

An official postal service was introduced in Abu Dhabi in 1963, with its first stamps appearing the following year – but in 1973 they were superseded by those of the United Arab Emirates. In spite of this relatively short period, the stamps of Abu Dhabi are full of interest, as Rufus Barnes shows in the first of two articles on the subject, this time concentrating on the British Postal Agency period, up to the end of 1966.

Abu Dhabi – The Last British Postal Agency

By Rufus Barnes

My parents bought me my first 'Part 1' catalogue in late 1965/early 1966. I was 12. I had been collecting stamps in a haphazard way since I was about 7, but my new catalogue enabled me to focus my thoughts on what I might collect more seriously. My decision was simple—I would only collect those countries that I thought I might be able to complete because they had issued few stamps, which in total were relatively cheap. On that criteria and that alone I started collecting Abu Dhabi and I have never regretted it. Some countries, like Australian Antarctic Territory and Cocos (Keeling) Islands, I collected for a number of years but then sold what had become quite good collections in order to fund improvements to my remaining interests—including Abu Dhabi. I soon found that, what appeared in the catalogue to be countries whose basic stamps were affordable, were a totally different kettle of fish once one started looking at varieties and postal history!

I abhor the concept of philately as a way of investing money—it distorts the market for real collectors—and some at least in the stamp trade have made matters worse by giving what seemed to me at the time to be wholly erroneous advice. Indeed in the days when Urch Harris was a major new issues dealer and they produced a monthly digest magazine, I wrote the only letter ever published by them. A previous editorial had argued that if collectors wanted to make a good investment they should buy new issues of the most popular countries—there would always be demand for them! Thinking of how few people collected the stamps of Abu Dhabi, I suggested that the Urch Harris argument was the exact opposite of the truth. If people really wanted to invest in stamps for the long term then they should consider those countries that were ignored and which would prove scarce in the future. Abu Dhabi has proved to be one such territory, as we

shall discover in this article and a follow-up article covering the period between postal independence and the establishment of the United Arab Emirates Post Office on 1 January 1973. In particular, genuine postally used covers (preferably registered) command extraordinary prices because of demand from wealthy Middle Eastern collectors who are now showing interest in their postal history heritage.

Postal services were not officially introduced in Abu Dhabi, the largest of what were then the Trucial States, until 30 March 1963. Prior to that date the small amount of mail from Abu Dhabi was sent to Bahrain for despatch from the British Postal Agency post office there.

Fig 1 Only covers with the sender's address can be identified as coming from Das Island

