

# A Study of the First Issues of India (1852–1854): Part 1

By Pragma Jain

Pragma Jain begins a series of articles discussing the the early issues of India. In this first instalment, he provides a brief introduction to India's pre-stamp postal history, before moving on to the country's very first issue – the famous Scinde District Dawk of 1852.



Fig 1 The obverse and reverse sides of the 1a. and 2a. copper tickets introduced in 1774 to pre-pay postage within the realm of the East India Company

To a philatelist, the early postal history of a country is more important than its political history. Most specialised collections have a volume or two showing this important period – comprising early covers, hand-struck stamps, postal notices, material from the pre-stamp era, etc. India is very rich in material of this kind and provides an immense scope for research to an ardent student of early Indian postal history.

As early as 1296AD, the historian Ziauddin Barani recorded a postal service in India, describing the horse and foot postal organisation of the Pathan ruler, Alauddin Khilji. Later, in 1341, Ibn Battuta, an oriental traveller, also commented on the existence of a postal service under Mohammed Bin Tughlak. In *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians* Sir Henry Miers Elliot recorded a similar establishment under Sikandar Lodi from 1488 to 1518. Further improvement to postal services in India was seen under Emperor Sher Shah (1540–45) and during the reign of Akbar (1566–1605), when Camels were employed along with the horses.

## European influences

Vasco de Gama was the first Portuguese explorer to land at Calicut in 1498 and by 1559 the Portuguese had established a strong foothold in India. By 1600, the French also began to arrive in India and the Danes settled in around 1620. The British formed the East India Company under Royal Charter in 1600 for trading purposes.

British supremacy in the region prevailed, reducing the other nations' interests to smaller pockets scattered around India. It is believed that a priest, Father Thomas Stevens, was the first Englishman to arrive at Goa in 1579. His letter to his father (which brought the Merchant Adventurers in 1582) is the first recorded outgoing mail from India to England, while a letter from King James I to Emperor Jahangir at Agra in 1608 is reputed to be the first inward mail to the country.

In 1688, a full-fledged post office was set up in Bombay for the receipt and despatch of letters. In 1766 the British Colonial Administrator, Lord Clive, organised a regular postal service restricted to use by the Government and its employees. Later, in 1774, Warren Hastings, the first



Fig 2 A rare Indian Bishop Mark introduced in 1775. Image courtesy of Spink

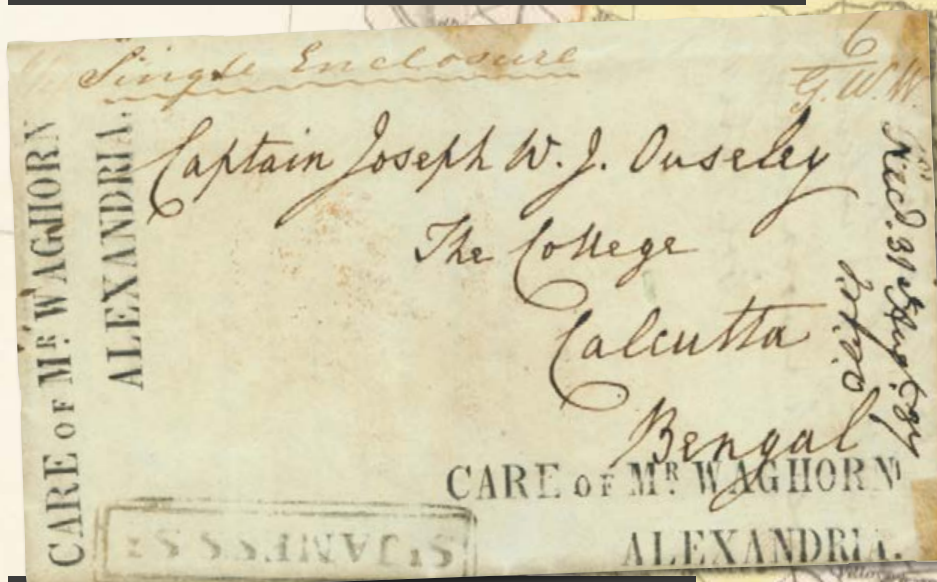


Fig 3 A letter carried on Thomas Waghorn's overland route from England to India via Alexandria, complete with special cachet

governor-general of British India, reorganised the whole system and extended the facility to private citizens.

