

# KUT BLITZ AIR-RAID DAMAGE

Philatelic Short Story

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*Christie's Philatelic Auction Catalogue Image.  
1940. Pair £1 'burnt sienna' KUT. Sold by Christie's for £2.6m before costs.  
This article suggests that these rare stamps resulted from wartime bombing.*

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## K.U.T. KING GEORGE VI £1 MAJOR ERROR OF COLOUR.

I couldn't believe it when I saw the picture of the stamps in the newspaper. They were described as not only being a major error of colour but as being 'imperf' and being gummed on the wrong side. The stamps were being exhibited at 'Stampex 2010' the premier world exhibition for the philatelic fraternity. It had been seventy years since I had seen the stamps and had immediately decided to visit the exhibition to see them.



Copy of stamps from 2010 catalogue.

Apparently the stamps had come to the philatelic world's attention when they were discovered in a schoolboy collection that had been offered on ebay for a few pounds. Once purchased the stamps described as a '1940 imperforate pair of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika £1 stamps in burnt sienna (should be black and crimson) with gum on the face side', had changed hands several times. Each time gaining in price until they had eventually appeared on Christie's Philatelic Auction where the audience had gasped as first the bidding broke the one million, then the second, going on to make a knock down price of 2.6 million. That before all the extra costs had been added on, the total account coming to just over three million pounds, as far as I am aware an all time record for a pair of stamps.

Now they were encased behind bullet proof glass with a red rope across a

red carpet to stop visitors getting too close. I leaned over to get a better view and immediately felt a heavy hand on each shoulder as two security officers warned me not to get too close. That was a laugh I was being warned not to go too close to my own stamps, I say my stamps, thinking about it perhaps technically they still belonged to De La Rue, the firm that printed them.

My mind drifted back to that awful night in September 1940 when I was a fifteen year old boy scout messenger for the London Fire department. It was the time of the London Blitz, German aircraft overhead, buildings all around were burning fiercely, fires, screaming out of broken windows, fire tenders on every corner, water hoses stretched out in every direction and huge streams of water being directed onto and into towering infernos. Myself cycling from one fire officer to another with hastily scribbled messages tucked into my shoulder bag.

I had just turned into Bunhill Row alongside the De La Rue printing works when I heard a big one coming down. I stood up on the peddles to try and get extra speed to get out of the way but the next thing I knew I was being swept across the road over the water hoses to end up in the gutter on the other side of the road. I never did hear the bomb explode, just saw the flash and felt the hot blast fly over me. I lay there for a few seconds making sure that I hadn't been injured and then as I started to lift myself up it started to rain, to rain paper, they must have hit the printing works.

The paper that rained down was sheets upon sheets of stamps, I knew they were stamps because the regular patterns on the paper reflected light from the fires back from the images. Almost by instinct I grabbed a handful of the sodden sheets and stuffed them into my shoulder bag, stood up and with my front wheel between my knees straightened the handlebars on my bicycle before racing off to deliver the message that I had been given to deliver to one of the fire officers.

It was only the next day when I arrived home that I remembered the stamps. I took them out, now stuck together after a night in my damp shoulder bag. I placed the whole crumpled mess into a bowl of water as I did with the stamps that I tore from envelopes as soon as they arrived through the letter box. After about fifteen minutes I was able to start laying sheets and part sheets out to dry. Some were burnt by the blast,

others were stained by the water, all had lost their gum. The majority were past redemption but I was able to salvage quite a few for swapping at school. We had had a stamp collecting craze sweep through the school that year and the headmaster had sworn that was why we had had such good results in the exams at the end of that year.

Most of those stamps I exchanged for other stamps, even managed to get a camel postman from the Sudan. There were that many to swap I managed to increase my marble collection and even acquired a 'ninety niner' conker. In the end I was left with a part sheet of one pound stamps with no perforations, It had been badly burnt, so much so that lots of the stamps were no longer red and black but a dull shade of brown and even though I had soaked them there was still a thin layer of gum left on the face side presumably from the back of another sheet it had lain against in the water. Of course nobody wanted these so I was stuck with the few pairs that I managed to salvage. It was a pair of these stamps that had turned up on Christie's Auction. Where they had been for the last seventy years I have no idea, our house was bombed within a year of the De La Rue bombing and I thought everything had literally gone up in smoke.

As thoughts of that night raced through my mind, I heard two old men behind me discussing the stamps, admiring their beauty and the fact that "The burnt sienna colour had to be a war time provisional printing due to the lack of the correct coloured inks that were normally imported from Germany". "And of course it was easy during the war time with the lack of energy and poor lighting for a sheet of stamps to be gummed on the wrong side". And again, "Of course there were other examples of stamps not being perforated". "But, what a beautiful pair of stamps, Unique, you know. Could have come from a trial printing! That would explain the rarity"

I listened for a while as the two blabbered on content in their own philatelic knowledge and self importance. I looked again at the stamps, they had obviously been cleaned up and when I had them there was definitely not that much gum on them. I wondered should I tell them the truth, then thought "What the hell. Who's going to listen to an old hobo?"



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**A grateful South African Philately Club thanks**

**Jamie Smith**

**for sharing this article with us.**

**01/09/2020**

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