

Pahang—A Fresh Look at the 1897 Bisects—Part 2

Rob Holley concludes his review of the circumstances surrounding this issue

What are the implications of all this for collectors? For those who would like the satisfaction of possessing a bisect that could have fulfilled a genuine postal purpose then they will need to look for one cancelled 2-4 August or, if they are a little less particular, up to the 17th. In either case, remember, it must bear the postmark Ulu Pahang which, as can be seen on Fig 5, should be struck in red, the preferred colour ink in use in Kuala Lipis at that time. Such an item must be worth a premium, perhaps a considerable premium, over those examples postmarked later and at other post offices.

To what extent was Owen culpable in this affair? Apart from the thorny question of the number of bisects created which was surely excessive, there are other matters which create suspicion. The shortage, according to Dr Wood, was confined to the 2c. value which is curious as, after the local letter rate was raised from 2c. to 3c. on 1 March 1894, there was no great demand for this value and in 1897 it did not correspond to any particular rate. In his letter to Johnston, Owen said that both the 2c. and the 3c. ran out. A somewhat odd coincidence but certainly a very convenient one.

On the other hand, it is not a very important point as one cannot make a 3c. bisect from a 5c. stamp without making a 2c. one as well! One might have thought Owen's superior in Singapore would have been interested in hearing what efforts had been made to seek other methods of meeting the shortage. If so, there is no mention of them in the letter. Were 1c. stamps used and, if so, did these run out too? And, as mentioned earlier, was there an attempt to borrow from Raub? Awkward questions to which it would have been nice to receive answers.

Shadowy figure

To what extent could the blame be laid at the door of the clerk, Bloom? He is a somewhat shadowy figure as, despite careful scrutiny of all the *Pahang Government Gazettes* from 1897 (the first to be published) to 1909, the writer has been unable to find any official reference to his existence (nor for that matter, to Norman Plant of Raub) despite the fact that the *Gazettes* published appointments, dismissals, leaves and retirements in the greatest of detail. On the other hand, if Bloom was the one feathering his nest and, as we shall see, he was intimately involved in the making of the bisects, then it is difficult to

see how Owen could have failed to suspect something, busy as he might have been. He had to initial (twice) every stamp on 13 sheets. The tedium of it! Did it not occur to him to question its necessity? But was he complicit or merely complaisant? Or just naive? Or did he just not want to disappoint friends? Readers will have to make up their own minds. One thing needs to be said in Owen's favour, however: There is no suspicion, nor has there ever been any suggestion, that he produced any bisects after the arrival of the new indent from Pekan. Andrew Gilmour felt that point needed to be made.

In making judgments about the bisects one has to bear in mind Dr Wood's attitude to them. Although he is known to have maintained a discreet silence when his researches uncovered doubtful goings-on in Malaya's 19th century philatelic affairs, it is certain he would not have legitimised outright knavery by

writing as he did about the stamps. It is clear he thought Owen was dealing with a genuine shortage in 1897 and he obviously accepted Owen's explanation for the production of the horizontal bisects which initially, it seems, attracted suspicions in some quarters. He was quite categorical on all the main points of Owen's story in a note published in *Gibbons Stamp Monthly* in June 1943 correcting an earlier piece by L N and M Williams entitled 'Manuscript Stamps' which, once again, had been based on the inaccurate James' article of 1907. It is worth quoting in full:

'The shortage of stamps was not due to delay on the part of the Crown Agents but was a purely local one due to an indent on the Pahang Treasury at Pekan being mislaid. This was confirmed to me by Mr F A S McClelland himself who was at the time in charge of the Treasury at Pekan.

'Mr Owen did not obtain permission to bisect and surcharge these stamps. In fact

he was told off for it by the PMG, Singapore, and had to write an explanation of his action, vide Lady Egerton's notes in the *Postage Stamp* of August 12th, 1916, page 238. (This was the letter from Owen to Johnston.)

'Mr Owen also told me that the first batch of stamps were bisected horizontally, but he did not much like the look of them and on his way home to tiffin he thought of the Cape Triangulars and on returning to his office he told his clerk to bisect them diagonally. He knew of none bisected vertically and none was done with his permission.'

Collectors of the bisects might be interested in another small matter which Dr Wood raised with Owen during their talk together. Dr Wood possessed two bisects which were postmarked in red at Raub on 13 January 1897, more than six months before they were issued! In both cases 'Aug' had been written over the date in black ink (*Fig 8*). Despite this, Dr Wood thought they were genuine and this was confirmed by Owen. Wood's explanation was 'that the postmaster had set his date stamp wrongly, and having found this out he proceeded to alter the month by writing "Aug" on the postmarks he had already applied.'

Cavalier?

