

PRINCESS ELIZABETH STAYS IN MALTA: MALTA'S 1950 "ROYAL VISIT" ISSUE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Malta:

Malta consists of three inhabited (and two uninhabited) islands (316 sq km), in the centre of the Mediterranean, 93 kms south-east of Sicily. It has a long and complex known history dating back 8,000 years; and has cultural connections to Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East. It became a British colony in 1814. British forces prevented the occupation of Malta during WWII, and used Malta as the staging ground for campaigns in North Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Malta remained a colony until independence in 1964.

Princess Elizabeth:

The arrival of Princess Elizabeth in late 1949, for the first of four stays over 18 months, to be with her husband (the Duke of Edinburgh, serving in the RN) provided welcome relief and distraction from post-war rebuilding efforts. The Maltese were captivated by the young Princess, and her activities were chronicled frequently in local newspapers and periodicals, and covered by news services abroad. Though her stays were primarily private, she alone or with her husband did participate in official engagements.

Importance of Postal Services:

In 1950 the population of Malta was about 300,000. Over 10,000 Maltese had emigrated to Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, between 1918 and 1920. A further 90,000, almost 30% of the population, headed for the same destinations between 1948-1967. From WWI until Independence in 1964, Malta was the home of a large number of British military and government personnel, who were prior or current residents of Great Britain. Post WWII, massive rebuilding was required, new services, such as international telephone services, were slow to be introduced. Postal services were the main conduit of private communications with the outside world; and were crucial to keeping the government functioning and in allowing its residents to stay in touch with family and friends overseas.

Significance of this issue:

In 1950, Malta's postage stamps were issued under the auspices of the Crown Agents in Great Britain, and their attitudes towards stamps had been greatly influenced by the King George V, who believed that the sole purpose of postage stamps was to be functional and pay postage costs. King George VI, shared his father's views, coupled with post-war austerity the only commemorative stamps issued by many colonies, including Malta, from 1935-1949 were five omnibus issues. So, to a population to whom international postal services were an important part of daily lives, the news that Malta would issue a stand alone commemorative set of stamps celebrating the Princess's time on the island garnered considerable interest and excitement.

Exhibitor's interest in Malta and the Princess Elizabeth issue:

The exhibitor's spouse grew up in Malta from 1929-1943, and recounted stories of life on the island before and during WWII. The Princess privately visited an aunt's florist shop in Sliema, and two uncles in the RN met her at navy social functions.

THE EXHIBIT:

Treatment:

The exhibit focuses on one set of stamps, and covers five aspects of the issue. The first part is the stamps themselves, illustrates them, and states the specifications. The second part summarizes information on the post offices, cancellation devices, and instructional markings, in use at the time. The third part shows a sampling of First Day Covers (FDCs) with examples of cachets and other first day usages. The fourth part covers other postal / commercial usages. In this section rates and some possible routings are presented. Finally, an example of revenue use is shown. Importance has been covered in the above background information.

Personal study and research:

The original portrait the stamps are based on has never been identified or reported. It has now been found, illustrated and referenced. Information has also been researched on some of the addressees and senders, rates and routings. Sorting out rates has been a challenge, there were both uniform surface mail rates and 14 zonal air mail rates in effect when the stamps were released. Air mail rates (to 19 zones) and registration fees were increased at the end of the availability period.

Philatelic and Subject Knowledge:

The Malta Study Circle has published a number of research papers and a comprehensive handbook. All of these have been consulted for research on the stamps, post offices, post marks, instructional markings, rates, and possible mail routings. The other major reference concentrates on postal history, but there are many significant discrepancies among the references. The identifying, naming and usage dates of the circular date stamps do not agree from reference to reference, nor do rates and their effective periods. The material has been chosen to try and illustrate the interest and importance of the issue, and to demonstrate knowledge of postal services (post offices, postmarks, instructional marks, rates, routings) available at the time. As much information as possible for each item has been included. Selected social / historical information has been added for some items and is indicated in blue text font.

Rarity and condition:

The material available reflects both the small size of the island and population demographics, the short period of time the stamps were available for purchase, and the postal usage. (The 3 month availability period is referred to as "in period" in the exhibit.) Single mint and used stamps are readily available, but imprint / plate blocks are less common. The 1/- stamp plate blocks 1a and 2a are quite rare, the 2a is shown here. First Day Covers sent to inland and overseas destinations are widely available. The "Cordelia's Emporium" First Day cachets are common, and the only commercial cachets produced. Three examples of privately produced cachets have been found. There is very little commercial material from inland use available. The item exhibited is the only one found. Commercial mail to GB, and from expatriates, is common. There are over-franked covers with a complete set of stamps. Import and export agents used postal services, which is reflected in overseas destinations. Commercial covers are not as common on correspondence to continental Europe, and Africa; and none has been seen sent to the Near or Far East, or Asia. There are also examples of late usage available, two examples are shown. Two examples of use on military forces mail have been found. One revenue use has been found, to pay the notary fee for a legal document, filed with the court during the 3 month stamp availability period. Though considered "modern" material, the stamps were issued 75 years ago, and both stamps and most covers are 70-75 years old. Malta had a post-war paper shortage, so initial paper quality was poor. Malta has a subtropical climate and high relative humidity, so preservation of paper products is problematic unless special measures are taken. As a result toning and wear are common on most material.

Changes to the exhibit since NOVAPEX 2024:

Additional acquisitions being shown:

- photographic proof of 1d stamp
- 2 additional plate blocks (1 each 1d and 3d stamps), now showing 11 of 12.
- 2 additional postmarks V3e and VG4a (16 of 18 shown)
- custom made "maxi-card"
- additional FDC cachet
- commercially used air letter
- example of Forces mail, which is also a registered postal stationary envelope
- commercial cover to Egypt, returned mail.

Additional research:

- portrait
- use of Field Post Office hand stamp

The treatment has been modified:

- more imprint/plate blocks of the stamps are shown (11 versus 8)
- less emphasis on FDCs (10 versus 14)
- more postal uses (22 versus 20)

PRIMARY REFERENCES:

Martin, R.E. (Editor), 1980. Malta: The postal history and postage stamps, 1576-1960. Robson Lowe Ltd., London, UK, 411 p. (PDF file available from the exhibitor).

Pound, G., and Lockyer, R., 2010. King George VI: postage stamps and postal services of Malta, 2nd edition.

Malta Study Circle Study Paper No. 33, Malta Study Circle, Watford, UK, 97 p.

Proud, E.B., 1999. The postal history of Malta. Proud-Bailey Co. Ltd, Heathfield, UK, 320 p.