Argyll Etkin’s November 4th 2004, auction contained a lot of two 1888 British Bechuanaland newspaper wrappers described as essays (lot 418) (Figure 1).

The lot description reads: “1888 ½d and 1d G.B. newspaper wrappers with ‘BRITISH / BECHUANALAND’ essay overprints above and below the stamps, with ‘BRITISH’ 10.5mm wide (being 9.5-10mm on the issued wrappers) and the ½d wrapper without bars obliterating the five lines of instructions. Very rare, and possibly unique, no essays of this issue of wrappers were recorded by Thy/Inglefield-Watson.” The alleged essays were illustrated in the auction catalogue on colour Plate H and here in Figure 1.

The issued wrappers in question are BBS No. WR 3 and WR 4 (Thy and Inglefield-Watson, 2004). They are British wrappers overprinted in 1888 by ‘BRITISH’ above and ‘BECHUANALAND’ below the stamp. In addition, the ½d wrapper has five lines of text deleted by 10 diagonal bars. The wrappers were printed and perhaps also overprinted by De La Rue. As stated in the auction catalogue, no essays were known to exist for overprinting the British wrappers for British Bechuanaland when our book went to press.

The Argyll Etkin catalogue gives two reasons for identifying the wrappers as essays: (1) the length of ‘BRITISH’ is 10.5 mm long in contrast to the issued wrappers where it is only 9.5-10mm long and (2) the bars that cancel the text on the issued ½d wrapper are missing. We will examine these two claims in turn.

**Background**

De La Rue printed the original wrappers in sheets of multiples, but typically cut the sheets prior to
shipment to the colonies. Huggins (1970, p. 90) states that “(w)rappers were printed in sheets, with stamps in rows, tête-bêche in relation to each other, spaced in a staggered manner to allow cutting.” It is further known that very similar Cape of Good Hope wrappers, also printed by De La Rue, were done in sheets of 10 (Philatelic Society London, 1895, p. 60).

Full uncut sheets were made available in the Cape of Good Hope for local commercial overprinting and cutting to specified size (Philatelic Society London, 1895, p. 60), as is well known for Cape Argus (newspaper) wrappers of the period. It is, however, not conclusively known if full sheets were made available in British Bechuanaland. The overprinting in London by De La Rue (or by the Stamping Department at Somerset House) may thus have been done either on individual wrappers or on sheets of wrappers. There, nevertheless, are indications that the Bechuanaland wrappers were cut prior to shipment: (1) multiples are not known to exist; (2) the printings were relatively small (WR 3, 32,640; WR 4, 29,520; WR 7, 110,400); (3) there was very limited commercial activity in the colony at that time; and (4) the knife used for cutting the wrappers had truncated corners unlikely to have been available in the colony. For these reasons it is suggested that stocks of already cut British wrappers were conveniently utilized for overprinting as British Bechuanaland wrappers.

Lengths of ‘BRITISH’ and ‘BECHUANALAND’

We have examined our holdings of the British wrappers with ‘BRITISH’ and ‘BECHUANALAND’ overprints (WR 3, 4, and 7). The results are summarized in Table 1 (below). A total of 69 wrappers were examined, comprising 12 of WR 3, 29 of WR 4, and 28 of WR 7.

The measured length of ‘BRITISH’ varies between 9.5 mm and 10.5 mm (the uncertainty in the measurements estimated in Table 1 is ±0.125 mm).

The majority (87%) of overprints on WR 3a (square ends to bars) has ‘BRITISH’ 10.5 mm long, similar to the alleged essays. All examples of WR 3b (sloped ends) have ‘BRITISH’ significantly shorter measuring only 9.5 mm. All copies of WR 4 have ‘BRITISH’ 10 mm long, while on most (96%) examples of WR 7 ‘BRITISH’ is 10.5 mm long. The observation is thus that 10.5 mm long overprints are dominant (58% of all WR 3) on the early ½d issued wrapper and thus not confined to possible essays.

The length of ‘BECHUANALAND’ is remarkably constant at 19 mm for all wrappers.

The distance between the two overprint lines shows as expected systematic variation related to the size of the imprinted stamps (Figure 2) (WR 4 30 mm, WR 3 and WR 7 32-32.5 mm; measured as distance between top of ‘BECHUANALAND’ and base of “BRITISH”).

Missing Overprint Bars

Missing overprints on postal stationery are for good reasons difficult or impossible to identify unless two overprints were required on such as reply postcards. The only known example that so far has been positively identified as missing is on a reply postcard, where ‘BRITISH BECHUANALAND’ is missing on the reply card, but not the message card (PC 6 V(2)). Others may exist among British and Cape stationery known occasionally to have been used in Bechuanaland without overprint.

The important question for further evaluating the alleged ½d essay wrapper is thus obviously whether both the overprinting and the text cancelling were done in one or two printing operations. The Philatelic Society of London (1895, p. 17) writes about the British Bechuanaland wrappers that “(t)he whole of the surcharge on the halfpenny values, including the diagonal lines, were applied at one operation.”

We have measured the perpendicular distance between the bars and the top corner of ‘B’ of ‘BRITISH’. A group of 16 WR 7 wrappers shows a very consistent distance. In contrast, the distances measured for WR 3 show two groupings, with about 2 mm difference, despite low numbers examined that can be broken down as belonging to WR 3a (6 wrappers) and WR 3b (3 wrappers), respectively.

The overprinting forms were probably made by electro- or stereo-plating an originally typeset forme as was common at De La Rue at that time (Easton.
1949). The evidence suggests that two formes were used for overprinting WR 3 (including the diagonal cancelling bars) and one forme for each of WR 4 and WR 7. There is thus no support for suggesting that the overprinting of WR 3 was done in two steps.

De La Rue produced the Cape newspaper wrappers in circulation in 1888 and had the same text inscription (without cancelling) as on the British wrappers used for the British Bechuanaland wrappers. The Cape wrappers were also overprinted for British Bechuanaland still without text cancelling. The reason for cancelling of the text is not clear. It is possible that it may have been that ‘book mail’ rates were not yet introduced in British Bechuanaland in 1888. It is plausible that this was a last minute realization at De La Rue or Somerset House and that a few trial overprints had already been made.

**Related Postcard Essay**

An essay for the 1888 overprinting of the British 1d foreign card exists that is very similar to the wrapper overprint (PC E(7); Figure 2). It is plausible that both the wrappers and the British postcards were overprinted at the same time and by the same overprinter (De La Rue). This postcard essay (or an example of it) was sold as lot 418 at the same Argyll Etkin’s auction containing the alleged essay wrappers.

**Conclusion**

In the absence of printers and/or archival marking on the wrappers, there is no support for the proof status of the 1d wrapper. The overprint is similar to that on the issued wrappers and cannot be distinguished from these (WR 4).

It is plausible that the missing cancelling bars on the ½d wrapper was an essay produced prior to realization that the text on the British wrappers did not apply in British Bechuanaland. We consider it less likely that the missing wrapper overprint bars were a printing error. On the other hand, in the absence of printer’s notations there is no direct confirmation that the wrapper was an essay.

The 10.5 mm length of ‘BRITISH’ on either of the wrappers cannot support the suggestion that they were essays since similar overprints exist on the issued wrappers.

**References**


