

# 'A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS', Number Twenty-Three 'What Can You Buy for a Ha'penny?'

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For the benefit of people for whom English is not their first language, and most people under 50, I should start with an explanation of the archaic contraction "ha'penny", which is pronounced "hayp-nee" and is, simply, a coin worth half a penny.

According to the 'Meriam-Webster English Dictionary', this odd little word was first recorded in English literature way back in 1579. That's almost 550 years ago so it must, you may think, have been coined by William Shakespeare. However, the Bard was born in 1564, causing me to have a healthy scepticism for any claims that he invented "ha'penny" at the age of 15.



In 1966, we progressive Australians adopted decimal currency, under which regime one penny became worth one cent, and the humble ha'penny was discarded. But there was a time, even in living memory for those of us in our dotage, when a ha'penny had real value. For a ha'penny you could buy one lolly, perhaps a clinker, or candy teeth.

So, while it was never a BIG deal, a ha'penny did have some intrinsic value.

In fact, as I have recorded in a previous column, if you go back well over a hundred years, there were three different Australian ½d postal rates, one of which allowed you to send a newspaper to New Zealand.<sup>(1)</sup> And that is simply extraordinary!

If you have been a regular reader of my articles, you will know that my interest in collecting basic stamps waned many years ago. As that passion waned, so my passion for postal history waxed.<sup>(2)</sup>

Don't get me wrong; I still appreciate a fine or rare stamp. I can be as delighted by a superlative 'Sydney View' - the one-in-a-thousand of such remarkable quality - as I am by an airmail crash cover - an item that exudes character through its distress.

What really floats my boat is the story behind a philatelic item. Stamps have stories but they are usually limited to the origin of the design and the manufacturing processes, and what they are worth.

A cover, a piece of used postal stationery, and even the humble postcard that has been through the mail, all have real-life stories to tell. Where did they originate; where were they addressed;

how did they travel; what mis-adventures did they experience on their journeys; how were they processed on arrival; and what do all those handstamps mean?

In this context, the stamp is important for the job it has done, paying or part-paying the cost of getting the article from Point A to Point B. If the stamp is removed from its envelope etc, the story is lost, although the denuded article still has a story to tell, culminating in the wanton vandalism of a human. (It isn't just animals and birds for whom Man is the mortal enemy, it's also paper artefacts.)

If the stamp survives, it should at least be respected for the service it has performed, even if the how-when-where-what-and-why is utterly compromised. The same cannot be said of the unmounted mint Two Pound Kangaroo that has had a cosseted existence in the finest of stamp albums or, perhaps, been ignominiously "slabbed"<sup>(3)</sup> by a benighted American entrepreneur.



None of the ha'penny stamps shown here has any commercial value. However, the letters etc from which they were removed may well have been significant items of postal history, each with an engaging story to tell, those stories now lost forever.

My colleague, Torsten Weller, spent time as a teenager working for Caulfield dealer Ray Winkleman. A lady had phoned to say she had a hoard of stamps to sell. She was invited to bring them to Ray's shop. The guys' reaction to the many thousands of common tuppenny (2d) KGV stamps, all still on very small pieces of paper, was "What a pity somebody tore them off the envelopes". To which their visitor responded: "Oh, I did that, because otherwise they would have been too heavy to bring on the tram".

Aaaaagggghhhhh!!!!

What was potentially thousands of dollars' worth of postmarks - this at a time when postmarks were avidly and widely collected - had been reduced by their owner to a quantity of worthless scrap.

And that's why I have spent decades imploring people not to tear stamps off envelopes.

That's probably enough background information, so I'll move on to discussing the subject of this column.



It is my pleasure to introduce a very attractive usage of one of Australia's first issues of postal stationery, in this case a 1911 1d Letter Card bearing the amateurish and unflattering portrait of King George V, for which the perpetrator, Samuel Reading, should have been sacked rather than allowed to go on to immortality as engraver of the iconic Kangaroo & Map stamps.

