

THE DESIGN AND PRODUCTION OF THE FIRST COMMONWEALTH EMBOSSSED KING GEORGE V STAMPED ENVELOPES

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The first Commonwealth stamped envelopes were issued in 1913 and were impressed with the 1d red Kangaroo and Map stamps. These were followed in 1914 by envelopes impressed with the King George V sideface stamp. Unlike the postal stationery stamps of most other countries at that time, these stamps were not embossed.

On 10 December 1913, the Commonwealth Stamp Printer, J. B. Cooke wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury requesting that he ask the Postmaster-General to approve the preparation of dies for embossed stamps to be used in the production of stamped envelopes, see Figure 1. At that time the Commonwealth Stamp Printing Branch issued over 60,000 stamped envelopes each week. He requested approval for the cutting of three dies, one each for the 1/2d, 1d and 2d stamps. He included with his letter a sample of an envelope featuring the head of King Edward VII and suggested that the die feature a design similar to the sample but with the portrait of King George V. He proposed an oval frame for the 1/2d value, a round frame for the 1d and a flat oval frame for the 2d and the inclusion of the inscription 'Australia Postage'. He also suggested that the stamps be printed in the same colour as the adhesive stamps of the corresponding denominations. In his letter Cooke suggested that the engraving of the dies could be done by Mr Samuel Reading of Lonsdale Street, Melbourne at a cost of about £60. Samuel Reading had been previously employed in recutting the dies of the embossed stamps of Victoria and in producing the die for the Kangaroo and Map stamps.

The Postmaster General's Department decided not to agree to the production of these dies and advised the Treasury of its decision in a letter signed by the Department's Secretary (Mr J. Oxenham), dated 7 September 1914.

Cooke responded to this decision in a letter to the Secretary of the Treasury dated 16 September 1914. In this he outlined his case for the use of embossed stamps. Cooke felt that the use of embossed stamps on envelopes, which were made of unwatermarked paper, was essential to protect against forgery. Not only was the paper for the Post Office issued envelopes unwatermarked but the envelope stamps were also printed directly on private envelopes. He pointed out that no other country was taking as substantial a risk with the possibility of forgery and consequent loss of revenue as Australia was risking by not using embossed envelope stamps.

His arguments were presumably persuasive as the Postmaster-General's Department reversed its previous decision and advised, in a letter of 29 December 1914 to the Treasury, approval for the purchase of three dies. The Department did however, suggest that the dies might be cut in the Note Printing Branch of Treasury. The Commonwealth Note Printer, T. S. Harrison, was asked for his opinion on whether the work could be done there and he responded in a letter of 23 January 1915 (see Figure 2) that it was not possible to engrave cameo relief dies in the Note Printing Branch in their entirety because '...this class of seal if properly executed requires the skill of very high class operators'. He claimed that an engraver was needed to 'sink' the die, a

