

**DE LA RUE PLATE NUMBERS AND CURRENT NUMBERS****Peter A.S. Smith (ESC 74)**

In my discussion of the Fourth Issue published last year in the London Philatelist, the curious fact was mentioned, without explanation, that the sheets of the earlier stamps usually had two types of "control" numbers in the side margins.<sup>1</sup> One type consists of a colourless numeral on a solid, circular ground, and the other type consists of a coloured numeral inside a rectangular frame having recurved corners (Fig. 1). The two types of numbers occur on the same sheets, but on different panes, and the numbers generally do not agree. The circular type appears at the top of the left sheet margin and at the bottom of the right one; the rectangular type occurs at the bottom of the left margin and at the top of the right.

After the appearance of that article, Mr. Hugh Osborne of Newcastle kindly wrote to me on the subject. He collects Ceylon, and has a special interest in the De La Rue issues. According to his information, the two types of "control" numbers are actually 1) the plate number (circular), and 2) the current number (rectangular). The plate numbers start with 1 for the first plate prepared for each denomination, whereas the current numbers start with the first plate prepared for each country. This system is established for Ceylon and many other countries for which De La Rue printed stamps. If it was applied to Egypt, it might be possible to make sense of the enigmatic situation with the Fourth Issue.

The Zeheri catalogue lists various "control" numbers for the 1879 issue, and purports to distinguish between the two types. However, when attempts to apply the foregoing system to the Zeheri listing are made there is no agreement, only pervading inconsistency. I have been able to confirm some, but not all, of the numbers listed. Mr. Osborne suggested that there might be errors in the Zeheri list, perhaps involving confusion between the two types. He pointed out that the plate number of each denomination should be 1, with additional numbers 2, 3, etc., for those values requiring several plates. The current numbers, however, would logically begin with 1 for the 5 paras, and proceed with 2 for the 10 paras, 3 for the 20 paras, 4 for the 1pt., 5 for the 2pt., and 6 for the 5pt.

There was nothing inconsistent with this view in my collection, and it had the virtue of explaining the part-sheet shown in Fig. 1, with plate number 1 and current number 2. However, the lack of a wide selection of panes and full sheets prevented further progress. The breakthrough came from Trenton Ruebush, who informed me that he has sufficient panes and sheets to confirm nearly all of the current and plate numbers proposed by Hugh Osborne. There now can be no doubt that they are correct, and that the Zeheri listing is, indeed, mixed up.

The 1pt. rose, the most heavily used value, required two or more plates, as shown by the confirmed plate numbers. The current number for plate 1 is 4, and for plate 2, it is because it was evidently prepared later, after the plate for the 5pt). On the other hand, the lesser used 10-para denomination required but one plate, which was used for all four of the colours in which it was eventually printed.

By the late 1880s, De La Rue abandoned current numbers, and subsequent plates bore only the plate number, one in each corner of the sheet of 240. The 1888 stamps in 1 millieme currency thus mark the end of current numbers. I have seen the 2 mills with the number 1 in each corner of the sheet, in the rectangular frame of the current numbers. This must be considered an error, for a current number 1 would make no sense, whereas the plate number would necessarily be 1. The Zeheri listing implies that plate 1 of the 1 mill was similarly treated.

The 1, 2, and 5pt. denominations continued in use for a long time, and eventually even the 2 and 5pt. required new plates. These were prepared after the abandonment of current numbers, and only the new plate number, 2, appears once on the outside margin of each pane. Thus it is that the 5pt. grey was printed from plates having plate number 1 and current number 6, and later from plate 2 without current number. Similarly, the 2pt. orange-brown was printed from plate 1, current number 5, and from plate 2 without current number. The situation with the 1pt. blue is not completely clear, but it appears that this value was printed from plate 2, current number 7, and from plates 3 and 4 without current numbers. The uncertainty is that the Zeheri listing

\*8 DEC 81



Fig. 1. 10 para (SG.51 Ze26). Right hand margin of sheet with date of printing (8 DEC 81) in top right corner, circular control number 1 in bottom right margin and rectangular current number 2 top right.

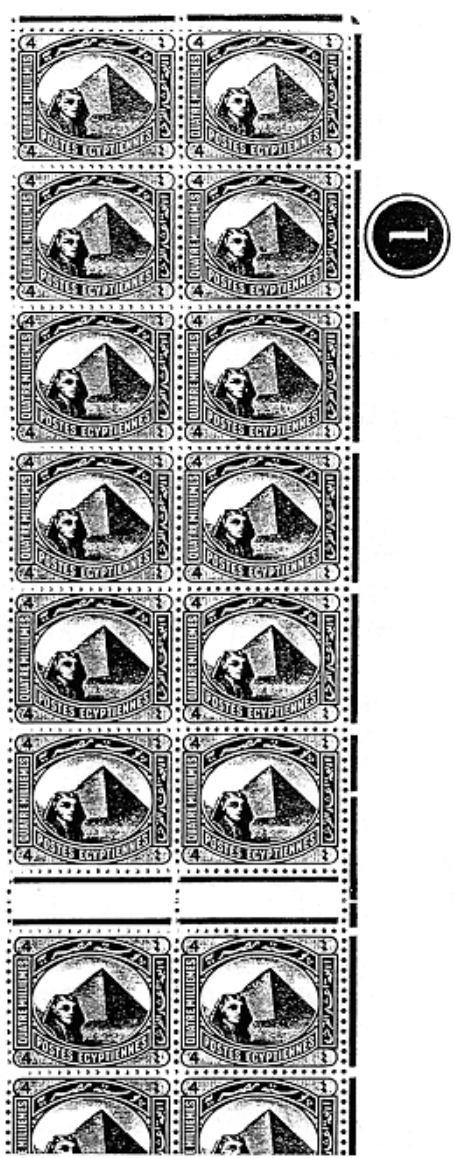


Fig. 2. 4 mill (SG.62 Ze40) of 1888. Right hand margin of sheet shows only circular control number 1 beside each pane.



implies that plate number 3 was printed in the rectangular frame of the previous current numbers. Perhaps members of the Circle may have an example showing plate number 3, and can confirm this. The 3, 4 and 5mills and the 10pt. denominations are not known with current numbers, and all plates had only circular plate numbers (Fig.2) insofar as I am aware.

It is clear that the entire listing of "control" numbers in Zeheri for the period 1879-1906 is rife with errors and is unreliable. Further insight into De La Rue's practices with plate and current numbers can be gained from two recent publications.<sup>2,3</sup>

#### References.

1. Smith, P.A.S. Egypt: the Fourth Issue. *London Philatelist* 102, 1993, p.117.
2. Ince, J., Sacher, J. *The Postal Services of the British Nigeria Region*. The Royal Philatelic Society, London, 1992.
3. Fricks, E.E. *Collectors Club Philatelist*, in press.