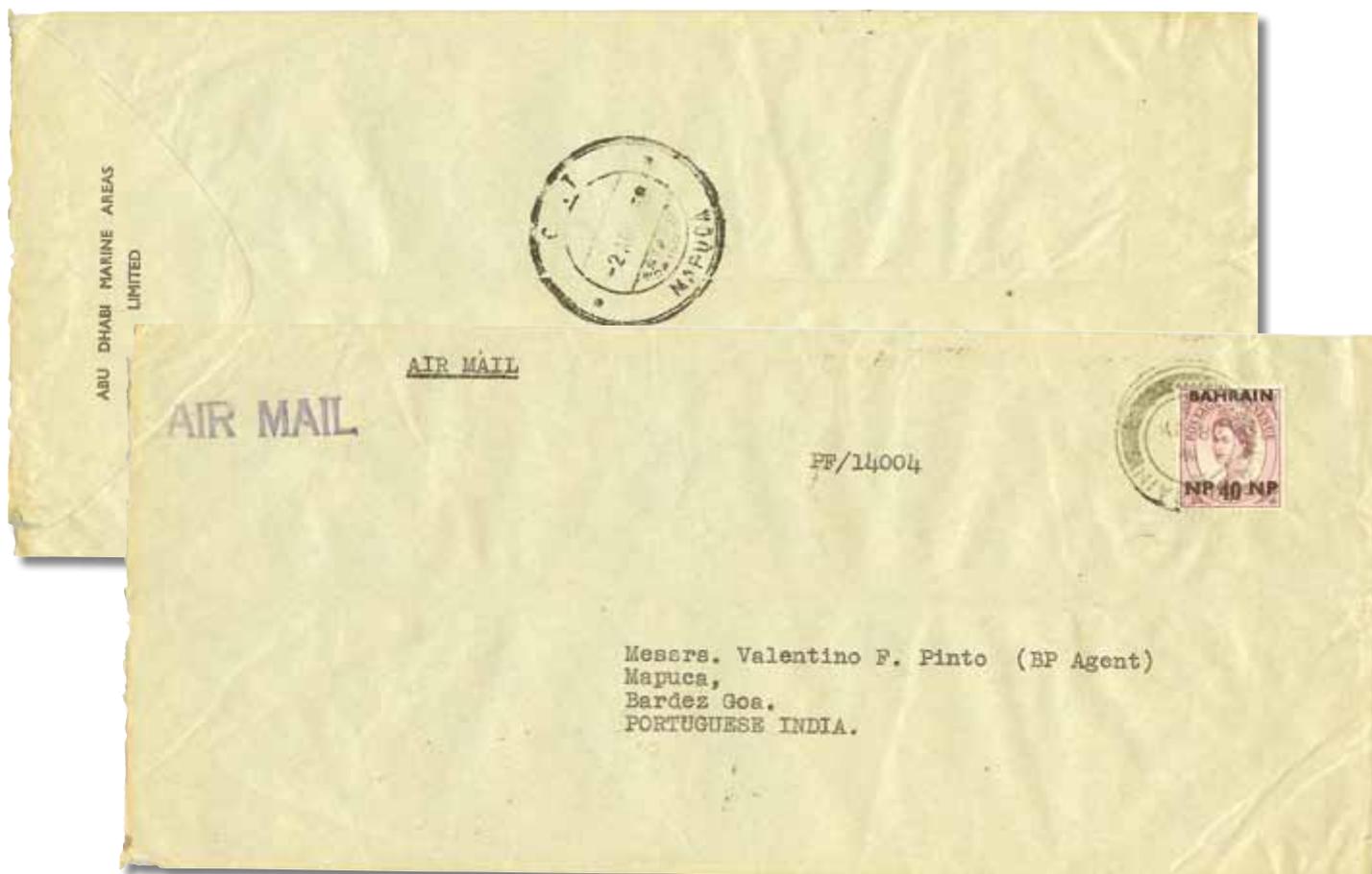




Fig 2 First day covers bearing the overprinted British stamps had an official cachet applied



Fig 3 An official first day cover envelope and postmark were produced for the first Abu Dhabi definitive issue

Das Island

A sort of postal ‘facility’ was introduced on Das Island, which is owned by Abu Dhabi and located mid-way between Abu Dhabi and Qatar, according to Neil Donaldson in his excellent work *Postal Agencies in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf* ‘probably before December 1960’ to meet the needs of oil exploration workers. This ‘facility’ comprised a supply of the British stamps overprinted in ‘NP’ or Rupees, as used in Muscat. Envelopes with these stamps applied were taken to Bahrain where they were postmarked with a Bahrain datestamp. Only covers clearly indicating the sender’s address as being Das Island can be identified as being from this source (Fig 1).

The then Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheik Shakhbut bin Sultan, had refused to allow the introduction of the Trucial States stamps prepared by the British Post Office, and used at Dubai, because the low values depicted seven palm trees of differing heights which suggested to him that some of the seven Trucial States were more important than others! Which one represented Abu Dhabi? Thus, when postal services were introduced on 30 March 1963, it was the NP and Rupees

overprinted stamps of GB which were placed on sale at the two post offices—one in the town of Abu Dhabi and the other at the now official post office on Das Island. Covers sent on the first day had an official cachet applied and Donaldson records only about 200 such covers exist from Das Island (Fig 2). It is worth checking used copies of the 2r. and 5r. values of these stamps with Abu Dhabi postmarks for the different printings recorded in the catalogue—none are common with Abu Dhabi postmarks and some are positively scarce.

The first definitives

One year to the day after the opening of the post office, the British overprinted stamps were replaced by the first Abu Dhabi definitive issue, depicting the Ruler, either alone, or with a gazelle, or with various structures to be found in his country. As with the stamps issued by the British Post

Office at that time, and these stamps were issued under British Post Office auspices, the low values were printed in photogravure by Harrisons and the high values in recess by Bradbury Wilkinson. An official first day cover envelope and first day of issue postmark were produced for the first time (Fig 3). The British overprints, however, remained valid for use alongside the new stamps until the British Postal Agency closed at the end of December 1966 and covers can be found with combinations of the GB overprints and the new stamps as well as just the GB overprints well after their withdrawal from sale.

On the same day as the new stamps were released, a 30n.p. aerogramme was placed on sale—the stamp imprint being the same design and colour as the 30n.p. definitive. A second printing of the aerogramme, with a different layout of the ‘sender’ panel, was produced and is regarded as scarce since the vast majority of the printing was utilised

Genuine postally used covers command extraordinary prices

Fig 4 There were two printings of the 30n.p. aerogramme. The sender panel of the second having four address lines of equal length

