

## WESTERN AUSTRALIA CONVICT STAMPS

Brian J. Birch

It is comforting to imagine that the majority of what is known about perfins was established by those who have specialised in the subject, mostly since the 1950s, but with occasional interested parties since the 1930s. However, this is not so and the early dealers in particular, were more knowledgeable than we give them credit for.

My researches into the origin and development of philatelic literature and the history of the hobby, necessitate my reading very many old philatelic magazines. In this connection, I was drawn to read some reminiscences written in 1900 by Theodor Buhl<sup>(1)</sup> (1864/65-1922), a well-known London-based stamp dealer from the late 1870s to 90s, who is probably best known for having been given first refusal to purchase the business of Stanley Gibbons for £20,000, turning it down as too expensive and then seeing it sold to Charles Phillips (1863-1940) for £25,000!

On page 152 of his reminiscences, he recalls that *The lettered South Australia, O.S., P.S., &c., are now worth something separately, but in the old days I used to buy these and the Western Australia, including "convict" stamps, with holes, from the late Alfred Smith, at 5s. [£0.25] and 10s. [£0.50] per thousand respectively.* (figure 1)



Figure 1

Alfred Smith (1837-1880) was one of the pioneer English stamp dealers who started dealing in Bath, with his brother [Henry] Stafford Smith (1843-1903) as partner. Some years later, the partnership was dissolved and Alfred moved to London and Stafford to Brighton, each to deal on his own account.

This partnership published the earliest quality English philatelic magazine, *The Stamp Collector's Magazine* (Bath, 1863-1874). Perusal of the first volume of their pioneer magazine shows that the editor, Charles W. Viner (1812-1906), noted, following some remarks on a French proposal to cancel stamps by tearing them, that: *With a like disregard to the feelings of stamp collectors, the curious stamps of Western Australia are disfigured, if not totally spoiled, by the abstraction of a round piece;*<sup>(2)</sup> The explanation of the mutilation was quickly forthcoming from S. Welfare<sup>(3)</sup> in the following issue, where he noted that ... *they are first pierced and then supplied to the convict establishment. By this means a convict's letter may, if necessary, be traced.* (Figure 2) This information caused Viner to execute a remarkable about-face for in the next issue<sup>(4)</sup> he proclaims that far from the stamps being disfigured or spoiled: *The stamps pierced with a round hole, explained by a correspondent in the last number of this magazine as being supplied to the convict establishment of the colony for the purpose of identification, may be with propriety included in collections as varieties, under the designation of 'convict mail'.*

**CORRESPONDENCE.**

**THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN 'CONVICT'  
STAMPS.**

*To the Editor of the 'STAMP COLLECTOR'S MAGAZINE.'*

SIR,—In the October number of the *Stamp Collector's Magazine*, I see you refer to the hole pierced in the stamp of Western Australia. I beg to offer some explanation respecting them, showing the way by which they are pierced without injuring the letter. I have just received some of these stamps from a lady having friends in Western Australia, and who, in the letter enclosing them, informed her that they are *first* pierced, and then supplied to the convict establishment. By this means a convict's letter may, if necessary, be traced. I consider these stamps of greater value, being more rare; and many stamp collectors of my acquaintance acknowledge them as another variety.

Yours truly,  
S. WELFARE.

*Brighton.*

Figure 2

All of this goes to show that not only did the early dealers and stamp collectors (for at his early date, the word *philately* had not yet been coined) understand the purpose of these “perfins” at the very outset of the hobby but that they were importing them in bulk in subsequent years. It begs the question – Where have all of these holey stamps gone?

### Note

Figure 1 was taken from a posting on [www.stampboards.net](http://www.stampboards.net) by Glen Stephens a well-known Australian dealer. ([www.glenstephens.com](http://www.glenstephens.com))

### References

1. **Theodor Buhl:** *Recollections of 20 years' stamp dealing.*, The Philatelic Journal of Great Britain, May 1900, Volume 10, Issue 5, pp.80-81; June, Issue 6, pp.100-102; July, Issue 7, pp.114-115; August, Issue 8, pp.130-131; September, Issue 9, pp.151-153; October, Issue 10, pp.172-173 & November, Issue 11, pp.188-190.
2. **[Charles W. Viner]:** *Stamps newly issued, or first described.*, The Stamp Collector's Magazine, October 1863, Volume 1, Issue 9, pp.140-141.
3. **S. Welfare:** *The Western Australia 'convict' stamps.*, The Stamp Collector's Magazine, November 1863, Volume 1, Issue 10, pp.157-158.
4. **Charles W. Viner:** *Addenda to Mount Brown's Catalogue of Postage Stamps, comprising notes, additions and emendations.*, The Stamp Collector's Magazine, December 1863, Volume 1, Issue 11, pp.175-176.

*[Ed:- It is interesting how these stamps date from the 1850's and thus predate Sloper perfins by many years. They were supplied to the colony Commissariat that controlled most of operation of the penal colony. Although certainly used on convict mail they are also known used by the various departments of the Commissariat. The Comptroller of Convicts who took over from the Commissariat stopped the use of these punctures in 1874.]*