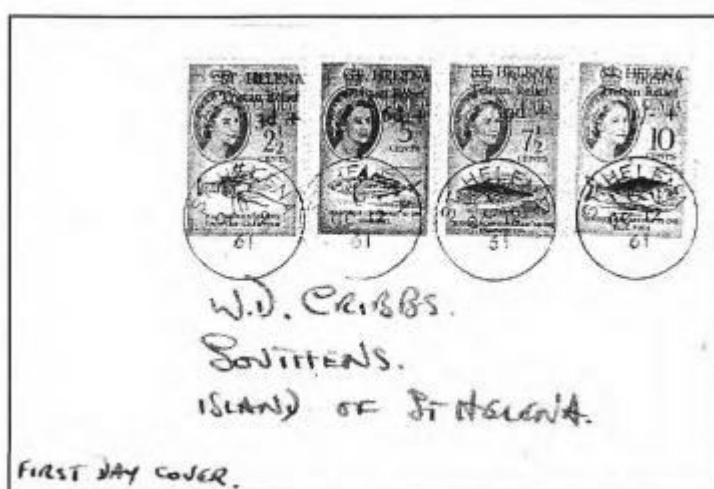


THERE'S A STORY BEHIND ST HELENA'S TRISTAN OVERPRINTS

by Trevor W. Hearl

The story behind the Tristan Relief Fund overprints, illustrated in the October 2000 South Atlantic Chronicle (Vol. XXIV, No. 4) seems, as I have heard it told, too good not to share. The cover, readers will recall, carried four Tristan stamps of the 1961 "Marine Life" issue in South African decimal currency, for 2 1/2, 5, 7 1/2, and 10 cents, overprinted with Sterling equivalents and the words "St Helena Tristan Relief," self-addressed to W. D. Cribbs, Southens, Island of St Helena." The stamps were carefully cancelled with the St Helena CDS on the date of issue, "Oc 12 61" (October 12, 1961).



The cover described in Trevor Hearl's article



Donald Cribbs, who must have long retired from the Colonial Service by now, was the Government Auditor at St Helena from 1960 to 1963, living at the historic house near Friar's Valley named after an early 18th century Sergeant Southens. When news of Tristan's volcanic tragedy and evacuation reached St Helena on 11

October 1961, the Governor, Sir Robert Alford, launched a Tristan Relief Fund and appealed for money-raising schemes to boost its coffers. Cribbs, an amateur philatelist, immediately thought of the Tristan stamps kept at the Post Office for sale to visitors. Nothing seemed more appropriate than to exploit them in aid of the Fund by making a Sterling surcharge of 3d, 6d, 9d, and 1/- on their decimal value.

The Colonial Treasurer agreed and in no time the project received Sir Robert's blessing. The Government printer set up his press for the novel and tricky task of overprinting sheets of Philatelic Magazine. But none could have reached London before the cables started humming between Whitehall and Jamestown. The first hint that islanders got of any storm brewing came a week later, on Thursday, October 19, when Main Street shoppers were surprised to see a stern-faced Governor striding up from The Castle with the Treasurer, making for the Post Office. There are no reports of smoke curling up from behind the building shortly afterwards, but in fact, Whitehall had ordered Sir Robert to get the overprints burned forthwith. And, they reminded him in no uncertain terms, that the authorization of stamp issues was their prerogative through the Crown Agents.

The Tristan Relief Fund's loss became philately's gain. As Edward Hibbert noted in *St Helena Postal History and Stamps* (1979, p. 93), they had innocently created "one of the rarest issues made by any of the colonies this century". Cribbs' cover still took Stanley Gibbons by surprise when auctioned in 1999, however -- opportunely on 14 October - doubling their estimate by realizing £1495. I suspect there must be more to this story than has yet been told.

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