

The London Gang: Forgers and Fakers

By Michael Peach

In most fields of collecting there are fakes and forgeries to be aware of. Philately is one such area that has seen its fair share of this unscrupulous behaviour. The irony is, however, that some forgeries are now themselves highly sought after and collected. Michael Peach gives testimony to one such 'gang' of tricksters and brings to light their shady behaviour back in 1880s London.



In the 1880s there was a period of forgeries and fakes in London involving several unscrupulous dealers and fakers. Among these were the three members of the so-called London Gang, Alfred Benjamin, Julian Hippolite Sarpy and George Kirke Jeffryes (various similar spellings of his name were also used), who were convicted of conspiracy to defraud and cheat by selling forged stamps at the central criminal court, London, on 14 March 1892 (Fig 1).

The gang

Alfred Benjamin was born in 1863. He was a partner in the firm of Benjamin and Bannister until about 1886 when he went to Australia. He returned in 1888, when he joined forces with Julian Sarpy. Sarpy, born in Australia in 1860, had started in business as 'J Sarpy & company' in Peckham. Benjamin was an excellent salesman and ran the dimly lit little shop at 1 Cullum Street (Fig 2), in the City of London, a district now completely redeveloped. Meanwhile, Sarpy was active in the back of the shop producing overprints and surcharges of the stamps that had been requested. The partners produced a trade card (Fig 3) announcing their business as dealers in facsimiles, faked surcharges and fiscal postals. On the walls of the shop, Benjamin posted a notice that he would not guarantee the genuineness of a stamp unless he had given written confirmation. The small handwritten notice was partially obscured by another notice stating 'this is my busy day'. Benjamin and Sarpy had in their possession a perforator as well as a press.

The activities of Jeffryes, born in 1868, were noted as early as 1883 by Jean-Baptiste Moens and London dealer, Theodore Buhl, who reported forged surcharges on South American stamps from Colombia



Fig 1 The infamous London Gang



Fig 2 A 1911 photograph of Cullum Street, London, where Benjamin and Sarpy ran their business

Fig 3 Benjamin and Sarpy's trade card



and Ecuador. These were genuine stamps with fictitious surcharges, namely the 1r. Ecuador surcharged in black '4 cvos' and 10c. Columbia surcharged in black 'Dos v Medio'. For the next few years, Jeffryes continued in business producing surcharges in black and red in various positions on genuine stamps of Columbia, Ecuador, North Borneo, Sarawak, Saint Vincent (4d. on 1s. vermilion), Sungei Ujong and Zululand. Jeffryes, Benjamin and Sarpy cleaned the ink marks off fiscally used stamps as well as adding postmarks. Jeffryes also produced bogus cancellations that were often from unheard of places.

Working from his home on Grove Road, Bow, Jeffryes produced more sophisticated issues. The first issues of New South Wales were some of the most notorious forgeries—the 1850 1d. Sydney Views, including plate 1 without clouds and plate 2 with clouds (Fig 4) as well as the 2d., which all have the same basic design. The genuine plates were re-engraved several times. These were so well done that M P Castle wrote about detecting them in *Stanley Gibbons' Monthly Journal*. This may have been a mistake, as the plates were later perfected. He also produced various versions of the 1851–55 issues; the 1d. with different shades and paper, 2d., 3d., and 6d. (Fig 5), and the 1856 6d. registration stamp. Other forgeries included the Ceylon 1857–59 8d., 9d., 1s.9d. (Fig 6) and 2s., some undenominated Grenada fiscals overprinted for postal use, New Zealand 1855 1s., Tasmania 1853 1d. and 4d. 1863 variations of the colour of the 2s.6d. postal fiscal, Victoria 1850 2d. and 3d., and 1854–58 1s. blue. The Victoria stamps were lithographed. Using a bit of imagination in 1886, he had two completely false Hawaiian stamps (\$2 and \$5) (Fig 7) engraved with the statue of Kamehameha I, based on the genuine 1883 25c. stamp. He paid Henry Ponsford of Little Street, £3.15s. to engrave the plates and £1.9s. to print 1000 copies of each. He marketed the stamps primarily through Benjamin, initially Benjamin and Bannister, and then Benjamin and Sarpy. The Sydney Views were sold for 2s.6d. single or 5s. for a pair. The forged stamps are now considered to be



Fig 4 New South Wales 1d. plate 2 forgery



Fig 5 New South Wales 6d. forgery

desirable items. The shop was frequented by several prominent philatelists, including Philipp von Ferrary, who purchased some choice surcharged varieties including an inverted Straits surcharge and a double inverted surcharge.

The arrests

At the instigation of the Philatelic Protection Association, of which Charles J Phillips, manager of Stanley Gibbons, was secretary, Jeffryes was arrested on Christmas Eve 1891 at his home, 80 Grove Road, Bow, and Benjamin and Sarpy were arrested at the shop. When Jeffryes was arrested by Detective Sergeant White and taken by cab to the police station, a parcel containing a large number of stamps was later found in the cab. Jeffryes claimed that he had printed them for Benjamin and Sarpy. The preliminary hearings were held at the Thames Police Court on 24 December and adjourned until 1 January 1892 on 26 counts, of which 23 were related to forgery.

In the interim, Sergeant White had searched Jeffryes' home and found two printing presses and a number of lithographic stones. He also searched the rooms of Benjamin and Sarpy at 46 Oval Road, and the shop at 1 Cullum Street. At the shop, there were large quantities of stamps and documents, three perforating machines and perforating tools, and bottles of acid, paint and printers' ink.