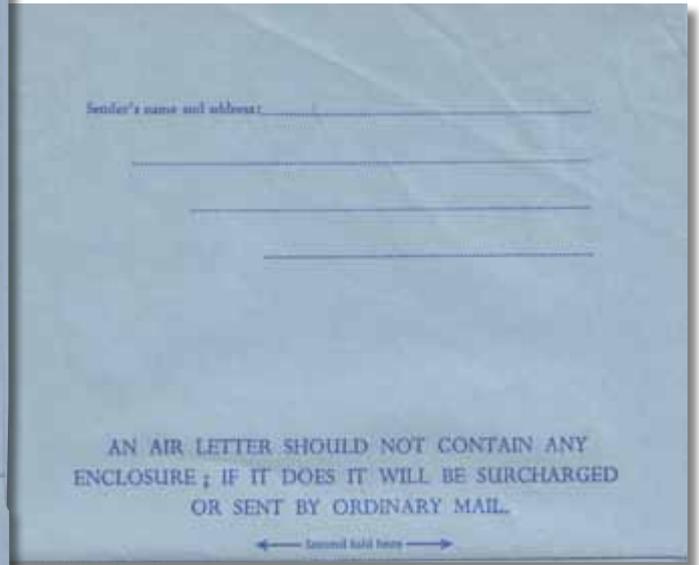
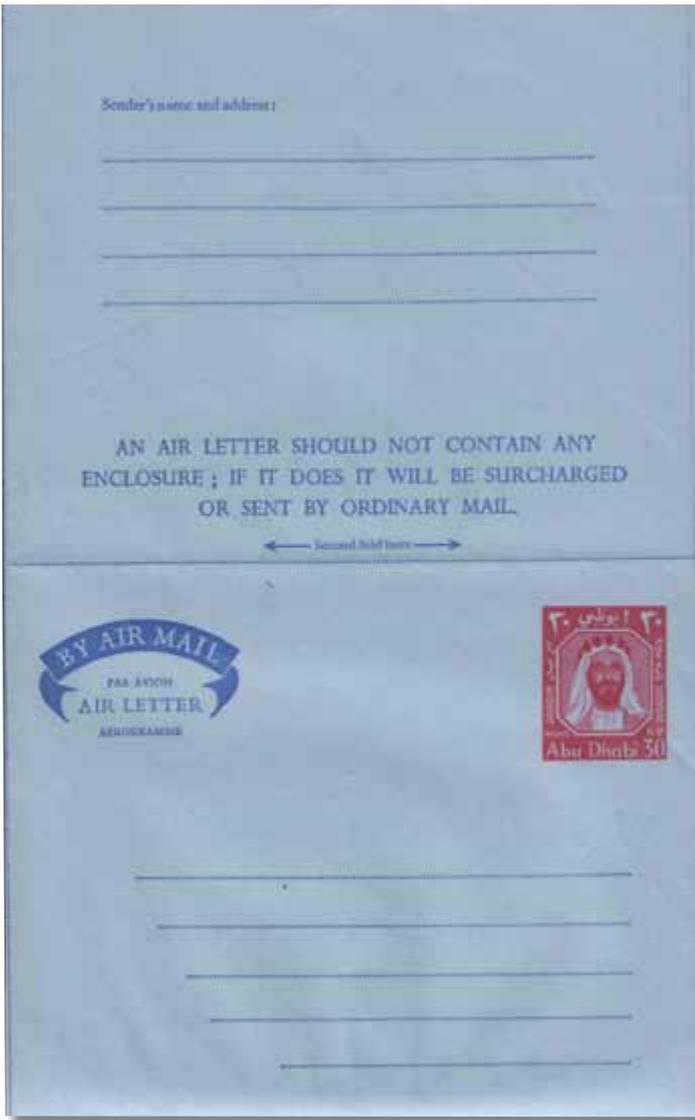


Fig 5 The white dot in frame variety can be found on both printings of the aerogramme



Fig 6 Revalued stamps and aerogramme with Sheikh Shakhbut's head obliterated were released on 1 October 1966



Fig 8 Constant varieties of clubbed, short and additional overprint bars exist

Fig 7 30n.p. surcharge with Arabic '20' instead of '30'

Fig 9 Inverted 20f. surcharge on the original perf 14 printing of the 20n.p. value



to create the overprinted/revalued version referred to below. The two back panels and a single front panel are shown in Fig 4; the panel at the right coming from the original printing. Commercially used examples of the 30n.p. aerogramme (and indeed all Abu Dhabi aerogrammes) are exceedingly rare and in November 2010 an example sold on e-bay for over £200. A printing variety exists on some examples of both printings of this aerogramme, namely a white dot on the frame line above the 'bi' of 'Dhabi'—the normal and variety are shown alongside each other in Fig 5.

30 March seems to have been an important date in the early years of the Abu Dhabi post office. On 30 March 1965 an attractive set of three stamps were issued depicting falcons. Although there was no indication on the stamps to this effect, they were produced to mark the second anniversary of the opening of the post office.

