

About Foreign Perfins

Remembering Ceylon and H. W. Cave, Booksellers

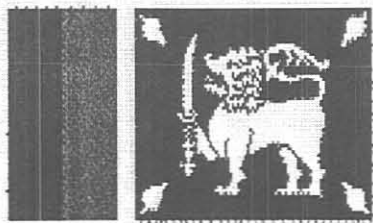
Floyd A. Walker, Foreign Catalog Editor

It was a half-century ago this year that Ceylon became an independent member of the British Commonwealth and 26 years ago that it officially became the Republic of Sri Lanka. It was just 40 years ago this month that I touched down in Ceylon for an all-too-brief visit. I was a member of a USAF crew that landed at a British airfield outside Colombo to refuel after a very long flight.

About my only memory of Ceylon is the weather and the beautiful beaches we saw from the air as we flew in. It was beautifully balmy and my buddies and I wanted desperately to spend time on the beaches rather than climb back into our cramped cargo plane.

Ceylon/Sri Lanka is perhaps best known for its tea. Some of the world's finest tea comes from Ceylon. I was told that it was also a major coffee-producing nation until a blight wiped out the bulk of the coffee plantations.

To perfins and security endorsement collectors, of course, Ceylon is well known



The national flag of Sri Lanka

for its CAVE overprints and its CAVE perfins.

Shortly after Joseph Sloper received approval for the use of perforated stamps in Great Britain—and by extension the British Empire—his salesmen started selling the idea, the service, and in most cases, the Sloper machines to business firms around the world.

The salesmen reached Ceylon sometime in the early 1880s and the firm of H. W. Cave & Co. was one of the first to buy into Sloper's idea. Mr. Cave had founded his company as a bookshop in 1876 and by the middle 1880s, he and his brothers had a thriving business in Colombo, the capital city, as booksellers, stationers, printers, and publishers.

The first CAVE perfin was fairly large, fairly complicated, and fairly short-lived. It appears that the tiny pins in the COLOMBO part of the pattern broke easily.

The Caves were disenchanted with the perfin idea and reverted to the use of overprints of several different varieties to safeguard their postage supplies from employees. From 1884 to 1908, the overprints were apparently used more than the perfin.



However, a simpler CAVE perfin was put into use around 1908 and continued in use until the middle 1950s.

The CAVE pattern is fairly common on the stamps of Ceylon, although good clean punches are somewhat scarce. It is clear that the Caves were perforating stamps for security purposes and not to impress stamp collectors.

After 1955, the use of perfins by Cave and by other firms on the island (and there are more than 80 known patterns on the stamps of Ceylon) declined rapidly, probably because of the rapid rise of the postage meter. Pitney-Bowes salesmen were as successful then as Sloper's had been earlier.

Sri Lanka today is a prosperous nation of about 17 million people. Internal conflicts have kept the country in turmoil in recent years, but the island is on major east-west air routes in the Indian Ocean and a mecca for tourists in search of the balmy weather, clear water, and great beaches I remember so well.

And as far as I know, Colombo is still home to a bookshop named Cave's.

Floyd A. Walker

Box 82

Grandview, MO 64030

edit2001@aol.com