

# STAMP SCOOP of the Year!

IF you had asked me a month ago how many Navigator imperforate mini sheets were produced for "Australia 99", I would have guessed at say 250,000 or even 500,000. The real number will astound you. Read on. It is the most exciting story concerning Australian decimal stamps for 20 years.

The attractive sheets were produced for sale at "Australia 99" in March, the most successful stamp exhibition ever to be held in the Southern Hemisphere.

The story of these special products for the show is a little confusing for the casual collector, so I will, now the dust has settled, go over the whole issue chronology again.

The two miniature sheets were issued reproducing the now famous set of 6 "Navigator" stamps initially issued by Australia in 1963, in the pre-decimal currency era.

Those exact six designs were then reissued in 1966 as part of the debut new Decimal Currency series. The same colours, and exact £SD to Decimal conversion rates were adhered to. That is, the low value 4/- became the exact decimal equivalent of 40¢ and the high value £2 became the new \$4, which was of course exactly two pounds. That £2 King stamp is by the way the most valuable face different stamp issued in Australia for the past 36 years in MUH condition.

So, these six stamps were decided upon as the "anchor piece" of the Australia 99 releases. The same 6 designs were used, and the same colors retained ... i.e. the £2 and \$4 Sepia brown colour Philip-Parker King was again printed in that same color and design. The only difference was in 1999 was that all six values were now issued in 45¢ letter rate denominations.

So far so good. Six stamps, all being 45¢, and available in two miniature sheets. One sheet contains the three "square" stamps i.e. Bass, King and Dampier, and being dark brown in overall colour (see front cover of this magazine) I always refer to this as the "Brown" sheet. The other one had the three horizontal design stamps, i.e. Cook, Tasman and Flinders. This being dark blue in overall design I refer to as the "Blue" sheet.

These two mini sheets were issued in large numbers in perforated condition. You could buy them in hang-sell packets at pretty well any post office across Australia. Lots were sold at Australia 99, and lots were sold by Australia post mail order, and by their overseas agents.

## AN HISTORIC FIRST

An interesting thing happened with these two Navigator sheets. For the FIRST time in the history of Australian stamps, they were available from the Philatelic Bureau by mail order or at the "A99" show in your CHOICE of either perforated or imperforate types.

This has happened before for many European issues, but NEVER before for Australia. New Zealand did it once for the Orchids miniature sheet for "NZ 1990", and the imperf version of that has held up well in price, in fact has increased all the time, and is catalogued in the excellent new Auckland City Stamps 1999 colour catalogue at \$110 mint or used or \$150 on FDC. Managing director Warwick Delamore told me today demand for these items always outstrips supply even at these rather hefty prices, and he predicts that this catalogue price will increase again in the next edition.



*The hand perforating machine at "A99". In a major boo-boo all 15,000 sheets were sold in a strikingly different perf gauge.*

So, as this 1990 NZ example shows, imperforate mini sheet versions of regular issues are virtually ALWAYS worth more than the perforated ones ... check the listings for any European catalogue to see the evidence of this. The sole New Zealand one is a better example closer to home. I know I left that "NZ 1990" with a bunch of those imperf sheets as I KNEW they would be scarce, and they would show me a profit. They paid for my trans-tasman airfare and hotel bill very quickly as I recall!

So why didn't more Australians bother buying up the special IMPERF miniature sheets for Australia 99?? Who knows. They were not available at local post offices for one thing. That stops a lot of people. They sold out at Philatelic via the dealer contact fairly soon after the show. That stops many others. I made it clear in my column here 3 months ago



that these imperfs on FDC would never be cheaper. They have doubled since.

At that time I said: "It is the Australia 99 items that people "forgot" to order such as the imperforate sheets on FDC that do well in the future. The earlier you buy such items from dealers, the cheaper they will be. I suggest if you missed these items, that you contact your favourite dealer to ensure you secure copies for your collection." All those who took that advice, owe me the customary bottle of Port already it seems!

The entire purpose of making available the IMPERFORATE Navigator mini sheets was so that you could get the "A99" perfins. "What are they", I can hear some of you STILL saying! Yes, it is a complicated issue to follow.

