

## Pitcairn Islands Philately

The musings of Roger West in his latest contribution prompt me to provide some more detail with regards the case for, and the relevance / necessity of Pitcairn Islands postage stamps. First some geographical and historical information.



The Pitcairn Islands, officially the Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands, is a group of four volcanic islands in the southern Pacific Ocean that form the sole British Overseas Territory in the Pacific Ocean. The four islands — Pitcairn proper, Henderson, Ducie, and Oeno — are scattered across several hundred kilometres of ocean and have a combined land area of about 18 square miles (47 km<sup>2</sup>). Henderson Island accounts for 86% of the land area. The islands nearest to the Pitcairn Islands are Mangareva (of French Polynesia) to the west and Easter Island to the east.

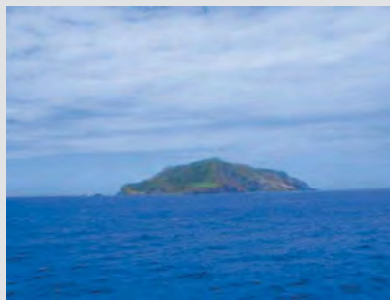
The Islands were formed by a centre of upwelling magma called the Pitcairn hotspot. Pitcairn Island is

a volcanic remnant primarily formed of tuff, where the north side of the cone has been eroded. Pitcairn is the only permanently inhabited island. Adamstown, the main settlement on the island, is built within the volcanic basin. Pitcairn Island has no permanent water source, however the island has three seasonal semi-permanent springs. Pitcairn is accessible only by boat through Bounty Bay, due to the island's steep cliffs. Henderson Island, supporting a rich variety of animals in its nearly inaccessible interior, is also capable of supporting a small human population despite its scarce fresh water, but access is difficult, owing to its outer shores being steep limestone cliffs covered by sharp coral. In 1988, this island was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The other islands are at a distance of more than 100 km (62 mi) and are not habitable.

Pitcairn is the least populous national jurisdiction in the world. The Pitcairn Islanders are a biracial ethnic group descended mostly from nine Bounty mutineers and a handful of Tahitian captives – as is still apparent from the surnames of many of the islanders. This famous mutiny and its aftermath have been the subject of many books and films. As of January 2020, there were 43 permanent inhabitants.



Flag of the Pitcairn Islands



West side of Pitcairn Island and Pitcairn Landing.

The earliest known settlers of the Pitcairn Islands were Polynesians who appear to have lived on Pitcairn and Henderson, and on Mangareva Island 540 kilometres (340 mi) to the northwest, for several centuries from at least the 12th century. They traded goods and formed social ties among the three islands despite the long canoe voyages between them, which helped the small populations on each island survive despite their limited resources. Eventually, important natural resources were exhausted, inter-island trade broke down and a period of civil war began on Mangareva, causing the small human populations on Henderson and Pitcairn to be cut off and eventually to become extinct.

Although archaeologists believe that Polynesians were living on Pitcairn as late as the 15th century, the islands were uninhabited when they were rediscovered by Europeans.

### European discovery

Ducie and Henderson Islands were discovered by Portuguese sailor Pedro Fernandes de Queirós, sailing for the Spanish Crown, who arrived on 26 January 1606. He named them La Encarnación ("The Incarnation") and San Juan Bautista ("Saint John the Baptist"), respectively. However, some sources express doubt about exactly which of the islands were visited and named by Queirós, suggesting that La Encarnación may actually have been Henderson Island, and San Juan Bautista may have been Pitcairn Island.

Pitcairn Island was sighted on 3 July 1767 by the crew of the British sloop HMS Swallow, commanded

by Captain Philip Carteret. The island was named after midshipman Robert Pitcairn, a fifteen-year-old crew member who was the first to sight the island. Robert Pitcairn was a son of British Marine Major John Pitcairn, who later was killed at the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill in the American War of Independence.

