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Plating Mafeking Bicycles

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Every now and then something happens to us so far out of the ordinary that even old stamp handlers are stirred from complacency and willy-nilly forced into some serious research work, without realising what new fields may be opened up in the course of and as a result of their labours.

Some five years ago, I was offered, and purchased, the duplicate stock of CAPE of GOOD HOPE No. 178 (Gibbons "Mafeking" 17/18),—comprising several hundred copies, mostly on piece, all postmarked, from the well-known Mafeking specialist and expert, Dr. K. Freund.

This parcel of stamps came to me "sorted" by the seller into several groups, including:

Stamps with heavy bar at top
Stamps with heavy bar at bottom
Stamps with no bar at all
Stamps with printing flaws incl. damaged lettering
Stamps with "watermarks."

It was this last-named group which intrigued me most, as on the majority of the so-called "watermarked" stamps the supposed watermark consisted of a straight vertical line which I had no hesitation in identifying as the normal vertical heavy bar intersecting the narrow "laid" bars of "laid paper" at right angles. ("Footnote I" below). Some other copies, however, showed quite distinct portions of letters,—presumably the paper-markers' watermark. I therefore soaked the remaining several hundred copies off their paper, and this brought to light the existence of two different types of watermark letters, viz one in Old English, and the other in serifed Roman Capitals. Of the former, I was certain of the letters "O" and "ana" and of the latter I had reconstructed the complete word "FINE." Armed with this fragmentary knowledge, I went to my local commercial printers who not only identified the complete watermark as "Oceana FINE" but

(Reduced Facsimile of Watermark)

also—to prove his point—produced an old Dickinson paper Sample book containing actual specimens of the "Oceana FINE" laid paper, and kindly allowed me to remove some sample pages (see illustration Fig. 1). In the meantime, Dr. Freund, acting on my cue, had arrived at similar conclusions, and has since published them in the *S. A. Philatelist.* (Footnote 2 below).

Before proceeding further on my way, a few brief notes on the circumstances surrounding the "Mafeking Bicycle" issue are deemed advisable and appropriate, and I wish, at this stage, to refer to the following bibliography, viz:

The S. A. Provisional War Stamps, by Bertram W. H. Poole, 1901
Mafeking Siege Stamps, in *Stamp Collector* (Birmingham) No. 49 of January 1901 (S. C. B.)
War Impressions, Chap. XIII "War and Philately" by Mortimer Menpes, London, May 1901
Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal, No. 127, Jan. 1901 ("S. G. M. J.")

Note 1: see letter by Stephen G. Rich in Jan. 1945 *South African Philatelist.*
Note 2: *S. A. Philatelist,* June 1944, p. 64/65.

The last-named paper contains the following "Official details" communicated by G. P. O. Capetown, under date of 7/12/1900, to the late Mr. Fred. J. Melville,—from which I cull the following extract:

> "The local stamps, viz those actually manufactured in Mafeking and bearing representations of the bust of Major-General Baden-Powell and Sergeant-Major Goodyear, of the Cadet Corps, on a bicycle, were used entirely for a postal service which was arranged within the *town and between the various outposts. The whole of the three* varieties of these stamps were printed by means of photography, the photograph being taken by Dr. (sic!) D. Taylor, and the gumming and perforating being done by Messrs. Townshend & Son. The two varieties (sic!) of the Baden-Powell pattern were designed by Captain Greener, the Chief Paymaster, whilst the one of the Bicycle pattern was designed by Dr. W. A. Hayes."

In the *Stamp Collector* the number issued of the Bicycle 1d stamps is given as 9476 copies, i. e. roughly 800 sheets of 12 each, while the date of issue is stated as 10th April 1900. As the siege of Mafeking was raised on May 17th, 1900, it will be seen that the currency of this stamp actually lasted only little over five weeks.

