



British Honduras

British Honduras (modern-day Belize) is a small country (8,867 square miles) in Central America lying between Mexico and Guatemala and bordering the Caribbean Sea. It was Great Britain's only colony on the east coast of Central America and, despite its location, was considered a part of the British West Indies until being renamed Belize in 1973.

The country originally was settled by the Mayans, who began migrating south from the Yucatan Peninsula around the sixteenth century BCE. The Mayans were excellent farmers, astronomers, and mathematicians who had developed a written language and the concept of "zero." They built large, elaborately decorated cities to serve as administrative and religious centers for the densely populated region, which was at its peak of development between 250–900 A.D. By the arrival of European explorers, however, their civilization was in serious decline. The modern-day name of the country, Belize, is thought by some scholars to be from the Mayan word, *balix*, meaning "muddy waters."

Although the first known European



Scott 1–3, issued 1866, featured Queen Victoria.

contacts were made during the sixteenth century, there are no historical records of year-round European settlement until the 1670s, when British settlers began to harvest logwood (*Haematoxylum campechianum*), whose heartwood was used in Europe to create a red or blue dye. By the early 1700s loggers were turning their attention to mahogany, which became extremely popular in European woodworking (in the peak year of mahogany exports, 1788, England alone imported in excess of 30,000 tons of the reddish wood).

Spain, however, had given the British logging rights but not colonizing rights, and the growing settlements eventually

led to a short-lived war between Spain and Great Britain when the Spanish Governor-General of Yucatan sent a fleet of about thirty ships to capture Belize. From September 3–10, 1798, a series of engagements were fought among the islands and reefs that blocked access to the city, culminating in a battle off St. George's Cay — which was then a much larger, horseshoe-shaped island that has since largely been destroyed by hurricanes. There were few to no casualties on either side and the Spanish finally withdrew.

"His Majesty's Settlement in the Bay of Honduras," as the colony was originally known, was not formally designated the Colony of British Honduras until 1840. It became a Crown Colony in 1871. Representative government continued to expand in the twentieth century. In January 1964 the colony was granted full internal self-government; the official name was changed from British Honduras to Belize in June 1973. Long-standing territorial claims by Guatemala delayed full independence from Great Britain until September 21, 1981, although Guatemala refused recognition to the new country for another ten years.



Squaring mahogany logs, ca. 1930.



Myan ruins at Xunantunich ("stone woman").

Philatelic History

In 1866, British Honduras' first postage stamps were issued without watermarks (Scott 1–3). A standard portrait of Queen Victoria was printed in typography by De La Rue in 1-penny, 6-pence, and 1-shilling denominations. In an unusual arrangement, the first printings of all three stamps were initially produced as a single sheet separated by horizontal and vertical gutter margins. Se-tenant examples of these are worth a premium. Subsequent printings of 1-penny stamps were issued in normal sheets.

These stamps were reprinted with Crown CC watermarks between 1872–1879, and new 3- and 4-pence denominations were added (Scott 5 and Scott 10). The 6-pence rose — issued in 1866 (Scott 2), 1872 (Scott 6), and 1878 (Scott 11) — was replaced by a 6-pence yellow (Scott 16) in 1885. The 1-shilling green — issued in 1866 (Scott 3), 1872 (Scott 7), and 1877 (Scott 12) — was replaced by a 1-shilling gray (Scott 17) in 1887. Both of the new colors were issued on Crown CA watermarked paper. The original 1-penny blue — first issued in 1866 (Scott 1) and reprinted in 1874 (Scott 4) and 1877 (Scott 8) — also was reprinted in 1884 (Scott 13), but was used only briefly before being replaced that same year with a red stamp (Scott 14).

Decimal currency was introduced in 1888, prompting a spate of surcharges from 2 cents to 50 cents on all existing stamps. Understandably, the inexperienced local printers produced many er-

rors and varieties, some of which were inevitably subject to forgery. That same year, to satisfy the demand for more 2-cent stamps, the word "TWO" was applied to the previously surcharged 50 cents on 1-shilling gray stamp (Scott 26). Although the overprint was meant to be applied in red, examples in black are known and highly priced.

Also during this period, De La Rue was commissioned to apply 1-, 2-, 3-, 6-, 10- and 50-cent surcharges to various stamps, including previously unissued 3-pence blue (Scott 36, 6c on 3p, 1891) and 1-penny green (Scott 47, 1c on 1p, 1892) denominations. The 1-cent surcharge on Scott 47 was to prepay internal postcards and printed papers.

