FOR many centuries money circulating in Sri Lanka reflected not so much that country’s history as the identities of many other nations with commercial or political interests in the island, as traders or rulers. This is certainly true of the paper money issued during the British administration. The present article looks at various note issues which were printed in England for circulation in Ceylon during the period 1800 to 1941.¹ Within a broad chronological framework, I have chosen to focus on government notes and some commercial bank issues, looking particularly at their designs, how they were influenced, and what they may tell us about the mother country’s perception of an overseas possession with a very different culture.² In the case of Ceylon, British note issues display continuing representation of British authority, and European neo-classical imagery combined with romantic and sometimes curious depictions of the colony. By the end of the period, however, more naturalistic views of Ceylon presaged political change and self-government.

The first paper money in Ceylon was issued by the Dutch in 1785, in the form of notes called Kredit Brieven which were denominated in rixdollars. When the British took over as colonial rulers in 1796, they assumed responsibility for that note issue, and in 1800 the British Government in Ceylon produced its own Treasury notes. The governor later explained that ‘The great inconvenience of circulating copper money (which is the established currency of these Settlements) induced me in the month of March last to issue promissory notes on the Public Treasury to the amount of 30,000 rix-dollars’. Apparently the notes were readily accepted: ‘The convenience and utility of these notes were soon perceived, not only by the Europeans, but the native inhabitants of the Colony, which induced me to make a further issue to the extent of 45,000 rix-dollars. . . These notes are generally 25, 50 and 100 rix-dollars each, bear no interest, but are merely considered as the substitute of so much copper money, and made exchangeable at the Treasury for their amount on demand.’³ The notes may have been welcomed by the indigenous population, but their design made it quite clear who was now in charge. In the top left corner they carried a small seated figure of Britannia with a trident, an olive branch and a shield bearing the Union Jack, all framed by a circle of foliage. This image, and indeed the overall appearance of the notes, is strongly reminiscent of notes issued by the Bank of England at the same period.

¹ This article is a corrected and slightly revised version of a lecture first given at a conference in Colombo in September 1994, and then to the British Numismatic Society in London in May 1995. The Colombo paper has been published under the title ‘Currency for a Colony: Paper Money for Ceylon’ in Origin, Evolution and Circulation of Foreign Coins in the Indian Ocean, edited by Osmund Bopearachchi and D.P.M. Weerakkody (New Delhi, 1990). I am most grateful to Osmund Bopearachchi for encouraging me to work on this subject, and to William Barrett for generously sharing the information in his own collection and research notes. Warm thanks are also due to David Beech of the Philatelic Section of the British Library, and the staff of the Royal Philatelic Society, London, especially the Olivers, for granting me access to their material.
² I have explored these themes further with a broader survey of paper money in British colonies, in ‘A distant view: imagery and imagination in the paper currency of the British Empire, 1800–1960’, to be published in a forthcoming volume Nation-states and Money: The past, present and future of national currencies, edited by Emily Gilbert and Eric Helleiner of the University of Toronto.
The assertion of British influence became more pronounced in 1825, when the government decided that for the sake of consistency, it would introduce sterling currency into all British colonies. A new silver currency was planned, to provide 'an unobjectionable and unvarying medium for the payment of troops and . . . a uniform currency in the whole of his Majesty's Foreign possessions founded upon and having reference to the currency of the United Kingdom'.  

4 A Treasury Minute noted that the currency of Ceylon was 'very various, and consists of rix dollars coined in England for its use, of many of the coins of India, of Spanish dollars, and of paper rix dollars'.  

5 (It was also remarked that colonial staff were complaining because of the depreciation of the silver rixdollars in which their salaries were paid!)  

6 It is clear that the new policy was driven less by ideological principles of colonial rule than by the desire for pragmatism and expediency in administration. It was brought into effect by an Order in Council of 23 March 1825 and local regulations in the colonies. In Ceylon, legislation in July 1825 provided for the introduction of sterling currency and set rates of exchange for the foreign coins in circulation. A further regulation in 1827 authorised a new General Treasury issue of sterling notes, in a range of values from £1 to £50, and payable at the Treasury on demand.  