Poole gives more detailed information about the organisation of the local post and on the production process of the stamps. He maintains that the only means of communication between townspeople (who were forbidden to visit the forts) and the defending troops (whose leave to town was severely rationed) was by correspondence. To deal with this properly, a special local post was formed, and members of the Cadet Corps were entrusted with the task of carrying mails to and fro. In order to perpetuate the exploits of these carriers, one of their number, viz. Sgt.-Major Goodyear, was chosen as the central design of the 1d Bicycle stamp—in the same way as the bust of Maj.-Gen. Baden-Powell was figured on the 3d stamps, in commemoration of the siege and defence of Mafeking. I submit, therefore, that all three locally produced Mafeking stamps (Scott Nos. 178 to 180) are "Commemoratives" in the full sense of the word, and should be collected as such.

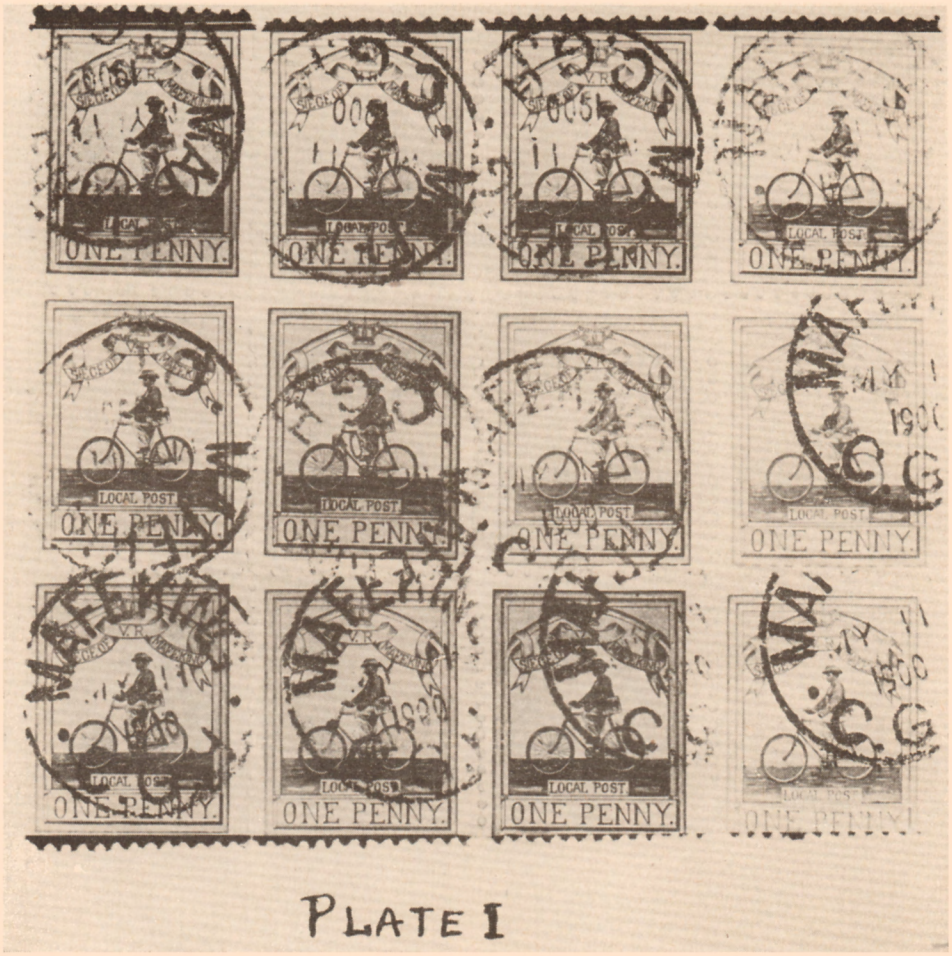
In my opening paragraph, I referred to stamps with "bar at top," "bar at bottom" and "no bar," and as there is a fine, clear photo of an unsevered block of 4 in Poole's book (fig. 17 of Plate IV), it was not difficult to come to the definite conclusion that:

> Stamps with bars at top are from top rows of sheets
> Stamps with bars at bottom are from bottom of sheets
> Stamps with no bars are from centre rows of sheets

seeing sheets were made up of 3 horizontal rows of 4 stamps each. If any proof were needed to establish the sheet position of "barred" stamps, I had succeeded in piecing together portions of the watermark,—the large "O" of "Oceana" proving an unmistakable guide. After placing several stamps in their juxtaposition by means of the Watermark "test," I started to match stamps with similar top (or bottom) bar width or shape, and here again Poole's block of 4 proved invaluable.

