

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO THE IRISH OVERPRINTS

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When the Provisional Government of Ireland took over, on 17 February 1922, the running of the Post Office in the 26 counties that were granted independence under the 1921 Treaty, it had no special designs ready for issue, so overprints in the Irish language (Gaeilge or Gaelic) were made on the British stamps then in stock.

Philatelists and dealers of the time had great fun in studying the various overprints made between 1922 and 1935 but so much so that they made them very complicated for the 'simple life' collector who, to a large extent ignored them. This article is intended to help collectors identify the various issues easily. The MacDonnell Whyte Catalogue, *Stamps of Ireland*, gives each set a reference number: 1T, 2T, etc. These are used throughout, in addition to the SG catalogue numbers.

Firstly there were two basic overprints:

RIALTAR Rialtas
SEALADAC Sealadac
na na
hÉIREANN hÉireann
1922 1922

and

SAORSTÁT Saorstát
ÉIREANN Éireann
1922 1922

These translate as: 'Rialtas' (Government) 'Sealadac' (Provisional) 'na' (of) 'hÉireann' (Ireland) and 'Saorstát' (Free State) 'Éireann' (Ireland) i.e. 'Provisional Government of Ireland' and 'Irish Free State'. The first overprint was an old typeface in which a letter similar to an English 'r' is used for 's' thus many catalogues and books mistakenly print 'Rialtas' as 'Rialtar'.

Several publications refer to the overprints as 5-line, 4-line or 3-line; this refers to the number of lines of print, e.g.

RIALTAR Rialtas
SEALADAC Sealadac
na na
hÉIREANN hÉireann
1922. 1922

is a 5-line overprint.

For the high value stamps the 'Rialtas' overprint was condensed as

RIALTAR Rialtas
SEALADAC Sealadac
na hÉIREANN na hÉireann
1922 1922

which is known as a 4-line overprint

So we have three categories we can easily sort the overprints into to start with: 5-line, 4-line and 3-line.

5-Line Overprints:

Dollard (1T and 2T)

RIALTAR
SEALADAC
na
hÉIREANN
1922



RIALTAR
SEALADAC
na
hÉIREANN
1922.



Left: Dollard (note antique '1922' with serifs).
Right: Thom (note block '1922' without serifs)

Now let's look at the 5-line overprints all reading 'Rialtas/Sealadac/na/hÉireann/1922'. The first of these was printed by Dollard Printing-house Ltd, Dublin and is easily distinguished by the typeface used for '1922' (see above, left):

Only the Dollard printing (SG 1/9 and 22/25, MW T1/T8 [set 1T] and T9/T11 [set 2T]) has this distinctive '1922'.

In the Dollard printing the following stamps were overprinted in two different colours—black and red: 2½d., 4d. and 9d. There is a variation in the red overprint known to specialist collectors as the *carmine* overprint. The *carmine* overprint is thought in fact to have been executed by Alex Thom & Co Ltd who in April 1922 were give the exclusive contract to overprint stamps. It is easiest to distinguish on the 4d. where it appears as a deep bluish red colour, less easy to detect on the 9d. where the agate colour of the basic stamp blends in with the overprint and takes away the bluish tinge, (not all catalogues list this value in carmine) and the 2½d. is almost impossible to distinguish due to the blue background of the basic stamp. The catalogue numbers of the carmine stamp are SG 24 (4d.) and 25a (9d.) or MW T10A (4d.) T11A (9d.).

Now to the rest of the 5-line overprints. We have already distinguished the Dollard by its peculiar '1922'. The Thom 5-line overprint has three different variations and there is an added complication of a 5-line overprint on coil stamps by Harrison & Sons. Having sorted out the Dollard 5-line I would suggest first of all sorting out the Harrison and Thom 'Wide' overprint variations to leave the most difficult sorting to last.

Harrison Coils (5T)

No Irish printer had the technology to produce rolls of stamps for use in vending and dispensing machines so the Irish postal authorities turned to the British printers, Harrison & Son Ltd to produce ½d., 1d., 1½d. and 2d. coil stamps. So extract those values from the remaining 5-line overprints you have after putting aside the Dollards. Look at the word 'Rialtas' on the top line of the overprint.