For the facility of paying the postage on letters, small copper tickets of 1a. and 2a. (2a. being the single rate for every 100 miles and 1a. for every additional 100 miles) were introduced exclusively for postal purposes under the Post Office Regulations Act 1774 (Fig 1). A specimen of this copper ticket is also with the British Museum. These rare copper tickets thus became one of the first recorded instruments for the pre-payment of postage, even before the Penny Black of 1840.

## The Scinde District Dawk, 1852

The first postage stamps of India were not issued for the whole of the country, but for a mere small province – Sind. Sind had introduced improved postal reforms in 1851, and had laid down various postal lines throughout the province (*Fig 4*). When Sir Bartle Frere, the then Provincial Commissioner of Sind, approached the Government at Bombay for extra funds to further improve postal lines, his request was denied. Instead, he was asked to find ways and means to maintain the ‘costly and luxurious’ network.

Being greatly influenced by the success of the uniform Penny Postage introduced in England, Frere took this opportunity to introduce a cheap postal rate in his province. To facilitate the prepayment of the service, Frere, with the help of Edward Lees Coffey, the Postmaster of Sind, designed the now famous Scinde Dawk postage stamps.

Originally, it was thought that the introduction of stamps might prove to be unpopular with the local inhabitants, who were in the habit of using coins to transact business. However, it proved otherwise and the use of the stamps was a success. During the period of 1852–53, the Scinde Dawks were issued in three different colours: red, white and blue.

The design of the Scinde Dawk was evidently inspired by the merchants’ seal of the East India Company. In the centre of the stamp is a heart-shaped device divided into three segments each containing one of the initials of the East India Company (E.I.C). Above this is a talismanic ‘4’, which is usually found at the top of marine merchants marks. Below the seal is the value ‘½ ANNA’ and the whole is enclosed in a circular band containing the inscription ‘Scinde District Dawk’. In the lower part of the band is a design representing a buckle.

## The Red Scinde Dawk

The first Scinde Dawk stamps, introduced on 1 July 1852, were embossed on a wafer of brittle red sealing wax. Because of its very delicate nature, the red wax stamp has not survived the decades well. As such, it is almost impossible to find an example in near perfect condition. There was no sign of an unused example until this stamp (*Fig 5*) surfaced in the collection of an anonymous Indian Royalty was offered for sale at David Feldman in Singapore during World Stamp Exhibition in 1995. The stamp was exhibited in the Court of Honour during the Exhibition in 1995 and at the Monacophil in 2015.

Fig 5 A very rare, near perfect unused example of the 1852 Red Scinde Dawk (Enlarged)



Fig 4 1845 Map of Operations in Scinde compiled from the notes of Charles Napier shows the area where the postal lines came into existence

One of the requirements of the re-organised postal service was that: ‘all letters shall be stamped with the day of the month on which they are delivered into any chief office’. As Britain played a predominant role in the development of the Indian postal system, it was only natural that the first postal marking, introduced in India in 1775, should follow that of the first British Bishop Mark (*Fig 2*). There are just four such letters which have survived with these marks, all of which passed through the Calcutta region.

## Expanding postal routes

Mail between England and India were generally carried by ships owned by the East India Company, known as East Indiamen. These ships travelled by a circuitous route via the Cape of Good Hope, which consumed lot of time. From 1826 onwards, the postal pioneer Thomas Waghorn started to form plans for a new overland mail route to England. The route from India ran via the Red Sea to Suez, overland through Egypt to the port of Alexandria and then onwards to England via Marseille and later Trieste, reducing the carriage time of mail by half. Waghorn was appointed Deputy Agent of the East India Company on 14 June, 1837, and was responsible for the carriage of mails between Alexandria and Suez. He used special cachets for both Suez and Alexandria (*Fig 3*).

Very few examples of the Red Scinde Dawk have survived on piece or on cover (Fig 6). Similarly, only two pairs are known to have survived (Fig 7). Because of its delicate nature the red stamp only remained in use for a limited period of time.

### White Scinde Dawk

The Red Scinde Dawk was soon replaced by another embossed stamp of the same design, but this time produced on white paper (Fig 8). However, the White Scinde Dawk was also found to be unsatisfactory as it was difficult to distinguish the stamp by candlelight, especially when used on a white cover.

### Blue Scinde Dawk

A new embossed stamp, which was also surface-printed in blue, was introduced to replace the White Scinde Dawk (Fig 9). An extra ring around the circumference of the design was added and on some examples faint blue dividing lines, used to aid the cutting out the stamps from the sheet, can be seen.

