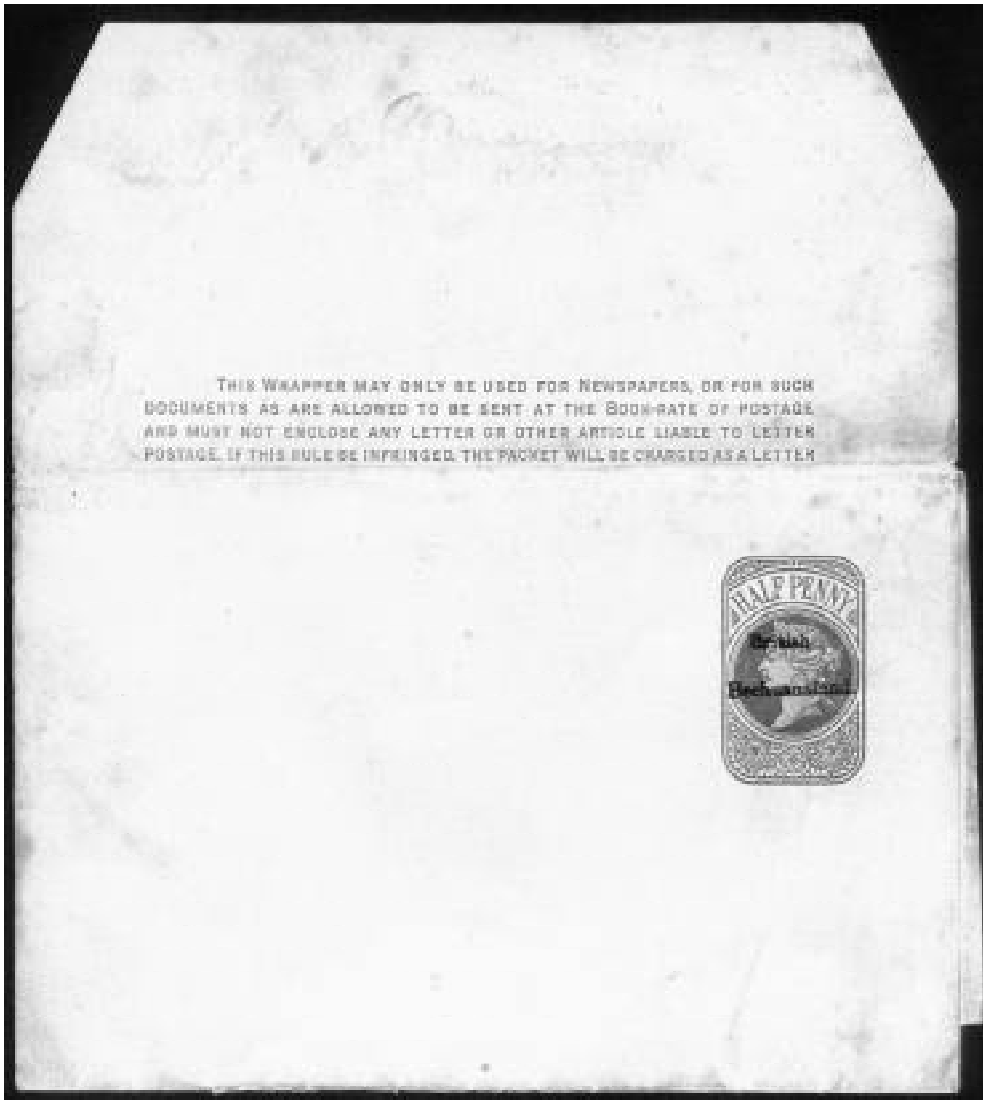


Figure 3. Half penny British newspaper wrapper with forged 'British Bechuanaland.' overprint.

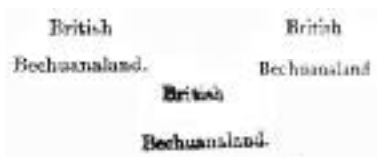


Figure 4. Forged overprint (lower) on wrapper and genuine overprints used on postcard and wrappers (upper right, WR 5, WR 6, PC 2; upper left, WR 1, WR 2, PC 4). The corresponding H&G numbers are E5, E6, 1a, E1, E2, and 1b, respectively.