Carteret, who sailed without the newly-invented marine chronometer, charted the island at  $25^{\circ}02'S$   $133^{\circ}21'W$  /  $25.033^{\circ}S$   $133.350^{\circ}W$ , and although the latitude was reasonably accurate, his recorded longitude was incorrect by about  $3^{\circ}$ , putting his coordinates 330 km (210 mi) to the west of the actual island. This made Pitcairn difficult to find, as highlighted by the failure of captain James Cook to locate the island in July 1773.

### European settlement



The mutineers turning Bligh and part of the officers and crew adrift from HMS Bounty on 29 April 1789

In 1790, nine of the mutineers from the Bounty, along with the native Tahitian men and women who were with them (six men, eleven women, and a baby girl), settled on Pitcairn Island and set fire to the Bounty. The inhabitants of the island were well aware of the Bounty's location, which is still visible underwater in Bounty Bay, but the wreckage gained significant attention in 1957 when documented by National Geographic explorer Luis Marden. Although the settlers survived by farming and fishing, the initial period of settlement was marked by serious tensions among them. Alcoholism, murder, disease and other ills took the lives of most mutineers and Tahitian men. John Adams and Ned Young turned to the scriptures, using the ship's Bible as their guide for a new and peaceful society. Young eventually died of an asthmatic infection.

Ducie Island was rediscovered in 1791 by Royal Navy captain Edwards aboard HMS Pandora, while searching for the Bounty mutineers. He named it after Francis Reynolds-Moreton, 3rd Baron Ducie, also a captain in the Royal Navy.

The Pitcairn islanders reported it was not until 27 December 1795 that the first ship since the Bounty was seen from the island, but it did not approach the land and they could not make out the nationality. A second ship appeared in 1801, but made no attempt to communicate with them. A third came sufficiently near to see their house, but did not try to send a boat on shore. Finally, the American sealing ship Topaz, under Mayhew Folger, became the first to visit the island, when the crew spent 10 hours on Pitcairn in February 1808. Whalers subsequently became regular visitors to the island. The last recorded whaler to visit was the James Arnold in 1888.

A report of Folger's discovery was forwarded to the Admiralty, mentioning the mutineers and giving a more precise location of the island: 25° 02' S 130° 00' W / 25.033° S 130.000° W. However, this was not known to Sir Thomas Staines, who commanded a Royal Navy flotilla of two ships, HMS Briton and HMS Tagus, which found the island at 25° 04' S 130° 25' W / 25.067° S 130.417° W (by meridian observation) on 17 September 1814. Staines sent a party ashore and wrote a detailed report for the Admiralty. By that time, only one mutineer, John Adams, remained alive. He was granted amnesty for his part in the mutiny.

Henderson Island was rediscovered on 17 January 1819 by British Captain James Henderson of the British East India Company ship Hercules. Captain Henry King, sailing on Elizabeth, landed on 2 March to find the king's colours already flying. His crew scratched the name of their ship into a tree. Oeno Island was discovered on 26 January 1824 by American captain George Worth aboard the whaler Oeno.

In 1832 having tried and failed to petition the British government and the London Missionary Society; Joshua Hill, an American adventurer arrived. He reported that by March 1833, he had founded a Temperance Society to combat drunkenness, a "Maundy Thursday Society", a monthly prayer meeting, a juvenile society, a Peace Society and a school.

Traditionally, Pitcairn Islanders consider that their islands "officially" became a British colony on 30 November 1838, at the same time becoming one of the first territories to extend voting rights to women. By the mid-1850s, the Pitcairn community was outgrowing the island; its leaders appealed to the British government for assistance, and were offered Norfolk Island. On 3 May 1856, the entire population of 193 people set sail for Norfolk on board the Morayshire, arriving on 8 June after a difficult five-week trip. However, just eighteen months later, seventeen of the Pitcairn Islanders returned to their home island, and another 27 followed five years later.