The first point of interest is that most stamp collectors believe that Australia's first stamps were the said Kangaroo issue of 1913. In fact, two years earlier, the Reading 'Fullface' portrait with 'AUSTRALIA' at the top had been introduced, printed on both Letter Cards and Postal Cards. Also, and while they are of a different class, the first Postage Due stamps inscribed 'AUSTRALIA' were issued in 1902.

Hopefully, these facts can seep deep into the consciousness of collector and dealer alike. The Kangaroo stamps are not, and never were, the first issue of Australian stamps.

Of course, the 1911 postal stationery issues were orphaned in a philatelic world overwhelmingly populated by the adhesive stamps of the six Australian States. The good thing about this is the combination frankings that were inevitably created.<sup>(4)</sup> The cards could be sent without additional postage only within Australia or to British Empire destinations. To be despatched to foreign parts, or if used locally but registered, one or more stamps of one or more of the six States needed to be affixed.<sup>(5)</sup>

Such frankings are common from Victoria and New South Wales. They are less available from Queensland and South Australia. They are decidedly scarce from Tasmania and Western Australia, the two least populous States.



Our subject was posted to Germany from the tiny WA settlement of Balbarrup, located in the timber-harvesting region near Manjimup, almost 300km due south of the State capital of Perth. The foreign letter rate at the time was 2½d (= tuppence ha'penny), which required the addition of the ½d and 1d Swan stamps. It looks like the sender might have wanted to obscure the unpopular (some thought "odious") portrait of the King, but at the last moment thought better of it. (In some countries he might have been arrested for such a slight against the monarchy. Think Thailand.)

By this date, 5th November 1911, the unframed Balbarrup datestamp was really showing its age.<sup>(6)</sup> The two under-inked strikes are barely legible and it is fortunate that the sender wrote the town's name at the top of his letter, within the card.

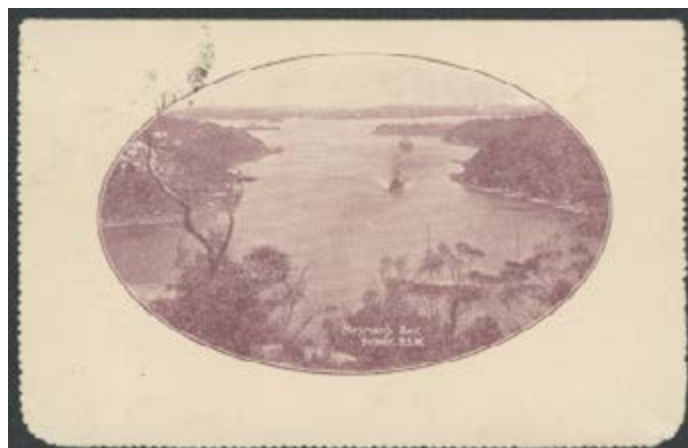
To protect the contents, these Letter Cards had a border that projected beyond the perforations, the reverse of which was gummed to allow the article to be sealed against unwanted inspection. In Europe, especially in Germany, it was a common practice to open Letter Cards without removing the outer border. This was done by careful use of a blade along the perforations to separate just one panel from the whole article.

One might see this as an admirable Teutonic trait, but it often results in such items appearing to be philatelic/collectors' mail. My personal preference is for the margins to be fully removed, as here. Unfortunately, such removal often resulted in at least minor damage to the Letter Card, a situation that makes undamaged examples, such as this, much scarcer and far more desirable.

In 1908, the South Australian Government Stamp Printer, James Bradley Cooke (he of 'JBC' Monogram fame), was hired by the Federal Government to perform the same role for the Commonwealth. Moving from Adelaide to Melbourne, Cooke was very active in modernising, some might say revolutionising, the operations of the Stamp Printing Office.

