

# A Few of My Favourite Things: Number Twenty-Seven “It’s On The Cards”

by Gary Watson FRPSL, FRPSV, FACCCofNSW, FBSAP

Some readers will be aware of my passion for Australian picture postcards (PPCs), especially those issued at a time when only the name and address of the recipient was allowed to be written on the reverse. These are the so-called ‘Undivided Back’ PPCs (UBs for short).



*Printer's proof before addition of 1d Arms stamp, for the sadly unadopted view 'HORNSBY LIGHT HOUSE [sic]/SYDNEY HEADS'.*

Such pictorial cards had their beginnings in 1870s Germany. However, in Australia it is generally accepted that the earliest PPCs were actually the 1d and 1½d scenic Postal Cards of the New South Wales (NSW) Post Office, issued from 1897.<sup>(1)</sup>

For UBs it was essentially all over by 1905, from when new Universal Postal Union (UPU) Regulations permitted up to half the address-side of a postcard to be used for correspondence.

That's only seven years, from introduction to demise.

In that brief period, Australian commercial producers responded to the global postcard craze by churning-out literally thousands of different home-grown designs, most of them printed here. By contrast, there were fewer than 100 different Post Office issues.

In addition to the NSW emissions, Queensland also released 1d and 1½d scenic Postal Cards. Interestingly, the Queensland views were restricted to the left-half of the back of the cards.

The NSW and Queensland Post Office issues are generally believed to be the only pre-1905 issues that were both Postal Cards and PPCs.

The extensive range of South Australian 1d cards were produced only from 1908, the same year as all States issued one or two magnificent 1d or 1½d cards for the visit to Australia of America's 'Great White Fleet'. It was only in 1910 that Queensland published a series with all-over black & white views.

These, of course, were all brought into existence well after the ubiquitous line dividing address from message was introduced.

What most collectors of scenic postal cards or of PPCs in general have never encountered is pictorial issues from Tasmania. There were certainly none in the late Lew Viney's collection that I sold back in the 1990s.



*The generic heading and embossed 1d stamp common to all twelve views*

So, it was a real surprise to discover that Hobart collector Malcolm Groom owned what appears to be a complete set of 12 different Tasmanian views on postal cards, each embossed with a 1d indicium in rose-pink on a distinctive Undivided Back, thus dating them to before 1905.

These cards are not recorded in Robson Lowe’s ‘The Empire in Australasia’. They are not given space in the Higgins & Gage ‘World Postal Stationery Catalogue’ (yes, the English spelling). They are not included in Owen Ingles’ extensive listings incorporated in ‘Tasmania: Stamps & Postal History’ by Gene Tinsley.

The only reference book in which these remarkable cards are listed is ‘Tasmanian Postal Stationery’ by Malcolm Groom RDP and his friend-since-childhood Allen Shatten from Melbourne, (2) both of whom are long-term members of the Royal of Victoria.

At page 77, there is a decidedly under-stated listing of these cards and on page 78 is the statement “no other examples are known unused or used”. Having avidly collected and promoted postal stationery for more than four decades, and having handled many of the best collections offered at auction during that time, I am confident that the authors’ statement of rarity is correct.

They also state that the cards “appear to be a trial series” but say nothing more about their status or origins.

I share their confidence that these cards were never issued for public use. If they had been released, it is certain that souvenir hunters of the day would have put aside a set or two, as they did with the exquisite 2d and 2½d pictorial envelopes printed by Waterlows in London.

At this point, you must be wondering what the embossed postal cards actually look like. Well, here they are, in alphabetical order of the captions.



*The complete set of twelve views.*

In short, they are extremely eye-catching and beautifully executed.

From a technical standpoint, the thin card stock is fairly standard for postcard production. They are pale buff on the address-side, or back, and cream on the view-side, or face. That is, with the exception of the 'MOUNT WELLINGTON' view, which is printed on a significantly thicker stock with a highly-surfaced white view-side.

All the scenes were printed by the earliest form of photolithography, known as collotype. If you're interested in the science behind the method, the Wikipedia article 'Collotype' is well-written for a general audience <sup>(3)</sup>.

To the left of each view is the vertical imprint, reading upwards, of the island's leading stationers 'J. WALCH & SONS, Hobart.'

As alluded to earlier the back of each card is adorned with an oval device inscribed 'TASMANIA POSTAGE/ONE PENNY' around a silhouette of a young Queen Victoria, who by this stage was approaching or in her 80s.