Coming to the stamps without bars (i. e. from centre rows) I found a valuable guide in the irregular perforation, which more often than not ran "out of parallel,"—horizontally, or vertically, or both. Not infrequently I came across a "blind" perf.—with its mate on another stamp,—and so I was fortunate in obtaining several side-by-side pairs, which I felt certain must have been "twins" from the same sheet, originally.

What with the "Poole" block, plus the watermark and perforation tests, I had now quite a number of pairs, strips and blocks,—and superimposing these on one another, I got the first glimpse of a complete reconstructed sheet of 12. But,—and it had been growing into a very big BUT in the course of this reconstruction, there were numerous blocks etc., left over which simply would not fit in with the sheet I had just finished re-building. These left-over stamps differed materially not only in the position of the bars, but some of them were of a rather paler shade, showed the stamp design in greater relief, and were of slightly but visibly smaller size. I had already had ample opportunity to notice that almost every stamp examined had its own more or less distinct minor varieties,—lines, dots, dashes, specks and so forth,—and the obvious next step was to classify and analyse these miscellaneous flaws.



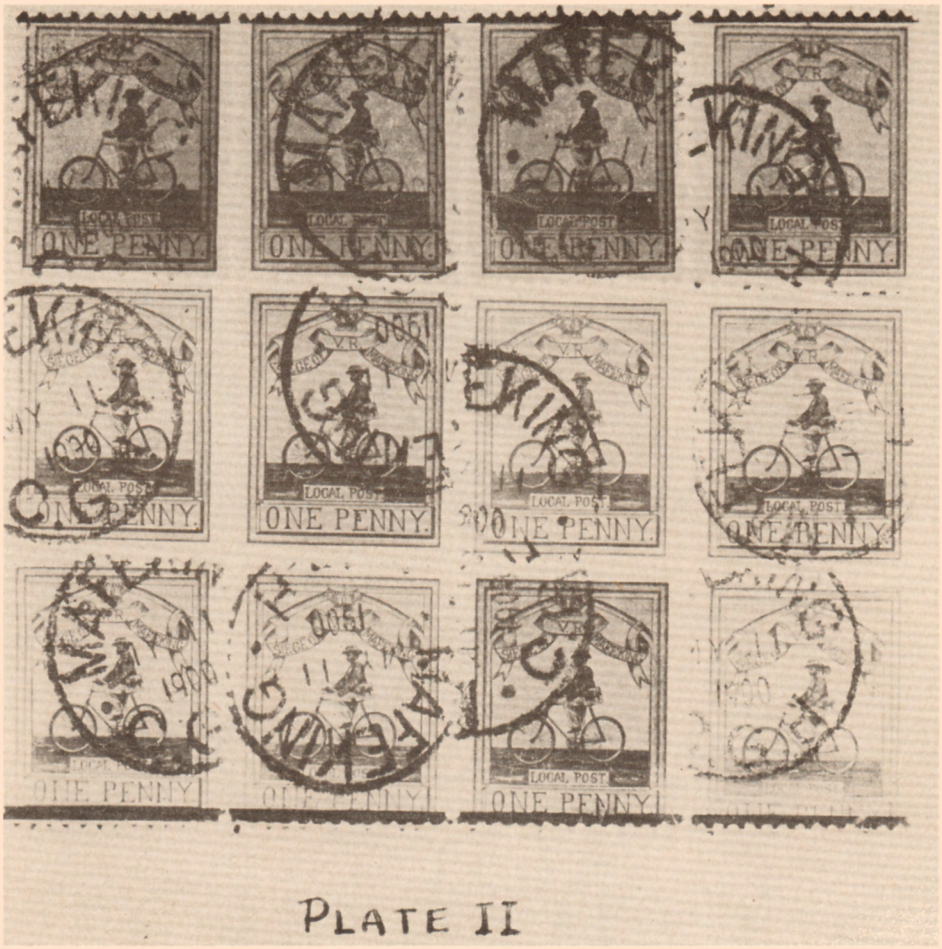
After much eye-straining and "burning of midnight oil"—I divided all flaws into three distinct groups, viz:

Variety Group 1) Constant flaws, recurring in the same position on quantities of stamps, without showing on any other stamps.

Variety Group 2) Constant flaws, in conjunction with other, additional flaws, of different kinds. As an example: quantities of stamps showed both a "nick" in the left upper frame line, as well as two distinct extra outside frame or "guide" lines. In addition to these constant and inseparable varieties, I could sub-divide these "nicked" stamps into three further groups, each showing their own peculiar flaw,—not to be found in any other of the 3 sub-groups—, but all in addition to the "nick" and "guide lines" common to them all.

Variety Group 3)—which proved the most interesting and useful of all—: "Shifting Flaws." Obviously, particles of dust, hair etc. settled on the glass plate during printing operations,—keeping on changing their positions, from one exposure to another. This is on all fours with the statement by Mr. J. V. Howat, "Staff Postmaster to Maj. Gen. Baden-Powell during the Mafeking Siege, 13th October 1899 to 17th May 1900" (see Footnote 3) to the effect that "heavy bombardment may account for Printer's errors" (on the overprinted stamps). "The printer ran a great risk in working in the printing establishment,—a large corrugated iron building which was very much exposed to shell-fire, and on two occasions was riddled by 94 pdr. shells. All other establishments were conducted underground in bomb-proof shelters, which in reality were only splinter-proof."

Note 3: *The Stamp Collector*, p. 19/20.



It was these "shifting flaws" which assisted me greatly in determining the sheet position of stamps of the "no bar" group,—more particularly one curved line about ½″ long which might have been an eye-lash or moustache hair,—and which kept wandering from one stamp to another,—and being caught midways astride two stamps, on two different occasions, conclusively proved those stamps to have been side-by-side neighbours originally. There still remained the problem of the many constant plate flaws,—over 30 of them—, and in view of the complete silence on this point in the available literature (except for Poole crediting the "long ONE PENNY" to "the second stamp in each sheet"—both statements being wrong), I had the choice of two alternatives for an explanation of their occurrence. The first, which was supported by Dr. Freund with whom I discussed these matters concurrently, was that the diversity of flaws was due to a number of different printings,—the other,—which I found after very careful and exhaustive examination to be the only acceptable solution, was that more than one plate ("photographic negative") had been used in the printing process,—actually THREE different plates,—a fact which hitherto has remained completely unknown. To start with: the top and bottom rows of the three plates are readily distinguishable by the peculiar shape and position of the "bars" which differ for each plate. For a long time I was puzzled for an explanation of these bars,—their cause, purpose and different appearance. Dr. Freund erroneously ascribes their cause (see Footnote 4) to the "printing frame which held the glass plate during printing" and I am indebted to some "old-timers" on the photographic staff of a

Note 4: *S. A. Philatelist,* November 1943, p. 129.

local newspaper for an ocular demonstration of the photographers' "stylo,"—which latter provides the factual origin of those bewildering bars. As the "Mafeking Bicycle" problem was taking definite shape by unfolding its amazing pattern in jigsaw puzzle fashion, the varying nature of the different flaws in itself provided the clue for reconstructing the genesis of these stamps, which may be summarised in the following stages, viz:

Stage 1) "Master Die" i. e. the design provided by Dr. W. A. Hayes—note initials W.H. in design

Stage 2) Photographic negative from design, by D. Taylor

Stage 3) 12 prints or "cliches" made from negative

Stage 4) Carefully trimmed "cliches" pasted on previously ruled cardboard. Traces of the ruling visible on all stamps from vertical Row 1 of all plates, and also on Stamp 3 of row 2 (all plates). A slip of the trimming scissors is responsible for a damaged cliche, viz the "nick" previously referred to, on all stamps No. 1 of row 2. At this stage we have now the "Key Plate" (positive).