Family coup

On 6 August 1966 Sheik Shakhbut, a man still steeped in the quiet lifestyle of the Trucial Oman prior to the discovery of oil, was overthrown by a family coup organised by his more forward-thinking brother, Sheik Zaid. The hand-over of the post office to local control, then planned for 1 September was postponed and the British Postal Agency arranged for existing stocks of the definitive stamps depicting the deposed Sheik Shakhbut to be overprinted with the former Sheik's head defaced by horizontal bars and revalued in the newly adopted currency of fils and dinars. This work was carried out by the Arabian Printing and Publishing House in Bahrain. The stamps and the aerogramme, similarly overprinted and revalued, were issued on 1 October 1966 (Fig 6). First day covers of this set are rare and an example sold on e-bay in October 2009 for £343!!

This overprinted set of stamps provides collectors with an extensive range of varieties to search for, one of which, the Arabic '20' instead of '30' fils on 30n.p. only exists on five single stamps and is the most expensive Abu Dhabi stamp priced in the catalogue (Fig 7). The error was found and corrected during the overprinting process and all the sheets containing the error were supposed to have been destroyed, but five got away. Examples of both the 30f. on 30n.p. and 75f. on 75n.p. are known with a double overprint,



Fig 10 A letter from the Philatelic Bureau revealed that they had run out of the 5f. and 10f. values

albeit one albino. Constant varieties exist with clubbed, short, or additional overprint bars—all adding to the fun of collecting this set. A selection of these varieties are illustrated in Fig 8.

For one value, the 20f. on 20n.p. there was an added issue to contend with. Stocks of the original stamp were running low and a reprint had been obtained but not released by the Abu Dhabi post office prior to the overthrow of Sheik Shakhbut. The new printing was perf 13×13½, whereas the original printing was perf 14½. It was initially believed that only reprinted sheets had been sent to Bahrain for overprinting/revaluing, but it later emerged that a few sheets of the initial printing had found their way to the Bahraini printers and one such sheet went through the printing machine upside down (Fig 9). Later still it was discovered that at least one sheet of the reprint had not been overprinted/revalued and stamps in this unoverprinted state were sold either at post offices or through the Philatelic Bureau. Both these varieties are priced at a considerable premium over their correct counterparts; even more prized are used examples, although I am not sure whether any used examples of the reprint without overprint/revaluation exist—it is not a priced item in the catalogue. Collectors should keep their eyes out for these varieties.

The last in the world

The British Postal Agency in Abu Dhabi—the last one anywhere in the world—eventually closed on 31 December 1966, but the overprinted stamps remained on sale at post offices until 31 March 1967 and were valid for a little time longer. Donaldson in his book records 3000 of the 1 dinar value were sold, making that the maximum number of sets possible, however a fair quantity of the 1 dinar stamp were commercially used, resulting in the set remaining sought after unmounted mint. It is interesting to note, however, that full sets of these stamps were still available from the efficiently run, but not very well patronised Abu Dhabi Philatelic Bureau up until 28 February 1972, when I was fortunate enough to buy at face value the last three sets of these stamps they had in stock. Dealers were even at that stage charging many multiples of face value for a set they had believed had been withdrawn five years previously. It was also surprising to learn, in the letter accompanying the stamps, that in fact it was the 5f. and 10f. values that the Philatelic Bureau had run out of, not the much scarcer 1 dinar (Fig 10).

During this British Postal Agency period, in addition to the first day of issue postmark referred to above, five identifiably different circular datestamps were used to cancel regular mail at Abu Dhabi post offices—

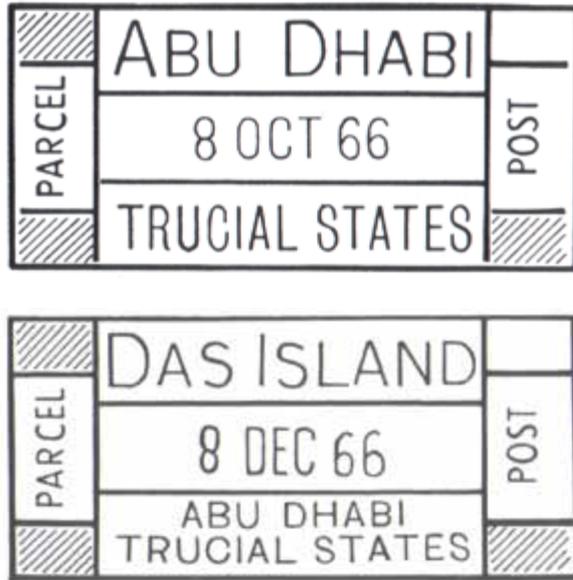
The overprinted set of stamps provides collectors with an extensive range of varieties to search for



Figs 11 to 13 Abu Dhabi town office postmarks



Figs 14 and 15 The two Das Island postmarks



Figs 16 and 17 Abu Dhabi and Das Island parcel post datestamps



Fig 18 An Official Paid handstamp was introduced in 1966

Fig 19 A misrouted cover sent from Dubai to Oman

