



DeLaRue

De La Rue Living Timeline

5. The First Banknote: A golden era (1859-1898)

In 1860, De La Rue produced its first banknote! It was the beginning of our most successful and best-known product, something for which we are still renowned today.

Crown Agents and Banknotes

As mentioned in the previous post, De La Rue had drawn the attention of the Crown Agents regarding stamps. The Crown Agents themselves were the commercial and financial agents of the colonies, in charge of procuring that which colonial administrators either could not, or were discouraged from, producing locally. Colonial agents had arisen almost organically, but in 1833 they were officially appointed by the British government as one of the many bodies involved in the administration of the complex British Empire.

De La Rue was particularly involved with the stamp department for the Agents, which also produced postal orders, headed writing paper, stock certificates, stamped envelopes, and, if asked, paper currency. In 1859, the administration in Mauritius approached with a request for banknotes, and the Crown Agents looked for a supplier. While Perkins Bacon were the traditional producer of paper money (as well as the stamps), the Agent-General Penrose Julyan was still annoyed at them over a previous error. He liked working with De La Rue, so awarded them the contract.

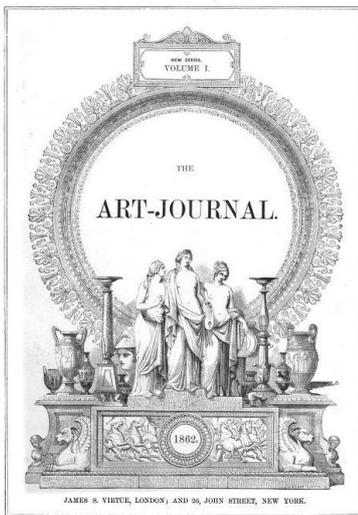


De La Rue took the order with gravity. Rather than follow in Perkins Bacon's established methods, they produced a note which has been called 'a milestone in banknote design'. They were printed in copperplate, the size of cheques, and bound in books of 500. Each note was on watermarked paper, with green or blue colouring, and made more secure with micro-lettering and floral ornamentation. They were then hand-signed by the treasurer. And as far as we know, these notes were never forged! For our first venture into paper currency, it was a great success.

The relationship with the Crown Agents grew from there. De La Rue received long term printing contracts, such as with India for 71 years, or Ceylon for 73. Requests for stamps and stamped paper went to De La Rue, as well as for paper currency and other printing endeavours. It was a fruitful relationship: the Crown Agents employed a Chief Inspector of Stamps to live and work with De La Rue, with 19 other inspectors beneath him. They worked together well into the twentieth century.



The Tea Society



With new exciting opportunities, life at De La Rue was going well. Warren and Colonel Billy (Thomas's sons) were at the helm of the company, and the latter in particular had conducted an overhaul of the factories - not only in terms of technology, but also of employee welfare. A lengthy article about De La Rue in *The Art Journal* (the most important Victorian journal about art) praised the reforms. In particular, they applauded what was known in-house as the 'Tea Society'. At this time, most factory-workers tended to drink a pint of beer on their breaks - quite dangerous in a factory setting. Warren and Billy encouraged their employees to take tea instead, and had invented a boiler 'sufficiently capacious to make tea for so large a body, and so constructed that the fine aroma of the tea is not lost.' A pint of tea with milk and sugar could thereafter be purchased by all employees for a penny. At the same time a library for all was thriving, and a sickness fund – all good encouragement to produce the quality goods that De La Rue was known for!

Altogether, the *Art Journal* article had nothing but praise for De La Rue, concluding

'The perfection of every section of the manufactures for which the firm has a world-wide reputation, the excellence of all the arrangements for the comfort and well-being of those employed, and the regularity with which an enormous amount of material is prepared for the home, foreign, and colonial markets, distinguishingly mark the manufactory of Thomas De la Rue & Co., as a fine example of one of our native industries.'

However, sadly for all the employees and people who had benefitted from Colonel Billy's warmth and drive, he died at only age 46, in 1870. In the wake of this tragedy, Warren, already semi-retired, did as his father had done before him: he called his sons into action. The eldest, Warren William, although rather different in character, was able to take over Billy's work and ensure that the company continued to produce goods high in quality and security. He was, in one commentator's words, 'a slogger'. He showed extreme attention to detail, and while his later life was dogged by eccentricity, in his early years he proved an extremely able partner.

The new security business customers, who were naturally concerned with the safety and security of their products, were well looked after by Warren William. The business grew, expanding well beyond the crown agents remit. The work on stamps in Italy led to an order for 5 lire notes. Secure products for Portugal, Ecuador, and Uruguay added to De La Rue's global outlook.



Christmas Cards!

This new material was supported by the older stationery business. De La Rue continued to develop playing cards, adding a 'pneumatic finish' - which are the little grooves we still see in cards that mean that they don't stick together. Railway tickets boomed as the train lines did. The indelible diary and similar products proved particularly popular with the well-to-do. Fancy stationery for weddings, funerals, and everything in between remained a mainstay of the factories.



In 1872, De La Rue began producing Christmas cards. Real artists, such as William and Rebecca Coleman, were hired to do the design-work, ensuring that the art was of a genuine high quality. Beautiful art was matched by efficient and modern manufacturing, ensuring that it could be produced cheaply. A good example of this was our replica of the first ever Christmas card. The first one had been printed in 1843, with only 1,000 produced and available for a shilling. Our reproduction in 1881 was printed with chromolithography and cost only 2 pence! Art critic Gleeson White wrote that of De La Rue that

"Their work throughout is distinguished by a high degree of mechanical excellence and by a great fertility of idea."

De La Rue's security and stationery business continued to flourish. However the careful drive of Warren William was lost in 1896, when he fell off his horse which affected his mental health. His younger brother, Thomas Andros, persuaded him to step down, and in 1898, changed the company from a partnership to a private company. While at the time he held the majority of the shares, it was an important change for the company. It wasn't the only change either, next time we will explore a key non-print product - the pen!