

BNG Paper Thickness

Where is the boundary between the BNG thick and thin papers? The difference can mean thousands of pounds in catalogue price, yet no clear boundary has ever existed. Rosenblum recognised a thick and a thin paper, but stated simply, “The thickness of the paper... varied considerably... all so-called medium paper is now classed as thick” (p.12). Croaker stated,

Variations in the thickness of the papers... have always been and will, I think, always remain, a subject of some uncertainty. I do not believe now that the generally accepted catalogue division into thick paper and thin paper will be altered. None the less, some of the paper used... should really be classified as a medium paper (Lakatoi 1, p.18).

Most of the confusion over BNG paper thickness arises over the boundary between this medium paper, and thick on one side or thin on the other. Yet it is precisely over this boundary that the biggest differences in catalogue price occur. Either the boundary should be made clear, or another or allied method used to determine the scarcity of an issue.

Some people determine paper thickness by how visible the rosettes watermark is: clear rosettes indicating thin paper, unclear indicating thick. This method takes no account of medium papers, and in any case does not work. The rosettes were impressed into the paper, so are closer to one face than the other. The faces were apparently then printed indiscriminately. If the impressed face is gummed, the rosettes are clearer. They remain clear on thin paper, but they can also be clear on thick paper and medium papers.

Others assign thick or thin according to whether the perforations are comb (C) or line (L). I once queried an expert on whether a stamp was thick or thin, and got the written reply, “Of course it’s thick – it is line perf”. A few years ago Gibbons’ Part 1 catalogue fell in with this thinking. It re-arranged the BNG issues and prefixed each value and thickness with a listing distinguishing C or L perfs. For BNG overprint issues this distinction degenerated, SG recognising that some values can be either C or L perf. It is reasonable to distinguish an issue by its perfs but, to put it charitably, perforations are a peculiar and, I argue below, inaccurate way to determine paper thickness.

Over the years I have measured hundreds of BNG stamps with a micrometer screw gauge, which measures in inches. The basic thick and thin papers are easily determined by measuring issues where each is common: for example BNG horizontal watermark for thick paper, and overprinted Small Papua vertical watermark for thin. They group around .0045” and .0035” respectively. Medium papers are more randomly distributed across issues, but there is a group around .004” more common than thicknesses just on either side of .004”.

Some stamps lie between these measurements. Based on factors such as which paper is more common and cancels suggesting a date of issue, I use these ranges:

Thick .0041” to .0046”
Thin .0035” to .0039”
Medium .004”.

It has been objected that gum thickness blurs measurements. As Rosenblum states, there are gum differences but they are slight. What little impact they have on paper thickness is seen by measuring stamps CTO with gum (always avoiding the postmark and preferably using the vignette), then soaking the gum off and re-measuring. In general I have found the difference to be .0001” – in practice not enough to affect assigning a stamp to thick, thin or medium paper.

I hope for comment on these boundaries. In general they work, but they produce some alarming anomalies. I have two expert certificates declaring the same .004” stamp as thick and thin. There is a tendency, including by expert certificates, to drift towards the higher catalogue price. Among several examples that I have there are two stamps measuring .004”, a BNG 2/6 vertical with a certificate as thick, and a 2½d horizontal with a certificate as thin; the latter with more visible rosettes. I have measured stamps certificated and auctioned as thin which measured .0041”. Yet to move the medium / thick boundary above .004” produces as serious and more numerous anomalies.

The biggest difficulty is with the 2½d and its Papua overprints. Ignoring Rosenblum’s claim, almost invariably expert certificates class the medium paper 2½d (.004”) as thin. I have four BNG 2½d, one mint and three used, at .0035”, and one BNG 2½d small o/p at .0028”, used with gum, which looks OK. I argue that only paper measuring .0035” or less should be classed thin, because the 2½d at .004” is reasonably common and I doubt warrants its catalogue value if considered thin, and because if .004” is considered thin, problems are created elsewhere.

I illustrate the last point by selecting examples from the 2/6 that I have measured. If .004” is considered thin, the following BNG would be all defined as ‘thin’:

- Horizontal .004”, mint and used, both C. This stamp does not exist in SG.
- Vertical .004”, mint, L. This stamp does not exist in SG.

According to Croaker the SG8 (Horizontal Wmk) and SG16 (Vertical Wmk) were both printed on the original thick paper with single line perforations, although printed much later (Lakatoi I, p18,19). This would imply a paper thickness of .0042”. This is also confirmed in the De La Rue consignment note #8 (p.23). Croaker refers to this stamp as ‘thick’ also (p.21). The second and also last printing, referred to on the consignment note #10 from De La Rue as thin paper with comb perforation (Lakatoi I, p.22,23), is arguably on the thinnest paper (.0035”). This was confirmed by Jack Thornhill’s research in 1980.