RIALTAR
SEALADAC
na
hÉIREANN
1922.

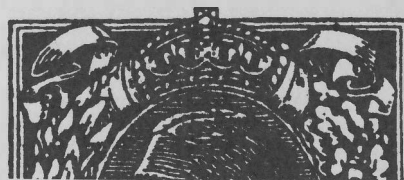
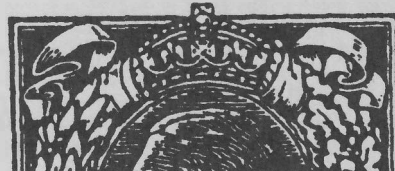
RIALTAR

As you can see from the illustration, the letter 'i' of 'Rialtas' is longer than it should be and extends below the foot of the 'R'. This is the most distinctive feature of the Harrison 5-line overprint. In most cases the Harrison coils have more or less clipped perforations at the left and right, or top and bottom. The colour of the overprint is a shiny black and it is slightly larger than others but the distinctive 'i' is the paramount feature to look for.

When you have sorted out the Harrison 5-line overprints look at the 2d. values as there are two variations of these. Two different dies were used to produce the basic British stamp. Die I has a thin white inner frame-line, sometimes broken, at the top, resulting in the black line separating it and the top white line being closer to the solid background. Die II has a strong thick white inner frame-line at the top. This

Harrison 2d. types:

Die I (below) Thin inner frame-line and four shading lines above King's head clear of oval
Die II (bottom) Thick inner frame-line and three lines of shading above King's head extending to oval



feature is the one I always use but the other distinctions are also useful. Die I: *Four* complete line of shading between top of King's head and oval frame-line. These four lines do *not* extend to the oval itself. The white line around 'TWO PENCE' is thin. Die II: *Three* complete lines of shading between top of King's head and oval frame-line. These lines *do* extend to the oval. The white line around 'TWO PENCE' is thicker. The difference in dies also applies to the 2d. values of the two other sets which we will examine below.

Catalogue numbers for the Harrison 5-line overprints are SG 26/29a, MW T20/T24 [set 5T].

Now we are left with the 5-line overprints by Thom. The following values can *only* be from one particular printing: 2½d., 3d., 4d., 5d., 9d. and 10d. They belong to the Thom printing in blue-black or red of June to October 1922, which we will come to shortly.

Thom 'Wide' setting (8T)

The most distinctive of the three remaining 5-line overprints is the Thom 'Wide' setting. In November 1922, in anticipation of issuing the new 'Saorstát Éireann' overprints, Thom destroyed the existing 'Rialtas' plates but supplies of the ½d., 1d., 1½d., 2d. and 1s. values ran short before the 6 December inauguration of the Irish Free State. Thom made new plates and the overprint from these is much wider, with a spaced out appearance unlike any of the other 5-lines.

RIALTAS
SEALADAC
na
hÉireann
1922.

RIALTAS
SEALADAC
na
hÉireann
1922.



Left: Thom wide; Right: Thom normal

One should easily be able to notice this 'spaced out' appearance but if necessary use a ruler to find that the top two lines 'Rialtas' and 'Sealadac' are 1mm longer than the top two lines of any others. Catalogue numbers for this issue are: SG 47/51, MW T42/T46 [set 8T]. Note that the 2d. value in this set is *only* Die II and can be a useful reference for distinguishing the dies on other issues.

Thom black & blue-black overprints (4T and 6T)

Now we come to the most difficult bit. We already know that the 5-line 2½d., 3d., 4d., 5d., 9d. and 10d. values must be from the Thom printings of June to October 1922 in blue-black and red. Having sorted out the Harrison coils and the 'Wide' printings, mentioned above, any ½d. or 1d. values must also be from this printing. This leaves the 1½d., 2d., 6d. and 1s. values which exist with either black or blue-black overprints.

