

The Pitcairn-

by Steve Pendleton

Pitcairn Island in the Pacific Ocean is one of the most storied isles in the world. Thousands of books and articles have been written about it. This is due primarily not only to its isolation but to the origin of its people: they are descendants of the famous crew of the HMAV *Bounty*, led by Fletcher Christian.

Besides being far away from pretty much everything, Pitcairn has another major problem. It is tiny, with only two square miles of land, much of which is quite hilly. Several times in its history, this has meant that the population has had to leave, because the land could no longer support them. Today there are perhaps only fifty or so people living on the island at any one time. Pitcairners have fared forth throughout the world — establishing large colonies in New Zealand, in particular.

However, there's one place that has received and sheltered Pitcairn families more than any other — Norfolk Island. This island is also small, but at five by three miles is a bit larger than the ancestral home. It lies between Australia and New Zealand, and so is thousands of miles away from Pitcairn. Nevertheless, even today, at least half of its population of several thousand are descended from mutineer ancestors.

This is the story of a unique connection — sometimes very tenuous — between two groups of kinsmen. It's a connection sometimes maintained, very loosely, by the mail. It also has been celebrated and recognized on many stamp issues of both Norfolk and Pitcairn.



Norfolk Connection

How the Pitcairners Came to Norfolk

By the early 1850s, the human population of Pitcairn was rapidly approaching the point where the island could no longer support it. This had happened once before. On that occasion the islanders had resettled in Tahiti, but sickness and disturbing outside influences had led the community back to its old haven. This time, however, a better choice seemed available.

For many years Norfolk Island had served as a hellish prison, but the facility was now shut down and the island abandoned. With the many vacant buildings already in place, with cleared land, and no other population, it seemed like an ideal move.

On May 3, 1856, 193 souls stepped aboard the *Morayshire* for the five-week voyage to Norfolk. There were only eight family names among them — Christian, Quintal, Adams, McCoy, and Young for the mutineers; Buffet, Evans, and Nobbs for three settlers allowed to join the community. In late 1857, seventeen members of the Young family, yearning for their tiny homeland, returned to Pitcairn. A few years later, twenty-seven others also retraced their steps. Today, this tiny community bears the surnames Christian, Young, Brown, and Warren.

Both communities flourished and grew. Communication, however, languished. Perhaps this was because of the distance or possibly because many Pitcairners were not particularly literate. Ron Hornadge, in his *Pitcairn Island Catalogue*, says that arrangements for mail between Pitcairn and Norfolk were to be facilitated through the British Consul on Tahiti. However, these arrangements apparently were rarely used.

For many years, the existence of any mail between Norfolk and Pitcairn from the nineteenth century was not known to experts, although there had been rumors that such mail might exist on Norfolk Island, handed down within families with no interest in philately. However, in 2005 that situation changed. On September 7 of that year Stanley Gibbons Australia held an auction that included a number of lots from the “Nobbs Correspondence.”

George Nobbs was a British citizen with a some-



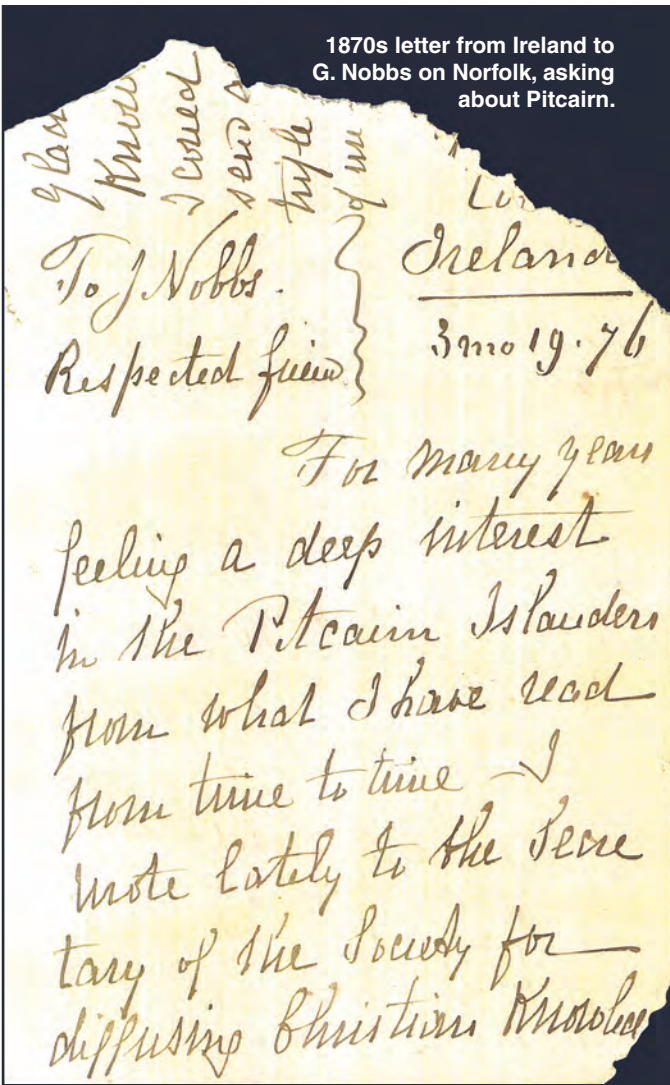
Pitcairn Islanders head home in their longboat after a trading session aboard a cruise ship.

