

The Five (Philatelic) Lives of Christmas Island

By Steve Pendleton

There are many Christmas Islands in the world; however, very few offer the kind of postal history generated by the one located in the central Pacific. Since its discovery in 1777, there have been five specific periods of postal history generated by this particular Christmas Island. Steve Pendleton takes us on an illustrated tour of each of them.



There are many islands called 'Christmas' around the world – even one stamp issuing island in the Indian Ocean. However, if you are looking for a place with a varied postal history, there's another one. This is located in the Line Islands in the Central Pacific. For years this huge atoll (it's believed to be the largest one in the world), was part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. Briefly it belonged to the Gilbert Islands after the Ellice Islands became Tuvalu. Finally, when Kiribati became independent, Christmas found a permanent home. Today, over five thousand Gilbertese (or I-Kiribati) live there. They have emigrated from their overpopulated main islands which lie far to the west. It has a large airfield, hotel (named after Captain Cook, and shown on a Kiribati stamp), lots of palm trees and a reputation for good fishing. It also has a new name – Kiritimati.

This Christmas Island does not issue stamps (although Kiribati has issued a number of stamps dealing with it). There are five periods to its postal history, some of which overlap.

They begin with the wreck of the *Aeon* and the issuance of a series of local stamps. Then, a British Gilbert and Ellice Islands post office was established. During World War II, an American military office was opened while the British office continued to be open. After World War II Christmas became a centre for atomic bomb testing, with both American and British military offices. Finally, an island post office was open during the Gilbert Islands era, as well as for Kiribati. What follows next is a brief orientation.

Christmas Island as it is

The Line Islands look like, well, a line in the Central Pacific, just above the equator and south of Hawaii. Christmas is by far the largest. The island shape is something like that of a claw, with a semi-lagoon at one end that is enclosed on two sides (Fig 1). The rest of the island served in the past as a danger to passing ships (Fig 2); one of the island bays is called the Bay of Wrecks – for good reason. Kiribati issued a very nice map stamp in 1981 (SG 148) (Fig 3).



Fig 1 Map of Christmas Island



Fig 2 One ship that survived the infamous Bay of Wrecks at Christmas Island was the USS Astoria. This cover is postmarked 'CHRISTMAS ISLAND' and dated 21 July 1934 (Reduced)



Fig 3 This \$1 Kiribati stamp from 1981 depicts a map of Christmas Island showing a ship heading towards the Bay of Wrecks

Christmas Island has a land area of over 360 square km, and innumerable small lakes and ponds. It can get periods of great rainfall, but also suffers from periods of drought. Perhaps this is the reason that early explorers found it uninhabited, but with some evidence of early occupancy. Captain Cook found it on, of course, Christmas Day 1777. The Gilbert Islands issued a four stamp set noting the discovery in 1977 (55/8) (Fig 4). It was known throughout the 19th century, and eventually its size led investors to think of planting enough palm trees to support a large coconut plantation.

The wreck of the *Aeon*

During the 1800s a number of uses were found for the island. Digging guano, obtaining coconuts, salt mining and diving for mother-of-pearl were just some of the activities. However, there were many years where no one lived there.

As noted, many wrecks occurred. There were several suggested reasons – mischarting the location and size, currents and the flat visage of it. One of the most famous was that of the *Aeon*. This vessel was bound from the US to the South Pacific when, on 18 July 1908, it struck the eastern tip of the island. All the passengers and crew were landed on the desert shore, but as they carried no radio and the island was not inhabited at the time, they found themselves marooned.

The cargo included many pieces of lumber, as well as a large number (one source says 500) of mail sacks. Luckily there were enough provisions, as well as scrounging off the land, to sustain life. Eventually, the captain and some crew were able to sail a lifeboat two days journey away. This enabled them to reach the cable station on Fanning Island. All the castaways were rescued, and the mail received a red two-line cachet reading ‘Damaged in wreck of S.S. *Aeon*’.

A source mentions believing that 17 of these letters have survived. Two have appeared in 2017 sales. One was seen in a Mowbrays (NZ) auction, where it attained a bid of just over \$1000 NZ.

