

A TALE OF TWO ISLANDS: A THEMATIC COMPARISON OF TRISTAN DA CUNHA AND ASCENSION (1950–1989)

A collection of stamps released by Tristan da Cunha and Ascension Islands are presented to highlight the thematic differences between the islands. The exhibit focuses on stamps released between 1950 and 1989. Despite both islands being isolated Atlantic islands, this period shows a distinct divergence in their development which is portrayed by the stamps. This study moves beyond traditional country-specific analysis by employing a comparative framework. By utilising the definitive issues of two territories linked by a common British administration, it contrasts their diverging geopolitical trajectories: community-driven isolation (Tristan da Cunha) versus strategic interdependence (Ascension). It demonstrates how stamps can serve as a measurable indicator of the specific role a territory occupies within a global network. The period from 1950 to 1989 shows a distinct divergence in the narratives portrayed by the stamps. Tristan was, initially, overshadowed by the island of St. Helena. This is evidenced by overprinted stamps. However, the 1950s saw Tristan emerge as its own distinct philatelic identity. During the 1960s Tristan made an attempt at decimalisation before the post office was almost lost during a volcanic eruption. Upon the return of the islanders, the post office was re-opened and this was announced by another series of overprinted stamps. Following this period, Tristan's themes focus mainly of self-sufficiency, their heritage, and the harsh realities of life on a remote island. In contrast, Ascension already had a distinct postal identity by the start of the 1950s. Unlike Tristan, the post office on Ascension never faced an existential crisis. Nor did they ever have an indigenous culture as found on Tristan [3]. This, perhaps, explains why the focus of their stamps is more utilitarian. During the 1960s Ascension saw rapid technological progress when NASA and BBC communications infrastructure were erected on the island [5]. This helped to shape the later roles that Ascension were to play in the early space missions. Whereas Tristan's themes embraced their isolation, Ascension strived for interconnectedness with the rest of the world.

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References

- [1] Davidson, B. (1972a): Tristan and S-R: How to get the year right, *The South African Philatelist*, 48(2), 48.
- [2] Davidson, B. (1972b): Tristan reverts to rubber cachets, *The South African Philatelist*, 48(6), 138.
- [3] Lovegrove, R (2012): *Islands Beyond the Horizon: The Life of Twenty of the World's Most Remote Places*, Oxford University Press.
- [4] Tristan da Cunha Government and Association. *Tristan da Cunha Volcanic Interlude 1961–1963*. Available at: <https://www.tristandc.com/history1961-1963.php> (Accessed: 21 April 2026).
- [5] Nesbit, J.S. and Bruce, K. (2024) Ascension, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 78:2, 303-313, DOI: 10.1080/10464883.2024.2381425

Geographical Setting

Tristan da Cunha

Tristan da Cunha is a volcanic island situated in the southern Atlantic Ocean. It forms part of a group of islands: Tristan da Cunha, Inaccessible, Nightingale, and Gough. Of these, only Tristan da Cunha and Gough have a human presence.

Tristan is a remote island situated in the South Atlantic



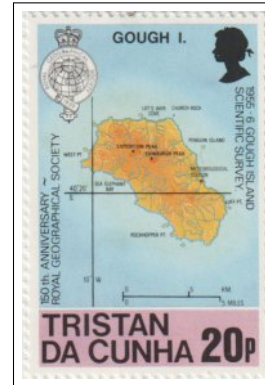
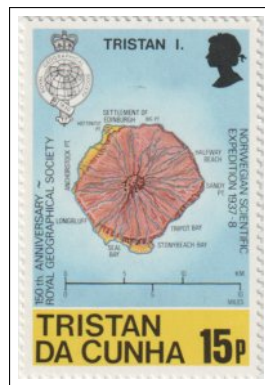
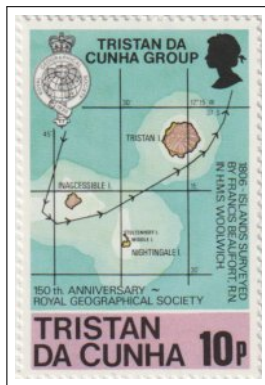
Definitive issue (17 February 1967)

