

# **ANTA 502: Review**

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# **The Mails and Stamps of Ross Dependency**

**[up until the closure of the Scott Base Post Office in 1987]**

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## 1 Introduction

The Ross Dependency is a very interesting philatelic area as it has:

- probably the area of the first mails posted in the Antarctic ?
- the home of the first Antarctic Post Office (Cape Royds).
- the region with the first Antarctic stamps, issued by New Zealand in 1908 (New Zealand stamp overprinted “King Edward V Land”) and 1911 (New Zealand overprinted “Victoria Land”).
- the first stamps to be used on the continent. [The next stamp to be used in the Antarctic was a stamp issued by USA in 1933 (25 years after the first NZ issue) for Byrd’s expedition. This was also available in continental USA and able to be used for postage in USA as well as in the Antarctic. Following on 21-22 years later were the next Antarctic issues - by New Zealand (Ross Dependency) and Australia (Australian Antarctic Territory) in 1957, and Falkland Island Dependencies (Trans Antarctic Expedition) in 1956. The first other country to issue stamps with an Antarctic theme was the Falkland Islands in 1929 (whales and penguins).<sup>1</sup>]
- stamps issued in 1957 for Ross Dependency celebrating the Trans Antarctic Expedition.
- a region with continuing issues of stamps until present the day.
- at present a Scott Base postmark which is used only in Christchurch.

## 2 The first mails from the Antarctic - written in the Ross Dependency?

What were the first mails actually written in the Antarctica and who wrote them?

Captain John Balleny in the *Eliza Scott* (and the *Sabrina*) discovered the first portion of land, now named Balleny Islands, in the Ross Dependency in 1839. James Ross in the *Terror* and *Erebus* made landfall at Cape Adare in January 1841, named many of the prominent parts of Victoria Land, and was the first to see the Ross Ice Shelf. The *Antarctic* under Captain Kristensen made the first landing on the continent in the Ross Dependency at Cape Adare on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1895 by Bull and party (including Borchgrevink). In 1898, a British Antarctic Expedition, sponsored by Sir George Newnes and led by Borchgrevink in the *Southern Cross*, spent the first winter in the Ross Dependency at Cape Adare before returning to Stewart Island.<sup>2 3</sup>

No doubt letters were written by people on these vessels and these were undoubtedly the first mails written in the Ross Dependency. As these ships had no on-board posting facilities, no special cachets or postmarks, and the ships returned to different countries as first landfall, there is no “first” Ross Dependency letter written.

## 3 The National Antarctic Expedition of 1901-1904 in the *Discovery* under Captain Scott

Scott in his 1901-4 expedition used a cachet which looked like a date stamp but had no official status as a cancellation. It was used on postcards which the expedition sold to raise funds. It reads ANTARCTIC EXPDN. 1901 S.S. DISCOVERY<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1 shows this on a postcard).<sup>5</sup> On 24<sup>th</sup> December 1901, *Discovery* left Port Chalmers and landed at Cape Adare on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1902. The relief vessel *S Y Morning* left Lyttleton on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1902 and arrived at the *Discovery* on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1903, delivering mail to the wintering party. Special labels were produced, inscribed “NATIONAL ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION” and these were sometimes placed on the envelope next to the stamp. The *Morning* left the Antarctic (with Shackleton on board) on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1903 and the ship arrived in Lyttelton on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1903 where the mail was processed with this date on the postmark. The evidence that this mail was written in the Antarctic comes from the person who wrote the letter, as there are clear details of the personnel still in the Antarctic. Figure 2 shows the envelope of a letter written by Captain Scott to Miss Rhodes, with the special label attached and a clear Lyttelton postmark.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1

Figure 2

On 14<sup>th</sup> November 1903 the *Morning* sailed on her second relief expedition, rendezvousing with the *Terra Nova* in Hobart and arriving at the *Discovery* on 5<sup>th</sup> January when the mail was delivered. The *Discovery* was freed from the ice and the three ships sailed back to New Zealand, via the Auckland Islands, to reach New Zealand on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1904. Mail written in the Antarctic, and on the way home, was posted from Lyttelton over the next few days. Some of these had the special label attached. Again the sender and the date stamp can identify the mail written in the Antarctic.