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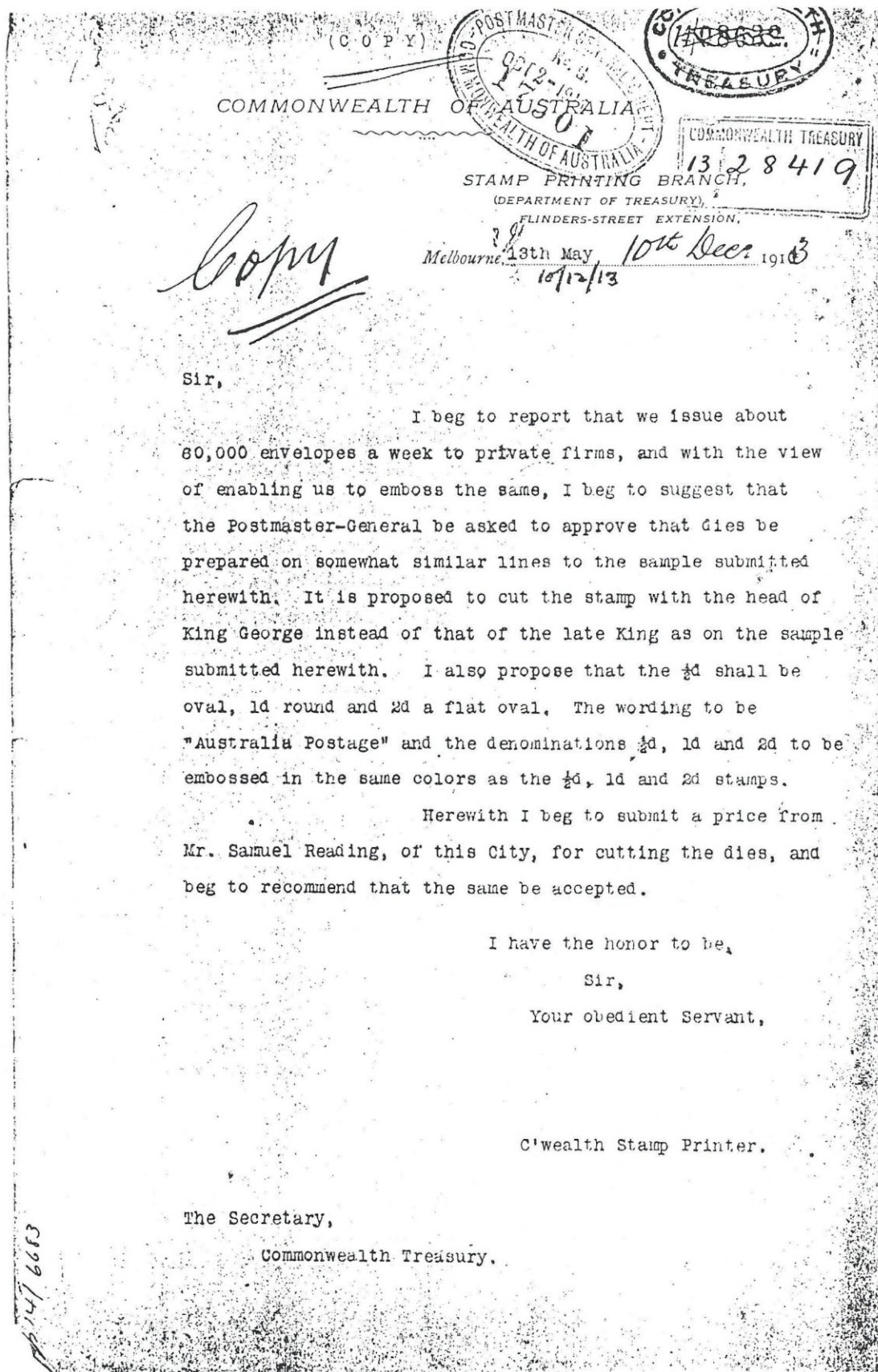


Figure 1 Letter from J.B.Cooke, December 10 1913

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puncher to execute the lettering and a geometric lathe operator to put the engine turning background to the lettering. Furthermore, Harrison felt that the die could not be engraved in Australia to the required level of workmanship and suggested that the work be done in London and that even there it would be difficult to find persons capable of doing the engraving to the appropriate standard.

With his letter, Harrison provided copies of an embossed envelope which he claimed had been produced from a die made in Australia (a colonial issue featuring Queen Victoria, presumably a Victorian envelope) and another envelope from a die cut in London (a Costa Rican envelope featuring the head of Columbus). In his letter he points to the poor work of the Australian envelope compared to that from Costa Rica, with its '...exquisite modelling of the face of Columbus', as evidence that the cutting of the dies could not be done in Australia. Although Harrison's samples have not been retained with his letter, Figure 3 illustrates a Costa Rican stamped envelope similar to the one to which he refers. It was produced by Waterlow Brothers and Layton, London.

In addition, Harrison did not like the designs suggested by Cooke, commenting that the round die was 'ugly'. He suggested that an oval design similar to the Costa Rican stamps be used and that only a single design was needed for the three values.

Cooke responded in a letter, dated 7 April 1915, to the Secretary of the Treasury that the Victorian envelope which Harrison claimed had been printed using a die engraved in Australia had in fact been printed from a die engraved by De La Rue of London. Harrison's use of this envelope to suggest that the work could not be undertaken in Australia was therefore, not appropriate. Presumably this confusion arose because, although the die had been originally produced in London, it had been later recut in Australia. As Cooke mentions in a later letter, this die had been obtained in 1869 and had been in continual use until 30 December 1912. G. Kellow, in his book *The Stamps of Victoria*, mentions that the first embossed Victoria stamped envelope was issued in 1869 and was printed from a die produced by De La Rue. However, in 1881, a new die was cut by Arthur Williams. Samuel Reading modified the die in 1886 by adding the words 'Stamp Duty' and again in 1901 when he removed that inscription. Cooke commented that there were advantages in having different designs for each denomination as it helped postmasters in country post offices, where the light at night was from a hurricane lamp, to distinguish different denominations and pointed out that different dies were used for United Kingdom stamped envelopes. He also submitted examples of Papuan stamps produced from a die engraved by Reading and a 3d registered envelope with a stamp engraved by Messrs Bridgland and King (also of Melbourne) which he claimed were equal to the work of De La Rue. He forwarded three designs, one each in the denominations 1/2d, 1d and 2d, for consideration by the Postmaster-General's Department. The 1/2d design would be engraved by Mr. Reading, the 1d by Messrs Bridgland and King and the 2d by Mr Purvis of Little Bourke Street, Melbourne.