Recess printed by: Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co.Ltd
Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
Perforation: $11 \times 11\frac{1}{2}$

Three islands make up the local Tristan da Cunha Group

A map of Permanently Inhabited Tristan da Cunha

Gough Island is also part of Tristan da Cunha



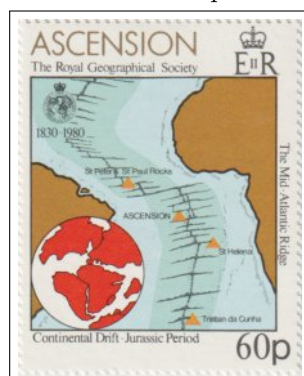
Definitive issue (15 December 1980)

Offset lithography printed by: Rosenbaum Bros.
Perforation: 14

Ascension

In contrast to Tristan da Cunha, Ascension is an isolated volcanic island located relatively close to the equator. Although it does have a human presence, it does not have an indigenous population [3].

The Island of Ascension is close to the equator



Definitive issue (17 November 1980)

Offset lithography printed by: Rosenbaum Bros. Walsall Security Printers Ltd.
Perforation: 14

Ascension is a volcanic Island



Definitive issue (21 May 1981)

Offset lithography printed by:
Perforation: 14.5

Quiet Outposts (1950s)

Tristan da Cunha

In 1952, the philately of Tristan da Cunha was overshadowed by St. Helena as can be seen in the overprinted stamps. By 1953, the island began issuing stamps bearing its name in print, starting with a coronation commemorative of Queen Elizabeth II. The first pictorial definitives of 1954 highlight a self-contained society, balancing industry and domestic life with the islands unique wildlife to portray a self-sufficient community deeply connected to its environment. The overall theme for this decade is one of emergence and self-reliance.

A complete set of 1952 St. Helena stamps overprinted "Tristan da Cunha"

The first definitive series from Tristan da Cunha was released on 1 January 1952 and consisted of overprinted St. Helena stamps depicting the St. Helena badge. Philatelically speaking, Tristan is still in St. Helena's shadow during this time.



Base stamp recess printed by Waterlow & Sons Ltd

Watermark: Crown over Script CA Multiple

Perforation: $12\frac{1}{2}$

The first stamp to have the name Tristan da Cunha as part of the design was the coronation commemorative stamp released on 2 June 1953. Tristan is expressing its philatelic independence at this point.



Recess printed by: De La Rue & Co. Ltd.