HMS Thetis visited Pitcairn Island on 18 April 1881 and "found the people very happy and contented, and in perfect health". At that time the population was 96, an increase of six since the visit of Admiral de Horsey in September 1878. Stores had recently been delivered from friends in England, including two whale-boats and Portland cement, which was used to make the reservoir watertight. HMS Thetis gave the islanders 200 lb (91 kg) of biscuits, 100 lb (45 kg) of candles, and 100 lb of soap and clothing to the value of £31, donated by the ship's company. An American trading ship called Venus had recently bestowed a supply of cotton seed, to provide the islanders with a crop for future trade.

In 1886, the Seventh-day Adventist layman John Tay visited Pitcairn and persuaded most of the islanders to accept his faith. He returned in 1890 on the missionary schooner Pitcairn with an ordained minister to perform baptisms. Since then, the majority of Pitcairn Islanders have been Adventists.

The islands of Henderson, Oeno and Ducie were annexed by Britain in 1902: Henderson on 1 July, Oeno on 10 July, and Ducie on 19 December. In 1938, the three islands, along with Pitcairn, were incorporated into a single administrative unit called the "Pitcairn Group of Islands". The population peaked at 233 in 1937. It has since decreased owing to emigration, primarily to Australia and New Zealand.

Source: Pitcairn Islands - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

## Pitcairn Island Postal Service

The postal history of the Pitcairn Islands can be traced to second half of the 19th century, when outgoing mail was hand stamped as "Posted on Pitcairn Island: no stamps available." Until 1926, letters from Pitcairn were delivered free of charge in New Zealand and elsewhere. Stamps were carried by passing ships and received postal stamps and cancellation at various ports of calls. However, this practice was discontinued in 1926 following reports of ship passengers mixing their own mail into the "no stamp" system set aside for the Pitcairn residents.

For the next 14 years New Zealand stamps and rates were used, and on October 15, 1940, the first Pitcairn Island postage stamps, consisting of eight denominations, were issued. In 1941 a small post office was built in the Square of Adamstown and the amount of mail increased significantly. In 1957 the island's first postmaster, Mr. Roy Clark, discussed the need for a larger post office, and in the early 1960s a new post office was built.

Mail to and from the island is sent via New Zealand and can take several months before it is delivered. The supply ships, which depart from New Zealand, deliver mail to the island at least three times a year and ships passing Pitcairn enroute to New Zealand are sometimes willing to collect mail and carry it to Auckland.



Photo by Herbert Ford, PISC  
Pitcairn's post office and general store, September 2007

The Pitcairn Island post office is opened for a period of time on Sundays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and before the arrival of ships enroute to New Zealand and after the departure of ships that deliver mail to the island.

Until 2020 the New Zealand-based Pitcairn Islands Philatelic Bureau coordinated the territory's stamp program. The program issues up to six commemorative stamps per year, and new definitive stamps are issued on an average cycle of five years. The sale of philatelic issues has been a source of revenue for the territory.

Source: *Postage stamps and postal history of the Pitcairn Islands* - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Communication marking the closure of the Pitcairn Island Philatelic Bureau.



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4 September 2020

Dear Customer,

It is with sadness that Louise and I have decided to retire after 16 years running the Philatelic Bureau. We have enjoyed producing and sending you the beautiful stamps of Pitcairn and dealing with your many orders and letters.

The Philatelic Bureau will be run from September 20th 2020 by Tower Mint in the United Kingdom. They will not only manage the stamps of Pitcairn but bring a coins programme into the mix.

Regarding the database handover we will ensure that only your name and contact address/email and purchase history and account balance will be handed to Tower for them to make contact regarding meeting your ongoing needs. We will destroy all credit card information held on file.

2020 has been a very unusual year with the pandemic completely disrupting the philatelic programme. The first issue, The Sinking of the Essex, will be incorporated in the 2021 Collections. For information on reaching the Bureau after September 20th, please refer to the contact details that will accompany correspondence you will receive from Tower Mint.

We trust you have enjoyed our working relationship and thank you for your support. We will miss the day-to-day contact but we are confident you will be in good hands.

Kind regards,



Louise and Russell Watson  
Pitcairn Islands Philatelic Bureau