

An Introduction to Australia's Beer Duty Stamps

by Martin Walker

During Australia's colonial days one of the major sources of revenue for the individual state governments was customs duty on imported goods. As home made products began to grab the local market the need for imports was lessened and consequently the government income was reduced. To replace the income lost in this way the various colonial governments began to tax local products as well as the imported. One of earliest products to suffer such treatment was beer. The idea was not new. Duty, tax or excise on beer, or the ingredients of beer, had been levied in Britain since the seventeenth century. Even they had pinched the idea from the Dutch who had been charging excise since the middle of the fourteenth century. I have been unable to determine the earliest use of special stamps to indicate the payment of beer duty but the Americans were using them as early as 1866.

In Australasia, New Zealand began to charge beer duty in 1878 and here in Australia the Tasmanian Government began charging duty early in 1880. To indicate payment of the duty the New Zealander's introduced special stamps to be affixed to the containers of beer. Like all good ideas, the principle of beer duty and its payment in stamps was replicated in Victoria in late 1880, Queensland in 1885; New South Wales in 1887, South Australia in 1894, and Western Australia in 1898.



Figs 1-2. Tasmanian and Victorian stamps used in 1880 – the first year duty was imposed on domestic beer.

The first Victorian stamps were also overprinted "DRAWBACK". These are very rare and are thought to have been used on beer manufactured in Victoria and then exported. The Victorians ceased the use of stamps to indicate the payment of beer duty in 1882 but re-introduced them in 1890.

When duty was introduced to each state the rate was two pence per gallon, excepting Tasmania, Queensland and New South Wales where three pence per gallon was charged. The raising of revenue in this manner proved quite lucrative to some colonial governments and the Tasmanians increased their rate to 4d per gallon in 1892. Also in 1892 the Victorian Government introduced a rate of 3d per gallon for beers produced from ingredients other than barley, malt and hops but retained the 2d rate for beer made exclusively from those ingredients.



Fig 3. Tasmanian stamp revalued from 1/3d to 1/8d after the duty was increased to 4d per gallon in 1892

In each state, different stamps were produced to match the various sizes of container be they bottles or casks. Some wonderfully named containers for bulk beer existed. Apart from the familiar casks and kegs, which could range in size from 2 to 15 gallons, we also have pins (4-4½ galls), firkins (8½-9 galls), kilderkins (16½-18 galls), half hogsheads (25-27 gallons), barrels (33-36 galls) and hogsheads (50-54 galls).

Where the containers could involve a variance in capacity some states charged duty on the minimum possible amount, some charged on the average and some at the maximum. For example, a kilderkin was charged as 16½ gallons in South Australia, 17 gallons in Victoria and 18 gallons in Tasmania. To complicate things even further, the coopers in S.A. would often make or repair containers by re-using the wood from worn or damaged barrels. The resultant containers could be slightly larger and were known as "bastard" versions of the original.



Fig 4. South Australia issued stamps for Bastard Pins and Bastard Firkins in 1894.

The problem of varying sizes was solved when the Commonwealth Beer Excise Act of 1901 set standard gallon capacities for bulk containers. For example, a kilderkin became 17 gallons, a half hogshead 25 gallons, a barrel 33 gallons, and a hogshead became a 50 gallon container across all of Australia. Therefore the states that previously rated their containers with capacities different to the new Act had to alter their stamps. The majority of states overcame this problem by overprinting their stamps with new rates and/or capacities. The capacities for half hogsheads, barrels and

hogsheads were changed again in 1912 to 26, 35 and 52 gallons respectively.



Fig. 5. Rare Queensland stamp showing the revaluation caused by the changed size of a hogshead in 1901.

The stamps for bulk beer were intended to be stuck, sometimes nailed, to the container and destroyed when the container was opened. To ensure the stamp was damaged some states required the stamp to be stuck over the spigot, or tap holes of the containers. This explains why used stamps are so difficult to obtain and often in poor condition when they do survive.

