Tuberculosis (TB) is a highly contagious disease, primarily of the lungs, but also affecting other parts of the body, including the bones, lymph glands and the brain. It is curable by modern therapy, but more recently strains immune to normal medical treatment have now become manifest. In addition miners’ phthisis, or silicosis, caused by the inhalation of quartz dust, is often accompanied by secondary tubercular infection.

The disease itself is of ancient origin and evidence of its existence has been found in the remains of bison, dated to 15,000 BCE, and in prehistoric humans dated to c. 4,000 BCE.

The term “phthisis” is of Greek origin and its use can be traced back to c. 460 BCE. Its meaning is, quite literally “consumption” and is a direct reference to one of the outward symptoms of TB, involving a chronic weight loss. During the 19th century the overcrowded urban conditions experienced in post-industrial revolution England made TB endemic. Consumption became the popular euphemism for it in polite English society. Sufferers able to travel often found relief in hot, dry climates and, for a time, the Karoo and the South African highveld became areas of preferred residence for many immigrants from Europe.

Because of its association with phthisis during the early 20th century, the spread of TB on the Witwatersrand became a matter of common concern for mine management, the labour unions and the community at large. The high concentrations of dust found underground combined with the housing of black workers in overcrowded, poorly ventilated mine compounds made mine labour particularly susceptible to the disease and in 1902 the Milner Commission revealed that 15.4% of the 1201 miners examined were suffering from TB, while another 7.3% were suspect. By 1907 a second commission had concluded that the mortality rate among miners on the Witwatersrand was six times that of other adult males of comparable backgrounds. Soon thereafter a third commission consisting entirely of medical practitioners resulted in the Miner’s Phthysis Act of 1912, making South Africa the first country in the world to make compensation compulsory to miners suffering from silicosis.

Although miners were a high-risk group in the development of work-related TB, the disease was soon found to be highly contagious, and liable to spread to other sectors of the population, regardless of social standing and economic background. As a result, the potential dissemination of TB became more of an issue for public concern than might have been otherwise. Its prevention and eradication thus became the focus of a number of awareness campaigns which also sought to raise funds for free medical treatment for all sectors of the population.

Despite this, for many years an unfortunate element of social stigma was attached to the disease, which only lessened after 1945 when penicillin became more freely available. This prejudice has been renewed in more recent times after TB became associated with the terminal symptoms of HIV-AIDS.

**The South Africa Christmas Stamp Fund**

In 1929 Mrs. Maja Egil Christiansen, a Danish national then residing in Durban, put forward the idea of selling Christmas labels, to raise funds for the erection and maintenance of a children’s TB sanatorium. The idea was, no doubt, inspired by events in her own country where, in 1903, twenty-six years
earlier, a postmaster, Einar Holbøll, had had the idea of adding an extra stamp sold in aid of charity, onto letters and greetings cards mailed during the Christmas season. The money thus raised could then be used to assist children who had contracted the disease. The plan was approved by the Danish authorities, and in December 1904 the country issued the world’s first Christmas stamp, featuring the portrait of Queen Louise of Denmark and the word Julen, or Christmas, inscribed at the top.

The practice of using a variety of colourful and well-designed labels on postal items arose during the latter years of the 19th century, when envelopes left open for postal inspection were charged half of the current rate for letters in sealed envelopes (Illustration 1). As, in most cases, inspection by the Post Office was nominal at best, many members of the public took advantage of this rebate and started closing the envelope flaps with stamp-like labels, or seals, to maintain their privacy. Inevitably Christmas charities began to design and sell their own seals to raise funds, and in subsequent years these became popularly known as “Christmas Stamps”, although they were only charity labels with no postal standing. Many, who cared little for the rebate, merely applied these labels to the front of their letters to show publicly their support for a cause.

By the 1960s the halcyon years of poster stamps, as these were sometimes known, was over, as their designs began to reflect the cheaper and more accessible methods of litho printing. The days of fine engraving, art nouveau ladies and recess printing were gone (Illustration 2).

