



Shackleton's expedition to the Antarctic terrors of the Weddell Sea (Library of Congress)

Below: the Fokker monoplane in which Bernt Balchen, Lt. June, and Professor Gould were forced down in the unknown wastes of Antarctica while they were on a scientific flight as part of the Byrd Expedition (Library of Congress)



ANTARCTICA STAMPS

Stamps from a deep-frozen desert

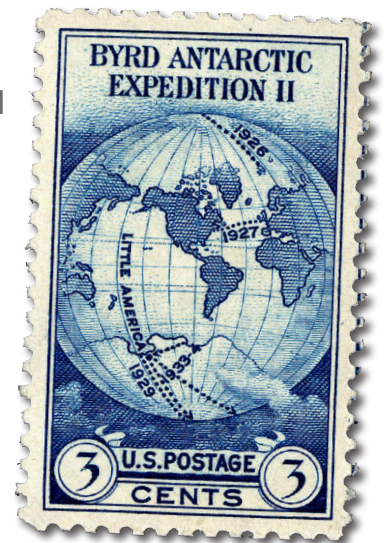
In a comprehensive guide to stamps issued on behalf of the South Pole, David Bailey discovers how the first heroic expeditions to Antarctica led to a scramble for territory. And how a ground-breaking treaty ended it

The discovery of Antarctica was a protracted affair, as whalers and sealers probed ever southwards, discovering unknown islands and stopping there to process their cargoes of whale blubber or to slaughter seals for their oil and skins. However, this was a competitive business, so they often kept their discoveries to themselves.

Scientific interest waxed and

waned as periods of intense activity were followed by extended hiatuses. Von Bellingshausen and Lazarev sailed around Antarctica in 1819-21, becoming the first Europeans to see it. In 1840, Charles Wilkes, a Lieutenant in the US Navy, discovered Victoria Land and christened the volcanoes Mt Erebus and Mt Terror. Another American, Mercator Cooper, made the first documented landing on the mainland in 1853 on what is now called the Oates Coast. Then, the

The stamp for Byrd's second Antarctic Expedition was for 3c, the US inland letter rate. It was, however, sold at a premium



world lost interest again until the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration. This began in the 1890s and lasted until after the First World War, giving place to the Mechanical Age. The generally accepted boundary between them is Shackleton's last expedition of 1921-22.

During the Heroic Age, nine countries launched seventeen major expeditions to gather a mass of information about Antarctica, mapping the coasts, exploring the interior and documenting the atrocious weather. They were characterised by physical courage and

Stamps from Shackleton's expedition of 1908 and Scott's expedition of 1911-13 (halfpenny image courtesy of Robert Siegel Auction Galleries)





endurance in a world with no radios or mechanised transport. They were also dangerous; 22 explorers never came home.

The connection between exploration and philately began in 1908 with Ernest Shackleton's second expedition to Antarctica, in search of the south and magnetic south poles. Funding for the trip had been hard to find, so the extra revenue from stamp sales would be welcome. The appearance of cancelled stamps would also help to claim the territory for the crown.

'Penny Universal' stamps of New Zealand were overprinted 'Edward VII Land', Shackleton was appointed Postmaster and given a cancellation device reading 'Brit Antarctic Exped' to be used on board his ship *Nimrod*. The stamps were sold to the public at a premium and also used on



The Argentine 'map' stamp of 1951 and two stamps from the Chilean set of 1958. The \$10 Official stamp is a quote from a 16th-century epic poem about the Spanish conquest of Chile



correspondence to New Zealand. Shackleton had an agreement with Robert Falcon Scott that he would not use the old *Discovery* site in McMurdo Sound but after searching for a safe landing point in King Edward VII land, and running low in coal, he changed his plans and found another anchorage in Victoria Land.

Shackleton returned home a hero having probed further south than anyone before him, discovering the Beardmore Glacier, climbing Mount Erebus and leaving behind some cases of whisky and brandy that were not discovered until 2010.