It is very likely that more than just two of these stamps exist. Certainly, several on which the date was not changed from January to August are known to the writer but these were postmarked on 11 January 1897, not the 13th. One marvels at the carelessness of a postmaster (or clerk) blithely using a date stamp seven months out of date for days at a time. Even allowing for the fact that English may not have been his first language it seems remarkably cavalier, and one can imagine

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Fig 8 Bisect postmarked on 13 January 1897, six months before the bisects were issued; the date has been changed with black ink to 'Aug'





Fig 9 JFO's figures on their own



Fig 10 JFO's figures followed by 'cts'



Fig 11 Bloom's figures with 'c'



Fig 12 Diagonal bisect from top left to bottom right



Fig 13 Bisect apparently started from bottom left and then changed to bottom right leaving the stamp in three parts

Fig 14 The commonest forgery. Figures and initials are unconvincing, the ink is the wrong shade and the postmark is a fake



the chagrin of the person getting these bisects 'used'. Could it have been Norman Plant, enhancing some of his \$10 worth? A large number of the bisects exist cancelled, presumably by favour, at Raub, the cancels being in both red and black, both legitimate.

In his 1934 article Dr Wood discussed at some length the various means by which manuscript additions on the stamps could be distinguished between those in the hand of Owen and those written by his clerk Bloom. Owen, naturally, initialled every stamp, in some cases rather cursorily, the 'F' and 'O' in particular being very poorly formed. Owen also, though not always, wrote in the new figures '2' and '3', usually with nothing after the numerals. In some cases, however, he added 'cts'. Sometimes he cancelled the '5' with a stroke of the pen, sometimes he did not. Bloom was left to fill in whatever was missing before bisecting the stamps. If he had to cancel the '5' his stroke was usually carefully done and ran more or less parallel with the line of bisection. Owen's strokes were more flamboyant, were not parallel and varied in thickness depending on the pressure on the nib. Bloom's figures of value had a little flourish or 'spur' at their top which can be easily seen. Bloom also usually wrote a symbol for 'cents' after his figures, i.e. a 'c' cancelled by a single vertical stroke. In this way six varieties can be readily identified based on just the manuscript inscriptions, i.e. JFO's figures on their own, 2c. and 3c. (Fig 9); JFO's figures followed by 'cts', 2c. and 3c. (Fig 10); Bloom's figures, 2c. and 3c. (Fig 11). Of these, JFO's figures on their own are by far the commonest, and his figures followed by 'cts' probably the scarcest.

Methods of bisection

Much has been made in previous articles of the method that was used to bisect the stamps. Although Dr Wood does not say so specifically, it seems Owen may have been responsible for dividing the horizontals which, in fact, are quite scarce, and the writer estimates that fewer than 100 stamps were bisected in this way. Bloom seems to have been the only one to cut the diagonals and it seems the position of the surcharge and initials on the stamps dictated that he made the bisection from the bottom left corner to the top right. Just occasionally, however, it appears he had to cut from the opposite corners to avoid slicing through either the surcharge or the initials. This was certainly the reason for one example of a SE to NW bisection seen by the writer, but not on another which recently appeared in a London auction (Richard Allan, 28 October 2005). This left a bigger part of a manuscript '3' on the lower bisect than the '2', making it a real oddity (Fig 12). A curious item was sold in a Malaya Study Group auction some years ago. It seems Bloom (if it was he) started to bisect the stamp from lower right to top left, got half way, and then changed to cutting it from bottom left to top right. This had the effect, of course, of dividing the stamp into three, the 2c. half being left in two parts. Nothing daunted, someone stuck all three pieces on to a piece of paper and had them cancelled—at Pekan on 7 November, probably 1897 (Fig 13). Readers may care to reconstruct the sequence of events of how this was done or, more importantly, who did it. The writer has yet to see a vertically divided bisect but, according to both Owen and Wood, they should not exist.

Forgeries

Considering the temptation a manuscript surcharge presents to the counterfeiter, relatively few forgeries seem to exist. An example of the commonest is shown at Fig 14. Not only are the figures and initials unconvincing, the ink is in the wrong shade and the postmark is a fake. This forgery was made some time ago—before much interest was taken in cancellations.

Dr Wood's meeting with John Fortescue Owen got as near to the truth about the bisects as we are ever likely to get; i.e. there was a genuine shortage, but that Owen, for whatever reason, let matters get out of hand, and then had to cover as best he could. Certainly their talk together laid the myths of the vexatious James article to rest, or should have done, but because so many writers have given them oxygen we may never be rid of them entirely. Both Wood and Owen have long since gone to their maker. Owen retired in October 1921 as Commissioner of Lands, FMS, with a pension of \$7,663 per annum. At one stage during his retirement he was in charge of the Malayan Information Bureau in London. He died on 11 September 1942, leaving an estate worth £4126, significantly less than that of Conlay. Dr Wood died on 20 May 1964 aged 87 (Fig 15). He went out to Malaya in 1902 and retired as Senior Medical Officer, Perak, in 1928. He spent his long retirement writing



Fig 15 Dr Wood

up his collection, setting the pages on his own printing press. As a philatelist he was peerless and he was the most meticulous of researchers, never claiming an iota more than he could personally verify. After his meeting with Owen he immediately wrote up his notes and sent them back to Owen to check. It will have been noted that he also contacted Mr F A S McClelland, Treasurer at Pekan at the time the bisects were made. No stone was left unturned. Perhaps there was more he could have told us about the extent to which the situation in Kuala Lipis in 1897 was philatelically exploited but in deference to Owen I am sure he told us as much as he dared. There were no less than 48 bisects in his collection when it was sold by Robson Lowe Ltd in December 1964, including seven horizontals and the letter written by Owen to Johnston on 20 August 1897. It is

intriguing to think he might have known its contents before he went to see Owen. If he had, I am sure he would have resolved the conflicting evidence about how long the shortage lasted, but I am not so sure he would have told us the answer!