## 1928 TRADITION FOLLOWED

Well, the Post Office announced a unique idea at "Australia 99" designed to get 1000's of personal visitors to attend the show. They built two machines that, in the tradition of the 3d Kookaburra miniature sheets, at the 1928 Exhibition, allowed you to have your imperforate stamps hand perforated on a manual press in front of your very eyes.

Two machines were built, one with a perf head to punch the long size "blue" mini sheets and one with a perf head to punch the "square" stamps found on the "brown" mini sheets. You were required to go and buy the specially printed IMPERFORATE mini sheets and take them to the two hand perforating machines. The maximum permitted was two sets per person. These two sheets perforated at the show were planned to look precisely the same as the regular perforated mini sheets apart from a small "A99" lettering that was punched on the LH side of each mini sheet.

That was the theory. On the "blue" mini sheets, the theory worked fine in practice. The widely sold "blue" mini sheet, and the hand perforated version all measured on the 3 stamp designs, exactly 14 x 14½ perf per gauge. Correct, as it was meant to be. Torn out from either mini sheet in singles, all stamps were identical of course.

The "brown" mini sheet is where the problem occurred. The widely available sheet had the 3 stamps perforated 14½ x 14. The perforating head on the special hand press was tooled up however in a DIFFERENT gauge in error.

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## Market Man

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The 3 stamps perforated at "Australia 99" on the special machine has not only the tiny "A99", letters to one side of the sheet, but also had the 3 stamps are perforated 15.2 x 14.7. That is a huge perforation variance, one of the greatest on any Australian stamp other than the KGV heads. This means full ¼ perf difference on both sides, and is visible with the naked eye.

### ONLY 15,000 EVER SOLD

This is where the story got interesting as far as stamp collectors are concerned. These "brown" mini sheets with the rare perfs were issued in ONLY 15,000 pieces. That means of course that only 15,000 copies in the world of the 45¢ Bass, Dampier and King stamps can exist. I believe that Gibbons, Michel, Scott, ASC, ACSC cats. etc. will list these as totally separate perforation errors. The stamps thus perforated were available to anyone who wanted them at Australia 99, and for a month or two afterwards by mail order. The only proviso was that NO-ONE seem to know about the different perfs until I broke the story worldwide on the front cover of our "June 1999" magazine. They'd sold out by then.

The price of the scarce perf mini sheet started in the trade at around \$70-\$75 a sheet, or \$25 per stamp. It is now pretty widely offered round \$100 a sheet, which is still around \$30 per rare perf stamp. One should compare this with the previously scarcest Decimal perforation variety, the \$1 Flinders, which is listed in Stanley Gibbons as 401c and catalogued at £100 (=A275). Best estimates are that some 200,000 of those were

sold, so \$30 apiece for something of which 15,000 were sold still sounds dirt cheap to me at current price levels.

I know I have had trouble re-stocking on these in recent months, as have all other dealers I have spoken to about them. No articles have been published overseas on them yet, so the strong international demand is yet to come, even when stocks here are almost exhausted. As there was an official written policy of "2 sets per person" of this scarce perf, in person or by mail, nearly all copies were purchased by collectors, not dealers. Australia's largest dealer Max Stern told me last week he got NONE. Not a single set! All his polite requests for a bulk supply were equally politely refused by Australia Post who insisted the "2 per person" rule applied to everyone.

There do of course exist, as Michael Eastick has written in recent columns, a number of this 15,000 quantity that were perforated irregularly. There were inverted, skewed, grossly misperfed, reversed, doubled, partial, and other such freaks. The small machines functioned poorly at times, and some of the attendants seemed happy to produce "funnies" for collectors. I ran numerous buying ads for this material and got a trickle supplied by lucky collectors. Prices are typically \$100+ per "freak" sheet, and demand outstrips supply by a factor of about 10 to 1 in my experience, so they will be real stars of the future.

A pair of inverted perfin sheets MUH sold for \$440 at a recent auction by regular advertiser Craig Chappell of Brisbane. Regular advertisers like Craig, Simon Dunkerely, Michael Eastick, Sydney Philatelics, Peter Strich, Manfred Junge and A-One Stamps have advised me demand for this material is red-hot. Supply is low and demand is high, a

fantastic recipe for the future. Australia's leading error dealer Simon Dunkerely told me the inverted perfin mini sheets are the best looking "pure" error he

has seen in recent years coming from Australia.