Watermark: Crown over Script CA Multiple

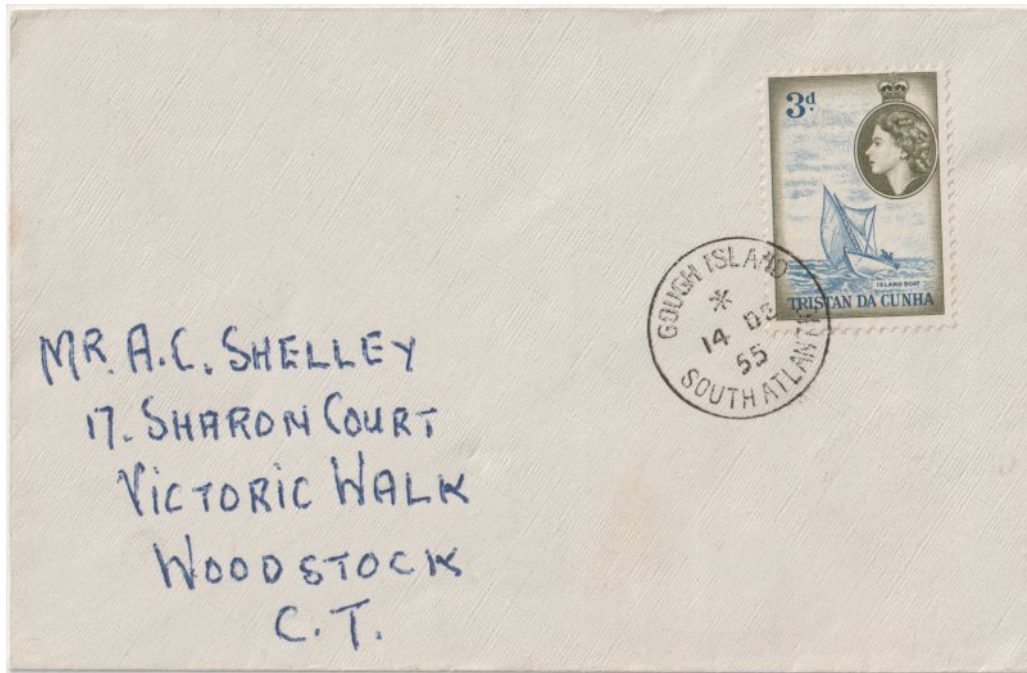
Perforation: $13\frac{1}{2} \times 13$

Complete example of the first pictorial definitive series issued by Tristan da Cunha (released on 2 January 1954). It shows aspects of island life, industry and nature creating an impression of self-sufficiency while surrounded by natural beauty.



Recess printed by: De La Rue & Co. Ltd.
 Watermark: Crown over Script CA
 Perforation: 12½ Multiple

Two Examples of the early use of Tristan da Cunha stamps. The reference to "First Day Cover" on the second example is not in reference to the stamps since these were released in January 1954. Both covers have Tristan stamps and Gough cancellations dated 14 December 1955. This corresponds to the period of the Gough Island Scientific Survey (Nov 1955–May 1956).



Ascension

Ascension established its postal identity earlier, issuing dedicated stamps by 1924. Its 1956 pictorial definitives lack a “community” narrative, likely due to the absence of an indigenous population. Instead, the set emphasises functional infrastructure and natural history, suggesting a harmonious coexistence between the island’s utility and its environment.

A complete set of the Ascension pictorial definitive series released on 19 November 1956.

On 19 November 1956 Ascension released its third pictorial definitive series. It was also the first definitive series of Queen Elizabeth II for Ascension. While focusing on the utilitarian aspects of the island, it also shows the island’s scenic beauty and wildlife.



Recess printed by: Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co. Ltd.
Watermark: Crown over Script CA Multiple
Perforation: 13

Trial and technology (1960s)

Tristan da Cunha

At the start of the decade the post office on Tristan commemorated its marine life as seen by the 1960 definitive series. Another marine life series was released on 15 April 1961. The scientific layout of these suggest a prideful cataloguing of wildlife. The release of the overprinted resettlement issue in 1963 has a theme of resurrection and resilience. Lastly, is a theme of history with the release of the 1965 definitive series commemorating notable naval vessels from the island's history.

Complete booklets from Tristan da Cunha (1960 and 1965)

An example of booklets from Tristan da Cunha. Top booklet was released circa 1960 and bottom circa 1965. Note the increases in rates for postage.

POSTAGE RATES FROM TRISTAN DA CUNHA	
LETTERS AND PACKETS (4 lb. max. wgt.)	
British Commonwealth	3d per oz.
1½d per additional ounce.	
Other Countries	4d per oz.
2½d per additional ounce.	
POSTCARDS	
British Commonwealth	1½d each.
Other Countries	2½d each.
REGISTRATION FEE	
6d extra.	

POSTAGE RATES FROM TRISTAN DA CUNHA	
Letters and packets (4 lbs max. wgt.)	
Surface	
British Commonwealth	4d per oz.
1½d per additional oz.	
Other countries	6d per oz.
4d per additional oz.	
Airmail	
All destinations	1/6d per oz.
Postcards	
Surface	
British Commonwealth	3d each
Other countries	6d each
Airmail	
All destinations	1/- each
Registration fee	1/6d extra

Tristan's first decimal series (South African Rand) released in 1961.

On 15 April 1961 Tristan implemented its first decimalisation based on South African currency. Due to the evacuation of the island (and the subsequent closure of the post office) and South Africa's Apartheid policy, Tristan reverted back to pound sterling when the post office re-opened in 1963 [4].