#### **4 The first Antarctica Post Office**

The first Post Office in the Antarctica was an office opened in 1904 at Scotia Bay, South Georgia. This was opened by the Argentine Post Office at a weather station originally opened by the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition and later handed over to Argentina.<sup>7</sup>

#### **5 The first Antarctic stamps issued and used in the Ross Dependency, or anywhere in the Antarctic, the first Post Office in the Ross Dependency or anywhere in the Antarctic: A review of Ernest Shackleton's 1907-1909 Expedition in the *Nimrod*.**

Ernest Shackleton, in the *Nimrod*, arrived in Lyttelton on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1907. The government and people of New Zealand took a great interest in this expedition with financial donations and supplies. The stamps used initially on outward mail from here were usually the ordinary New Zealand 1d (one penny) "Universal" in use at that time.<sup>7</sup>

On 18<sup>th</sup> December, Mr Robertson, secretary to the NZ Post Office, sent a letter to the Postmaster General, advising him that Shackleton had not committed to any other postal administration and suggesting that it would be worthwhile for the NZ government to supply the expedition with specially overprinted stamps at no cost to the expedition. This was approved the same day!<sup>3</sup>

A circular date stamp, 24.5 mm in diameter and inscribed "BRIT.ANTARCTIC EXPD, NZ", was supplied by the then NZ Post and Telegraph Department for all mail matters from the expedition (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup>

On 20<sup>th</sup> December, the New Zealand government appointed Ernest Shackleton postmaster for "King Edward VII Land Post Office", as that was where he intended to establish his Antarctic base. The Prime Minister, Sir Joseph Ward, pointed out in his farewell to the expedition, that the appointment did not carry a large remuneration!<sup>7</sup>

The government supplied the distinctive postage stamps for use on mails from the region. One hundred sheets of 240 stamps (24,000 stamps in total) of the 1d Universal issue (Royal Plate of 1907 perforated 14 on Cowan Paper) were printed in two vertical upward reading lines "King Edward VII / Land" in dark green ink (Figure 4).<sup>7</sup> Figure 5 shows a sheet of 60 stamps with the King Edward VII overprint and signed by "E H Shackleton, Postmaster".<sup>9</sup> Of the 24 000 stamps overprinted, 23 492 were sent to Shackleton, 448 were sent to the Universal Postal Union (UPU) in Berne and 60 were retained by the Post Office for their archives.<sup>7</sup> Shackleton subsequently stated that his appointment as postmaster, and the issue of the distinctive stamps, simplified the handling of correspondence despatched for the Antarctic by the expedition.

The expedition sailed from Lyttelton on 31 December 1907. On 1<sup>st</sup> January, the special date stamp was first used on five letters.<sup>5</sup> The post office was opened on board the *Nimrod* on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1908 to receive mail for despatch, and the mail received from Christchurch was processed.

Figure 3

Figure 4

## Figure 5

The *Koonya*, which had towed the *Nimrod* (to save fuel) until pack ice was sighted, let the tow go on 15<sup>th</sup> January and collected all mail for NZ and other destinations then. The mails, many with the new stamps, and all with the special postmark dated “2.30 PM, JA 15, 08”, were transferred in a pillow case, along with one passenger, to the *Koonya*, which arrived back in Dunedin on 22 December and in Lyttelton on 23 January, when the letters were sent on. These letters were considered as the first day of issue of these overprinted stamps. There were many letters addressed to non-existent people, such as “King Albatross”, “Mr Brown Seal”, “Seal Bear and Co Ltd”, which were in general returned to the sender, or if no identification was found, to the dead letter office.<sup>5</sup>

Shackleton planned to make his base at Balloon Bight in King Edward VII Land, but on arrival there it was found the Bight had disappeared due to changes in the ice shelf. Thus the *Nimrod* retreated from here, entered McMurdo Sound and finally made a landing on Cape Royds on Ross Island. Final stores were landed there for the wintering over party and, on 22 February 1908, the *Nimrod* sailed back to NZ with about 550 letters on board. These were the first letters posted anywhere in the Antarctic with a distinctive Antarctic stamp. Note that the stamps were NOT used in the region that the overprint stated – King Edward VII Land.<sup>7</sup>

Shackleton was proud of “his” special stamps and went to great trouble to attempt to fulfil a request to place a brass cylinder, with stamps and some other small objects, at the South Pole. They buried this cylinder, marking it with a flag and taking a photo, at the furthest point south they reached – about 160 km short of the pole.<sup>2</sup>

On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1908, *Nimrod* sailed again for the Antarctic with 860 mail items. Shackleton officially closed the Post Office on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1909, the last day of cancellation of these stamps, and the day that *Nimrod* left Cape Royds.<sup>7</sup> Postal items from this expedition are very scarce. It is interesting that the Royal Philatelic Society protested about this first Antarctic stamp, stating that “..it seems palpable to everyone that there are no living creatures except polar bears and wild birds in the Antarctic regions..”<sup>10</sup> These stamps currently retail for about \$100 used and \$1000 mint.<sup>11</sup>