The symbol used by the international movement against TB was the Cross of Lorraine, a double-barred cross which was originally carried by Knights Templar during the Christian invasions of the Middle East in the 11th and 12th centuries. During the Renaissance the cross was used by alchemists as a symbol of earth and spirit, although at some stage it was also appropriated by the Catholic Church in a variant form as the heraldic symbol for a Cardinal.

It was adopted as the symbol of the world-wide movement against TB at the International Conference on Tuberculosis held in London in 1902, and appeared for the first time on a Christmas stamp, issued by the US Postal Service, in 1920. In South Africa it was featured on Christmas seals from 1933 onwards.

This choice has not been without local criticism. Writing in the 1950s Credo Mutwa has pointed out that, in black iconography, the two-barred cross is considered to be a symbol of death, which has deterred many possible patients from seeking medical assistance. In all fairness, by the time Mutwa had penned this opinion, the symbol had been in use in South Africa for over a generation, which means that its image probably preceded its reputation. Given the rudimentary conditions of health facilities available to the South African rural population of that time, it seems probable that the mortality rate from TB then experienced in the farming communities far exceeded the 1:3 ratios recorded on the Witwatersrand.

In 1929 Mrs. Christiansen’s ideas were put before the Tuberculosis Hospital Fund of Natal. The outcome was the establishment of the South African Christmas Stamp Fund, and the publication of the first Christmas seals in November 1929. Unfortunately the organisation’s archives were destroyed in about 1995, when its head office was transferred from Durban to Johannesburg, and many of these facts have been extrapolated or drawn from secondary sources.

In 1947 a number of anti-tuberculosis associations throughout the country amalgamated under the leadership of Charles E. James, then Chair of the Natal Anti-TB Association to form the South African National Tuberculosis Association (SANTA). At that stage South Africa was widely regarded as one of the worst TB areas in the world, and some concerted action was obviously needed. By 1973 the association had established about 200 branches and action groups, with 120 care groups dedicated specifically to black urban communities, and over 300 located in the rural areas.

Although the Christmas Stamp Fund (CSF) and the Natal Anti-TB Association, later SANTA, were nominally separate organisations, each having its own management structures, the two bodies had their offices in the same building, and it is difficult to believe that they did not cooperate in matters of common concern. Thus, although the CSF was primarily concerned with the raising of funds towards anti-TB activities, in the context of SANTA’s overall structuring its financial contribution must have been relatively modest. Nonetheless the sale of these labels played a fundamental role in shaping the organisation’s public image as well as the general perception and awareness of TB.

The first stamp which went on sale at all Union Money Order offices on 15 November 1929, sold a total of 168,362 units at a penny each, giving the organisation a total of £786.9.6. Of this amount £174 was raised in Durban, while Cape Town contributed over £52. The committee continued its activities until 1995 when it was finally wound up, by which stage its annual income from the sale of charity sheetlets had dropped to less than R6000. Presumably much of this can be attributed to changing public perceptions of the disease as well as the failure of the
organisation to adapt its volunteer work force to the changing national demographic of a post-1994 South Africa.

**Christmas Stamps and the Post Office**

It seems probable that the Christmas stamp programme received the support of the Post Office virtually from its outset, although its exact nature has been difficult to determine, and was probably subject to changing circumstances.

The first stamps, issued in 1929 and 1930 respectively (Illustrations 3 and 4), were clearly the product of amateurs, bearing the hallmarks of a product cheaply designed and produced on a proverbial shoe-string. They were badly printed on a poor-quality gummed paper which was brittle and, as collectors will testify today, was particularly susceptible to the ravages of tropicalisation. Their design, which was almost identical in both years, did not understand the principles of miniaturised artwork, and used a self-invented font which was probably the outcome of training received in a woodworking class.