In South Australia, he had overseen the introduction of scenic Postal Cards. Similar emissions had already been released in New South Wales and Queensland, and Cooke was keen for the Commonwealth to embrace this innovation to advertise Australia's cities, beauty spots and industries to the world.

The story of the scenic Letter Cards is too broad to be examined in this space. I recommend that interested readers obtain the indispensable 'Postal Stationery' volume of the Australian Commonwealth Specialists' Catalogue (ACSC), where these attractive issues occupy 83 pages and are comprehensively illustrated.<sup>(7)</sup>



For the item under consideration here, the view on the reverse is one of five variants on the theme of a Sydney Harbour ferryboat plying the waters of Mosman's Bay, one of them incorrectly inscribed 'MOSMAN BAY' and another erroneously rendered as 'MOSMON BAY'.

For the 1911 Letter Cards, there were several different stocks used, our example being classified as a very thin (0.16mm thick) 'off-white, chalky card' (it's really paper) from the initial issues on which the first line of text ended with the word 'any'. This is catalogued as LC3 with view 78A, having the caption in an unusual font with an over-size 'S' appearing four times. The views were printed in an array of colours, this example being a red-purple.

Across the entire series from 1911 to 1924, there are many rare scenes, but this isn't one of them. In fact, this is a readily available view and probably the commonest of the Mosman's Bay variants. It had previously been used for the NSW scenic Postal Cards issued from 1897, and can also be found on contemporary picture postcards.

Used, this Letter Card is priced at only \$150, a very modest sum for a rather scarce item of postal stationery. But, perhaps ironically, its real value is in the stamps that were added by the sender, more specifically the Ha'penny in dull blue-green <sup>(8)</sup>. This humble stamp is priced in the ACSC 'Federal Period, 1901-1912' volume (2023) at \$8 mint and \$12 used, and in the Stanley Gibbons "Red Book" (2025 Edition) at £5½ mint and £8½ used.



These are hardly figures about which to get excited. However, there is something very unusual about the ½d stamp on this Letter Card. These stamps were printed in sheets of 120 comprising two panes of 60 (10x6) with a central horizontal gutter. Our subject stamp is from the lower row of the upper pane. It is perforated all around but the perfs at the base are at the bottom of the gutter margin. It was supposed to also be perforated immediately below the design.

Too specialised to be listed by Gibbons, this production error is recorded in the ACSC as 'Imperforate at base' #W4b, with the explanatory note "Three mint and five used examples are recorded ... Three used examples are in the Western Australia Museum, two of which are trimmed at the base ..." In other words, this is a very rare stamp. Two of the three institutionalised examples have been vandalised by having had the lower perforations removed. Only two used stamps are in

private hands, one stated in the ACSC to be "... used on a 9 November 1911 1d George V Fullface lettercard". <sup>(9)</sup>

Which is the item before you here.

The ACSC pricing for W4b is, well, interesting. Here is a stamp of which only two mint examples are stated to exist, with only two used examples, one of which happens to be on an entire postal article, in private hands.

In the 2004 edition, the stamp was priced at \$2000 used. It was unpriced mint because to that time no unused examples had been reported.

At the Premier Philately sale of Dr Cecil Walkley's Western Australian stamps on the 14th of April 2005, his used example of this rare error sold for \$4000 + 16½% buyer's premium & GST, a total of \$4660. Figures have never been my strength but even I know that this is far more than double the 2004 catalogue value.



Despite that inarguable fact, and despite no other used single being sold at auction in the years since, the current price of \$2500 is, at least in my not-so-humble opinion, ridiculously low. Especially when one takes into account that Dr Walkley's stamp was defective, having been roughly separated from the sheet through the margin, leaving no trace of the perforations that had been at the base.

I graded it 'B' then, and it hasn't improved over time. The current catalogue value should be, again in my opinion, at least \$5000. This would reflect the real price paid at auction twenty years ago. And a much higher figure could be easily justified.