## 6 Capt Scott’s Second Expedition of 1910-1913 in the *Terra Nova*.

The *Terra Nova*, under Captain Scott, arrived in Lyttelton on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1910. Again the idea of stamps to support the expedition arose – in particular, Kingsey suggested a set of 4. The secretary of the Post Office could not recommend this proposal and eventually the then current New Zealand 1d Dominion stamp was approved with the horizontal overprint, “VICTORIA/ LAND”, in two lines (Figure 6). 200 sheets of 120 stamps were printed with the overprint, but 3 sheets were damaged in the printing process. The cost of the printing, 100 pounds, was written off. The datestamp used was Shackleton’s one reissued, with the only difference being the date (Figure 7). The 24 000 stamps were distributed as follows: destroyed by printer 360, sent to UPU 400, Post Office collection 60 and the rest given to the expedition.<sup>3</sup> Captain Scott was sworn in as Post Master of Victoria Land in a statutory declaration on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1910<sup>6</sup> (Figure 8).

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

The *Terra Nova* left Dunedin on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1910, reaching the Antarctic and opening the Post Office at Cape Evans on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1911. Scott wrote "... and wrote letters from breakfast til teatime this day..." on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 1911. <sup>6</sup> The first letter dated was postmarked at 10 pm on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1911, the day the *Terra Nova* sailed for Lyttelton, and this is considered the first day of issue for the 1d overprint.

The *Terra Nova* sailed from Lyttelton on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1911 reaching the ice on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1912, returning from Antarctica on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1912 with the second outward batch of mail and arriving in Lyttelton on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1912.

Because the postage rates to some countries was 2½ d, it was felt necessary to provide a limited number of the ½ d stamps as well. On 8<sup>th</sup> May 1912, five pound of the ½ King Edward VII stamps were ordered. As it was thought there was only one overprint to be done, the early print forme was destroyed, so the ½ d overprint is very slightly different. Only 2400 of these in total were printed, with UPU receiving 400, NZ Post Office 60 and the remainder going to the expedition. <sup>3</sup> These were sent south in the *Terra Nova*, leaving Lyttelton on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1912, arriving off Cape Evans on 18<sup>th</sup> January to the news of the death of the polar party and embarking with the third batch of mail and the survivors on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1913, the day the Post Office was finally closed. <sup>7</sup>

The remainder of the ½ d and 1d stamps were sold by the expedition to raise funds at 25 shillings and 5 shillings respectively (Figure 9). <sup>6</sup> The current retail value of these is about \$2000 mint and \$1200 used for the ½ d and \$100 mint and \$175 used for the 1d. <sup>11</sup>

## 7 The Americans in Ross Dependency at Little America

Rear Admiral Byrd led four expeditions, with their headquarters at the Bay of Whales. The name of their bases was called Little America. The first expedition was in 1928-1930 and each of the two ships, the *City of New York* and the *Eleanor Bolling*, had their own special Post Offices and postmarks. *City of New York* Post Office was in operation from 15 August 1928 until 25 July 1930 and the *Eleanor Bolling* Post Office was operated from 15 August 1928 until 19 June 1930. A variety of different cachets were used from the ships and from the expedition, as there was widespread interest in the whole USA Antarctic program. <sup>4</sup> The postmarks from these two ships are illustrated in Figure 10. <sup>1</sup> For genuine use in the Antarctic, the date has to be checked, as the Post Office was open for the journey from USA.

Figure 10

The United States Post office issued a stamp for the second expedition – a 3 cents blue stamp showing both poles but worded with "Byrd Antarctic Expedition II". This stamp was the third in the world to be designed for use in the Antarctic, all being used solely in the Ross Dependency. The stamp was designed by President Roosevelt (Figure 11). <sup>1</sup> The stamp was intended for use at the Little America Post Office on shore (the Post Office used only these stamps and was in use from 6 October 1933 to 31 May 1935) but was also available on the

*Jacob Rupert*, Figure 12, (the supply ship post office operated from 8 October 1933 to 24 May 1935) and from the US Post Office Department in mainland USA as well. 120 960 covers were taken south and each cost a service charge of 50 cents, surely a useful addition to the expedition funds. Thus the postmark (Figure 13) on an envelope with these stamps shows which mails were posted in the Antarctic. Most covers were postmarked on 3 days: 30/1/1934, 31/1/1934 and 30/1/1935.<sup>4 1</sup> The Little America Post Office was situated on the Ross Ice Shelf. The stamp was also issued in imperforate, ungummed miniature sheets of 6 for the National Stamp Exhibition in New York.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

The third expedition of 1939-1941 had no special stamps, but special postmarks were used on the *USS Bear*, Figure 14, (previously named the *Bear of Oakland* in the second expedition) and the *USS North Star*.