The distinction between black and blue-black Thom 5-line overprints rests mainly on colour and is the rock a lot of collectors perish on. The first thing you do is establish

a reference. You know for sure that the 5d. and 10d., and—if you have correctly sorted out the Harrison and 'Wide' prints—the ½d. and 1d. are *definitely* blue-black. (The 2½d., 4d. and 9d. values have a red overprint so they are no use to you as a reference). Dates on used stamps can provide a definite guide, if the 5-line Thom overprints have postmarks earlier than June they *must* be black. Using these used examples, if you have them, and/or the ½d., and 1d. examples if you are sure they are not Harrisons or 'Wides', you can check the others against them for colour of overprints. What you are looking for is an overprint with a crisp sharp black overprint, which held to light is shiny and with a slight bluish tinge, as opposed to a matt black to greyish black often overinked or underinked overprint, with a rather rough appearance. On the black overprint there are often whiskers of ink at the edges of the character, unlike the clean cut appearance of the blue-black type.

The 1½d. and, especially, the 6d. are the most difficult to distinguish by virtue of their background colours which to a greater or lesser degree incorporate some blue in the mix of ink. If you really want to go to town on these a very powerful magnifying glass or a junior microscope will show you flecks of blue in the blue-black overprint.

Catalogue numbers for the Thom 5-line black overprint issued on February 17 1922 are SG 10/15, MW T15/T19 [set 4T]. For the Thom 5-line blue-black or red overprint they are SG 30/43, MW T25/T38 [set 6T]. The 2d. values of both sets exist in Die I and Die II—see the notes on the Harrison coils above.

4-Line Overprints

Dollard and Thom (3T and 7T)



Seaborse with (top) Dollard and (bottom) Thom 4-line overprints

The high value 4-line overprint on the 2s.6d., 5s. and 10s. was produced first by Dollard and then by Thom. The Thom printing is three times scarcer than the Dollard taking printing quantities alone into account but in terms of actual quantities on the market is probably 10 times scarcer. It is therefore important to distinguish between the two, but it is not that easy. Here are the two overprints side by side:

RIALTAS
SEALADAC
na hÉireann
1922

RIALTAS
SEALADAC
na hÉireann
1922

Dollard (left) and Thom 4-line overprints

The best way to distinguish them is to look at the line 'na hÉireann'. On the Dollard printing the 'h' and 'É' are further apart (1mm) than on the 'Thom' (0.5mm) and most important of all the 'h' is out of line with the 'É' on the Dollard. The test I always use is to place a ruler under the type of 'na hÉireann' so that the bottom of all the letters are lined up at the top of the ruler. If the 'h' is above the ruler it is a Dollard and if it is flush along with the other characters, it is a Thom.

Some collectors prefer to use measurements to distinguish the Dollard and Thom high value 4-line overprints. I don't, as I feel the method I give above is the ultimate test and far more precise than the measurement as one doesn't always get the measurement right. However if you wish to measure, the data is as follows: in the Dollard overprint the word 'hÉireann' measures 14.5mm whereas the Thom version measures 14mm. The overall measurement of the line 'na hÉireann' should not be used as some Dollards have a variation known as *short third line* (21mm) which nearly equals the Thom overall measurement of 20.75mm.

The Thom 4-line overprint is a much sharper and clearer overprint than the Dollard and usually has a shiny blue-black appearance as opposed to the dull black or greyish black of the Dollard. SG catalogue numbers of both sets are 17/21 (Dollard) and 44/46 (Thom). MW are T12/14 (Dollard) [set 3T] T39/41 (Thom) [set 7T].

3-Line Overprints:

Thom & Harrison printings (9T and 10T)

On 6 December 1922 the Irish Free State came into being and gradually stamps with the 3-line overprint

SAORSTÁT
Éireann
1922

Saorstát
Éireann
1922

were issued. The 2½d., 3d., 4d., 5d., 6d., 9d., 10d. and 1s. can *only* be from one printing, that by Alex Thom & Co Ltd of December 1922 to January 1923. The 1½d., 1d., 1½d. and 2d. were also produced in coil form by Harrison & Son Ltd in England.