So, what about an undamaged example used on cover, in this case a beautiful Letter Card? Well, in the ACSC footnote, this great rarity of Western Australia, which is also a Commonwealth of Australia issue, is priced at \$4000. Yep, significantly less than the damaged used single sold for two decades ago, and only 60% more than that damaged stamp is priced at today.

To underscore the absurdity of the pricing, one needs only look at the circumstances of my acquisition of the Letter Card.

This remarkable item was formerly in the exceptional Letter Cards collection created by the late John Sinfield. This was surely the finest such collection ever developed. When John's Letter Cards were offered by Abacus Auctions on 3rd March 2019, this was Lot 2011, and the estimate was \$4000. To highlight our appreciation of the card, it was featured on the inside front cover of the auction catalogue at 150% of actual size.

The estimate didn't so much reflect what we thought the item should be worth, as what we anticipated postal stationery collectors might be encouraged to pay for it. I actually hoped that WA collectors, in particular, would compete for it.



As it happened, my only serious challenge was from a collector of Halfpenny Stamps! He pushed things along, resulting in a hammer price of \$5000 + 19.8% premium and GST, a total of \$5990.

The fact is that in 2009, in a competitive environment, I paid 50% more than the price quoted fourteen years later - that's a generation later - in the 2023 edition of the ACSC. That does not compute.

Let's revisit my opening question: what can you buy for a ha'penny? Well, back in 1911 a person bought a stamp that he did not realise was worth any more than the ha'penny he paid for it. He stuck it on a Letter Card and sent it to a friend on the other side of the world. The recipient probably had no idea of the significance of the franking, but he kept the item as an attractive piece of mail.

Somehow it survived, probably through the ravages of at least one and probably two World Wars. Eventually it came into the possession of John Sinfield, an erudite collector who believed that it greatly enhanced the standing of his collection of Australian postal stationery.

To me, it's far more than an attractive usage of a Letter Card to a very common destination. The unique franking turned the mundane into the spectacular. It's one of the most significant items in my collection, and one of the highlights of my State/Commonwealth combination frankings.

Putting all this together, there can be no surprise that this 1911 Letter Card from an unremarkable hamlet in rural Western Australia is one of my favourite things. What can, or more properly could, you buy for a ha'penny? Plenty!

<sup>(1)</sup> See 'A Ha'penny for Your Thoughts' in 'Philately from Australia' (March 2024) at pages 18-20

<sup>(2)</sup> "Waxed and waned" might sound Shakespearean, but it isn't. This ancient expression regarding the phases of the moon, 'waxing' getting larger, and 'waning' getting smaller, harks back some 800 years, to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. (And "hark" - or listen - can be traced back to a Proto-Germanic word meaning "to hear".)

<sup>(3)</sup> Slabbing is the quirky American 'innovation' that treats rare stamps and coins as nothing more than commodities, placing them within blocks of Perspex for eternity. The slabbed item retains its quality and appearance, but at the cost of its soul. True collectors want to marvel at your stamps, not your chunks of plastic.

<sup>(4)</sup> In simple terms, a 'combination' franking involves the use of stamps from two or more postal administrations. A 'mixed' franking is of two or more issues from the same issuing entity.

<sup>(5)</sup> It was only from 13.10.1910, that stamps of the various States became valid for use in all of the other States.

<sup>(6)</sup> According to 'Postal Markings Illustrated' published by the Western Australia Study Group progressively between 1984 and 2002, usage of this datestamp has been recorded from SE21/1901 until JU6/1910, the current example therefore being the latest recorded date (LRD).

<sup>(7)</sup> 'The Australian Commonwealth Specialists' Catalogue: Postal Stationery' edited by Dr Geoff Kellow and published by Brusden White (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2018)

<sup>(8)</sup> Curiously, both catalogues characterise it as 'green', which is unfortunately imprecise.

<sup>(9)</sup> In the first edition of the ACSC 'Federal Period' volume (2004), it was erroneously stated that the stamp was used "on a 1913 postcard".