In 1891 a reduction in foreign let-



The 6-pence rose reissued in 1878 (Scott 11) was replaced by a 6-pence yellow (Scott 16) in 1885.

ter rates led to an urgent need for more 6-cent stamps, a demand that was met by revaluing the previously surcharged 10 cents on 4-pence stamps (Scott 30, 1888) by locally applying a new 6-cent surcharge in either black (Scott 33) or red (Scott 34).

Also in 1891 the word "FIVE" was added to the previously surcharged 3 cents on 3-pence brown (Scott 35), and the 6 cents on 3-pence blue was re-sur-



In 1888 "TWO" was applied to the previously surcharged 50 cents on 1-shilling gray (Scott 26).



De La Rue surcharged a previously unissued 3-pence blue in 1891 (Scott 36) and a 1-penny green in 1892 (Scott 47).





Beginning in 1891, denominations to 25 cents were inscribed "POSTAGE POSTAGE" (e.g., Scott 46).



In 1899 higher stamp values read "POSTAGE & REVENUE" (e.g., Scott 55).



In 1899 some stamps were overprinted "REVENUE" for fiscal use (e.g., Scott 49).

charged "15" to provide temporary 5- and 15-cent denominations (Scott 37).

This unprecedented spate of provisional surcharges ended when De La Rue's "key-types" from 1 cent to \$5 were issued in 1891–1901. Denominations to 25 cents were inscribed "POSTAGE POSTAGE," whereas higher values (and new printings of 5- and 10-cent stamps in changed colors) read "POSTAGE & REVENUE" in the vertical panels. In 1899 the 5-, 10- and 25-cent stamps and the earlier 50 cents on 1-shilling stamp were overprinted "REVENUE" (presumably locally) for fiscal use (Scott 48–51); some curious spelling errors were "BEVENUE," "REVENU," and "REVUE." There were two settings of the overprint; however, the basic stamps remained available for postage.

King Edward VII "key-types" (1-, 2-, 5- and 20-cent stamps) were introduced

between 1902–1904 with the Crown CA watermark. They were quickly followed with new printings of the three lowest values and the 10-, 25- and 50-cent stamps as well as the \$1, \$2 and \$5 denominations on Multiple Crown CA wa-



King Edward VII "key-type" stamps were introduced between 1902–1904 (e.g., Scott 61, 1904).



New King George V definitives were issued 1913–1917 with the same design used by the British Solomon Islands and Malta (e.g., Scott 82, 1913).



A 1915 wartime stamp consignment was overprinted in violet with an overall moiré pattern (e.g., Scott 86).

termarked paper. Color changes for 1-, 2-, 5- and 25-cent stamps were released with the new watermark between 1908–1911.

In 1913 De La Rue printed the new King George V definitives, adopting the design used for contemporary stamps for British Solomon Islands and Malta. The ten stamps were issued in denominations from 1 cent to \$5 between 1913–1917 (Scott 75–84). In 1915 a consignment of 1-, 2- and 5-cent stamps was overprinted with an overall moiré pattern in violet to invalidate them should they fall into enemy hands while being shipped during World War I (Scott 85–87). Apparently the voyage to British Honduras was considered to be particularly treacherous, but one wonders why only these low denominations were singled out for this treatment. No other colonial territories followed this example.

As did most of the British colonies, British Honduras issued locally-produced war tax overprints, commencing in 1916 with "WAR" applied to the moiré pattern defaced 1-cent stamps (Scott MR1). This was followed in 1917 by overprinting regular 1- and 3-cent stamps (Scott MR2–MR3) and in 1918 by overprinting the same stamps with a larger typeface (Scott MR4–MR5).

In 1921 British Honduras marked the War's end with a 2-cent Peace stamp featuring George V and the Colony's seal. Bahamas and Barbados were the only other colonies to issue such commemoratives. An almost identical 4-cent definitive omitting the word

British Honduras Sampler



New 3-pence value added in 1872 (Scott 5).



New 4-pence value added in 1879 (Scott 10).



The 1-shilling green reissued in 1877 (Scott 12) was replaced by a 1-shilling gray (Scott 17) in 1887.



The 1-pence blue reissued in 1884 (Scott 13) was replaced with a red stamp (Scott 14) that same year.



Examples of surcharges added when decimal currency was introduced in 1888: 2 cents on 1-penny (Scott 22), 10 cents on 4-pence (Scott 23), 20 cents on 6-pence (Scott 24).



In 1891 the previously surcharged 10 cents on 4-pence stamps were revalued with a new 6-cent surcharge in either black (Scott 33) or red (Scott 34).



In 1891 the word "FIVE" was added to the previously surcharged 3 cents on 3-pence brown (Scott 35), and the 6 cents on 3-pence blue was re-surcharged "15" (Scott 37).



New printings appeared 1904–1906 (e.g., Scott 68, 1906).