Recess printed by: Waterlow & Sons Ltd.
 Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
 Perforation: 12½ × 13

A complete set of the famous overprinted St. Helena definitive series released on 12 April 1963 [4] (549 days after evacuation). These are also the first stamps issued after the re-opening of the Tristan post office following its closure in 1961. Seen within the context of history, the overprint connotes a theme of resurrection and resilience.



Photogravure printed by: Harrison & Sons, Ltd.
 Watermark: Crown over Script CA Multiple
 Perforation: $11\frac{1}{2} \times 12$ and $12 \times 11\frac{1}{2}$

Notable vessels from Tristan's history. The Heemstede made the first landing, and the Tristania aided in the evacuation of the island during the eruption. Both the Boissevain and Bornholm brought the islanders back from the UK [4]. Taken together it is a theme of taking pride in their history.



Recess printed by Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co. Ltd.
 Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
 Perforation: $11 \times 11\frac{1}{2}$

Ascension

During this period, Ascension became a major communication hub with the construction of a NASA facility and a BBC relay station [5]. While 1966 and 1967 stamp issues celebrated these technological milestones, Ascension also commemorate their birdlife as seen in the 1960 definitive series. Collectively, these issues illustrate international interdependence and progress occurring harmoniously within the islands natural environment.

The first definitive issue from Ascension released in the 1960s. It was released on 23 May 1963, and focused on the birdlife of the island. This was the first Ascension series dedicated to a single theme.



Photogravure printed by: Harrison & Sons Ltd.
Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
Perforation: $14 \times 14\frac{1}{2}$

An example of the use of the 1963 definitive series. The cover is postmarked Ascension, 31 July 1963 and the destination of the cover is St. Helena



On 7 November 1966, a definitive series was released celebrating the opening of the Apollo Satellite Station. This played an important role in Man's exploration of space. This was the first space-themed series released by Ascension.



Photogravure printed by: Harrison & Sons Ltd.
 Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
 Perforation: 14

These are the stamps of the definitive series released on 1 December 1967, commemorating the opening of the Ascension Island transmission station in 1966. This station made it possible to broadcast the BBC to Africa and South America. This is the first time that the name of a company appears on a stamp from Ascension.



Printed (Photogravure and Hot stamping) by: Harrison & Sons Ltd.
 Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
 Perforation: 14.5

From Hearth to Heavens (1970s)

Tristan da Cunha

The 1970s marked a period of stabilisation for Tristan da Cunha, highlighted by four key stamp series. The 1972 longboat issue honoured maritime traditions, while the 1971 commemorative series recalled the islands role in scientific history. A 1973 series celebrated the tenth anniversary of resettlement, confirming the community’s successful return. Finally, the 1979 childrens drawing series re-framed “home” as a vibrant reality rather than a site of trauma. Together, these issues evoke narratives of cultural memory, stability, and continuity.

Tristan da Cunha “National Savings” stamps(including rubber-stamped variety) released in 1970.

On 15 May 1970 a definitive issue was released an overprinted with “National Savings” to promote savings. It was locally surcharged 2.5p. It is considered amongst the scarcer of Tristan stamps [2].



Recess printed by: Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co. Ltd.
Watermark: St. Edward’s Crown Block CA Multiple
Perforation: 11 × 11½

This definitive issue (released 1 June 1971) to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Shackleton-Rowett expedition was famously released 1 year too soon since the expedition only arrived at Tristan in 1922 [1].



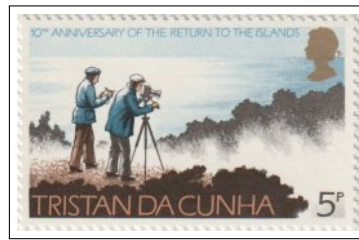
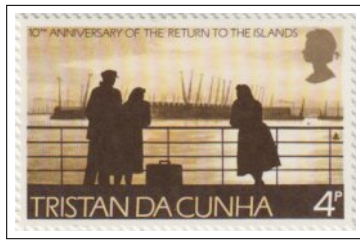
Printed (offset lithography) by: John Waddington Security Print Ltd.
Watermark: St. Edward’s Crown Block CA
Perforation: 13½ × 14

The culturally important role of the longboat to Tristan culture is depicted in the definitive series which was released on 1 June 1972.