Resuming on 1 January, the hearing was adjourned several times, resuming on 8 and 22 January and 5 February, when the trio were committed for trial at the Old Bailey. The testimony was repeated at the trial.

The trial

The trial started on Friday 11 March 1892 and lasted until the following Monday. There were initially 26 counts in the indictment. By a quirk of the law, the first 23 relating to forgery were declared inadmissible because a stamp was not considered to be a document in writing and could not be forged. However, three indictments did remain for conspiracy to defraud and cheat.

The first witness was George Clayton, a postman, who had known Jeffryes for many years. He sold stamps for Jeffryes to, among others, Theodore Buhl, a stamp dealer in the City, who identified two of them as forgeries. He had seen Jeffryes at work cutting out wooden postmarks and printing surcharges.

Thomas Henry Ponsford confirmed that he had engraved and printed the \$2 and \$5 Hawaiian stamps for G K Jeffryes in August 1886.

Many of the other witnesses, besides the police, were either stamp dealers or stamp collectors who were all involved with purchasing stamps. The Hawaiian forgeries were favourites, along with the Sydney views. Many, if not all, were aware that most of the stamps were fakes or had had the ink removed. The small notice on the wall of the shop not guaranteeing the genuineness of a stamp unless written confirmation was given was not noticed by several customers, including Rudolph Mayer,

Theodore Buhl and Douglas MacKenzie. There was also considerable trade with continental dealers unaware of such a sign. Well-known philatelists included Edward Denny Bacon, later curator of the Royal Philatelic Collection, and Douglas Garth, President of the Philatelic Society. Stamp dealers included Percy May Bright of Bright and Son, Bournemouth, who claimed that Sarpy obtained 6s.6d. from him by false pretenses. Another dealer was Albert Felsenthal, a.k.a. Edward Lester, who had purchased forgeries from the gang. He had seen Jeffryes at work surcharging some Argentine stamps. Although he had sold some of the stamps to Theodore Buhl and other dealers, he had identified them beforehand as forgeries. His main business was in used stamps buying them from housekeepers and waste-paper dealers.

Also among the witnesses was stamp collector Julius Cyriax, a manufacturing chemist, who had purchased large quantities of stamps, totalling around £300, from Benjamin in about 1886. His collection was later found to contain several forgeries. Benjamin took these stamps back in 1890 and refunded £100. Douglas MacKenzie, a collector and researcher of fakes and forgeries, had purchased stamps from Benjamin and was privy to their operations. He was also an occasional writer for the *Philatelic Journal*. Charles J Phillips, who had also examined many of the stamps belonging to the prisoners and found nearly all of them to be forged, also took to the witness stand.

The verdict

The jury returned a verdict of guilty. Jeffryes and Benjamin were sentenced to six months hard labour and Sarpy to four months on the count of conspiracy to defraud and there were identical sentences to run concurrently on the charge of obtaining money by false pretenses. The sentences were not severe, particularly when compared with that of recently convicted (8 February 1892) Dr Bernhardt Assmus on similar charges to three years penal servitude. The judge in this case was particularly upset by the Queen's head being upside down on a forgery of the 4a. Indian stamp.

So what happened next?

After their release from prison, Benjamin and Sarpy continued trading at 1 Cullum Street, presumably in genuine stamps or forgeries labelled as such, for many years. When Benjamin sold his stamps as forgeries, he doubled the price. After Sarpy died in 1910, Benjamin carried on as Benjamin and Sarpy. Benjamin died in 1924. Both are listed in the 1901 census as stamp dealers and Benjamin is in the 1911 census.

What happened to Jeffryes? Doubts have been cast on Jeffryes' role in the business. He is recorded as being employed at Covent Garden, as a seed-salesman. Branston suggests that he was later a greengrocer in Grove Road as a George Jeffery, greengrocer, is listed in the 1895 London street directory. The 1901 and 1911 censuses show that George Kirke Jeffryes was living in Newcastle on Tyne



Fig 6 Ceylon 1s.9d. forgery



Fig 7 The Hawaiian labels with their completely false \$2 and \$5 values

with his wife Alice and five children. He was a General Carrier's Manager. His children were all born in London, the youngest, Gwendolyn, in 1899. He is not listed in the 1891 census, but he must have been living in Grove Road, Bow, with his family, as he was arrested there.

Varro E Taylor and others have stated that he was also an engraver. How did he have time for the expert engraving? The false Hawaiian stamps (\$2 and \$5 labels) were engraved by Henry Ponsford. It is noted that no engraving tools were found when Sergeant White searched Jeffryes' home. Had he had the other forgeries engraved, or did he procure the printing dies from the Belgian stamp dealer J B Moens? The Post Office had been able to track a number of dies to Moens.

Several years later (1934), Sir Edward Denny Bacon was able to examine some of the stamps confiscated prior to the trial. He found that a number of the surcharges were similar and applied with a rubber stamp. In particular, he concluded that the 8c. on 2c. brown of North Borneo (1883) and the Zululand 1888 2d. with an inverted overprint were forgeries. These had been listed in various catalogues and collections as genuine.

Further reading

At the time, the trial was widely reported in the philatelic press, particularly the *London Philatelist* and the *Philatelic Journal of Great Britain*. Detailed proceedings can be found at www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=t18920307-375 and in *Forensic Philately* (1986) by Herman Herst, Jr.

References

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