

OLD GRAHAM'S PHILATELIC TALES NO.6



One of my favourite books is "Philatelic Forgers-their Lives and Works", which is as you can imagine is full of shadowy stories of how forgers make a dishonest buck. One however is curiously missing, so for today's story, I thought I would shine a light into her world. Her world, did you say? Yes, the majority of these crooks were male, but not Madame Joseph.

This lady was either French or Belgian, and her first name is unknown. She and others used fake handstamps to turn mint stamps into more valuable used ones. Examples would be the 1933 issue of the Falkland Islands where the addition of postmarks to the set of twelve stamps adds around £1000 to the catalogue price; another would be the 1922 to 1937 set of stamps showing the Badge of St. Helena-the addition of postmarks here would double the value over the mint set. Over 400 fake cancels were used, mainly for British Commonwealth stamps. Some 311 were made of wood, some of which may have been made in France. The remaining 125 are made of zinc or copper. The wooden hand cancellers have been hand carved to a very high standard. Madame Joseph may have been the "front" as it was she who served customers at her premises in Irving Street, London, while others (including an even more shadowy husband) may have been hard at work in the rest of the premises.

Madam Joseph was a wholesaler of the amended stamps to the philatelic trade, with the Stamp Dealers then passing on their wares to the general public. The cancels could have been hired out to some dishonest stamp dealers, but logic would tell you that this could affect the Madame's profit-margins. Heavily mounted mint stamps would, ahem, be "improved" by making them into a fine used stamp. The cancellation could also have been used to mask repairs to damaged stamps.

When was this carried out? Seventy six of the wooden cancellers are dated from May 1935, and this would suggest that this was the point when the operation commenced in a serious fashion, for the 1935 Silver Jubilee. This would allow some dishonest dealers to complete and sell their omnibus sets without delay. In some cases, the dates of cancellation are before the arrival of the stamps in the territory. (To take one example, only two sheets of the Moroccan Agency stamps managed to reach

Morocco in time for the first day of issue). The most recently dated cancel of the cancellers is made of rubber, and it is (Aden) Seiyun. It may well have been a genuine cancel - it is dated from 1967. Examples of four of the cancels are shown at the beginning of this article.

There is even a story that Madame Joseph lent her talents to provide forged documents for the French Resistance during the Second World War. Whether this was in France, whether she was working for the British Government in the UK, or whether this is just a nice story, I could not tell. Logic would suggest the latter if she was active in the UK from 1935 onwards.

The collection of cancels was inherited by a London Stamp Dealer called Gordon Rhodes at some unknown point. He operated a stamp shop at 17A Lime Street in the City of London. On his demise, the cancels passed to his employee, Cecil Rhodes. They appear to have funded the gambling habit of Mr Rhodes in the 1960s.

To take one small country, Grenada: there are eleven Madame Joseph cancels. The first two are in copper dated the 12th of December 1894 and the 6th of October 1909 respectively. The remainder are made of wood with dates between the 19th of November 1934 and the 9th of November 1943. There are two different cancellations for the Silver Jubilee issue dated the 6th of May 1935. The first one has no horizontal bar on the "G" of Grenada. They are all very convincing.

What happened to the cancels after "Madame Joseph" ceased to operate? They now reside in the museum of the Royal Philatelic Society in London, after the veteran stamp dealer, Derek Worboys, stepped in to remove this menace from the Stamp Trade.

Collectors may find some of these items in their own collections. There are two excellent books, "**Madame Joseph Forged Postmarks**" which appeared in 1994, and "**Madame Joseph Revisited**", which appeared in 2005, if you want to find out more about the individual cancels. They do now command a premium over the real stamps. Sacre Blue, mon ami!