Stage 5) Photographs taken from "Key Plate," first one, and subsequently two others, the latter two being minutely larger than the first plate. These three "glass negatives" constitute our three "printing plates."

Stage 6) Horizontally laid paper ("Oceana FINE") obtained locally and treated with Ferrocyanide of Potassium, for the actual printing of the stamps, from the 3 plates.

Stage 7) Gumming and perforating (gauge 12) with a single-line perforator, by Townshend & Son, at Mafeking,—and after checking by the Postmaster, Mr. Howat,—stamps are ready for issue.

Before proceeding to give detailed descriptions of the 36 different stamps making up the 3 plates of 12 each, I would like to elucidate a few points which come to mind, viz:

a) any number of photographs taken from the "Key Plate" would show the varieties "guide lines" and "damaged cliche." Actually, only three such photos were taken and/or used as printing plates.

b) the difference in size between stamps from plate I on the one hand, and those of pl. II and III on the other, can be explained by a time lag between the taking of the photos,—involving a change of the distance between the camera and the "key plate." Photos for pl. II and III were taken simultaneously,—maybe a day or two after pl. I.

c) It is quite safe to assume that the 2 additional plates owe their existence to the great demand for these stamps,—seeing each "plate" would print only 12 stamps at a time, and close on 800 sheets were actually printed.

d) among the stock acquired by me, stamps from pl. III are leading in numbers, closely followed by stamps from pl. 2, whilst pl. I stamps appear to be quite scarce. Actual ratio is about 6-5-1. The block illustrated by Poole is from pl. III.

e) Plate characteristics: Pl. I generally light colour, with stamps finely printed as if in relief. Pl. III: printed mostly in deep shades, flat appearance, bottom row damaged (by heat or acid?) Pl. II: also mostly in deep shades, general appearance similar to pl. II, but slightly finer.

f) Bar characteristics: *Pl. I:* top bar lies on outer frame of stamp No. 1, slanting upwards to right, till about 1½ mm. clear over right top of No. 4 stamp. Bottom: starts well below outer frame of No. 9, slanting upwards, ending at foot of "Y" and obliterating full stop on No. 12. Top bar split,—visibility depending on width of margin and perforation. *Pl. II:* Encroaching on outer frame of stamp No. 13 slanting upwards to right till about 1 mm. clear to right top of No. 16. Bottom: covering inside frame line under value, slanting up to right and cutting value tablet of No. 24 in half. Only v of y shows on No. 24. If margin wide enough, split bar shows on all bottom stamps. *Pl. III:* top, from just clear over centre frame line of No. 25, slanting down to right until inner frame line of No. 29 is completely covered. Bottom: split all the way, practically straight, completely covering bottom outer frame of all four bottom stamps.

g) while many flaws described below are easily recognisable with the naked eye, some others are quite tiny and minute and visible only with the aid of a powerful magnifier. However small and intrinsically insignificant, these tiny specks are vital for plating purposes.

h) sub-varieties Nos. 13a, 24a, 31a: apparently these developed during the life-time of the plate, and may be due to splashes of ink, acid, or "what you like."

i) owing to irregular "fixing" of the printed sheets, the blue on many stamps is still highly sensitive to warm or brackish water etc., and any number of pale shades down to pale grey can be obtained ad lib. through immersion in hot etc. water.