*Stamp impression showing stamp box.  
Extract from 'GOVERNMENT HOUSE' card,  
the only one to clearly show the stamp-box at  
upper-right.*

Until preparing this column, I had not closely examined the stamp impressions. I was surprised to note that each stamp is overprinted on a faint rectangular 'stamp box' measuring 18x22mm. On all but one card, this box is very difficult to see with the naked eye.

The exception is 'GOVERNMENT HOUSE' on which the base and the lower portions of the sides are readily observed. On this card the distance between the top edge of the card and the top of the printed heading 'POST CARD - TASMANIA' is 16mm. On most of the others this measurement is 11 to 12mm. On 'HOBART FROM THE BAY' it is a mere 8mm.

This is important data that indicates the cards were **not** derived from a single sheet of twelve clichés, as might have been expected.

Another surprise was to discover that the stamp impressions appear to be printed from a flat plate, with only the Queen's head being clearly embossed. How could that be?

More careful inspection revealed that the entire impression **is** embossed but the printing is so flat, lacking the expected peaks and troughs characteristic of this form of embossing, that it nearly caught me out.

The impressions are of very high quality with any wear to the die being minimal. I expect the situation is that the die was intended principally to be applied to the thinner stock of envelopes, on which more regular embossings would have been obtained.

It is not surprising that the views are attributed to Walch & Sons. This long-established company had petitioned the colonial government as early as 1880 to introduce new-fangled postal cards like those that had started filtering into Australia from Europe. To promote the idea, Walch's published private unstamped cards. Two years later, in 1882, the first Tasmanian postal cards were issued.

In about 1890, the Walch company made a second pitch, this time for the Post Office to issue letter cards. Again they promoted the idea with their own production, printed in black on a range of pastel-coloured stocks. And again the government eventually bought in, authorising the 2d green on white letter card of 1898.

It is difficult to know when Walch's idea for pictorial postal cards was hatched. It was likely inspired by the NSW scenic cards published from 1897, with which they would doubtless have been familiar.

Unlike the two previous occasions when the firm went-into-bat for their brainchilds (brainchildren?), I doubt if this series represented a third approach to the Post Office.

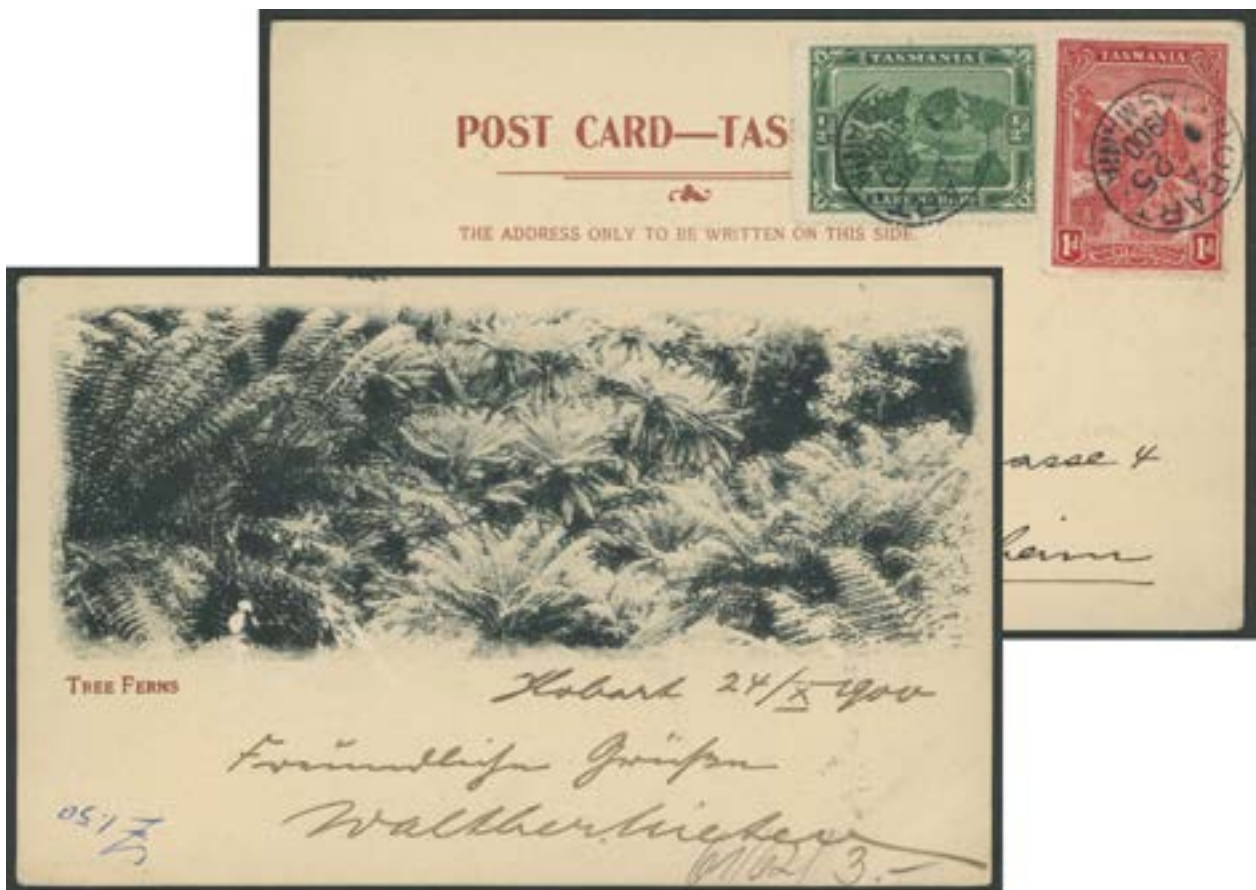
Apart from these twelve cards, there are no known 'forerunners' to spruik the idea. There are also no indications that any of the twelve cards has ever been in an official file. Had that been the case, we would expect to find evidence of attachment, such as pinholes, and/or endorsements. That is not the case.