Stamps were distributed to Post Office Money Order offices throughout the country and sold to the public over the counter. Equally important, they were announced to post office employees by Post Office Circular No 596 of 25 November 1929 which told them that proceeds from their sale would “accrue to the Radium Fund or other approved charity”.

The issue of these labels needs to be read in the context of white politics of that time. Although the 1922 general labour strike had taken place primarily on the Witwatersrand, it affected the working class electorate in all of South Africa’s major urban areas. In its aftermath the Labour Party entered into an alliance with Hertzog’s National Party and, after the 1924 election, became part of a coalition government. Labour issues were in the forefront of its concerns, and riding high amongst them were those of the powerful and militant Mine Workers Union. Any action on TB therefore, would have had the full support of the National Labour coalition.

This means that although these labels were not recognised for postal use, they were accorded “semi-official” status and were subject to the same Post Office accounting procedures as any postally valid stamp. Despite bearing no value, they were sold for 1d each, and there is reason to believe that they may have been considered as antecedents for future issues of a “semi-postal” nature. Certainly we know from post office records that the following returns were made for the first, 1929 issue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Figures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total numbers printed</td>
<td>489,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number sold in 1929</td>
<td>168,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total surplus</td>
<td>303,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probable wastage</td>
<td>17,278 or 3.5% of total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income from sales</td>
<td>£786.9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Post Office charges</td>
<td>£84.19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing &amp; production costs</td>
<td>£149.0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net profit</td>
<td>£552.9.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures are revealing for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is a discrepancy of about 3.5% between the number printed, the number sold, and the surplus stock left over after sales. This can probably be accounted for by wastage at the sales counter which indicates that the sheets were poorly produced and that the roulette perforations did not separate easily. The post office being the post office, it seems likely that its fastidious staff would not have sold to the public labels which were anything but perfect, leading us to the conclusion that the method of sheet perforation could have been a source of irritation and unhappiness for postal employees working behind the counter.

Secondly there is a discrepancy in the accounts between the number of stamps sold, namely 168,362 units at 1d each, which should have shown an income of £701.10.2, and the actual return on income, namely £786.9.6.

In reality the figure of £701.10.2 is the figure reflected in the accounts after the Post Office had taken off its commission of £84.19.4, which is approximately 10.8% of the combined totals. The purpose behind this piece of flim-flam on the part of the Post Office’s accountants is difficult to understand, unless it was used to conceal the figures for wastage, which would have come to £71.19.0, which does not match the Post Office’s “commission” of £84.19.4. So this discrepancy must remain a mystery.

The final point centres on an undeclared amount of £149.0.3 which has been subtracted from the Post Office returns to give the project a profit of £552.9.11. At the time this total would have been enough to purchase a small house in one of Johannesburg’s middle income suburbs and is the equivalent today of about R600,000 which was not a bad return for a project still in its infancy. The undeclared amount can probably be attributed to the cost of printing 489,000 stamps and 1600 posters by the company of John Singleton-Williams Ltd of Durban.
Production Issues

The relationship between the Christmas Stamp Fund Committee and the Union Post Office was renewed the following year, although details of their financial arrangements are not known. What is clear, though, is that from 1931 onwards, the Post Office must have begun to take a more direct interest in the design and production of the labels. The first two issues, in 1929 and 1930, bore similar designs whose printed area was 22.5x31mm, but from 1931 onwards, these measurements were reduced to 21.5x26.5mm, one of the standard sizes used by the Government Printer to produce the Union’s definitive stamps.

In 1931 the printing was carried out by the Durban firm of Robinson & Co by screened rotogravure, and the sheets were not rouletted as before but perforated on a comb 14 machine, again one of the standard sizes used to perforate Union definitives. However, Robinson & Co would not have had the machinery necessary to carry out this work and, as far as is known, perforating technology at this level is a security feature that has always been the monopoly of the Government Printer. It must be concluded therefore, that the printing of the labels was carried out in Durban, but that the consignment was then sent to Pretoria for finishing. As the facilities at the Government Printer were not made available for outside commercial work as a matter of Government policy, it must also be concluded that the design and printing of the labels was done in Durban to Post Office specifications, and that the perforating was done subsequently in Pretoria under instruction of the Post Office.