The duty on bottled beer was also charged by the gallon. Although a gallon is made up of four quarts, various acts of parliament across the country decreed that, for the purposes of charging duty, one gallon of beer was made up of six quart or twelve pint bottles.

The method of using stamps for bottled beer varied across Australia. They were either stuck as whole stamps to the delivery crates or cut into halves with one half stuck to the delivery cart-note and the other half retained in the brewery's delivery book. Many of the surviving stamps are only known as half-stamps and come from small batches of cart-notes found in old hotels.

A local example is shown on a Cannon Brewery cart-note illustrated at page 111 of Hallett Shueard and David Tuckwell's "Brewers and Aerated Water Manufacturers in South Australia 1836-1936: The Bottle Collector's Guide.

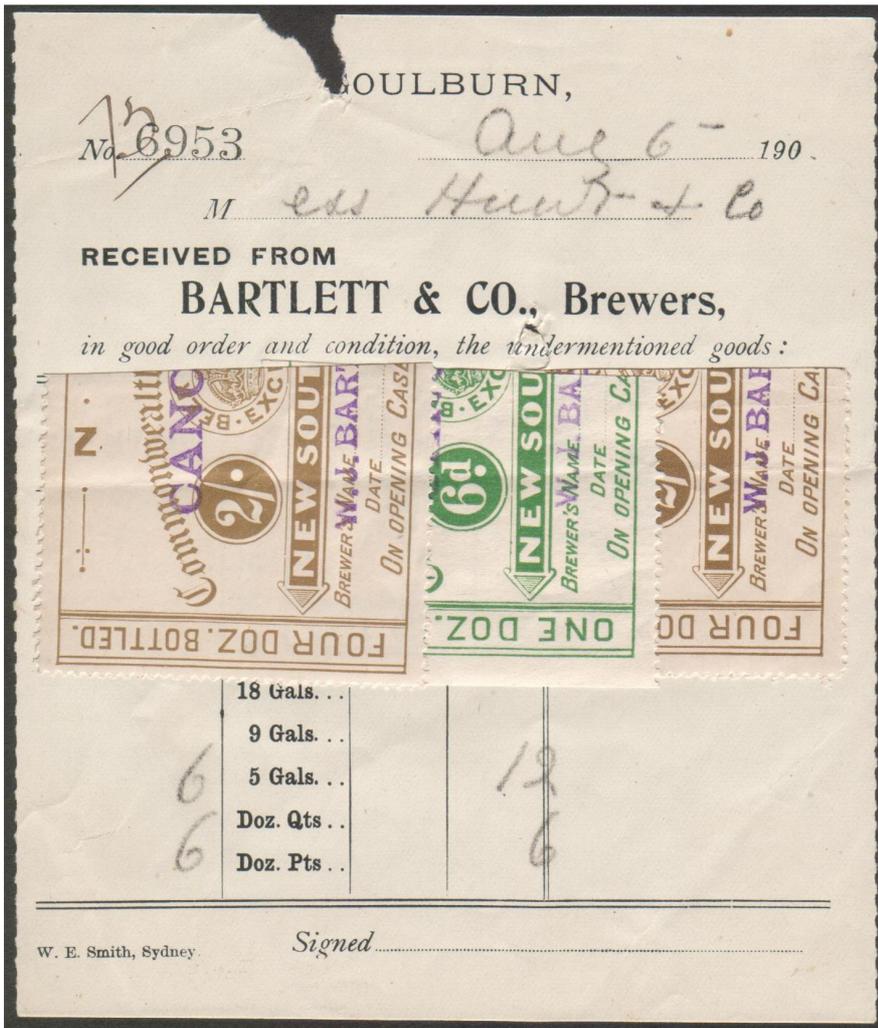


Fig. 6. Brewer's cart-note showing half-stamps for the duty on 9 dozen bottles rated as 18 gallons of beer. The other halves of the stamps were retained in the brewer's delivery book.

