

SIR HUMPHREY GILBERT - ONE OF HISTORY'S TYRANTS

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On 3rd August 1933 Newfoundland issued a set of stamps to commemorate the official annexation of the island on behalf of the English crown. 350 years earlier Sir Humphrey Gilbert had been commissioned by Queen Elizabeth 1 to continue in his quest for locating a Northwest Passage to China around the top of the American continent, to break the grip held by the Spanish and Portuguese on trade with the east.

Sir Humphrey Gilbert's Quest/Early History

Sir Humphrey Gilbert is described by Boggs as an English adventurer, soldier, navigator and would-be colonist. Born around 1539 he was raised as a half brother to Sir Walter Raleigh in his ancestral home of Compton Castle in Devon, educated at Oxford and Eton, aiming at a career in law. It would appear a military career took preference and whilst on military duties in Ireland in 1566 he gained permission to put his desire for exploration into action. He raised capital for fitting out an expedition by selling his estates. There is little information of this adventure except it was unsuccessful. Later another fleet of five ships was assembled, viz. *Raleigh*, *Delight*, *Golden Hind*, *Swallow and Squirrel*, and on 11th June 1583 he sailed out from Plymouth. Shortly after the *Raleigh* was forced to return to port and after seven weeks at sea the four ships entered the Narrows of St. John's (Harbour) on 3rd August 1583.

In 1497 John Cabot was claimed as the discoverer of Newfoundland, and John Guy in 1610 attempted the first permanent English settlement on the island. It was the event on 3rd August 1583 that finally formalised the annexation. Continuing exploration southward Sir Humphrey lost a second ship, the *Delight* in a storm near Cape Breton, the remaining three ships finally headed for home. At a point near the Azores they were met with a storm when on 9th September Gilbert's ship the *Squirrel* foundered and Gilbert was lost with his ship.

Printing of The Commemoration Stamps of 1933

The set of stamps issued by Newfoundland on 3rd August 1933 comprised of fourteen denominations depicting aspects of Gilbert's life and, more importantly those concerned with the annexation. Together with the set of fourteen stamps issued for John Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland in 1897 they are the longest commemorative issues of the island (see fig 1 opposite). They were recess printed in sheets of 100 by Perkins Bacon & Co. for the contractors John Dickinson & Co., perforated comb 13½ (exact 13.4) and with no imprints. White wove paper was used watermarked with the Coat of Arms. Later the 7¢, 9¢, 10¢, 14¢, 20¢, 24¢ and 32¢ values appeared with line perf. 14 (exact 13.8). Die proofs were engraved by A J Downey (1¢, 3¢, 8¢, 14¢ and 15¢), L V Phillips



Fig 1

(2¢), J Y Scott (20¢), C Sigrist (4¢, 5¢, 9¢, 10¢ and 32¢) and Wolfenden (7¢) and printed in black. The plate proofs appeared in their issued colours. Also, as was the issuing practice at that time most values can be found imperforate. Specimen stamps are also very occasionally available on the market (see fig 2 overleaf). In 1983 Canada issued a single stamp commemorating Sir Humphrey and the same event.



Fig 2 Specimen spread over three stamps in reverse.

Issued Stamps

- 1¢ Portrait of Sir Humphrey Gilbert
- 2¢ Compton Castle, Sir Humphrey's ancestral home in Devon
- 3¢ The family Arms and Crest. Depicted on the Crest is a squirrel after which Sir Humphrey named the ship he sailed in for this event.
- 4¢ Eton College. View of the Quadrangle and founder's tower.
- 5¢ The Anchor represents a 'Token' received from Queen Elizabeth prior to his departure.
- 7¢ Depicts Sir Humphrey kneeling in front of the Queen to receive his patents for colonisation on June 1578.
- 8¢ The fleet of five ships departing Plymouth
- 9¢ The remaining four ships entering the harbour of St. John's
- 10¢ The formal annexation of Newfoundland on behalf of the English crown.
- 14¢ The Royal Arms. They carry the inscription, "I have engraved thereon the Arms of England".
- 15¢ Sir Humphrey sitting aft in his frigate, shortly before his demise in the storm off the Azores.
- 20¢ Map of Newfoundland c. 1624
- 24¢ Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I.
- 32¢ The statue of Sir Humphrey which stands over the south porch of Truro Cathedral in Devon.

There may be a point of view that the celebrations were perhaps a little misguided as the impression given is that this half brother to Sir Walter Raleigh was a good man to win this land for England. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. In 1569 and as Governor of Munster in Ireland he subjected the province to a blood-soaked reign of terror, especially in suppressing the Desmond rebellions, when actions of his troops were deliberate, systematic, gruesome and undertaken with relish. He has gone down in history as one of history's most evil tyrants and thus how he will be remembered.

References.

The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Newfoundland, Winthrop S Boggs, 1975

Monsters, History's Most Evil Men and Women, Simon Sebag Montefiore,