Given the technical limitations of rouletting technology, it seems likely that, in 1929 and 1930, the size of the sheets did not exceed 60 labels, laid out in a 6x10 format. Anything larger than that might have resulted in unacceptable levels of wastage. Unfortunately, the largest positional piece recorded to date is a horizontal marginal strip of five, which yielded very little information.

After 1934 labels were printed in sheets of 120, in a 6x20 format. Details of the sheet design tended to vary from year to year. In some years positional arrows were placed at the centre of the sheet, on both the horizontal and the vertical axis, in others these were omitted. To facilitate booklet manufacture in most years the top three horizontal rows were printed upright, while the lower three were inverted, giving rows 3 and 4 a tete-beche format (Illustration 5), but in at least six issues this was not done. In some years the selvedge was used to carry anti-TB messages (Illustration 6), in others not.

In 1964 and 1965 the SANTA labels were redesigned and produced in the Republic’s new commemorative stamp format, which had been introduced in 1961 (Illustrations 7 and 8). Unfortunately there was no alteration to SANTA’s marketing strategy, and the design of booklets must have been given over to a person who quite obviously had no knowledge of packaging.

From a booklet point of view this must have been catastrophic, producing a product which few people could have liked. In 1966, in a bid to recover sales, SANTA switched to a miniature sheet format of 2x5 labels, which appears to have been popular with the public, although very few labels from this later period have been seen on cover. Sheets were rouletted even though their design continued to reflect graphically the use of perforations. It seems likely therefore, that at this time the Christmas labels ceased to be produced by the Government Printer. SANTA however, continued to be the Post Office’s designated charity.

The Santa Archive

In 1996 the Board of the South African Post Office requested me in my capacity as Senior Manager, Philately, to liaise with the management of SANTA and the Christmas Stamp Fund to determine how we could best assist them in their charity drive. SANTA had been the Post Office’s designated charity since at least 1929, and although it had played a valuable role in the past towards the eradication of tuberculosis, its fund-raising efforts in 1995, through the Christmas Stamp Fund, had realised less than R6000. After just one meeting it became clear that the organization suffered from a decreasing base of voluntary workers, and a fundraising policy that may have stood it well fifty years ago, but had now become irrelevant. Eventually it was decided by the Board to suspend all future material assistance to SANTA, and substitute in its stead an annual monetary donation.

Two years later, after I had left the Post Office, I was requested by SANTA’s Management to dispose of their archives on their behalf on the collector’s market. This raised about R12,000. The data recorded below is based only upon the material that was delivered to me for disposal. Regrettably their records did not include any of their operational files, and details of designers, artwork, printing specifications and all relevant correspondence had apparently been destroyed some years previously. Similarly no original artwork has ever been located.

The archive included a range of stamps, in sheet and booklet format, as well as stocks of the post 1966 decorative sheets, which should be the subject of a separate study. Some years,
namely 1931, 1932, 1933, 1941 and 1944 were not represented, and it must be assumed that all stock of those issues was sold out. The material had previously been stored in Durban, presumably not under ideal conditions, and much of it was badly tropicalised. Labels from 1929 and 1930 were in particularly bad condition. Sheets were generally brittle and tended to separate at the perforations, and before any research could be done, they had to be pressed and kept flat for a length of time. Storage was a problem, even in the short-term, and all but the most careful of handling became hazardous.

