

## The Classic Issues of Afghanistan – 1871-1876,

by Robert Jack

At the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries, anyone who was anyone in the stamp collecting world dabbled in Afghanistan. It was the “in thing”. Afghanistan had long fascinated the British public, and stamp collectors were no exception. It was a strange far away land, almost but not quite part of the Empire. A land where we kept on going to war. The first Afghan war lasted from 1839-42; the second from 1878-1880. The first was calamitous from a British point of view, but it was the second war in particular that stamped itself on the British consciousness. It had epic disasters – such as the battle of Maiwand where out of a force of 2,476 men, a total of 969 were killed and 177 wounded with the remainder forced to retreat to Kandahar – and equally epic successes – such as the Kabul to Kandahar march undertaken by General Roberts to relieve the besieged city.

News of the scale of the defeat at Maiwand had shocked Victorian Britain, but the heroism and valour shown (two Victoria Crosses were awarded) also inspired Woodville’s “Saving the Guns” and other artworks, and was later immortalised in Kipling’s poem *That Day*. It even made its mark in fiction: in *A Study in Scarlet* it is explained that it was at Maiwand that Sherlock Holmes’ assistant, Dr Watson, received his war wound.

Against this background Afghanistan proved a popular collecting area. But it was also one where controversy, mystery and complication were never far away. It may seem strange, but it is not known exactly when the Afghan postal service began operating. We know the first postal routes were from Kabul to Tashkurghan (an important trading centre in the north) and Peshawar (situated in the North West Frontier Province of India and Afghanistan’s link to the outside world), but not the dates that those routes were opened. The earliest reference seems to be a simple two line statement in the *Illustrated London News* for 7<sup>th</sup> May 1870 stating that: “The Ameer of Afghanistan has established a postal service between Cabul and Peshawur”, but it seems certain that the first stamps were not issued until rather later: the earliest known use is 25<sup>th</sup> March 1871.

And what strange stamps they were. Not for Afghanistan a perforated rectangle with the monarchs head in the middle. No, perforation didn’t reach Afghanistan until 1907 so they started off with imperf circular stamps with a lion’s head in the centre. And there we have it, right from the first issue: controversy. Are they lions or tigers? Even today the major catalogues cannot agree on a description – but that really should not be the case. The confusion in the terminology arises from a linguistic mistranslation by the early collectors of Afghanistan, many of whom were Europeans living in India: they understood Hindi (as spoken in India), but not Dari (as spoken in Afghanistan) and therein lay the seeds of the confusion. The name of the Amir was Sher Ali (fig.1), which translates as “Ali the Lion” in Dari



Fig. 1 Sher Ali

(and also in Urdu). Unfortunately, in Hindi it translates as “Ali the Tiger” (viz Sher Khan the tiger in Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*). This mistranslation was soon noticed – and corrected – but unfortunately the tiger error keeps recurring. The design of the stamps arose because Afghanistan was a devoutly Islamic country and so it was out of the question for the image of the Amir to appear on a postage stamp – instead his honorific title “The Lion” was adapted to form the design. To refer to the poor creature – and by implication the Amir – as a tiger would have been most disrespectful. The title of “the Lion” is still used in Afghanistan today: Ahmed Shah Massoud, assassinated in 2001 was, and is, often referred to as “the Lion of the Panjshir”.

The classic stamps of Afghanistan tend to be referred to by their date of issue. Thus the first issue is known as “1288”, the date inscribed on the stamps and which refers to the Islamic solar calendar which was then in use. Written in the local script that becomes ١٢٨٨. It equates to 1871-72 in the Western calendar. The stamps were lithographed with 15 clichés on the stone. There were three values for this issue: Shahi, Sanar and Abasi, the value in words being placed above the lion’s head (fig.2). In Afghanistan’s slightly confusing currency:



Fig. 2 The three values of 1288: shahi, sanar and abasi. The date can be seen at about the 5 to 6 o’clock position

12 Shahi = 6 Sanar = 3 Abasi = 1 Afghan Rupee

There were four 1288 plates: A, B, C and D; the characteristics and make-up of each being as follows–

- Plate A: Both circles dotted with outer circle 30mm in diameter. The Plate is made up solely of Shahi stamps.
- Plate B: Both circles dotted with outer circle 28mm in diameter. The Plate is made up of ten Shahi and five Sanar stamps.
- Plate C: Both circles dotted with outer circle 28mm in diameter but narrower than Plate B. The Plate is made up of five Shahi, five Sanar and five Abasi stamps.
- Plate D: The outer circle is dotted, but the inner circle is plain. The Plate is made up of five Shahi, five Sanar and five Abasi stamps.