what checkered past, who settled on Pitcairn and became a reverend and a leader of the community. When his parishioners migrated to Norfolk, he went with them and established a farm and store there. After his death the property was sold, but it wasn't until the late 1980s, while looking through the store's attic, that the then-owners found a biscuit tin filled with a trove of letters, covers, and printed matter to and from Nobbs. Their condition, unfortunately, was very mixed; some items were insect-eaten, torn, or stained. A number were to



“The Mother of Us All” — anchor from the *Bounty*, displayed in Adamstown Square, Pitcairn Island.

1870s letter from Ireland to G. Nobbs on Norfolk, asking about Pitcairn.



various people on Pitcairn before the move — these are, of course, very rare in their own right.

Most of the rest of the contents of the sale involved mail sent to Nobbs on Norfolk. This was usually from New Zealand or occasionally the United States. However, there were two lots of mail from Pitcairn. One was a simple, unmarked tan envelope with a barely decipherable manuscript address: “Rev. G.H. Nobbs / Norfolk Island from Pitcairn Island.” There is no indication as to who sent the letter or what its contents might have been.

The other was a very damaged (stained and torn on the left side) entire, addressed to “Norfolk Island S.P. Ocean from Pitcairn Is. Pacific Ocean.” It is light blue in color. The letter is from Mary Elizabeth (possibly Mary Elizabeth Young), probably written around 1867. In it she says she would like to go back to Norfolk, and adds that the people on Pitcairn were quite well. There were sixty inhabitants at the time. She further notes that they were expecting the arrival of a vessel, the *Rakaia*.

There is one other record of mail conditions at the time. One of the two previously known letters from Pitcairn in private hands was written by the Chief Magistrate of Pitcairn, Robert Buffet, about 1870. This letter is believed to have been directed to the British Consul in Tahiti. In his letter Buffet tells how isolated the island is and how he longs for a visit from a British ship: “One reason for us wishing to see a man of war is because we think there may be letters in Valparaiso from our children, brothers and sisters on Norfolk Island from which we have not heard since February 1868.” This is our only indication — apart from the recent find of the Nobbs correspondence — that there was indeed

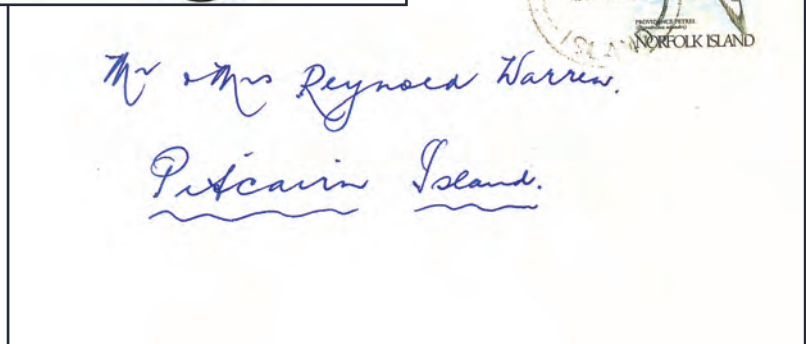
a correspondence between the two communities. Who knows? Perhaps hidden in one of the abandoned houses on Pitcairn there lies a similar tin with letters from kinsmen so far away.