Color changes released between 1908–1911 (e.g., Scott 73, 1909).



First war tax overprint used the moiré pattern 1-cent stamps (Scott MR1).



In 1917 normal 1-cent and 3-cent stamps were overprinted with a larger typeface (e.g., Scott MR4).



2-cent Peace commemorative (Scott 89) featuring George V and the Colony's seal issued in 1921.



4-cent definitive (Scott 90) omitting the word "peace" from the scroll issued in 1922.



A 1922–33 series of definitives adapted frames seen on stamps from Jamaica, Nyasaland, and Straits Settlements (e.g., Scott 101).

British Honduras Sampler



Among the 1953–57 Queen Elizabeth II pictorials designs: Legislative Council Chamber and mace (Scott 146), Pine logging industry (Scott 147), Armadillo (Scott 153), Mayan woman (Scott 152).



Among the 1938 pictorial definitives designs: List of the colony's products (Scott 118), Chicle production (Scott 116), Mahogany logging (Scott 120), Court House design with mystery "T" in the banner (Scott 124), Colony's seal (Scott 126).



Attractive 1962 definitives featured Central American birds, including: a Red-legged Honeycreeper (Scott 168), Scarlet Macaw (Scott 172), Keel-billed Toucan (Scott 175), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (Scott 177).



Wild life definitives with the EIIR cipher were issued in 1968, including: Grouper (Scott 216), Collared Anteater (Scott 217), Great Barracuda (Scott 224), Mountain Lion (Scott 225).



New 1974 Belize definitives featured butterflies, including: *Thecla regalis* (Scott 346), *Catonephele numilia* (Scott 348), *Caligo uranus* (Scott 357), *Philaethria dido* (Scott 360).



Current definitives were overprinted "BELIZE RELIEF FUND" and surcharged to provide aid for victims of the 1931 hurricane (e.g., Scott B2).

"peace" from the scroll above the king's portrait was released in 1922.

A new Multiple Script watermark printing of the 1-cent definitive was placed on sale in 1921.

A new series of definitives issued from 1922–1933 adapted frames seen previously on stamps from Jamaica, Nyasaland, and Straits Settlements. The obsolete Multiple Crown CA watermark was used for the initial 25-cent printing and for the \$5 stamp; all other denominations were on Multiple Script CA paper.

In 1932 the current 1-, 2-, 3-, 4- and 5-cent definitives were overprinted "BELIZE RELIEF FUND" and surcharged to match the postal value (Scott B1–B5), thereby providing aid for victims of the 1931 hurricane (unnamed) and subsequent flooding that had devastated the capital, Belize. Two-thirds of the city's buildings were destroyed and more than 1,000 people were killed.

Following the omnibus Silver Jubilee (Scott 108–111) and Coronation (Scott 112–114) sets of 1935 and 1937, the first pictorial definitives for British Honduras were issued in 1938 with an inset portrait of King George VI (Scott 115–126). These were typical Bradbury, Wilkinson stamps of the period. Perhaps the 4-cent value was the most unusual design, listing the colony's products: chicle, grapefruit, bananas, sugar, mahogany, coconuts, cohune, and rice. The 2- and 50-cent stamps featured chicle production, a major ingredient for Wrigley's chewing gum. Mahogany (then the national tree), grapefruit, and Cohune



The 150th Anniversary of the Battle of St George's Cay (1798–1948) was belatedly marked by six stamps in two designs in 1949: St. George's Cay (Scott 131) and HMS Merlin (Scott 134).

Palm industries also were represented. The colony's graphic emblem seen on the \$5 stamp, features two figures recalling the logging trade that led to British settlement. Take a look at the \$1 Court House design — can anyone explain the significance of the letter "T" featured on this stamp? A new printing of the 2-cent value with perforation changed to 12 was placed on sale in 1947.

The 150th Anniversary of the Battle of St George's Cay (1798–1948), a very important event in the colony's history, was belatedly marked by six stamps in 1949 (Scott 131–136). Three stamps showed a view of St. George's Cay and three portrayed HMS *Merlin*, which played a significant role in the seven-day conflict against Spanish attackers.



New Constitution overprint on 1957 definitive (Scott 159).



Keel-billed Toucan.

Omnibus stamps marking Victory (Scott 127–128, 1946), Silver Wedding (Scott 129–130, 1948), Universal Postal Union (Scott 137–140, 1949), and the West Indies University (Scott 141–142, 1951) also were issued during this period.

