

## BRITISH OIL RIVERS – OVERPRINT & PERFIN

Roy Gault

As catalogue editor, each day brings the chance of something interesting and rare in the Perfin field popping through the letter-box. You just never know what's going to turn up. **Magnus Werner** is responsible for sending in this little gem - *or is it?*



The stamp is a QV Jubilee ½d (vermilion), cancelled with a part Leith postmark and perfinned “CS&C<sup>o</sup>.” (C6910.01), partly off stamp. Also clearly visible is the “**BRITISH./OIL RIVERS.**” overprint in black. After a bit of delving on the internet I've come up with the following.

The ‘Niger Coast Protectorate’ was a British protectorate in the ‘Oil Rivers’ area of present-day Nigeria. Originally established as the ‘Oil Rivers Protectorate’ in 1891, it was extended into the interior and renamed the ‘Niger Coast Protectorate’ on 12 May 1893. It eventually merged with the chartered territories of the Royal Niger Company on 1 January 1900 to form the colony of Southern Nigeria. Thus the ‘Oil Rivers’ part of the name only appeared for a short period of time, technically 1891-1893, although some overprinted stamps are known used in 1894, presumably using up old stock.

The main post office was established at Old Calabar in November 1891, with sub-offices at Benin, Bonny, Brass, Opobo, and Warri. Initially the postage stamps of Britain were used (presumably without overprint), but in July 1892 they were overprinted in black with “**BRITISH/PROTECTORATE/OIL RIVERS**” - see next page. This overprinting was carried out in Great Britain by ‘De La Rue’ and supplies of overprinted stamps sent out to the protectorate. The stamps involved were the 16-dot 1d Lilac, and the Jubilee ½d (vermilion), 2d, 2½d, 5d, and 1/- (green).

By September 1893, supplies of some values were running short, particularly the ½d value, so emergency measures were taken to produce a substitute. The 1d Lilac was overprinted (sourced locally) with a diagonal line running from the bottom left to top right corners of the stamp, with each ‘half’ hand-stamped ‘½d’. The 2d and 2½d Jubilee values were also overprinted ‘half/penny’ to produce a supply of ½d stamps from complete stamps.



Overprint

The name change to the ‘Niger Coast Protectorate’ occurred just as new stamps were being prepared. Thus, the first issue (available in November 1893) featured a ¾ portrait of Queen Victoria, but had the name "OIL RIVERS" obliterated and overprinted "NIGER COAST".

Having said all of this, what can we make of Magnus’s ‘little gem’? For me, I believe the stamp, cancel and perfin are genuine, but the overprint (which I can’t find listed anywhere) is a fake. Even gramatically it fails as there is a full stop after both ‘BRITISH’ and ‘OIL RIVERS’, which just doesn’t make sense. Note that a full stop was not used anywhere in the genuine overprint. Of course, it could be that I’m wrong and that Magnus has a unique stamp worth many thousands of pounds! Whichever way it goes, I still think it’s a gem.

Magnus notes that Stanley Gibbons, under the heading of ‘Niger Company Territories’, states that *‘Initially the stamps on such covers were left uncanceled until the mail arrived in the United Kingdon, the Company handstamp being struck elsewhere on the address side’*. This could account for an overprinted stamp arriving in the UK unfranked, and then cancelled at Leith. However, I think the Gibbons reference is to the ‘Royal Niger Company’ rather than the ‘Oil Rivers Protectorate’.

Can any overprint experts in the society make more sense of it all?  
***Magnus and I will be interested in what anyone has to say!***