Although I bid on them, I did not win either cover. How-



Commemorative cover for 1984 visit by Norfolk group to Pitcairn.

Nola and Reynold Warren of Pitcairn have visited Norfolk Island several times, and now maintain a correspondence with relatives.





Pitcairn Island stamp set commemorating return of islanders from Norfolk and last day of issue cover.

ever, I did obtain another item that, although not from Pitcairn to Norfolk, has a connection with both islands. It is a letter to Nobbs from Ireland, probably written in the mid-1870s. The writer is full of questions about Pitcairn. I have often wondered, is this the first Pitcairn "fan mail?"

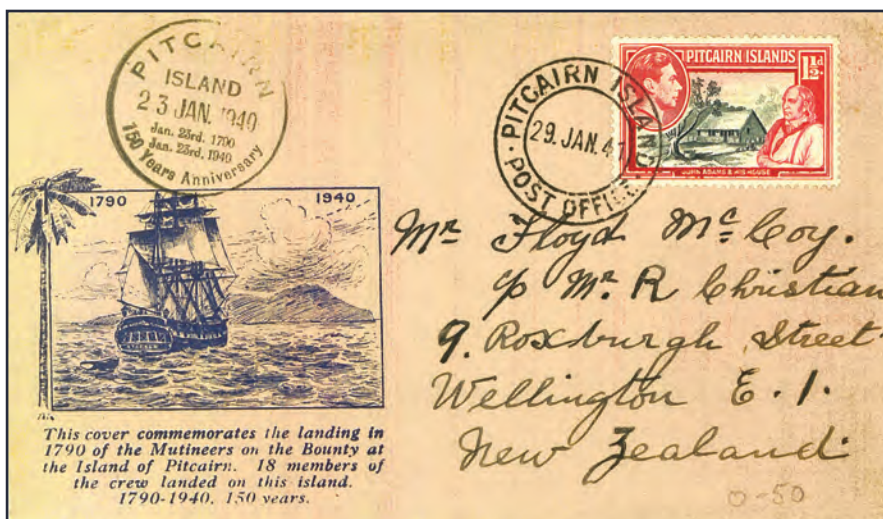
Although not found in a letter, there is one other allusion to the difficulties of maintaining communications between the two islands in those years. It was brought to my attention by Dr. Herb Ford, of the Pitcairn Island Study Center in Angwin, California. Dr. Ford pointed out a book by Rosaline Young, in which the author mentions a visit to Pitcairn by a group of Norfolk youths in 1880:

About the middle of the year 1880 seven of the youth from Norfolk Island came on a visit to the old home of their parents. Scarcely any communications passed between the two islands, so that the event of their coming was improved in learning all about the state of the island and the people they had lately left.

The visitors came to the island by whaling ship. This, combined with the fact that most of the Pitcairn-oriented letters in the Nobbs correspondence originated from whaling ships or American whaling ports, indicates the importance of that trade to the island.



1-penny Pitcairn stamp shows Fletcher Christian. Cover is signed by a direct descendant.



1½-pence stamp shows John Adams. Cover is addressed to Floyd McCoy, a Pitcairner. There are still McCoy's on Norfolk, but no longer on Pitcairn.



Postmaster Roy Clark used to sell souvenir chips from John Adams' old house.



Pitcairn stamps show John Adams and his grave on Pitcairn.



A 1967 Norfolk stamp showing John Adams' at prayer.

In 1956 Norfolk issued two stamps commemorating the arrival of the Pitcairners, as well as a special cancel. The cover also was canceled at Pitcairn.



Renewed Connections

It seems that between the 1880s and the 1980s connections between Norfolk and Pitcairn were minimal. Much of this can be attributed to the difficulties caused by the isolation of and distances between the two islands. Until the opening of the Panama Canal, few ships called at Pitcairn. The same was true of Norfolk. While Norfolk gained an airport in World War II, Pitcairn has never had air service (outside a few experimental air drops). Not surprisingly, mail between the two islands during that hundred-year period is quite scarce. One collector reports a 1953 cover sent by Ben Christian on Norfolk to Floyd McCoy on Pitcairn, and a few 1970s covers are known.

