

THE AUSTRALIAN KGV HEADS AND THE “DISSOLUTE FOWL”

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Even if you have little inclination to comprehend the myriad of variations in the King George V 'Heads' or 'Sideface' issues of Australia between 1913 and 1936, as analysed so ably by Mel West in the September 2019 edition of “Flight”, it is noticeable that the design of one stamp sticks out from the rest, the penny red engraved issue of 1913, the very first in the series. To understand why this is, it is necessary to examine how this issue came into being in the first place.

The Emu and the 1913 Engraved Issue

Following the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, there was no agreement on national insignia for the design of 'Australian' stamps and those of the pre-existing colonial states continued in use for several years with a complex recharging arrangement for mail which crossed state boundaries.

A coat of arms was eventually adopted in 1908 only to be abandoned in 1912, when the shield was changed to include the arms of all 6 states. The latter survives to this day and is shown on the 1999 stamp in *Fig. 1*. The 1908 coat of arms, with the Emu 'leg up'. is shown in *Fig. 2*.



Fig. 1 - Modern coat of arms



Fig. 2 - 1908 coat of arms

The inclusion of the Emu and Red Kangaroo as supporters to the shield was always controversial as they had appeared in none of the states' arms. However, they had appeared on the Bowman Flag (*Fig.3*) adopted in New South Wales in 1806 to mark the victory of Trafalgar, when they were considered to be endemic fauna large enough to support the shield. They also symbolised the motto 'Advance Australia', as neither animal can move backwards easily.



Fig. 3 - Bowman Flag



Fig. 4 - Hermann Altmann winning design



Fig. 5 - 1913-1914 – Red, No wmk.; perf. 11, TS Harrison

This was the basis on which Hermann Altmann produced his competition winning design (*Fig 4*) for the new Commonwealth stamps in 1911. However, political reaction to the controversy over appropriate symbols for the new nation, and especially the use of the king's head, led to the adoption of a modified version of the second placed design which became the undistinguished Kangaroo and Map issue which preceded the Heads issue by almost 12 months. Only with a change of government in 1913 was Altman's design modified to produce the first George V Head (sideface) issue, intended to replace progressively the Kangaroo and Map issue. The final design (*Fig 5*) was done by Ronald A Harrison of printer TS Harrison who prepared plates for engraving and whose image for the emu was to draw justifiable criticism.

The Emu and the Letterpress Design

In the haste to produce a definitive stamp worthy of the new commonwealth, albeit 12 years after its creation, however, the capacity of the printer to produce 500 million stamps p.a. as required had not been checked. It turned out that Harrison did not have the capacity and, even before the 1913 issue went to printing, steps had to be taken to restrict the issue to the penny red only, to cancel the printing of the higher values and to tender for replacement of the entire issue by letterpress printing, a faster process. Perkins Bacon were the successful bidder.

This meant that certain design modification would be necessary for technical reasons. In January 1914, the Commonwealth High Commissioner's Office sent a copy of the 1913 engraved design to the company with strict instructions that only changes which were "absolutely necessary owing to the printing having to be executed by letterpress instead of steel engraving" were to be made.

By then, the criticism of Harrison's 1913 image for the Emu included an article in the Stanley Gibbons Journal that year which referred to it as a "dissolute fowl". The opportunity to respond to this and to change the design was not lost on Perkins Bacon but it took some firm diplomacy to achieve it. In correspondence, their engraver stated that the emu in the original engraved design was "an impossible thing", in contrast to the "impeccable" kangaroo. He went on "I had doubts about the head which is too much like an ostrich. So, I referred to my Cassels' Natural History and found it has a characteristic sort of mask and a frill of ragged feathers round the base of the neck". The die proof (*Fig 6*) shows the proposal at this stage.



Fig. 6 - Near final die proof by Perkins Bacon



*Fig. 7 - 1914 – Red, single wmk.; perf. 14½
x14; typo JB Cooke,
TS Harrison from 1918*

In the event, the finer detail of the feathers was smoothed out (as was that of the king's hair and the wattle flowers) before the Stamping Department of the Inland Revenue acknowledged the criticism of the first emu and that the new design was a "vast improvement." The plates and watermarked paper arrived in Australia from London in June 2014 and the first stamp, a penny

red (Fig 7) went on sale on 14 July. Meantime, JB Cooke used three undenominated dies to produce the ½d, 4d and 5d values to the same design. Many more printings were to follow.



Fig. 8 - Enlarged detail of Emu in 1913 engraved issue – the “dissolute fowl”.



Fig.9 - Enlarged detail of Emu in 1914 issue, showing redesign of emu and different line details for letterpress plate

Figures 8 and 9 compare the detail of the emu design between the two issues. The letterpress design was subsequently used for 22 years with many thousands of value, colour and shade, plate flaw, perforation, watermark and other variations. Even the engraved issue, which was only used for a year, was printed from 4 plates in two printings of November 1913 and February 1914 with a total of 2,295,450 stamps, reflecting the original underestimate of need. It can be found in 4 shades of red and with distinctive flaws to allow identification of the relevant plates. There is even a “spear in emu” flaw in plate 4 examples to delight those of us who collect bird related varieties of these prolific stamps.