



Stamps of The Welsh West India Company



The Welsh West India Company followed hard on the heels of the much more well known East India Company and Hudson's Bay Company. It was formed from the ashes (literally) of the Cardiff Bay Co. You will have heard of the South Sea Bubble. The Cardiff Bay Bubble was organic rather than financial; methane to be precise. After the initial burst there were after-blooms which meant the citizens of Cardiff couldn't risk any more naked flames and lived on cold meats, pickles and salads for weeks afterwards.

Sadly the WWIC couldn't emulate the success of the other big companies. Though it was granted its letters patent in 1732, giving it exclusive trading rights over much of the Caribbean on behalf of the Welsh, it found stiff opposition to this from the Spanish, Dutch, French and the English all of who had been well entrenched, and at war with each other, for over 200 years. As a sop the Welsh were given the Îles Calamité, lying North-West of Anguilla, as an operational base, which they promptly renamed St David's, but was soon known everywhere as San Daffy.

The Company hoped to make their fortune trading pelts of the West Indian Beaver which was only native to the Îles Calamité. However the 6 sent back to Cardiff represented 75% of the population of this rodent, and even though the two remaining males formed a relationship the species was doomed to extinction. Do they resorted to Plan B with a triangular trading route. Ships would set sail from Cardiff and Barry to West Africa. Here the traders bought trinkets and nick-nacks off the natives. They would take these across the Atlantic where they hoped to unload them in return for men who wanted full time work down the coal pits of The Valleys. It was never likely to succeed, but somehow the company managed to stay afloat (literally and financially) until well after the East India Company lost control on the other side of the world. In short they outsourced some traditional crafts. If you find an antique paperweight inscribed 'A Present from Haverford West' it's a good bet it says Made in Lagos.

The end came when the reason for name Îles Calamité became clear. In 188 after a plague of toads had devastated the coconut groves and mango plantations, a hurricane struck the island destroying much in its path while the volcano Mount Effluvius erupted, not only blowing itself apart, but triggered an earthquake which flattened all that the lava and hurricane had spared. This also caused a tsunami which literally washed away everything, including the islands. Now all that remains is a few bits of reef that trap unwary sailors. Every year on the anniversary of the disaster a few Welshfolk sail out to the area and drop a wreath of leeks on the eater, raise the flag, and start singing.

The picture shows Iorwerh Pritchard, son of the WWIC chairman Gwynfor Pritchard, at the Company's department store on San Daffy with what was claimed to be the first bicycle in the West Indies. Both he and his bike were lost in the destruction of the island.

The Company operated its own postal service starting in 1832, and in 1858 considered using adhesive perforated stamps. The first design featured the bust of a youthful Queen Victoria in a rather typical frame. There were stamps for incoming and outgoing mail, with values in sterling or some local currency respectively, though only one value of each was prepared (letter rate), meaning parcels often ended up with many stamps affixed. Rather than have new values printed, in 1872 the Company decided on a radical new design.

For this issue they decided to drop the links with the Crown and decided on a design that reflected the nature of the Company and its (now) diverse trading. Yet again they had stamps that were intended for incoming and outgoing mail, but this time they were a complementary pair showing St Davids in the foreground and Cardiff Docks in the distance. Centrally placed is the arms of the Company, which shows its links across the Atlantic Ocean.

The four values were 2d, 5d, 8d and 1 shilling, and they came in four colours. They had abandoned the local currency by this time because it went off quite quickly, and some fortunes locked away in deposit accounts were lost.

One thing was missed, before the first delivery of 250,000 of each value, was that with the stamps printed in pairs they couldn't just ship entire sheets across to St Davids. They had to be broken up from the sheets into individual stamps and sorted into two piles. They managed to round up some orphans of the streets to perform this task in exchange for a bowl of gruel twice a day, and a shared straw mattress. Some collectors prefer to find examples with authentic little grubby fingerprints on the back of the stamps. Considerable numbers of pairs are easy enough to find, especially as they were popular with collectors, who would bribe the orphans to smuggle pairs out of the warehouse.

As stamps though, they are rather large in order to accommodate the design. This led to problems because when used on letters they didn't leave much room for the address. Luckily there were plenty of stocks of the QV 2ds left over, so these had a new lease of life and can be found cancelled with dates right up to 1888 when the island became no more.