The first official group contact between the two communities since 1864 came about in October 1984. About thirty Norfolk Islanders left their home on October 14, flying first to Auckland, then on to Tahiti. From there it was another six-hour flight to Mangareva, the closest island to Pitcairn with an airport, where they met the chartered cargo ship *Taporo II* for transport on the final leg to Pitcairn, which they reached to the great celebrations of the Pitcairners on October 25. After suitable partying and proclaiming, they returned to Norfolk in early November. The ostensible reason for the journey was to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of George Nobbs on Norfolk. Special commemorative covers exist that were carried on the trip.

Friendships made during this visit, as well as a similar one made in 1990 to celebrate the bicentennial of Pitcairn's settlement, have resulted in a great deal more interchange. Much more mail traffic has developed, as well as Internet communication and even talking via satellite. A number of Pitcairners have made individual trips to Norfolk, and one family lived there for a time. Several Pit-



A 1981 combination cover with Norfolk and Pitcairn stamps commemorating the 125th anniversary of the migration to Norfolk and a souvenir sheet (below).

cairn youths have found employment and familiar surroundings by working in the tourist industry there.

In 2006 Norfolk celebrated the 150th anniversary of its settlement by the Pitcairners. People from all over the world who are related to the old mutineer families, as well as individual Pitcairners, attended the festivities. One large group was from, of all places, Tahiti.

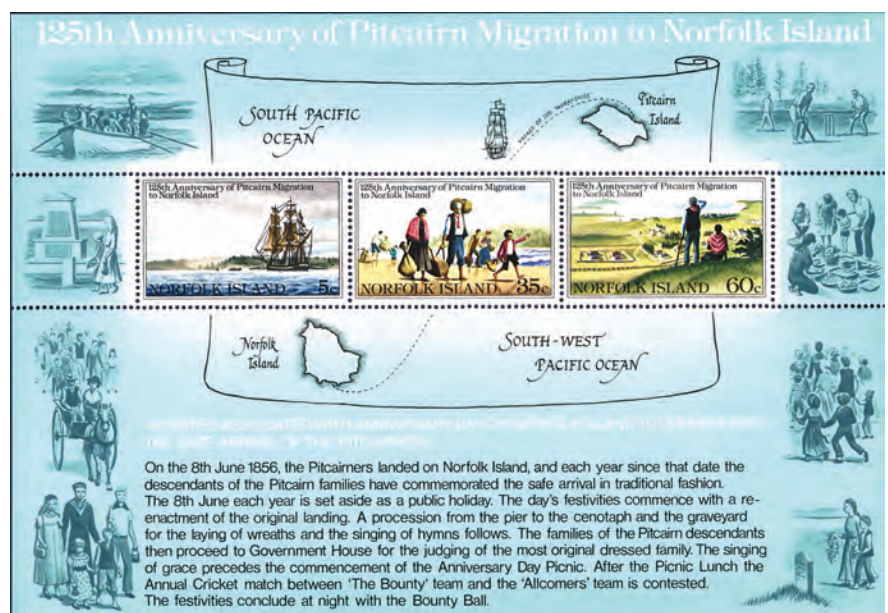
Island Connection and Philately

Ever since Pitcairn's first stamp issue in 1940, stamps have held a great interest for the families of both islands, for here their ancestors are depicted for the world to see. Pitcairn Scott 2, 7, and 8 all contain portraits of mutineer Fletcher Christian (who now has hundreds of descendants around the world). He also is shown on Pitcairn Scott 156 and 335. Strangely, he is not shown on Norfolk stamps, although his son, Thursday October Christian, appears on Norfolk Scott 496.

Another well-known ancestor, John Adams (and his house) is shown on Pitcairn Scott 3. A different portrait, as well as his grave, are shown on Pitcairn Scott 182–183 and 501. Adams was the last surviving male mutineer.

Some of the descendants of these well-known figures were not adverse to making a bit of money out of their ancestors' notoriety. In the 1940s especially, many souvenir covers were prepared with the 1940 Pitcairn set, and signed by or addressed to such individuals as Fred Christian or Floyd McCoy. The island postmaster at that time, Roy Clark, was very ingenious at making up these kinds of covers, sometimes gluing pieces of wood from mutineer homes or even the *Bounty* onto them.

In 1956 Norfolk Island made its first philatelic reference to the connection. Two stamps (Scott 19–20) were released



that year to note the arrival of the first settlers. In addition, a special cancel, reading "Norfolk Centenary 1856–1956," was prepared.

