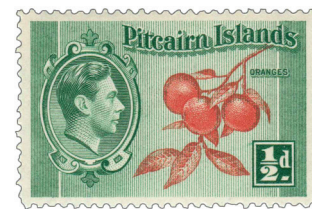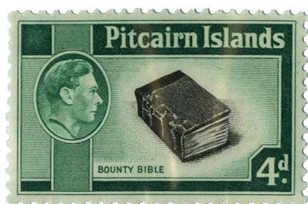# This Day in History… October 15, 1940

Pitcairn Islands Stamps Fund the Colony

On October 15, 1940, the Pitcairn Islands Post Office opened, issuing the colony's first stamps. These stamps were very popular with collectors and eventually helped support most of the colony's budget.

Up to the early 1900s, the Pitcairn Islands didn't have a postal system. Letters sent from the islands were hand stamped "Posted on Pitcairn Island: no stamps available." These letters were carried for free aboard ships and usually received stamps or cancellations at ports along the way. At various times, the British consulate in Tahiti attempted to set up mail service, and some mail was handled by the Panama Canal Zone.

The first stamp issued by the Pitcairn Islands in 1940.

Then in 1921, the United Kingdom and New Zealand reached an agreement to handle mail for the island, with recipients paying for the postage. However, five years later, the New Zealand government halted this service after learning that ship passengers were putting their own mail into the "no stamp" system that was meant only for the residents of Pitcairn.

For about a year, the islands had no postal system. Then in June 1927, a postal agency was established that used New Zealand stamps and envelopes were canceled "Pitcairn Island/NZ Postal Agency." Some commemorative covers were even produced during this era, including one that marked the establishment of a radio link to the islands in 1938.
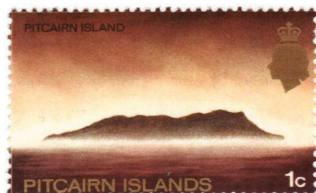
1951 stamp picturing the Bounty Bible

In 1937, the British Consul in Tonga was sent to the Pitcairn Islands to study its government and find a way for it to be more self-sufficient. The consul concluded that selling postage stamps would the best way to achieve this. The British government agreed and sent Henry Evans Maude to bring "those twin blessings of civilization, a legal code and… postage stamps."

The New Zealand postal agency ended its service in the islands on October 14, 1940. On October 15, 1940, the new Pitcairn Islands Post Office opened and issued the islands' first set of stamps produced specifically for the Pitcairn Islands. First Day Covers sold out in one day. One of these covers was even sent the future queen of England, Princess Elizabeth. Soon they ran out of envelopes, so people made their own, first from paper, and then from parts of coconut trees

1966 stamp honoring Winston Churchill

The Pitcairn Islands built a new post office the following year and the amount of mail sent from the islands grew dramatically – so much that another, larger post office, was built in the 1960s. Pitcairn Islands stamps became especially popular with stamp collectors and before long, became the largest source of revenue for the islands. A total of £12,760 (about $17,500) were sold in the first six months. The money raised by these sales succeeded in making the islands mostly self-sufficient. They helped support the community and pay wages, and excess funds were used to build a school and hire the islands' first professional teacher, from New Zealand.

The first stamp issue remained on sale until July 1957. By the 1970s, the sale of stamps accounted for two-thirds of the islands' revenue. They later sold coins that also contributed to this fund. Despite the popularity of these stamps, the Pitcairn Islands issued a relatively small number of stamp designs – less than 300 by 1989. They generally issued up to six commemoratives in a year and new definitives every five years. The stamp designs were intended to capture a specific image of the islands for outsiders and they usually honored local history as well as the British royal family.
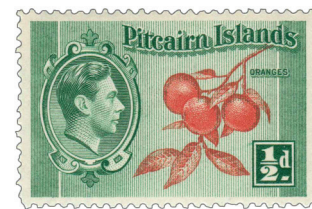
1969 stamp picturing the island

However, by the end of the 1900s, letter writing and collecting declined and the islands were no longer able to support themselves with the sale of postage stamps. The Pitcairn Islands went bankrupt in 2004 and the British government took over 90% of the islands' budget. The Pitcairn Islands Philatelic Bureau remained in operation there until 2020, after which it was taken over by the United Kingdom.

Mystic Stamp Company • Camden, NY 13316

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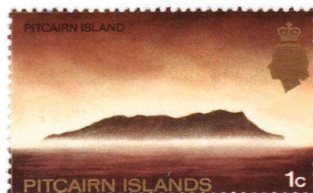

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