I am not aware of any surviving issued notes from this series, but several unissued examples and proofs indicate what was intended. The vignettes on the notes were the work of Silvester, a London engraver who produced notes for many private local banks in towns throughout Britain. Much of the paper money used in her colonies was printed in Britain, and it is perhaps to be expected that the imagery drew heavily on the iconography used on British banknotes. In this instance, comparing Silvester's design for the Ceylon five pound Treasury note with his work for the General Bank in Plymouth reveals several similarities. (Pl. 15, 1-2) Each features a graceful female allegorical figure, with little wings symbolising communication in her hair, and holding a caduceus, the winged staff indicating that she is a messenger offering peace, protection and health. Both vignettes include a large package or packages, suggesting trade and export – appropriate images for Plymouth, a major sea-port, and for Ceylon where profit earned through exports was clearly appealing to her colonial masters. However, there were also attempts to give the Ceylon Treasury notes some local colour. The one pound and two pound notes carried vignettes of Britannia, each with an elephant in the background; the image on the one pound note also included a pagoda and distant palm trees. The palm tree appears again on the five pound note, but this time the female allegory is accompanied not by an elephant, but by two camels kneeling quietly while she holds their reins. It is a delightful but surprising scene, not least because the camel is not indigenous to Ceylon. Unfortunately we do not know who chose this design, but we may suspect that these creatures were the engraver's attempt to find what he thought was an appropriate emblem for South Asia.

A major change in the design of the Treasury notes was introduced in 1850. The new notes were printed by Perkins Bacon and Company, a London engraving and printing firm started by an American, Jacob Perkins, who came to Britain in 1819 hoping to get a contract printing Bank of England notes. He failed in that ambition, but did establish one of Britain's foremost security printing firms, producing notes for many local British banks and for countries overseas. Records relating to the production of notes for Ceylon are contained in surviving records of the firm.  

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5 Treasury Minute of 11 February 1925; see Chalmers, as in n. 3, pp. 355 and 422.  

6 As in n. 3, pp. 422–3.  

7 See Chalmers, as in n. 3, p. 355, and Fernando, as in n. 4, pp. 5–6 and 25. The general Order in Council is reproduced in Chalmers on p. 425. In practice the attempt to make sterling the standard unit of currency in Ceylon failed, largely because of the prevalence of Indian coins and fluctuating Indian rates of exchange.  

8 The following quotes and references come from the Perkins Bacon archives held in the Royal Philatelic Society (RPS), London.
In November 1849 Perkins Bacon wrote to the Agent for the Colonies (then George Baillie) with regard to Ceylon, quoting prices for watermark moulds, ‘the best Bank Note Paper’, preparing printing plates, and printing the notes. They must have had a favourable reply, because later in the same month they wrote again, sending drawings of the one pound, two pound and five pound notes for approval. They went on to say:

We note your remarks as to the importance of a distinctive character in each of the denominations, and have endeavoured by means of elaborate and combined Engine work to attain that object... The Sinhalese and Malabar Characters shall be carefully copied and engraved on each note.

The copy of the letter in the Perkins’ archive does not include copies of the drawings, but many unissued examples of the notes have survived. (Pl. 16, 3) The designs combined a hand-engraved vignette with a panel of microscopic lettering and borders and medallions of abstract patterns engraved by machine — the ‘engine work’ referred to in the letter. These complex ornamental patterns were produced by a geometric lathe and were particularly suitable for steel-engraving, because the hardness of this metal, as compared with copper, allowed accurate reproduction of very fine detail. Perkins was noted for banknote designs using this technique, in which he made pioneering developments, although other firms also made good use of the medium. The basic format for all the Ceylon Treasury notes was the same, but each denomination was distinguished by variations of shape and pattern in the machine-engraved sections and in the lettering used for the word ‘CEYLON’ at the top centre of each note. Despite their earnest promise, the printers had less success with the (to them) foreign languages, for the Sinhalese texts contained non-existent characters and nonsensical words.

It is not certain, however, whether this was the fault of the engraver or of the source provided by the governor.