It will be realised from this that Plates B, C and D were composite plates, but the sheets were usually cut into strips of each value before distribution to the post office and no complete sheets are known. Reconstructing plates is a challenge not so much because of the difficulty in identifying each position, but because of the difficulty in obtaining specimens to plate in the first place. Similar stamps with text in the centre in place of the



lion's head are revenue stamps.

A peculiarity of the Afghan post office was its cancellation methods. These varied from post office to post office but one constant with the early issues is that they were often cancelled by literally tearing off a piece of the stamp. This is usually known as a "bite". Used stamps are consequently invariably "damaged". This is the norm and is just one of the quirks which appealed to the early collectors (and still does today!). The mutilation is not random: it is the word "mashul" in the inscription around the stamp which is removed. This word has been variously translated as "tax", "postage" or "fee", but it seems clear that the intention of tearing out the word was to show that by buying the stamp, the tax, postage or fee had been paid. It should be noted incidentally that the mutilation was carried out after the stamp had been affixed to the envelope, with the result that frequently part of the envelope was removed as well! It should be noted that any mail going abroad also had to carry Indian postage (or else be charged postage due) as Afghanistan did not join the UPU until 1928 (fig.3).



Fig. 3 A typical cover to India. The Afghan stamp cancelled by "bite". All the postmarks are Indian.

The second issue – "1289" – comprised only two values printed in a small sheet of four. These were the "high values", the sheet containing two 6 Shahi and two 1 Rupee stamps. No complete sheets are known. The controversy with this issue arises from the cancellation used: rather than the bite cancel many stamps have a distinctive obliteration – in every sense of the word – said to consist of a mixture of mud and rifle oil. This



Fig. 4 1289: unused and used with typical "mud and rifle oil" cancel. The date is at 11 o'clock.

designation may be apocryphal but whatever the make-up of the "ink", the result is usually pretty awful (fig.4). Unfortunately, it meant that contemporary collectors threw away most used specimens as being unworthy of putting in an album and waited for a better example to come along. It never did. Consequently used copies are much scarcer than unused, but because of their appearance, not as valuable. Fortunately, this cancellation is only found on this issue.

The use of the postal system was expanding and the following year saw the need for more Shahi stamps (the basic letter rate). A new "1290 Plate A" issue was prepared, again with a plate of 15 clichés, soon followed by a redrawn simplified design without corner ornaments in a plate of 60 ("1290 Plate B").

1290 Plate A is perhaps the easiest to find and also the most

interesting of these classic issues. The plate wore quite badly and four distinct states can be identified: (1) early, (2) worn, (3) retouched and (4) retouched and worn again. There are of course intermediate states which means that despite being a simple

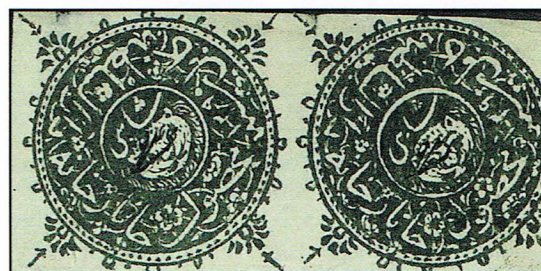


Fig. 5. 1290 Plate A, the right hand stamp with the "missing corner ornament" error.