The fourth expedition, Operation Highjump in 1946-1947, involved 13 different ships and was by far the largest ever to visit the Antarctic. It handled an increased amount of philatelic mail of about 150 000 covers (processed and postmarked on the *USS Mount Olympus*). It was decided, because of the physical number of covers, that the mail would be cancelled in advance, so the date stamp was set at 10 January 1947 and all mail was so stamped. However the Antarctic was not fully consulted, as there was heavy pack ice and the ships did not arrive until 15 January 1947, well after the date shown on the covers (Figure 15).<sup>4 1</sup>

Figure 14

Figure 15

## **8 The Trans Antarctic Expedition and the first Ross Dependency stamps**

At the instigation of Mr Helm of the NZ Antarctic Society, when the Ross Sea Committee was sent up to organise the NZ participation in the Trans-Antarctic Expedition, one of its first letters was to the Post Office suggesting that four stamps be issued for the expedition, with suitable values. The values were 3d for postage within NZ, 4d for Air Mail postage within NZ, 8d airgraph postage to UK and 1/6 Airmail letter to the UK (as members of the expedition were from NZ and the UK). Designs were decided, commissions were given to four artists and Edmund Hillary was appointed as Post Master. The Post Office was persuaded to sell the set of stamps on a First Day Cover with a penguin (Figure 16) throughout New Zealand and, with

widespread publicity, the total printing of 100 000 was sold out.<sup>7</sup> There was one printing of the stamps and 1 000 080 stamps were produced of each value.<sup>3</sup> The *HMNZS Endeavour* was the supply ship for this expedition and first sailed from Bluff on 21 December 1956. Mail was passed to the frigate *HMNZS Pukaki* when the pack ice was first reached but the Ross Dependency stamps were not valid until the Post Office was opened in the Antarctic. Some time elapsed before the final site of Scott Base was chosen, but on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1957 the Post Office was opened on Ross Island. The covers were postmarked with this date, the official First Day of Issue.

Figure 16

Originally the base was not meant to be near the USA McMurdo base but the late change meant it was now only 3 km away. There was a great demand from US personnel for these distinctive stamps and an aircraft crate was set up on the ice alongside the *Endeavour*, with queues up to 20 m long at times (Figure 17).

Figure 17

There were about 120 000 covers sold, with these stamps, to commemorate the Trans Antarctic crossing. These were taken to the Antarctic on the *Endeavour*, leaving Dunedin on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1957, postmarked 20<sup>th</sup> January 1958, the date Dr Fuchs reached the South Pole, and returned on the *Endeavour*, which arrived back in Wellington on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1958. <sup>3</sup>

## 9 Ross Dependency stamps and mail

In 1967 New Zealand decimalised its currency and the set of Ross Dependency stamps was issued with the same designs, but with the decimal equivalent values (Figure 18).<sup>12</sup>

Figure 18

Since then, New Zealand has continued to issue stamps depicting life on and around the ice including wildlife, transport, marine life, ice formations, etc., with sets issued in 1972 (Figure 19), 1982 (Figure 20), and, from 1994, a set every year. These are all listed in any New Zealand stamp catalogue.<sup>11 12</sup>

Figure 19

Figure 20

There were a variety of different basic post marks used at Scott Base, with differences in the size of different parts of the lettering and different designs, beyond the scope of this review. Special date stamps were also produced for many different special occasions. Some of these are illustrated in Figure 21.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 21

The mail from the US base at McMurdo Sound was postmarked “U.S. Navy 17046” (Figure 22)

Figure 22

## 10 Other expeditions and their postal markings.

There has been a wide variety of other expeditions, scientific explorations, military vessels, whaling and fishing ships and tourism ventures in the region. There are no other stamps apart from those identified above, but these enterprises have often produced their own special covers and cachets. These are far too numerous to mention them all in this overview, but two earlier ones are mentioned and some cachets are illustrated as being indicative of what has been produced in Figure 23. <sup>3 14 15 16</sup>

A Japanese scientific expedition was in the Ross Sea in 1911-1912. They made a claim to a sector of the Antarctic, which was later withdrawn. Japanese whalers operated in this area in large numbers before World War II. It is not known if there are special date stamps for these at the time, but many post 1936 postmarks and cachets exist. <sup>6</sup>

The Australasian Antarctic expedition in the *Aurora* mainly operated from Australian Antarctic territories, but did visit Lyttelton and Dunedin and had some philatelic cachets with "Loose Ship's Letter".

Figure 23

## 11 Closure of the Ross Dependency Post Office

The Ross Dependency Post Office was closed on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1987 due to "financial reasons". Mail is still able to be posted at Scott Base, and Ross Dependency stamps are still used, but all mail posted at Scott Base is now sent to Christchurch, where the Scott Base postmark is applied.

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