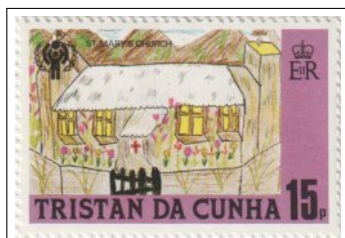
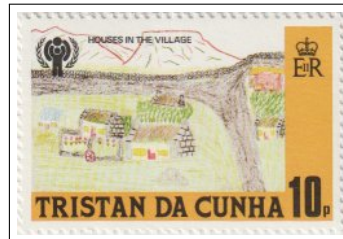
Printed (offset lithography) by: Walsall Security Printers Ltd.
Watermark: St. Edward’s Crown Block CA
Perforation: 14

A strong message is conveyed in this definitive series (released on 10 November 1973), which commemorates the 10th anniversary of the islanders' return to Tristan da Cunha.



Printed (offset lithography) by: House of Questa
 Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA
 Perforation: 14.5

These children drawings signify that the Tristan is still an actively growing community. It was released on 26 November 1979, depicting children's drawings of the island. The International Year of the Child logo is visible in the top right of each stamp. This is the first series where Tristan is participating in an international celebration.



Printed (offset lithography) by: House of Questa
 Watermark: Crown CA spiral sideways
 Perforation: 14

Ascension

In the 1970s, Ascensions stamps shifted toward space exploration, using 1971 and 1975 issues to frame its role in global technology. By featuring Skylab satellite imagery and the Apollo-Soyuz mission, these series portrayed an island defining itself through technological prowess and international interdependence rather than physical isolation.

First decimalisation issue of Ascension 1971

The first decimal series stamps for Ascension Island (released on 15 February 1971). It depicts the past and future of space exploration. It is clear that Ascension values the progress that is made in terms of technology.



Printed (offset lithography) by Format International Security Printers Ltd.
 Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
 Perforation: 14½

Early remote sensing images portrayed on stamps. In this case, satellite images of Ascension along with space vessels showing the close ties between the two. It was released on 20 March 1975 and depicted the Skylab mission.



Printed (offset lithography) by: House of Questa
 Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
 Perforation: 14½

A pivotal moment in space exploration and the role that Ascension played being commemorated on stamps. Released on 18 August 1975, celebrating the Apollo-Soyuz link.



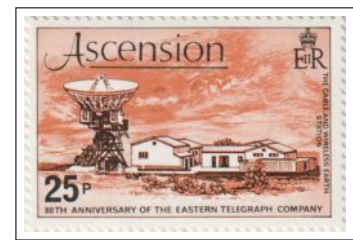
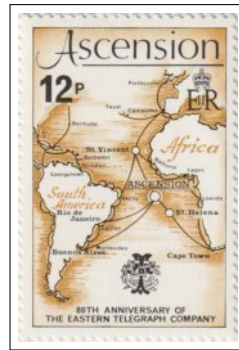
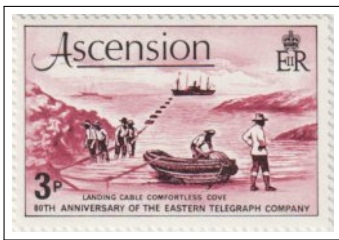
Printed (offset lithography) by: Format International Security Printers Ltd.
 Watermark: St. Edward's Crown Block CA Multiple
 Perforation: 14½

Isolation and interdependence (1980s)

Ascension

In the 1980s, Ascensions stamps shifted to a retrospective of its strategic military and communications roles. The series' of 1981 and 1982 commemorated the 80th anniversary of the Eastern Telegraph Company and the 40th anniversary of Wideawake Airfield, highlighting the island's global importance. A 1986 series featuring 19th-century naval vessels further cemented this narrative, portraying Ascension as a vital high-tech logistical station with over a century of significance.

An example of retrospection in Ascension stamps. Released on 27 April 1981, it celebrates cable and wireless communication.