There have been a few vocal critics in the trade of these "A99" sheets, the inverted perfin, and now even the imperforate sheets. Almost without exception these voices in the wilderness are from dealers who did NOT have the common sense to obtain stocks of these items! I'll let ASM readers determine whether their negative comments are based on an impartial summary of the situation, or are simply "sour grapes"!!

### SCOOP OF THE DECADE!

Now to the "scoop" of this entire magazine. Look at the mini sheet on the front cover. It is fully imperforate. As I said at the start of this article, a few 100,000 printed would not have surprised me. Around 10% of that figure seems to have been the REAL story, and hence the sensation.

In a detailed "Letter to the Editor" published elsewhere in this magazine, Mr David Maiden the Manager of the Australia Post Philatelic Division corrects the quite ridiculously incorrect figure hypothesized by another stamp magazine of the numbers sold of the "A99" perfin miniature sheets. That magazine, as in many things philatelic has ran a negativity campaign on this issue. I suspect when their readers end up paying twice what astute readers of THIS magazine spend, by often getting in first, their readership will continue to drop!

Anyway, the figure sold of the "A99" perfin mini sheets with the scarce perfs on the "brown" sheet was ALWAYS been correctly quoted in THIS magazine at 15,000 pieces. Month after month after month. That figure was published in the official Australia Post colour "Philatelic Bulletin" and in other official literature connected with "Australia 99". Based on that information, why anyone would invent a story the quantity was possibly 6 times greater mystifies me. The basic tenet of good journalism is "check your facts" and "Stamp News" did not do so.

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Imperforate "Blue" Mini Sheet at top and scarce perforation "Brown" mini-sheet at bottom.

Halbersham

## Market Man

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The letter from David Maiden states that "Australia Post accounting records show that 30,033 sets of the Imperforate Navigator Miniature sheets have been sold as at 23 July 1999. That includes sales at 'Australia 99' and through mail order." He also confirms that only some 15,000 "A99" perfined sets were sold in total. As these 15,000 sets were hand perforated on sets of imperforate mini sheets sold at the show, one simply deducts 15,000 from the 30,033 imperforate sets sold as at July 23, leaving some 15,033 imperf sets in collector and dealer hands worldwide at that point.

I understand the imperforate mini sheets were sold out and withdrawn at end July and only a few thousand sets were in stock at the time of David Maiden's letter being written. This gives a ball park figure of some 20,000 sets of imperforate miniature sheets existing. A really TINY number. My prediction some months ago about these and especially the FDC were wiser than even I thought at that time!

Remember that it is likely that EVERY major album will have provision for the perforate and IMPERFORATE sheets on their "1999" pages. Lighthouse, Davo, Stanley Gibbons, Scott, Schaubek, Lindner, Minkus, KaBe, Seven Seas etc. The imperf sheet was freely available, at the show and by mail order for several months to all who required it, with no restriction on number purchased. I can ASSURE you that a lot more than 20,000 sets of printed album pages for Australia are sold worldwide.

The perf AND Imperf sheets will also be listed in priced in EVERY major stamp catalogue next year. Contrast this to say the 1970 Cook "Anpex" mini sheet, that was never sold by Australia Post, this being a private issue in a large run of 50,000 pieces, and is not illustrated in any major overseas album yet STILL sells for \$25 a sheet locally. Dealers around the country have been scrambling to obtain stock of the IMPERF "Navigator" sheets. Prices of \$40-\$50 mint seem to be regarded as sensible starting prices for many dealers, and WHERE it will end up in 12 months time is anyone's guess. However, I do suggest that today's prices will look cheap in a year's time!

One very important final point is that there was a remote possibility of the scarce perf varieties on the "A99" being forged from imperforate sheets, had the imperf sheets remained cheap, and the "A99" ones remained at \$100 or so a set. Leading Melbourne dealer Peter Strich, owner of Myer Melbourne Stamps pointed this out to me this week. Peter said: "If the imperforate sheets are selling at say \$50 or more a set, obviously no-one will be using those to try and fake any "A99" perfins, hence BOTH should hold up strongly in price in the future". A point to ponder!

**ASM**