Following the omnibus 1953 Coronation stamp (Scott 143), twelve Queen Elizabeth pictorials were issued featuring indigenous flora and fauna and local scenes: Colony Arms, Tapir (Mountain Cow), Legislative Council Chamber and mace, Pine logging industry, Spiny lobster, Stanley Field Airport, frieze from the Mayan temple at Xunantunich, Blue butterfly, Armadillo, Mayan woman, Hawkesworth suspension bridge, and Pine Ridge orchid (Scott 144–155). In 1957 there were new printings of 2-, 3- and 5-cent denominations in perf 14. De La Rue took over the printing from Waterlow in 1961 with subsequent perforation changes for the 2-, 3-, 5- and 10-cent stamps. In 1961 Scott 145–146 and 149–150 were overprinted "NEW CONSTITUTION / 1960."

More than 500 bird species have been recorded in the colony, so it was appropriate to issue attractive 1962 definitives of Central American birds designed by the renowned artist D.R. Eckelberry (Scott 167–178). The well-known "white beak" variety clearly affected several sheets of the 1-cent Great Curassow design. Surprisingly, this missing color also occurs on the 1964 New Constitution overprints, and even more astonishing, it was retained on a new printing for the 1966 Dedication



"SELF GOVERNMENT / 1964" overprint on tropical bird definitive (Scott 182, Great Currasow).



1962 "Hurricane Hattie" overprints (Scott 165, Blue butterfly).



Example from the set of stamps overprinted to mark the dedication of the site of the new capital, Belmopan, October 9, 1965 (Scott 197, Great Kiskakee).

of New Capital overprint with the new sideways CA watermark. Nevertheless, despite appearing on several sheets, this variety is scarce and seldom offered for sale. In 1967 1-, 2-, 4-, 5-, 10-, 15- and 50-cent definitives were reprinted with sideways watermarks.

Attainment of self-government was marked by a "SELF GOVERNMENT / 1964" overprint on Scott 167, 169, 170, 172, and 174 of the bird definitives (Scott 182–186). Another special issue was the 1962 "Hurricane Hattie" overprints (Scott 163–166), remembering the hurricane that struck Belize on October 31, 1961 with winds exceeding 186 mph and thirteen-foot storm surges that destroyed almost half of the city's buildings and killed more than 400 people.. Unlike the semi-postal issued to aid victims of the hurricane that devastated Belize in September 1931, there was no additional surcharge on the 1962 stamps, suggesting that no contributions from sales were donated to the disaster fund. A refugee camp named Hattieville was established close to the devastated capital and grew into a permanent village with a population today of about 1,300 inhabitants.

Following this second horrific disaster in thirty years, it was decided to build a new capital city located fifty-two miles inland from Belize. The new capital was named Belmopan, derived from combining the names of the Belize and Mopan rivers. Construction began in 1962, and in 1966 five overprinted definitives referred to previously (Scott 195–199) were issued to mark the dedication of the new capital. Although government



Wildlife definitives were reprinted in 1973 with silver panel replacing "BRITISH HONDURAS" with "BELIZE" (Belize Scott 312, Crana fish).



Short-lived identical designs inscribed "BELIZE" were issued in January 1974 (Belize Scott 327).

offices and embassies are now located in Belmopan (the Belizean House of Representatives began meeting there in 1971), the country's commercial center and port remain in the much larger and newly-designated Belize City. (As of 2000 Belize City remained the largest city in Belize with a population of 54,125, while Belmopan could boast only a meager 8,305 inhabitants.)

Wild life definitives with the EIIR cipher replacing the Queen's portrait were issued in 1968 (Scott 214–225). A blue ½-cent (Crana fish) on Crown CA watermarked paper was introduced in 1969

(Scott 234) and, for no stated reason, re-issued in 1971 in yellow-olive. There was absolutely no postal need for this very low denomination, which was clearly aimed at the packet trade for collectors. A spectacular error without the denomination and country name was discovered from sheets that had been broken up for supplying packets; a few stamps were recovered, but some may yet be found in old albums.

Sideways watermarked paper was re-introduced for new printings of 2-, 3-, 10-cent and \$5 denominations in 1970; subsequent printings of 3-, 5- and 10-cent stamps were issued in 1972, this time on upright watermarked paper.

There were several special issues before the country was renamed Belize in 1973, including overprints on definitives for Population Census 1970 (Scott 251–254) and Racial-Equality Year 1971 (Scott 281–282). (British Honduras seems to have had a penchant for overprints!)

In 1973 the wildlife definitives were reprinted on watermarked paper with a silver panel replacing "BRITISH HONDURAS" with "BELIZE" (Scott 312–324). Short-lived identical designs inscribed "BELIZE" were issued in January 1974 (Scott 327–339) and replaced after just eight months with definitives featuring butterflies (Scott 345–360). Due to the proliferation of spurious issues following the establishment of a new philatelic agency, I closed my collection at this point.

Readers may contact me with comments or questions at chambon@xtra.co.nz