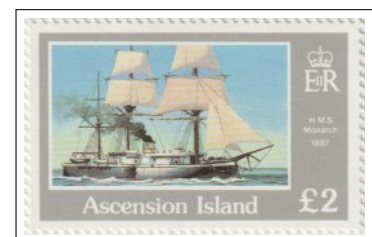
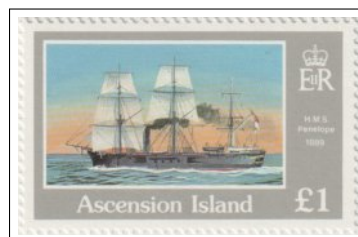
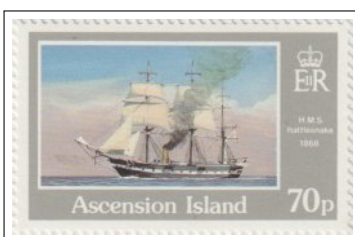
Printed (offset lithography) by: Walsall Security Printers Ltd.
Watermark: Crown over Block CA Diagonal Multiple
Perforation: $14\frac{1}{2}$

Here, Ascension commemorates the construction of Wideawake airfield which played an important role in WW II and the later Falklands War. It was released on 15 June 1982.



Printed (offset lithography) by: Walsall Security Printers Ltd.
Watermark: Crown over Block CA Diagonal Multiple
Perforation: 14

Part of the definitive series released on 14 October 1986 military naval vessels of the British Navy. A stark contrast to the longboats depicted by Tristan.

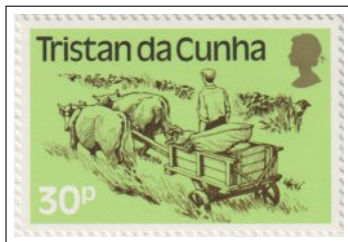
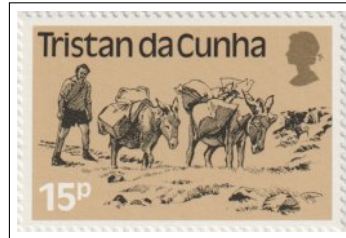


Printed (offset lithography) by: House of Questa
Watermark: Crown over Script CA Diagonal Multiple
Perforation: $14\frac{1}{2}$

Tristan da Cunha

Tristan da Cunha's 1980s stamps emphasise community resilience against harsh island realities. The 1983 and 1984 definitive series highlight modernisation in transport and traditional wool production, showcasing local progress. This is contrasted by 1985 issues depicting shipwrecks and a tragic longboat loss from a century prior. Together, these stamps create a narrative of perseverance and advancement in the face of historical hardship.

In this series, a subtle theme of modernisation is present. Although it is still clear that Tristan has not embraced technology to the extent that Ascension has. It was released on 2 May 1983.



Printed (offset lithography) by: Format International Security Printers Ltd.
 Watermark: Multiple Crown CA Diagonal
 Perforation: 14

This souvenir sheet (released on 30 July 1984) depicts the process of making “warm and attractive woollens” on the island. It is an example of traditional textile crafts.



Printed (offset lithography) by: Walsall Security Printers Ltd.
 Watermark: Multiple Crown CA Diagonal
 Perforation: 14½

On this souvenir sheet (released on 4 February 1985), the known shipwrecks around Tristan are indicated. For many years Tristan would occasionally house survivors of these disasters.



Printed (offset lithography) by: House of Questa
 Watermark: Multiple Crown CA Diagonal
 Perforation: $13\frac{3}{4}$

One of the most tragic episodes of Tristan’s history is depicted in this stamp series (released on 28 November 1985). It commemorates the tragic loss of life 100 years earlier.



Printed (offset lithography) by: Walsall Security Printers Ltd.
 Watermark: Multiple Crown CA Diagonal
 Perforation: 14

Conclusion

It is clear from the above that Tristan da Cunha and Ascension differ in the narratives they chose to portray in fundamental ways. Ascension chose the path of technological development and international interdependence, while Tristan da Cunha chose a world of self-sufficiency, embracing their isolation. Rather than judging which of these is better, it needs to be accepted that each path was the path for that particular territory. One common thread between them, though, is a rich biodiversity and a rich history.

Acknowledgement: Layout created using L^AT_EX package stampalbum.sty created by Dr. L. Erasmus