If one draws the conclusion from the references available, the Scinde Dawks were printed in England by De La Rue & Co., upon the request of Sir Bartle Frere. In John Martineau's book, *The Life and letters of Sir Bartle Frere*, there is a specific mention of these stamps being manufactured by De La Rue. In addition, various letters written by the Postmaster of Sind also mention the requesting and receiving of stamps from England. White and a blue Scinde Dawk stamps are in De La Rue's Official Collection Vol 35 at page 0001380, which is now housed in The Postal Museum in Britain.

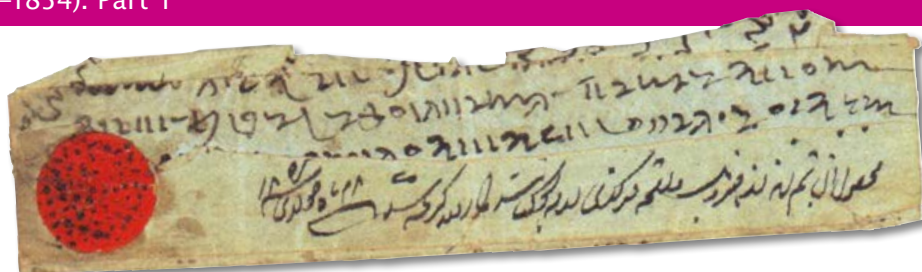


Fig 6 Very few Red Scinde Dawk stamps have survived on cover. Image courtesy of Spink



Fig 7 Only two Red Scinde Dawk pairs are known to have survived (Enlarged)



Fig 8 A used pair of White Scinde Dawk stamps, which were embossed on white paper (Enlarged)



Fig 9 The front and reverse of the Blue Scinde Dawk (Enlarged)

The Scinde Dawk stamps were first issued on 1 July 1852 and were withdrawn on 30 September 1854, the day before the introduction of India's first national stamp issue (discussed in the next article). The remaining stamps were ordered to be destroyed. However, the last remaining batch was not destroyed until 1856, two years after the issue of the regular stamps of India.

Despite several thousand Scinde Dawk stamps having been used during 1852–54, today they are very scarce. The red stamp can rarely be found un-cracked, thanks to its brittle nature, and unused examples of the White and Blue versions are also extremely rare.

### Cancellations used on the Scinde Dawks

Although the cancellations on Scinde Dawk stamps ought to be rightly defined as the work of a Provincial administration, one cannot help taking them into consideration with the other postmarks of India, as some of the cancellations found on the famous stamps were, in fact, later adopted for cancelling India's first national stamps issued in 1854.

There are nine types of cancellations (and one sub-type) found on Scinde Dawk stamps:

**Type A:** A diamond of 49 dots (seven rows of seven dots). The notable distinction of this type is that the four corner dots are much larger than the rest. The diagonals measure 22 and 19 mm. Examples are scarce.

**Type B:** A diamond of 64 dots (eight rows of eight dots). In this type, the diagonals measure 19mm and 17mm. Examples of this type are common.

**Type C:** A circular cancellation of dots. Examples are scarce.

**Sub-type C1:** A smaller circular cancellation of dots compared to type C.

**Type D:** A diamond of 51 dots (composed of seven rows of mainly seven dots, but the

first and last rows having eight dots). The type is similar to type 'A' and the diagonals also measure the same. Again, examples are very scarce.

**Type E:** A large 'star'. Examples are common.

**Type F:** A smaller 'star'. Examples are common.

**Type G:** A diamond formed of seven parallel lines. The diagonal sides measure 24mm and 18mm. Examples of this type are scarce.

**Type H:** A diamond of 81 dots (nine rows of nine dots). The diagonals measure 26mm and 20mm. Examples are common.

**Type I:** This type comprises the number '96' inset in a diamond of 11 parallel lines. The diagonals here measure as in type H, viz., 26mm and 20mm. Examples are common.

The cancellation types B, G, H and I were intended for use on India's first national stamps, which were introduced on 1 October 1854. Their use on the Scinde Dawk stamps proves that the order for the destruction of the Scinde Dawk stamps by that date was not fully carried out. There are thus six true Scinde Dawk cancellations: Types A, C, C1, D, E and F. Examples of pen-cancelled stamps are also abundant.