Stamps also helped to fund the Scott Expedition of 1911-1913 aboard the *Terra Nova*; ½ d and 1d stamps were overprinted 'Victoria Land' and were used at the Captain Evans base in McMurdo Sound as well as on board

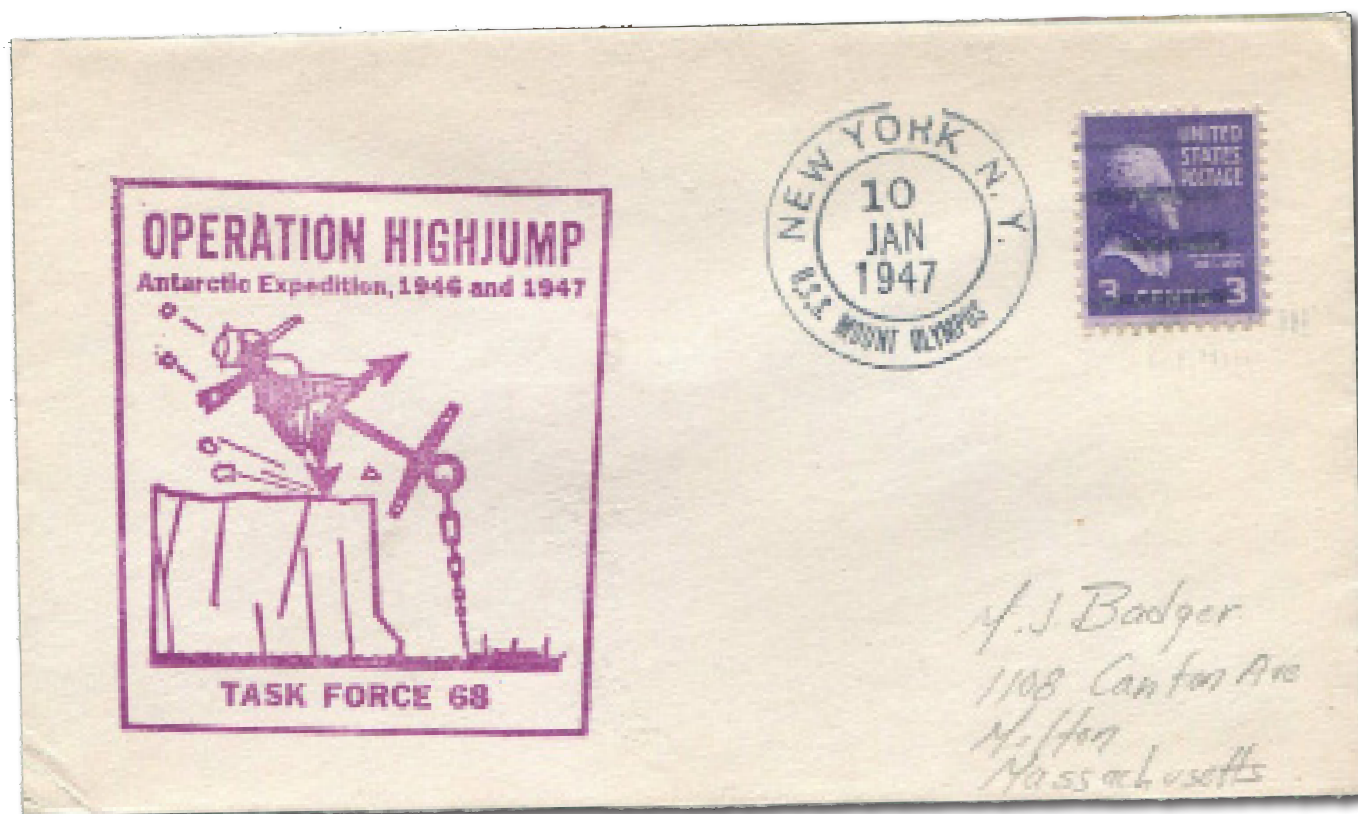
A cover from the 1946-47 Operation Highjump, led by Admiral Byrd

ship. The expedition, however, ended in disappointment and tragedy. Scott's party arrived at the South Pole to find that Amundsen had got there first, and they all perished on the way back.

The Mechanical Age

After Shackleton's last expedition, Antarctic exploration paused again, for seven years. But these were productive times for aviation, land transport, radio communication and other technologies that would make life easier on the ice. It also allowed time for the acquisition of territory to gain priority over the scientific research. Antarctica was a new continent, with land that could be rich in minerals. It could also have huge strategic importance.

The next expedition to take place was the British Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE), which spread over two Antarctic summers between 1929 and 1931. It was funded by all three governments and frankly described as an 'acquisitive exploratory expedition'. The expedition leader, Sir Douglas Mawson, claimed British Sovereignty over their five landfalls, though this was later transferred to Australia, as agreed. The expedition used Scott's ship, the *Discovery* and stopped at Cape





Denison, where Mawson's expedition of 1912-13 had landed. Here the proclamation of sovereignty was copied out by hand and buried on site in a container made of food tins under a cairn of stones. It was recovered in 1977 and is now in a museum.