When the colonies became a federation in 1901 the responsibility of raising excise duty on beer fell to the Commonwealth Department of Trade and Customs. After analysing all the acts relating to beer duty across the states a single “Beer Excise Act” was drafted and then debated in parliament in mid 1901. The Act was eventually passed and became effective across the whole of Australia on 7 October 1901. The following day, the Commonwealth Budget introduced a range of customs and excise tariffs. These included a uniform rate of 3d per gallon on beer produced domestically and containing not less than 2% of proof spirit. From this date the rate of beer duty was contained in the schedule of excise tariffs.

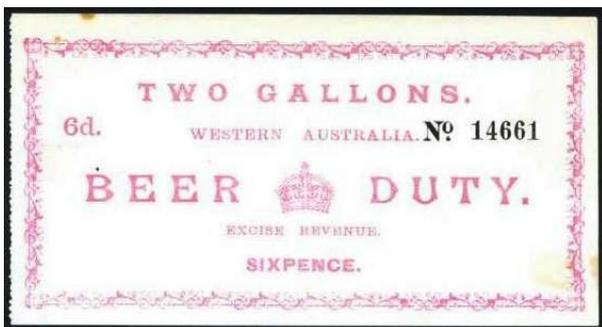


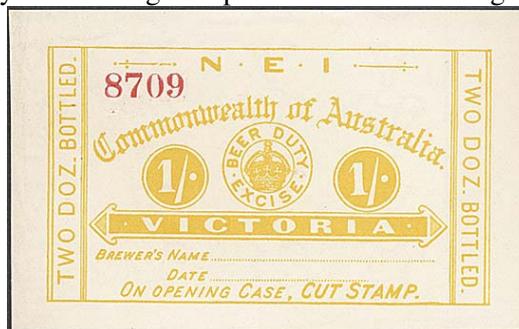
Fig. 7. Rare Western Australian stamp issued for the new commonwealth rate in 1901.

By early 1902 the revenue being raised by the beer excise far exceeded expectations and the government introduced the two-tiered rate of duty used by Victoria from 1892. The two-tiered structure existed until 1918 when a single rate was introduced to simplify the bookkeeping. Subsequent rate changes are shown in the table at the end of this article.

Coming back to the stamps, the unification from six sets of colonial stamps to a single set of Australian Commonwealth stamps was not an easy process and was even worse than similar problems experienced with Australia’s postage stamps. When the uniform rate of 3d per gallon was introduced in 1901 this meant that all the stamps issued by South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia became useless along with the Victorian stamps for duty on beer made exclusively from barley, malt and hops.

Stamps from this period are very rare as they were only used for a few months. The Commonwealth government was to have issued a uniform set of stamps across Australia on 1 January 1902. Thankfully they did not as the new two-tiered rates of February 1902 doubled the complications caused by six states trying to use up old stocks of stamps and produce new ones as required.

A uniform design was eventually introduced in 1903 but the name of the issuing state was still inscribed upon the stamps. This was to facilitate the requirements of the constitution that enacted that for the first five years of the Commonwealth the surplus revenue raised was to be returned to the states raising that revenue. In 1908 this requirement changed to allow the surplus to be returned to each state in proportion to the population of each state. Finally at the end of 1910 all of the surplus revenue was retained by the Commonwealth but a truly uniform Australian design was still more than ten years away. Until then, the six states issued stamps of similar design but produced by different printers on different papers in different colours with different perforations! They even came up with different ways of creating stamps when the rates changed.



Figs. 8-10. The uniform designs of 1903. Note how the top stamp does not have a space for the serial number, the middle stamp has one space and the bottom stamp has two spaces. The last variation allowed the stamps to be cut in halves without losing the serial number.

In 1922 uniform series of stamps for bulk and bottled beer were produced in Melbourne by the Note and Stamp Printing Branch of the Reserve Bank of Australia.