A 1961 issue of three Pitcairn stamps (Scott 32–34) commemorates the return of the first small party from Norfolk to Pitcairn. The man shown on the 3-pence value is Simon Young, leader of the group. (He also is depicted on Pitcairn Scott 497.) The 6-pence value shows maps of the two islands; in actuality, Norfolk (on the left) is much bigger than Pitcairn.

The 125th anniversary of the Norfolk settlement saw stamp releases by both islands. Norfolk issued Scott 277–279, while Pitcairn issued Scott 203–205. The stamps are designed in the same style. One can only imagine the sadness the islanders must have felt as they carried their meager possessions down to the waiting ship (Pitcairn Scott 203), and their anticipation as they finally landed on their beautiful new island (Norfolk Scott 278). Combination First Day covers exist with both sets canceled.

Woodcut view of Pitcairn in the 1850s, from a sketch made during the visit of the HMS *Amphitrite*.



In 1991 Pitcairn released four stamps depicting personalities from this period. Shown on Scott 399–402 are Friday October Christian, Moses Young, and Rosalind Amelia Young. The fourth person shown, James Russell McCoy, was important mainly on Pitcairn.

George Nobbs is shown on two Pitcairn stamps, Scott 496 and 503. It is due to Nobbs, of course, that we now have at least a few examples of early Pitcairn mail.

If you look for them, I'm sure you can find more philatelic examples of this connection. And, if you examine enough covers, you might find an inter-island one as well.



Postscript

In the February 2006 *AP*, Harold Patterson presented a very well-done article (“Pitcairn to Norfolk — A Round Trip,” page 154) that appears to deal with the same subject as this one. However, while Patterson focuses on the dramatic story of the evacuation and return of the Pitcairn Islanders, I have tried to describe the mail — such as it is — that is known *between* the two communities. Since the discovery of the Nobbs correspondence, there is a greater amount of nineteenth-century Pitcairn letters known to exist. We can hope that further discoveries await.

Acknowledgments

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The Author

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PITCAIRN'S ISLAND.

An interesting communication has just been received from this place. The inhabitants were all well on the 14th September, 1856, the date of the Chaplain's letter to the Rev. T. B. Murray. They had heard of the death of the Czar Nicholas; but, as no newspaper was on board the vessel which conveyed the intelligence, they were still in the dark. Though they had suffered some anxiety from a poor yam harvest, they had a good stock of sweet potatoes to turn to, and the "pinch of the year" was past. They were awaiting the measures of Government for their transfer to Norfolk Island, some having relinquished house-building in expectation of this important change. It appears, by accounts from Sydney, that Sir W. Denison, Governor of New South Wales had, in September last, under instructions from home, dispatched a vessel to Pitcairn's Island, with a view of making arrangements. It was intended that, on her return to Sydney, a transport should be fitted out, for the purpose of conveying the islanders to their new and beautiful abode.

The accompanying view of the Island was sketched from H.M.S. *Amphitrite*, in March last.

"We arrived (says a Correspondent) at Valparaiso, on the 19th March, after a long and tedious cruise from San Francisco, touching at Sandwich and Society Islands, also Pitcairn's Island, on our way down. While we were at the Sandwich Isles, King Kamehameha III. died, at the age of forty-one, of excessive drinking.

"We arrived at Pitcairn's Island on the 17th February. The islanders came off in a whale-boat, and seemed glad to see us. The Captain and officers spent the day on shore, and were most kindly treated. In the evening we went to the schoolhouse, where all the people assembled, sang very nicely, and finished with "God Save the Queen." We took a cow and several other useful presents to the islanders. They now number between 180 and 190, and talk about removing to Norfolk Island this year; but I think the greater portion will remain at Pitcairn's, being much attached to it. It is, however, impossible they can all remain there much longer, it being only five miles in circumference, and a great deal of the island is too mountainous to cultivate. They live principally on yams and sweet potatoes; which they till with great success, there being the finest I have seen in the Pacific. Animal food they indulge in only on Sundays. On February 18th

An 1856 newspaper article reports on a Chaplain's letter from Pitcairn and the residents' desire to move to Norfolk. It also mentions a visit by the HMS *Amphitrite*, which includes a reference to the "talk about removing to Norfolk Island this year."