American interest in Antarctica revived after the First World War through the achievements of Admiral William Byrd, who had made a (disputed) flight over the North Pole and flown non-stop from the USA to France carrying mail. He led five Antarctic expeditions in all. The second, from 1933-35 was commemorated philatelically. It was Franklin D Roosevelt who thought that Americans might like a stamp that had been posted at the US Base and, with a 50c premium on top of the 3c face value, it would help to fund the expedition. The stamp was not valid for use in the USA but 240,000 covers were posted home from Little America. They were sent in two batches. The first were carried to Antarctica with the expedition and sent home via

The French base on the Crozet Archipelago. A stamp commemorating the fifth Treaty Consultative meeting and one of many issues commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Treaty itself

Dunedin in New Zealand by summer 1934. The second batch could be received as late 1 November 1934, to be sent out via Dunedin and cancelled before the expedition returned home. But difficulties in handling this volume of mail meant that some covers took a year to be delivered.

The stamp was also released as miniature sheet of six, which were sold at the 1934 National Stamp Exhibition in New York.

Antarctica hot's up

Competing claims to slices of Antarctica continued both before the war and during it. And Britain could sense the pressure on the Falkland Islands and the string of smaller possessions between them and the Pole. Chile and Argentina had overlapping claims to British territories, U-boats had been sighted, a German cruiser was attacking Norwegian whaling vessels and many Argentines had German ancestry. Japan's entry into the war only served to raise the stakes. The British responded with Operation Tabarin. Ostensibly, this was a research mission, but in setting up its bases, it established a permanent, year-round British presence in the southernmost seas, the first of its

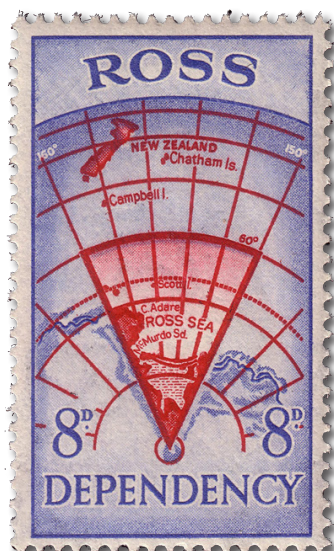
kind in Antarctica.

A more public assertion of ownership came philatelically, in 1944, when the eight lower values of the 1938 Falkland Islands definitive set were overprinted for its four dependencies: Graham Land, South Georgia, South Orkneys and South Shetland. These became the British Antarctic Survey and later, the British Antarctic Territories.

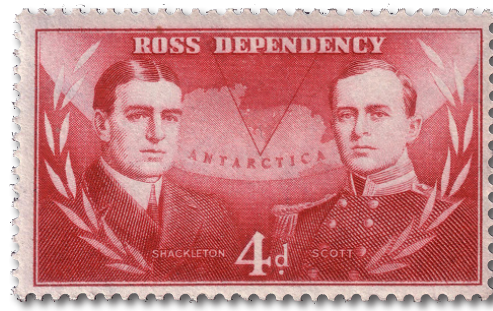
After the war, explorations continued and so did competing claims. In 1946, the USA launched Operation Highjump, sending 4,700 men, thirteen ships and 33 aircraft south to train personnel, to test equipment, to do pure research, and also to extend American influence over the largest practical area. An aim that was at first denied.

This expedition generated a large amount of letters home, and the official cover makes an inexpensive start to an Antarctic collection.

In 1948, Chile and Argentina signed an agreement to recognise each other's claims – claims backed by stamps. Argentina issued a 'map' stamp in 1951 and Chile a set of four in 1958. More seriously in 1948, Argentine troops had fired on British troops in a disputed area. By 1956, there were over twenty 'foreign'



Three values from the first Ross Dependency set





bases in Antarctica. And Russian expeditions in 1955-57 and 1956-58 brought the tensions of the cold war down South.

Competing claims get put on ice

The International Geophysical Year of 1957-1958 showed how countries could come together and benefit from joint research and the exchange of information. Now, something of that spirit emerged in the Antarctic Treaty, which was signed on 1 December 1959 and came into effect in 1961. The Treaty covered all lands below the sixtieth parallel of south latitude. And the Parties agreed that Antarctica should be used for peaceful purposes only, that scientific investigations should continue

uninterrupted and both the plans and results of future investigations should be shared. Territorial claims were neither allowed nor repudiated, just made irrelevant. No further claims would be allowed. And no nuclear materials would be used or stored in Antarctica.

The original signatories were the twelve countries active in the area during the International Geophysical Year: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Britain, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the Soviet Union and the United States. Since then, another 42 countries have signed up.