In the tabulation given below I have adopted the system of numbering all stamps from 1 to 36, rather than referring to stamp No. X, Row Y, Plate Z,—which latter might be confusing. The consecutive numbering of varieties works out as follows, viz:

PLATE I

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12

PLATE II

13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24

PLATE III

25	26	27	28
29	30	31	32
33	34	35	36

Follows now a comprehensive list of flaws characteristic of individual stamps, and necessary to identify their sheet position; the following symbols being used to avoid repetition, viz:

T stands for "bar at top of stamp"
B stands for "bar at bottom of stamp"

G stands for "guide line(s) at left of stamp"
N stands for "nick in outer top frame left of crown"

1) dot over front wheel, white flaw over G of Siege ..... T-G
2) big white ball in top frame left of crown ..... T
3) daisies on ground above Y of Penny ..... T
4) ring in top right corner, small dot below NE of One ..... T
5) white spot before cyclist's head, ball top to crown ..... G-N
6) no discernible flaw .....
7) cocoon below centre of left frame ..... faint G
8) spot in right triangle, dot in right outer frame, opposite wheel .....
9) white spot behind cyclist's head ..... B-G
10) dot right top of O, dot between N. E., bottom bar bending down at right ..... B
11) dot at right foot of right triangle, bottom bar wavy at left ..... B
12) dot at bottom of O, dot outside frame opposite O, dot below S of Post ..... B
13) thickened frame above Y of Penny ..... T-G
13a) ditto plus large flaw at top left ..... T-G
14) lamp on front wheel, dot right of crown, dot behind cyclist ..... T
15) rose-bud in top right triangle ..... T
16) dot outside top frame centre, white dot under OF ..... T
17) large dot left bottom O, dot behind cyclist ..... G-N
18) dot in top half of E of Penny .....
19) numerous white spots (splashes) at left ..... faint G
20) tiny dot below frame under N of One, faint dot behind cyclist .....
21) dot in frame opp. Siege, dot behind cyclist's head ..... B-G
22) broken O, dot between NE of One, white spots left over O and on foot of E of One ..... B
23) wavy and cracked bottom bar below EN of Penny ..... B
24) cluster of tiny spots left top of O of One ..... B
24a) ditto *plus faint large white ball at NY of* Penny ..... B
25) dot below left end of ribbon, dot at foot of N of One ..... T-G
26) dot above G of Siege, tiny dot at foot of second N ..... T
27) dark ball outside centre left frame, dot above V. R., tiny dot below first N of Penny ..... T
28) barrel above EK of Mafeking ..... T
29) circle bottom back wheel, dots between wheels ..... G-N
30) white flaw under G of Siege, dot centre right arch .....
31) thickened foot to I of Siege ..... faint G
31a) ditto plus 2 faint balls at top left triangle ..... faint G
32) white line after cyclist, tiny dot below second N .....
33) line on bar below O, 2 spaced dots top right frame ..... B-G
34) ten large cracks in bottom tablet ..... B
35) large blob about ONE, right bottom cracked, white speck behind cyclist ..... B
36) damaged left bottom corner, dot left of V of V. R. ..... B

I sincerely trust the above effort will be of help to anyone wishing to plate his Mafeking Bicycle stamps, and I shall be glad to hear from any interested collector seeking further elucidation, and assist him in allocating his stamps to their correct sheet position.

The illustrations of the three plates represent actual photographs of reconstructed sheets in each case.

In conclusion, I wish to make acknowledgement to Dr. Freund for whatever points or pointers he passed on to me, in the course of my investigations. Paradoxically enough, it was his very opposition to my ideas of the three different "plates" (pitted against his theory of three different "printings" from one and the same plate) which led to the intensification of my researches and finally led to his corroboration of, and even to some additions to my findings.

I am also greatly indebted to Mr. Leon W. Davis, of Hamilton Square, N. J., for kindly making available, for the purposes of this article, the photo-negatives illustrating the three reconstructed plates of stamps owned by him.