Left: Thom 3-line Right: Harrison 3-line
Note the rounded foot to 'l' of '1922' and the raised second 'e' of 'Éireann' on the Harrison

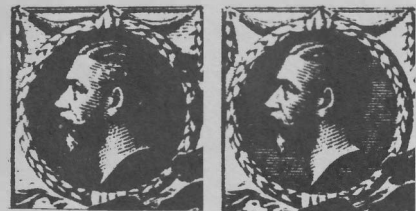
SAORSTÁT
Éireann
1922

SAORSTÁT
Éireann
1922

These can be distinguished from their Thom counterparts by the rounded foot of the '1' of '1922' as opposed to the square foot of the Thom '1'. Also the second 'e' of 'Éireann' is slightly raised making the word appear uneven and slightly curved, and the loop of the figure '9' of '1922' is round in contrast to the oval loop in the Thom overprint. Again, being coil stamps they usually have clipped perforations on at least one side.

Catalogue numbers for the Thom 3-line overprint on ½d. to 1s. values are SG 52/63, MW T47/T58 [set 9T]; Harrison 3-line overprints are SG 67/70, MW T62/T65 [set 10T].

1935 'Re-engraved' (14T)



Left: Cross-hatched background of the re-engraved Seahorse design
Right: Previous horizontal line background

The high value—2s.6d. 5s. and 10s.—3-line overprints present some nice complications to sort out. Let us ignore chronological order and take the easiest first. The last overprint to be issued came out in 1935 and it was on what is known as the 're-engraved' British high value stamps of 1934. These are easily distinguished from the previous 'Seahorse' design by the background behind the King's head which is cross-hatched (i.e. diagonal and horizontal lines) instead of horizontal lines only.

Catalogue numbers for the 1935 3-line overprint on the re-engraved 2s.6d., 5s. and 10s. are SG 99/101, MW T75/T77 [set 14T].

1925 'Narrow date' printing (11T)

SAORSTÁT SAORSTÁT
ÉIREANN ÉIREANN
1922 1922

Left: Narrow Date 3-line overprint
Right: Wide Date 3-line overprint

There are three other 3-line overprints on the 'Seahorse' design high value stamps. One set has a distinctive 'narrow date' which is easily distinguishable from the others. The third line, '1922' is at least 0.75mm shorter and the figures are very close together with the '22' practically joined on many examples (SG 83/5, MW T66/T68 [set 11T]).

Thom & Government printings (13T)

Now we come to the most difficult of the 3-line overprints to sort out. The Thom printing of December 1922 is a crisp clean cut overprint in shiny blue-black ink whereas the Government printing (believed to have been produced at Somerset House in London) is matt black, with rather worn looking type resulting in whiskers of ink around the edges of the characters, with a heavy impression usually showing clearly in relief on the back of the stamps. Used examples dated before May 1927, provided they are not the 'narrow date' described above, must be from the Thom printing, and can be a useful reference.

Composite 'Wide and Narrow' printing (12T)

In 1927 there was a 'composite printing' using both the 'wide' and 'narrow' date clichés to make up a printing plate. Collectors look for pairs showing both 'wide' and 'narrow' settings, known as either 'composite' pairs or 'wide and narrow' pairs. A fine example is shown on the front cover (picture courtesy Stanley Gibbons Ltd). SG catalogue numbers are 83a/85a. MW are T69/T71 [set 12T].

The catalogue numbers of the Thom 3-line overprint are SG 64/66, MW T59/T61 [set 9T] and of the Government printing 3-line 'wide' overprint SG 86/88, MW T72/T74 [set 13T].

It may be possible with very specialised knowledge and research to distinguish between London and Dublin printings of the 1925 'Narrow Date', to identify singles from the 'Composite' printing, and to make out the Harrison and Somerset House overprints on the re-engraved 'Seahorses'. This is outside the scope of this relatively simplified article.

To summarise then:

- Sort into 5-line, 4-line and 3-line overprints.
- Sort Dollard distinctive '1922' from other 5-lines¹
- Sort Harrison long 'i' in 'Rialtas' from remaining 5-lines.
- Sort Thom 'Wide' setting (first two lines 1mm longer than the other 5-lines).
- Remaining ½d., 1d., 2½d., 3d., 4d., 5d., 9d. and 10d. 5-lines have the Thom blue/black or red.

6. Sort 1½d., 2d. (die I and die II) 6d. and 1s. into black and blue-black by comparing colour and sharpness of print. Used examples with dates before June 1922 have to be black and can be useful references for comparison.