Today, there are around fifty permanent bases in Antarctica and the population fluctuates from around 1,000 in the winter to 4,000

The first stamp of the Australian Antarctic Territory, showing the 1954 expedition at Vestfold Hills

Belgium was active in Antarctic exploration. Adrien Gerlach's party spent the first winter in Antarctica and expeditions continued thereafter. These stamps are fundraisers from 1966

in summer. Four territories issue their own stamps for letters home.

The British Antarctic Territories are home to the southernmost working post office in the world, at Port Lockroy in Graham Land. It operates out of a restored historic building and in a typical year, sends around 70,000 postcards to over 100 countries. The BAT's first stamps appeared in these pages as a Celebrated Set in the September 2021 issue of *Stamp Collector*.

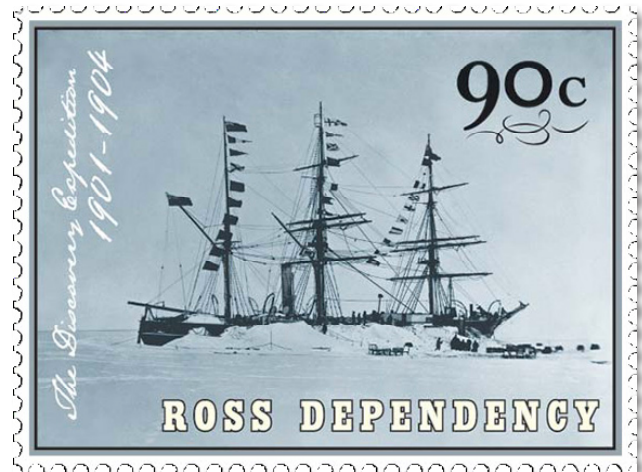
The French Southern and Antarctic Territories were formed in 1955, consisting of islands in the Indian Ocean and Adelle Land on the continent itself. The first stamp was an overprint on Madagascar, but all successive issues have been printed in Paris, to an exceptional standard of design and production.

The Australian Antarctic Territories Stamps appeared in 1955 and the first issues make strong territorial claims. Since the Treaty, they feature every aspect of Antarctic life and current research (a set from 2017 features deep sea creatures). These are also put on sale in Australia, and so are easier to find.

Territories known as the Ross Dependency were placed in the care of New Zealand in 1933 and the stamps can only be used from there. They appeared from 1957 to 1987, when the Post Office closed. Happily, it re-opened in November 1994. The first postmaster was Sir



From left: Norway's claim to Antarctica and its participation in International Geophysical Year; the cold war comes to Antarctica – a Russian stamp of 1956



Edmund Hilary (of Everest fame) who was commissioned to establish a base in the Ross Dependency. A tent for the Post Office was the first thing to be set up.

Collecting Antarctica

Stamps and covers from Antarctica's many researchers are an established collecting area and there is much material and information available on the website freezemail.org.

If you are more interested in the Heroic Age, the club to join (and the website to visit) is the Polar Postal History Society of Great Britain (www.polarpostalhistory.org.uk), while anniversaries of Heroic Age expeditions open up another, more affordable collecting area. In addition to Britain, Australia and New Zealand, there were expeditions from France, Belgium,

A Russian expedition of 1963 and a Ross Dependency stamp commemorating the Discovery Expedition of 1901-1904

Germany, Norway, Sweden and Japan. Most have issued sets to celebrate their heroes.

It is also possible to trace the growth of Antarctic exploration per se, as many countries used commemorative stamps to announce their expeditions to the public. Where 'real' stamps were not released, organisers would often print their own postcards or poster stamps to build awareness.

All of which adds up to a lot of philately for a frozen desert.

Many thanks to Colnect, Robert Siegel Auction Galleries, Antarctic Philately, 'Exploring Stamps' on YouTube, Royal Museums, Greenwich, the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Discovering Antarctica, and Stanley Gibbons, for information and images used in this article.

A promotional postcard for the Australian expedition of 1954



ANTARCTICA TODAY

Stamps from the Antarctic Territories continue to explore the extraordinary climate, scenery, and wildlife of Antarctica.



The Australian Antarctic Territory recently issued a set of four stamps showing four types of lichen found near Australia's Davis research station. Lichen, Australia Post explain, is a slow-growing, composite plant comprising a fungus with either a green alga or cyanobacteria.



Meanwhile, the most recent stamp set from Ross Dependency, issued by New Zealand Post, shows 'Megafauna' including an Antarctic Minke Whale.