To finally resolve the issue, the Postmaster-General decided to meet with Cooke. Following this meeting the Postmaster-General's Department agreed to approve the adoption of the design Cooke had submitted for the 1/2d die for all three values

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COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY.



AUSTRALIAN NOTE ENGRAVING AND PRINTING BRANCH,

FLINDERS-STREET EXTENSION 811

23rd. January, 1915.

Melbourne.

S i r,

1. With reference to the attached papers (14/25921) relative to the proposed purchase of three steel dies for embossing envelopes, I have the honor to state it is not possible to engrave the Cameo Relief dies in this office in their entirety. This class of seal if properly executed requires the skill of very high class operators - the engraver who "sinks" the portrait, the die puncher who executes the lettering, and the Geometric lathe operator who puts the "engine turned" background to the lettering &c.

2. In my opinion these dies cannot be sufficiently well made in Australia, and I submit copies of the work done in the Commonwealth and the London production. Attention is invited to the exquisite modelling of the face of Columbus as compared with the "flat" and very poor work on the face of Victoria. In fact there is no attempt at modelling on the latter production and this kind of work could be readily imitated.

3. No advantage exists in having three different pattern dies. A round Cameo relief for a portrait is generally considered very ugly, therefore I beg to suggest that the design be oval, similar to the proof from the Costa Rica die (enclosed), and that the dies vary in denomination only, being printed in different colors for the several values in the same way as obtains in the letterpress issue.

4. This should reduce cost and give a far better result, as more time and labor can be expended on the original head, and the duplication of this master die is a matter of hours only.

5. I have the honor to state that even in London great difficulty is experienced in procuring men capable of doing this fine work of relief dies, and should it be decided that the embossing of envelopes will be undertaken to any extent I most certainly am of opinion that the die should be of the most exquisite workmanship. If one design for the dies is required the cost should not reach £60, even with the very best work thereon, and I think the price for the articles made in the Commonwealth too high. As I have indicated the cost would not exceed this amount if made in London by the highest class of workmen.

I have the honor to be,

S i r,

your obedient servant.

T. W. Harrison

Australian Note Printer.

The Secretary,
Commonwealth Treasury,
Melbourne.

Will you kindly cause care to be taken of the enclosed Costa Rica Envelope, and return same to me as it is the only copy I possess.

Figure 2 Letter from T.W.Harrison, January 23 1915

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The Department also agreed to have the dies cut by Samuel Reading. Cooke then finalised the arrangements for the cutting of the dies and forwarded to the Postmaster-General's Department a copy of an undertaking signed by Reading to produce the three dies to the satisfaction of the Stamp Printing Branch for £60. The specification for the work was:

'Required for the purpose of embossing envelopes three steel dies to be cut according to design to be supplied.

The workmanship throughout to be of the highest order possible, and to be subject to the entire approval of the Commonwealth Stamp Printer.

The dies to be cut in steel after cutting to be hardened.

Time allowed for cutting the three dies referred to, four months from the date of the issuing of the official order.'

In a letter dated 11 April 1916, Cooke reported that Reading has satisfactorily completed the dies and enclosed proofs for the Postmaster-General's approval. He commented that:

'It will be remembered that there was a difference of opinion as to whether we should send to London to have the dies engraved or entrust the work to a local engraver...I am of the opinion that the engraver has been fortunate in his effort to turn out a first class die, the engraving of the head being equal to anything we could have obtained in London, and we have given the Australian an opportunity of showing his skill'.

Richard Peck, in an article in the *Bulletin of the Commonwealth Collectors Club of New South Wales* (October 1984, p.140), records that the dies were entered in the Stamp Printing Branch's register on 2 May 1916. In addition six 1d electros for embossing were entered in the register on 24 May 1916.

The Postmaster-General's Department notified acceptance of the dies in a letter to the Treasury on 3 May 1916 and requested further proofs for distribution to the Deputy Postmasters-General, located in each state. The dies were then used to produce envelopes impressed with the 1/2d green, 1d carmine and 2d violet stamps featuring King George V in an octagonal frame, see Figure 3. The final design was not inscribed 'Postage' but that was added to the design in 1920. The octagonal design was replaced by a new design depicting a portrait of George V in an oval frame in 1928.

Source: Treasury File A571 1916/11118, Australian Archives.



Figure 3 The Costa Rican example (left) and the issued Commonwealth stamp