7. Distinguish 4-line overprints by 'h' and 'Éireann'—Dollard has 1mm gap and 'h' above baseline of remainder of the line of type. Thom has close, 5mm gap between 'h' and 'É' and 'h' is flush with rest of line.

8. Sort ½d. 1d., 1½d. and 2d. 3-line into Harrison (rounded foot '1') and Thom (square foot to '1')—other values to 1s have to be Thom.

9. Segregate 1935 3-line 2s.6d., 5s. and 10s. by (crosshatched) background to King's head.

10. Segregate 1925 3-line 2s.6d., 5s. and 10s. by narrow '1922' with '22' almost joined.

11. Sort 1922 Thom and 1927–28 Government 'wide date' by colour (blue-black for Thom, black for Govt), clarity (clean and sharp for Thom, whiskery and rough for Govt) and impression (very heavy for Govt).

If you still have any trouble in distinguishing your overprints please write to me c/o the Editor and I will deal with all queries in a follow-up article.

This article first appeared in *Irish Stamp News*.

Appendix

These checklists are designed to show you what choice you have for a particular value. For instance if you have a 3d. 5-line it is either SG 5 or 36, SG 5 being the distinctive Dollard '1922' type; if however it is a 1½d. you have trouble as it can be one of four different overprints!

Catalogue numbers are from the Stanley Gibbons *British Commonwealth Catalogue*, 1993 edition, those in brackets come from MacDonnell Whyte's *Stamps of Ireland*.

5-line Overprints

Value	1T	2T	2T Carmine ¹	4T	5T	6T	8T
½d.	1 (T1)	—	—	—	26 (T20)	30 (T25)	47 (T42)
1d.	2/3 (T2)	—	—	—	27 (T21)	31 (T26)	48 (T43)
1½d.	—	—	—	10 (T15)	28 (T22)	32 (T27)	49 (T44)
2d. Die I	—	—	—	12 (T16)	29 (T23)	33 (T28)	—
2d. Die II	—	—	—	13 (T17)	29a (T24)	34 (T29)	50 (T45)
2½d.	4 (T3)	22 (T9)	— (T9A) ²	—	—	35 (T30)	—
3d.	5 (T4)	—	—	—	—	36 (T31)	—
4d.	6 (T5)	23 (T10)	24 (T10A)	—	—	37 (T32)	—
5d.	7 (T6)	—	—	—	—	38 (T33)	—
6d.	—	—	—	14 (T18)	—	39 (T34)	—
9d. agate	8 (T7)	25 (T11)	25 (T11A)	—	—	40 (T35)	—
9d. olive	—	—	—	—	—	41 (T36)	—
10d.	9 (T8)	—	—	—	—	42 (T37)	—
1s.	—	—	—	15 (T19)	—	43 (T38)	51 (T46)

¹ ½d. with red overprint is a proof printing never issued for sale, but 3 sheets were 'liberated' from the printing works.

² 2½d. with carmine overprint is almost indistinguishable and therefore not listed by any catalogue.

4-line Overprints

Value	3T	7T
2s.6d.	17/18 (T12)	44 (T39)
5s.	19 (T13)	45 (T40)
10s.	21 (T14)	46 (T41)

3-line Overprints

Value	9T	10T	11T	12T	13T	14T
½d.	52 (T47)	67 (T62)	—	—	—	—
1d.	53 (T48)	68 (T63)	—	—	—	—
1½d.	54 (T49)	69 (T64)	—	—	—	—
2d. Die II	55 (T50)	70 (T65)	—	—	—	—
2½d.	56 (T51)	—	—	—	—	—
3d.	57 (T52)	—	—	—	—	—
4d.	58 (T53)	—	—	—	—	—
5d.	59 (T54)	—	—	—	—	—
6d.	60 (T55)	—	—	—	—	—
9d.	61 (T56)	—	—	—	—	—
10d.	62 (T57)	—	—	—	—	—
1s.	63 (T58)	—	—	—	—	—
2s.6d.	64 (T59)	—	83 (T66)	83a (T69)	86 (T72)	99 (T75)
5s.	65 (T60)	—	84 (T67)	84a (T70)	87 (T73)	100 (T76)
10s.	66 (T61)	—	85 (T68)	85a (T71)	88 (T74)	101 (T77)