I put forward the thought that this was an instance of the company hoping to profit by plugging a gap in the market. The Post Office had issued monochrome views on envelopes in 1898 and on Letter Cards two years later. But they had produced no scenic postal cards.

In my collection, I have standard UB PPCs published by Walch & Sons that used exactly the same views as on five of the embossed cards. These are 'CAPE RAOUL' (used in 1904), 'FERN TREE BOWER' (1902), 'GOVERNMENT HOUSE' (unused), 'RIVER DERWENT AT NEW NORFOLK' (1903) and 'TREE FERNS' (1900). I am very confident that the other seven views were similarly released on standard PPCs.

Interestingly, four of the five noted PPCs have the identical heading and stamp box as the embossed cards. My suggestion is that the PPCs were issued first. The 1d embossings were added - presumably by the Post Office but it is possible that Walch & Sons were in possession of their own embossing dies - to cards from their stock.

Thus, it may be that the embossed cards were prepared in-house; the results or more likely the costs were considered unsatisfactory; and the idea was scrapped, leaving us with a unique set of twelve trial or proof scenic postal cards.



*Walch & Sons 'TREE FERNS' picture postcard (PPC) using exactly the same photograph as the stamped postal card with this view.*

While these musings are admittedly speculative, I have no doubt that the cards are genuine. They were probably embossed by the Tasmanian Post Office ... but perhaps not. And they probably date from 1900.

Ten of the twelve are in superb condition. 'TREE FERNS' has a post-production vertical flaw across the view. 'RIVER DERWENT...' has a faint band of discolouration on the address-side. Otherwise, they are near-enough pristine.

In 2024, Malcolm Groom's collection of Tasmanian Stamped To Order Postal Stationery was offered by Abacus Auctions. <sup>(4)</sup> What amazes me is that I was the only bidder for this marvellous set of embossed postal cards. With an estimate of \$4000 for the twelve, I had expected to be trampled in the rush. Instead, and after banging on from the rostrum about how important I considered this set to be, I snared a dozen beautiful one-off cards for a mere \$300 each!, including the buyer's premium.

Trust me, I'm not complaining.

These delightful cards are now among the very best items in my collection of Undivided Back Postcards and, as such, certainly deserve an honoured place among My Favourite Things.

<sup>(1)</sup> To clarify the definitions used here, officially issued denominated 'postal cards', with or without a pictorial component, are a subset of the much broader family of 'postcards'. All postal cards are postcards; not all postcards are postal cards.

<sup>(2)</sup> Published by the Tasmanian Philatelic Society Inc (2021) in an edition of only 200 copies.

<sup>(3)</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/collotype>

<sup>(4)</sup> Abacus Auctions Pty Ltd, Auction Number 256 on 22nd May 2024, Lot Number 702. Three of the cards were illustrated in the catalogue. All of them were shown on the company's website