Some Observations

The seemingly innocuous design and production of charity labels does not appear to have been without its share of controversy. In 1942 the label featured a kneeling woman and child in an obvious reference to the birth of Jesus. While the baby in the cot proclaimed his divinity by disporting a halo, hazy and nebulous, but a halo nonetheless, the lady had no such attachment (Illustration 9). Some Catholics saw this as a mark of disrespect towards Our Lady and wrote letters to the press. Others decided the design depicted a nun with a sick child and found that they had no objections to it after all. In the war years most people had other issues uppermost in their minds, after all.

In 1950 the Christmas Stamp Committee issued a rather drab design showing a nursing sister standing on a landing welcoming two toddlers crawling up a set of stairs towards her (Illustration 10). Presumably the toddlers have TB, for why else would they be trying so hard to get into a hospital, but then why should this sadistic nurse be forcing them to crawl up the stairs in the first instance? To see, perhaps, if they were out of breath and therefore really had TB and qualified for admission? The Committee liked this design so much that in 1950 the label went to three printings, each technically worse than the last. Then, just for good measure, they reprinted the same design in 1962, just in case the lesson had not been learnt twelve years before.
In 1951 two versions of the same stamp were issued, both featuring a small child in a night shift standing on a brown globe which, in retrospect, resembles a basketball. One, found only in sheets, had 1d inscribed on the globe; the other with no value, has only been found in booklets (Illustration 11). The reasons for this discrepancy are not known, but it might be the result of a change in marketing policy. The labels for 1929-1932 were not given a value, but those from 1933-1949 were inscribed 1d. In 1952 they reverted to being value-free. It seems probable that sometime in 1951 a decision was taken to do away with the inscribed value, but no-one bothered telling the artist. When the first sheets were delivered the mistake was realised, and instead of delaying their decision for another year, the Committee decided to order a reprint of the label minus its value. Those sheets were then used in the manufacture of booklets. It is possible that the labels in sheet format were never issued.

In 1958 the Moderator of the NGK in the Transvaal, the Rev AM Meiring, declared that the label issued by the Christmas Stamp Fund for that year should not be circulated, because “the depiction of the Virgin Mary on the stamp with a halo that was larger than that of the Child Jesus was completely in the Roman Catholic tradition. It was offensive to the Protestant point of view” (The Star, 1958). On the other hand Monsignor F Mason, Vicar-General of the Pretoria Arch-diocese of the Roman Catholic Church thought it was “a very nice stamp” (Illustration 12). The dispute was eventually taken before the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Dr Albert Hertzog. Ultimately the Committee reprinted the 1957 label and inscribed it 1958, giving the public a choice of what stamp they wanted to buy (Illustration 13).

The Engelse roots of the Christmas stamp programme were probably typified by the fact that the Natalians who ran it took sixteen years to translate Christmas correctly into Afrikaans. It started off correctly in 1929 as Kersfees, but then degenerated into Krismis, then Kersmis, and finally settled upon Kersfees in 1944 (Illustrations 3, 4 and 14).

Illustration 12. 1958 Christmas label, also known as the Madonna with the large halo

Illustration 13. Alternative 1958 Christmas label

Illustration 14. 1944 Christmas label with standardised spelling of KERSFEES

Illustration 15. Booklet cover for the 1935 issue, saddle-stitched on the left-hand side

Booklets

The earliest booklet I was able to find in the archive was for the 1935 issue, with a value of 1s (Illustration 15). Given the design of its cover, this was probably the first year that Christmas labels were sold in this format. I cannot tell for certain at what stage additional booklet values were created, but there were certainly 6d and 1s booklets in 1939. Thereafter a complete range of booklets was made available, including the 6d, 1s, 25d, 5s and 10s values. With decimalization in 1961, the cheapest booklet was priced at 10c and the most expensive at R1.