Local stamps

In the early 1900s interest revived in making Christmas into a copra plantation. This is where Christmas begins to feel the impact of one Paul Emmanuel Rougier. Born in France in 1864, Rougier joined the Marist Order of the Catholic Church as a missionary priest. He went to Tahiti, from where he was eventually able to visit many of the more isolated isles. He decided to set up a firm, the Central Pacific Cocoanut Plantations Ltd, in 1914. A small group of workers (which he later joined) was sent to the island aboard the company vessel *Ysabel May*. They founded a settlement called ‘Kaianu’ (later renamed Paris) at the western end of the island.

One of Rougier’s schemes involved the creation of a Christmas Island Local Stamp. It is believed that the stamp (a multicoloured affair bearing a picture of the yacht and with the company name) was issued by a New Caledonia printer in sheets of four in 1916. The value was 5c., which represented the cost to deliver a letter within the community (Fig 5). A letter to Tahiti or elsewhere was supposed to cost 10c.

In 1924 another 5c. stamp was created in different perforations and slightly different colours (this is also known used with a manuscript 10c. marking). Possibly in May 1927 a 10c. stamp was issued, and 1934 saw yet another printing. These can be easily differentiated because the 1927 issue has ‘10 CENTS’ printed at the top in red, while the later stamp has it printed in green-blue (Fig 6).

Father Rougier passed away in 1932, but



Fig 4 Four stamps issued by Gilbert Islands commemorating the bicentenary of the discovery of the Christmas Islands by Captain Cook



Fig 5 An original 5c. local island stamp on cover postmarked 3 April 1918 (Reduced)

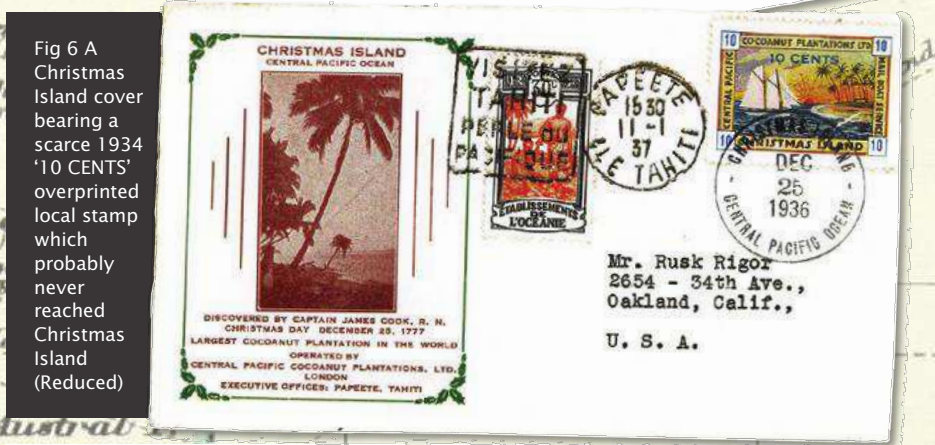


Fig 6 A Christmas Island cover bearing a scarce 1934 ‘10 CENTS’ overprinted local stamp which probably never reached Christmas Island (Reduced)

the locals continued to be sold until about 1938. Many questions have been raised about the need for them, and just how legitimate was their use. There never were many workers there – 1938 had the largest number at 51. Other years there may have been 20 or 30. There were usually a few Europeans, but most of the workers were from French Polynesia.

Local covers do exist. One estimate, from several years ago, stated only five were known, but since then a few more have been discovered. Many of the covers bear addresses to known stamp dealers – Roessler is one. Many covers were also cancelled at Papeete. It is quite possible that many, if not most of these, never actually got to Christmas. Covers were carried on the company yacht. After it sank, another vessel, the *Marechal Foch* carried mail.

These covers had several different cachets. One is a small double-ring design with the words ‘CHRISTMAS-ISLAND/LOCAL-POSTAGE’ on the edge and a small palm tree at the bottom (See Fig 4). Another is a large double-ring marking with the words ‘CHRISTMAS ISLAND. CENTRAL PACIFIC COCOANUT PLANTATIONS LTD’ and a large palm in the centre. Finally there is a plain one-ring design reading ‘CHRISTMAS ISLAND/CENTRAL PACIFIC OCEAN’ – this one is believed to have been kept in Papeete (see Fig 6).