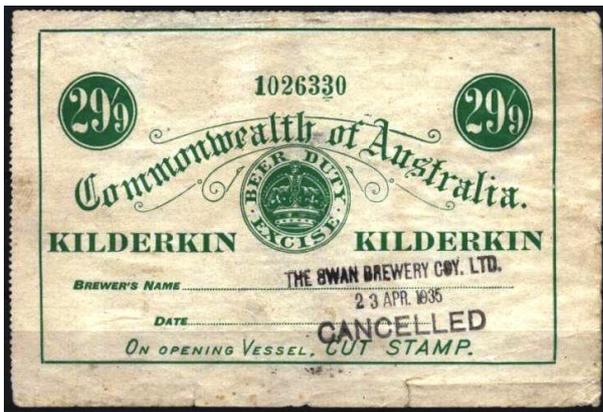


Fig. 11. A stamp for the duty paid on a kilderkin of 17 gallons at 1/9d per gallon.

After replacing a series of up to nine stamps for bulk beer and eighteen stamps for bottled beer every time the rate changed someone suggested that stamps be simply expressed in terms of a quantity of beer. This series was issued in 1947 and remained until the use of stamps was abolished from 1 August 1958. The remaining stamps were destroyed but to satisfy the demands of stamp collectors, the Customs and Excise Department kept a small supply. A set of 26 stamps that once represented the payment of £698/16/2 of duty was then available for the price of a stamped envelope.

After decades in the doldrums, the collecting of revenue stamps, including beer duty stamps, is presently undergoing a renaissance.



Fig. 12. Stamps for 3 gallons of beer must have been little used as remainders had very low serial numbers.

As a consequence, the old catalogues of revenue stamps are now being rewritten. Early indicators suggest there may be well over two thousand different stamps to list! To ensure the accuracy of these catalogues a small band of collectors and researchers are keen to see any and all beer duty stamps. If you have any tucked in your collections of stamps or brewery ephemera please contact the author (PO Box 247, Torrensville Plaza, SA 5031, email martin.walker@drakes.com.au).

Alternatively, please contact Dingle Smith (5 Vest Place, Weetangera, Canberra, 2614, email dsm30722@bigpond.net.au) who I discovered was compiling his own list whilst I was writing this article. Our efforts will be combined for future publication with all contributors acknowledged.

Table of Commonwealth Duty Rates for domestically produced beer (1901-1958).

Date of introduction	Rate per gallon	Notes
1901 (Oct 8)	3d	Uniform rate throughout the Commonwealth
1902 (Feb 7)	2d (BMH) 3d (NEI)	BMH = Beer made exclusively from barley, malt and hops. NEI = Beer "Not Elsewhere Included" in Excise Tariff Schedule.
1914 (Dec 3)	5d (BMH) 6d (NEI)	Increased to fund war effort.
1917 (Aug 3)	6d (BMH) 7d (NEI)	Increased to fund war effort and to replace customs duties lost due to import prohibitions.
1918 (Sep 25)	1/-	Single rate to simplify bookkeeping and further increase for war effort.
1920 (Mar 25)	1/3d	Increased to clear war debts
1920 (Sep 17)	1/9d	Increased to repay war loans becoming due
1929 (Aug 23)	2/-	Increased to replace customs duties lost due to decline in trade caused by the depression.
1929 (Dec 21)	1/10d	Lowered to reduce hardship suffered by consumers affected by the depression.
1930 (Jul 10)	2/-	Increased to ease budget deficits caused by the depression.
1933 (Oct 5)	1/9d	Lowered to stimulate sales at the end of the depression.
1939 (Sep 9)	2/-	Increased to fund war effort.
1940 (Nov 22)	2/9d	Increased to fund war effort and to suppress consumption of "luxuries".
1941 (Oct 30)	3/-	War effort
1942 (Sep 3)	4/7d	War effort
1951 (Sep 27)	7/2d	Inflation driven by wage demands and 40 hour week
1956 (Mar 15)	9/10d	Last rate change before the withdrawal of stamps in 1958.

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