

Imperial British East Africa Stamps

A year before Queen Victoria gave her royal blessing to the British South Africa Company (BSAC), she chartered another African company. Dubbed the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC), it received its imprimatur in 1888. London was very interested in securing the east African territory, keeping it out of the clutches of other imperial powers — while letting someone else pay the bills. The trading success of William MacKinnon's company gave promise of future rewards. Like the BSAC, the IBEAC was invested with authority to raise taxes, establish courts, administer justice — and issue postage stamps. You might say the two chartered companies were rivals, though their surrounding territories were so vast that there was little risk of conflict.

The east African enterprise was the first chartered company authorized to operate a postal authority. The IBEAC was the first to overprint a British stamp with the proprietary name of its company. And it was the first to issue its own postage stamps.

The first original design of IBEAC stamps, featuring a crown over a brilliant sun, apparently is meant to represent the motto printed beneath it — Light and Liberty. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I've always thought the symbol looked rather hollow — that is, an emblem with no center, no focal point. The crown is solid enough, conveying a clear sense of imperial dominion. But who is the ruler? Why, it's a company, not the queen!

Like the BSAC, the IBEAC had a tough time finding its footing. Its resources went into top-heavy administration, and considerable sums were spent on railroad-building, as well as assuaging indigenous tribes. By 1893, nearly bankrupt, the IBEAC was ready to cede its administrative duties —



This overprint on a British stamp in 1890 comes from the internet; it's way out of my price range.



1890



1895



1895



1897

including its postal authority — to the crown.

Then began an interval of overprinted stamps. First came a set of the crown-and-sun stamps, hand-stamped

“British East Africa.” Very rare. Next was a late-Victorian set from India, the vast British-ruled Raj just across the Indian Ocean, also overprinted “British East Africa.” By 1896, postal authorities had managed to produce the first original set for British East Africa, with a portrait of the aged but dignified queen (below). However, supplies of the new stamps ran out, and in 1897 a new set of

overprints appeared — stamps from Zanzibar (above right), an island territory under British “protection” off the east African coast. Finally, in 1898, came another series, a short set of high values in a larger format, featuring the same vignette of Queen Victoria. Also quite dear.



1896

NEXT: EAST AFRICA AND UGANDA