A private cachet (believed to be unique) has also been reported. This is a crude, five-line mark with the name of ‘F.J.O. Jerabek’, who was manager of the plantation about 1930.

The British (Gilbert and Ellice) Post Office

Christmas Island became part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands in 1919, but a British (Western Pacific High Commission) representative did not land until 1937. With the disappearance of the local post system, a British post office was deemed necessary.

Base image credit: The British Library. Taken from, British Possessions and Colonies c1.899. Id no. 0011820533

Such an office was opened on 14 February 1939 – even though the population in 1940 was reported as a total of 27. Four postmarks are known from this office. The first is a single-ring design reading ‘POST OFFICE/ CHRISTMAS ISLAND’ (Fig 7). Later there was a double-ring reading the same (Fig 8). Finally, there was a common single-ring type reading ‘CHRISTMAS/ISLAND/ GILBERT &/ ELLICE ISLANDS’ (Fig 9). There were two varieties of this marking.

During World War II, it is reported that the office was open but had very few stamps. After the war it continued to be open, even during the large military activities of the late 1950s.

On 1 October 1975 Gilbert and Ellice was renamed the Gilbert Islands with the loss of the Ellice Islands (Tuvalu). Christmas remained part of the Gilbert Islands. A new cancel was used. It was a double-ring design reading ‘CHRISTMAS ISLAND/ GILBERT ISLANDS’. As of 12 July 1979 the island was a part of the independent nation of Kiribati, and its post office is under its jurisdiction.

The Americans arrive

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, real estate in the Central Pacific suddenly became much more strategic. Not only could they provide bases from which the military could operate, but they would be most useful in ferrying warplanes to New Zealand, Australia and New Guinea.

Several of the Line Islands were seen as being of prime importance. The small atoll of Palmyra to the north, Christmas and Fanning were all targets for airfields.

By early 1942 advance units were already constructing a long airstrip on the northern edge of Christmas. Soon, units of the Connecticut National Guard arrived to garrison, and the first real infrastructure (roads, numerous buildings, etc.) were built. It has been said that recreation facilities were nonexistent, so the soldiers amused themselves by shooting sharks in the lagoon.

Christmas Island’s military postal address was A.P.O. 915, San Francisco. During the war this unit had a single-ring postmark reading ‘AMERICAN BASE FORCES/ A.P.O. 915’ around the edge (Fig 10). Because of security concerns this number was later excised, creating a subtype. Later these were replaced with another device reading ‘U.S. ARMY POSTAL SERVICE APO’ with ‘915’ in the centre.

At the end of the war the airfields were gradually shut down. The post office had been open from 11 February 1942 to 12 October 1948. Those few remaining civilian plantation employees could return to work in their accustomed isolation. Or so it seemed.

Atomic tests

Besides coconuts and land for aircraft, the Line Islands possess one other attribute – at least to the great powers. They’re in the middle of nowhere and have a population unlikely to protest any activities. So, the US and the UK planned the most unfriendly of activities – a series of atomic and hydrogen bomb tests. For the British, these became known as Operation Grapple. For the Americans, they were called Operation Dominic.



Fig 7 A cover dated 3 December 1939 with the single-ring postmark that was first used by the British Gilbert and Ellice Post Office on Christmas Island (Reduced)

Fig 8 A cover sent to neighbouring Fanning Island cancelled by the double-ring postmark



Fig 9 A cover with an illegal use of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean) stamps. It bears the more common single-ring style of British Gilbert and Ellice Post Office postmark (Reduced)

Fig 10 American Base Forces A.P.O. 915 postmark on a commercial World War II cover (Reduced)



Fig 11 A rare first British military ‘FIELD POST OFFICE/158’ postmark which was used on Christmas Island for about a month (Reduced)

A large nuclear device was detonated near Malden Island on 15 May 1957. If you want to look for an item from a truly little-known desert island, try finding a cover from the crew from this place. They had a simple one-line 'MALDEN ISLAND' marking, with mail cancelled through Christmas Island. A few collectors also got a special treat – their covers were decorated with the paw print of the island's pet pig.

During 1957 units of the British Army continued to reinforce the island. Infrastructure beyond that found in the rest of the Gilberts was built. In fact, at the end of the tests much of the material (such as the communications system) was removed to Tarawa. The northern part of the island became devoted to the military. At one point about 4000 soldiers were stationed there.