Entertaining postscript

The *Pahang Government Gazettes* of the period make no mention of the bisects but provide an entertaining postscript to their story. Owen's superior in Pahang in 1897 was the previously-mentioned British Resident, a post occupied at that time by a colourful character, Hugh Clifford (Fig 16), who eventually rose to the position of Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States. Clifford was, in the modern jargon, a 'hands-on' administrator, and also an early advocate of open government, as he not only required his district officers to send him monthly reports but he actually published them in the *Gazette*, and what a fascinating picture they provide of life in the early days of colonial Malaya. Clifford went even further. He had to furnish his superior, the High Commissioner, with annual reports and he put these in the *Gazette* as well. In August 1897 the Resident was still living in Pekan, the new residency being built for him in Kuala

Lipis awaiting the completion of the new Trunk Road which was to link Kuala Lipis with Selangor. The road was opened in 1898 and the Resident moved into his new home with his staff. Fig 17 shows the Residency, presumably the building in the foreground. The photograph was taken c.1905. It is tempting to think that one of the other buildings shown is the District Office, birthplace of the bisects. The Resident's transfer, incidentally, explains the big increase in Kuala Lipis's postal business 1898-1900, mentioned earlier. Clifford liked to keep in touch with all his district officers, which meant he had much

travelling to do, the major part of it by boat, but some on bicycle—the Government providing each Federal officer with a cycling allowance of \$10 a month, in the words of the *Gazette* 'as long as the machine is a good one and kept in good order.' Clifford's report for August 1897 is worth quoting:

'On the evening of 17th August, at 11 o'clock, I left Pekan for Kuala Lipis. I reached Temerloh at 2.30 p.m. on the 20th August.

and at 9 p.m., on the 22nd August, I arrived at Kuala Lipis, having accomplished the river journey of 200 miles in 118 hours. This was the first trip of my new house-boat ... On 23rd August Mr. Owen, the Superintendent of Ulu Pahang, and I bicycled over the new road to the 13th mile. We only made a short journey this day as our bearers were late in starting. On 24th August, we renewed our journey and bicycled through to Raub, where we arrived at 1 p.m.'

(Fig 18 shows a photograph of a houseboat on the Pahang River at Kuala Lipis taken c.1905, and there is evidence to suggest that the white-suited gentleman in a solar topee sitting on the top of it is the then Pahang Resident, Mr Cecil Wray. If so, then the houseboat is likely to be the one referred to in Clifford's report.)

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In the month the bisects made their appearance, Owen and his superior were cycling around Ulu Pahang

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Fig 16 Hugh Clifford, the British Resident in Pahang

Interesting conversation

So, in the same month as the bisects made their appearance and while we have evidence that some were still stored away in Owen's safe, he and his superior were cycling around Ulu Pahang. To have been a fly on the handlebars! It is a near certainty something must have passed between them regarding the shortage as Owen's letter to Johnston, the Singapore postmaster, was written on 20 August, only two days before the arrival of the Resident in Kuala Lipis, and with the Singapore post office all agog it is hardly credible to think the matter would not have been mentioned. We know Owen still had some bisects in his possession because another cover exists in his hand, written to Johnston on 20 September (Fig 19). It is over-franked with bisects and registered—obviously it contained something Owen and Johnston did



Fig 17 The Residency circa 1905



Fig 18 Houseboat on the Pahang River at Kuala Lipis circa 1905

Fig 19 Registered cover, over-franked with bisects, sent by Owen to Johnston on 20 September 1897



not wish to see go astray—the remaining provisionals in Owen’s possession perhaps? The authorities would have been keen to make sure no more reached the Singapore dealers. It is noted that Johnston, or somebody in his office, very prudently kept the cover. It fetched S\$8050 (approximately £3220) when it returned to Singapore to be auctioned by Christie’s in 1993.

Note

The author would like to pay tribute, unfortunately posthumously, to Andrew Gilmour, CMG, for the influence he had on this article. His experiences of Malaya went back to 1921, only 24 years after the bisects first appeared, and he was able to paint a fascinating picture of the daily life of a district officer in a remote area of the country in the early colonial days. Hopefully, readers have been given a glimpse of this picture. Perhaps because of their shared background in the Malayan Civil Service, Mr Gilmour was sympathetic to the problems Owen faced in Kuala Lipis in 1897 and contested my criticism of him. I trust he would not consider this reappraisal of the events in August of that year, and later, to be too unfair.

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