Large o/p

Horizontal .0039”, mint, L. This stamp does not exist in SG.

Both Rosenblum and Croaker refer to this stamp as ‘thick’(Rosenblum, p.14; Croaker, Lakatoi II & III, p.2)

Small o/p

Horizontal .004”, mint, L. This stamp does not exist in SG.

Horizontal .004”, mint, C. This stamp does not exist in SG.

Both of these stamps are referred to by Rosenblum and Croaker as ‘thick’(Rosenblum, p.16; Croaker, Lakatoi II & III, p.4).

I have also measured a BNG 1/- .004”, mint, C. This stamp does not exist in SG.

“Later printings on thick paper were with watermark vertical, the paper being slightly less thick, not so opaque and with watermark easily seen” (Croaker, Lakatoi I, p19).

Analysis of the consignment invoices of De La Rue

I don’t see how to remove the L or C anomalies, but the thickness anomalies are removed if .004” is considered thick. This would mean sweeping revisions of expert certificates and of 2½d catalogue values. But it might help stop mutton being sold as lamb.

The above measurement categories conform with those Jack Thornhill proposed in *Australian Stamp Monthly*, July 1982, p.150, but Jack differed in arguing that .004” is thin. He thus had two thin papers, one .0035”, the other .004”. He used .004” thin for the ½d and 2½d horizontal and the 1d, 2d, 2½d, and 6d vertical. His reasoning may have been to conform as far as possible with expert certificates, or because he thought “No 2½d [was] printed on .0035” paper” (whereas I have found five which are.) On the other hand Jack measured a great many stamps, and he too isolated three paper categories: thick, medium and thin.

I propose that

1. Paper thickness be measured only by measuring paper thickness, not by perf type or the clarity of the rosette as clearly articulated by Hamilton Croaker.
2. There be three paper categories: thick (.0041-5"), medium (.004") and thin (.0035-9").
3. That if momentum or inertia sticks with two categories, .004" be classed as thick which is consistent with previous research presented by Rosenblum and Croaker.

I illustrate the case for 2. with an example. At a recent auction of specialist Papua I bought a BNG 2½d advertised as SG4ab thin dull blue, mint, which cost A\$853. It measured .0041": med-thick. In addition, neither Rosenblum nor Croaker provide any reference to a thin paper horizontal watermark in dull-blue. They do however, refer to a thick paper of which the only known specimens are overprinted 'Papua' (Croaker, Lakatoi II & III, p.20).

The 2½d dull-blue horizontal watermark only exists in the medium-thick paper measuring around the .004". However, the ultramarine exists in thick (.0042) and medium-thick (.004). There are no references to a 2½d thin paper(.0035) horizontal watermark in either ultramarine or dull-blue. The last shipment of 2½d was consigned as "thin paper, watermark vertical, single line perf." However, according to research conducted by Jack Thornhill and confirmed by others these were infact medium-thick papers (.004). In this instances it may appear an example of tortology, but clear definitions can be more serious.

In another example, the 2/6 was not printed until 1904 three years after the release of the BNG series (½d to 1/-). As a result it was printed on the medium-thick paper (.004) with horizontal watermark and line perf but referred to as 'thick'. A few sheets were printed with the watermark vertical but these are distinguishable by the line perf and medium thick paper; quite distinct from the last 2/6 issue printed on the thinnest of the 'thin' paper (.0035") with vertical watermark and comb perfs.

The difficulty lies in defining the thin paper as (.0035") and not (.004") for the vertical watermark papers other than 2½d and the 2/6. For some issues the difference in value would be slight. To my knowledge all the 2/6 verticals measure .004-41": they would become medium papers, not thick, with no change in value. For other issues the difference would be great, notably for the 2½d, which is truly scarce around .0035" and should probably catalogue higher, reasonably common around .004" and worth less than its catalogue value as thin but more than if simply reclassified thick, and common on most issues around .0045". Introducing a medium category might put an end to a reasonably common stamp being passed off as scarce. Shifting it to thick would too, but make it less valuable than its numbers warrant.

At present there is obviously no survey of the scarcity of medium papers, nor enough work on whether the above category boundaries really do clarify stamp scarcity. With apologies in advance because I can only reply as time permits, I welcome what others might say to test them, and any other comments.