Both the British and the Americans used military mail systems (the few locals who remained had the Gilbert and Ellice post office, which got a bit of use). British troops in transit could send mail in Honolulu via FPO 1063.

The first British military postmark on the island was 'FIELD POST OFFICE/158', which was used for about a month (June-July 1956). It is a standard double-ring design with the number at the bottom (Fig 11). This was shortly replaced by two similar cancels reading (possibly uniquely?) B.F.P.O./CHRISTMAS ISLAND. The only difference in the two is that one has an asterisk in the middle (Fig 12), the other, not.

These cancels were in use between August 1956 and June 1964, when the last British troops left the island. If you are very lucky you might find one dated Christmas Day.

In addition to the cancels, some covers were prepared with an atomic bomb depiction on the front. They also usually had the 'OPERATION GRAPPLE' appellation. There are also covers with the wording 'FIRST BRITISH/MEGATON TRIAL/1957' (Fig 13).

The Americans returned to the island in 1962. The post office was given the number APO 86, and was open only from May to September 1962. Single-ring cancels are known reading 'ARMY & AIR FORCE POSTAL SERVICE/A.P.O.' with the number 86 in the lower middle (Fig 14). There was both a hand cancel and a machine version (Fig 15). This was certainly isolated duty. However, there was a daily mail flight to Hawaii.

Although the American stay was brief, a maintenance crew was left to take care of the airfield and (presumably) to assist in cleanup. These men were served by a contract station, which had a single-ring hand cancel reading 'HONOLULU, HAWAII CHRISTMAS ISLAND Br.'.

Kiribati

Christmas Island has never been quite the same since its exposure to the military. It was provided with a much-expanded infrastructure including a very nice jet-capable airfield, plus lots of roads and homes. It also had something few of the other Gilbert Islands had – space for expansion of a land-hungry population.



Fig 12 A British military cover with one of the two similar types of 'B.F.P.O./CHRISTMAS ISLAND' postmarks. This one has the asterisk in the middle (Reduced)

Fig 13 This cover shows a depiction of an A bomb test with the wording 'FIRST BRITISH/MEGATON TRIAL/1957' (Reduced)



Fig 14 With the return of US military personnel in 1962 came a new hand postmark and a new number: A.P.O. 86 (Reduced)



Fig 15 A machine cancel was also used to cancel mail during the American's military stay on the island during May to September 1962 (Reduced)

Through successive governments (Gilbert and Ellice Colony, Gilberts Colony and finally the independent nation of Kiribati) the island population has expanded, from a few hundred plantation workers during the test years, to several thousand inhabitants today. It certainly has the largest population of any of the Line Islands. Fishing and the plantation provide a living, and there is an expanding tourist industry fuelled by scheduled jet service.

There have been a number of cancellations from the island office. The last one from Gilbert and Ellice days was a common single-ring design with 'CHRISTMAS ISLAND' on the top and 'GILBERT & ELLICE ISLANDS' at the bottom. When the colony split (the Ellice Islands becoming Tuvalu) there was a double-ring cancel reading 'CHRISTMAS ISLAND GILBERT ISLANDS'. Since 1978 I have seen several Kiribati cancels. One is a similar design to the Gilbert Islands one, with the replacement of 'GILBERT' by 'KIRIBATI'.

More recently I have seen two similar double-ring standard designs, one reading 'CHRISTMAS IS/KIRIBATI', the other with the letters 'PO' added to the island name (Figs 16 and 17). I also know of a pictorial cancel with the island name and a palm tree.

Finally, for a real prize (though probably illegal), try sending a cover to the postmaster at the Kiribati island bearing mint stamps from Christmas Island (Indian Ocean), and ask for a cancel. There's absolutely no guarantee he will do it, but I did find a cover serviced thus (see Fig 9) – so someone succeeded!



Fig 16 Kiribati stamps with a double-ring 'PO CHRISTMAS IS/KIRIBATI' postmark (Reduced)



Below: Fig 17 Commercial cover from the Ministry of Commerce on Kiritimati (Christmas Island) to Tarawa with Millennium cachet as well as a 'PO CHRISTMAS IS/KIRIBATI' postmark (Reduced)

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