The date is at 2 o'clock.

plate of 15 subjects it can be quite difficult to find two stamps exactly the same. The major error in Afghan philately also occurs on this issue where the top right corner ornament was missed out on position 6 when the plate was engraved (fig.5). This was quickly noticed and the corner ornament was roughly added in (fig.6). The scarcity of the "missing corner ornament" error is



Fig. 6 The missing corner ornament roughly restored, and showing signs of wear

such that it went unnoticed by collectors for thirty years. It is thought there may be fewer than a dozen examples in existence.

1290 Plate B was the first simplification of the lion design, with the corner ornaments being removed (fig.7). The sheet size was increased to 60. It has been reported that over 120 full sheets of this issue were looted from the main post office in Kabul during the Second Afghan War, but it seems that many have been cut up to fit album pages so that complete sheets have become quite scarce.



Fig. 7 1290 Plate B. The simplified design. The date is at about the 5 to 6 o'clock position

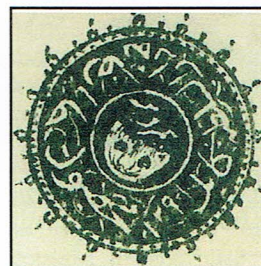
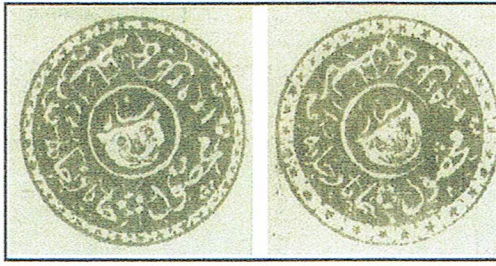


Fig. 8 1291: the half rupee value. The date is again at 5 to 6 o'clock

The following year, 1292 (1875-76), another high value composite sheet of 15 clichés was issued, being five each of the Abasi, half Rupee and Rupee values (fig.8). This was followed in 1293 (1876-77) by a medium value composite sheet of 15: five of the Abasi and ten of the Sanar. All these are quite difficult to find used, but easier to locate unused. One of the Sanar stamps (cliché 15) has a much wider outer circle which earns it a separate catalogue listing (SG 18a) and a much higher catalogue price even though the reality is that every cliché is different and none is rarer than any other (fig.9). This issue can





*Fig. 9 1292: the sanar value, one with wide outer circle, both in "purple". The date is at about 2 o'clock.*

be found printed in both black and purple. The stamps were first issued in black, but then seem to have been superseded by those in purple. It is thought that the purple stamps may have been proofs which were pressed into use following damage to the plate. In any event, purple stamps are commoner than black. It should be noted that the use of the colour "purple" to describe these stamps can be misleading. Purple is the colour of issue, however over the intervening years the purple ink has been susceptible to oxidisation and it is "normal" for such stamps today to appear brown in colour, those with a purple tinge being comparatively scarce.

The last issue considered here is the "Tablet



*Fig.10 The abasi value of the Tablet issue, in purple. The date is at 5 o'clock, just to the right of the Tablet.*

Issue", so called as the value has been moved from above the lion's head and placed in a tablet below the head (*fig.10*). Like the previous issue it is found both in black and purple, with the purple being more plentiful. There are five values – Shahi, Abasi, Sanar, half Rupee and Rupee – in a composite sheet of 24. The word Shahi is expressed in two different ways, and the Abasi and Rupee values can be found with or without the word "yak" meaning "one" in front, thus there are eight face-different stamps in the sheet. This issue was in use for only a few months, being superseded in September 1876, and these Tablets are amongst the scarcest – and most sought after – of all Afghan stamps. No complete sheets exist and the largest multiples are unused strips of three of the half and one Rupee values and pairs of the other values in black, and unused and used strips of three of the Shahi and unused strips of three of the Abasi and rupee in purple. Used examples of the high values and mint examples of the low values are particularly rare.

I hope this has been a useful introduction to the beginnings of Afghanistan's postal history. A future article will cover the other end of the spectrum with the Taliban and post-Taliban eras.

*Editor's Note: Afghanistan 1870-1900: A Specialised Catalogue which covers these issues is available to borrow from the NPS Library, or to buy from the author (details from [afghanphilately@aol.com](mailto:afghanphilately@aol.com)).*