The first booklets were saddle-stitched on the left-hand side, but within a few years they began to be stapled, and later on to be glue-bound. Booklets for 1938-40 carried advertising on the back cover, paid for by the Vacuum Oil Company of South Africa. In 1938 it featured “Pegasus 8 in 1 petrol”, in 1939 we were introduced to Pegasus and Mobiloil, and in 1940 we were told that Mobiloil Gargoyle was the “World’s largest selling motor oil” (Illustrations 16-18). Thereafter this advertising space, which might have been able to generate valuable revenues for SANTA, was taken over by SANTA to publicise its role in the fight against TB.
Conclusions
The status of South Africa’s Christmas labels has always been difficult to determine. It seems likely that, at some stage, it was planned to raise them to the status of official charity stamps, a concept which was first used in South Africa in 1938 and again in 1939. Certainly their link to the Union Post Office and the Government Printer in Pretoria makes this highly probable. The latter was prohibited from printing any material of a commercial nature, and would not have done so without a strict undertaking being given by the Post Office. Added to this is the fact that some early issues were printed on multiple Springbok-head watermarked paper, which was normally reserved for Union postage and revenue stamps. Some early Union catalogues and handbooks had no compunction about listing them, as an addendum at the back of the book perhaps, but they enjoyed a degree of philatelic recognition nonetheless. The reasons why they did not take the final step, from charity label to official stamp, has never been documented or fully understood. The wanton destruction of their original archive in Durban, sadly, has left many questions unanswered.

Bibliography

A shorter and less comprehensive version of this article has appeared in the South African Philatelist, volume 91 (2), 60-63, 2015. Here reproduced with permission.

Illustration 16. Advertising on the back of the 1938 booklet
Illustration 17. Advertising on the back of the 1939 booklet
Illustration 18. Advertising on the back of the 1940 booklet

Planned Meetings During World Stamp Show NY 2016
June 2, 3-5pm. A Display of the Early British and Colonial Postal Orders. Postal Order Society. Meeting Room 1E07.
June 3, 2-4pm. Rhodesian Study Circle General Meeting/Lecture. Rhodesian Study Circle. Meeting Room 1E09.

Websites that Promote Southern Africa Philately
Anglo Boer War
www.boerwarsociety.co.uk
Basutoland, Bechuanaland & Swaziland
www.bechuanaandphilately.com
Cape and Natal Study Circle
www.capeandnatalsc.com
Orange Free State Study Circle
www.orangefreestatephilately.org.uk
Rhodesian Study Circle
www.rhodesianstudycircle.org.uk
South African Collectors’ Society
www.southafricacollector.com
The Philatelic Society For Greater Southern Africa
www.psgsa.org
The Rhodesian Philatelist
www.rhodesianphilatelist.org
Transvaal Study Circle
www.transvaalstamps.org.uk
Thanks to Otto Peetoom for making this compilation.
Membership Application

Membership fees are $25 to US mailing addresses and $30 for all other addresses. Membership includes a subscription to the Society’s journal Forerunners. Those that join before July 1 will receive the complete back issues for that year. Thereafter annual renewals occur in August and are due by September 1. If sending in dues by mail, please provide funds in US$ either in currency or a check on a USA bank account made out to “PSGSA.” Mail all payments to David McNamee, PSGSA Treasurer, P.O. Box 37, Alamo, CA 94507 USA. Paypal to “dmcnamee@aol.com” is also acceptable, but please add US$ 1 extra to cover part of the PayPal fees we must pay to use the service. For some overseas members, it might be more advantageous to send in dues for two or more years to avoid the annual conversion fees.

Name: ________________________________
Address: ________________________________

Email address: ___________________________
APS No: ____________________________

Collecting interests and Comments: ____________________________________________________________
Cape of Good Hope cleft stick letter dated 1771 and addressed to Groenekloof

**Highlights**

South Africa Christmas Stamps  
Cape Brief Stock Letter  
OFS and Transvaal Consular Mail  
Society Auctions  
Philatelic Honesty  
*Philately Southern Africa*  
South Africa Postal Cards  
Modern South African Forgeries  
World Postage Stamp Show

*Unsold Auction Lots are Now Available at Reserve*