The same vignette was used on all denominations, and showed a helmeted Britannia with trident, shield, and lion; packages for export and a cornucopia spilling out fruit; and behind her, an elephant, palm tree and ships at sea. (Pl. 16, 4) Once again, only the elephant and the palms are distinctive features for Ceylon; all the others — Britannia, her lion, packages, cornucopia and ships — were common elements on notes produced by this and other firms for banks in Britain and overseas. Indeed, this very vignette, without the elephant and palm, was also used in Canada on issues of the British Bank of North America. Such repetition of imagery is not unusual, for most printers had a range of ‘off-the-peg’ vignettes, borders and so on, which were cheaper than customised designs. Stock images were often used on sample notes sent out to advertise the printers’ business, and in Britain, some banks specifically asked Perkins for these, or features they had seen on other notes. Evidently the designs submitted for Ceylon were acceptable, for the Perkins records show that they worked on the note production over the next few months — the die for the vignette, for example, was engraved on 14 December. In May 1850 they wrote to say that all the five pound and two pound notes, and twenty thousand of the one pound notes were ready, and asking how the notes were to be packed and how many they should send.

The Government Treasury notes in Ceylon only continued for another few years, being withdrawn from circulation from 1 January 1856. But Ceylon was not left without paper money, as in 1844 a local Ordinance had permitted licensed banks to issue their own notes for India shows that the printers were wary of native scripts; they ask for them to be written out, preferably on an enlarged scale, refer to the extra time they will take, and imply that they impose constraints on the overall design of a note.

My thanks to Osmund Bopearachchi for pointing out the errors, which gave much amusement to the Sinhalese audience at the conference in Colombo. Correspondence with banks in India shows that the printers were wary of native scripts: they ask for them to be written out, preferably on an enlarged scale, refer to the extra time they will take, and imply that they impose constraints on the overall design of a note.

Perkins Bacon to George Baillie, 13 May 1850, Draft Letter Book, February 1843 to March 1851. (RPS).
amounts of one pound or more. Over time this opportunity appears to have been taken up by several commercial banking companies: the Bank of Western India and the Bank of Ceylon, both of which became the Oriental Bank Corporation, the Chartered Mercantile Bank of India, London and China; and later by the Asiatic Banking Corporation. Of these, the Oriental Bank Corporation had particularly significant long-term effects, not least because the governor of Ceylon decreed that its notes would be accepted for any payments due to the government, in place of the Treasury notes. This fateful decision was justified on the grounds that in the conditions of its charter, the bank had 'given what appears to Her Majesty's Government to be a sufficient security for their convertibility'.

The Oriental Bank's predecessors in Ceylon were the Bank of Western India and the Bank of Ceylon. Little appears to be known about the note issues of the former, but unissued examples survive for the Bank of Ceylon. The bank was founded in 1840; a branch was opened in Colombo in June 1841, and another in Kandy in 1843. Its notes were produced by Perkins Bacon. Unfortunately the printers' draft letter books do not appear to contain any correspondence relating to the designs, but the engraving record books note that they were working on the first one pound and two pound notes from December 1840 to February 1841, and then on the five, ten, twenty and fifty pound notes from March to July of 1841.

All the denominations carried the same design, other than minor variations in lettering. It contained little of Perkins' characteristic machine-engraving but was emphatically British, with the Royal Arms in the top centre of the note, and a vignette of Britannia to the left. This familiar figure has her usual accessories of helmet, trident, shield with Union Jack, and lion. Almost predictably, an elephant and palm trees are in place behind her, but unexpectedly, a camel has also appeared. (Pl. 17, 5) (Only the forepart of the camel is visible, tempting speculation that the engraver may have been unnecessarily concerned about putting the wrong number of humps!) Here again the elephant, palms and even the misplaced camel were surely intended as symbols of Ceylon, all positioned behind Britannia who has pride of place as a personification of the mother country. The dominant position of Britannia is a common feature on notes in British colonies, but a particular comparison in this instance may be made with a note design by Perkins for the Provincial Bank of Ireland in the 1820s, showing Britannia and Hibernia. (Pl. 17, 6) The seated figure of Britannia, carrying a trident and with helmeted head in profile, is very like that on the note for Ceylon, and although the two figures are seated side-by-side and holding hands, there is clearly a hierarchy, Hibernia sweetly bowing her head in deference to Britannia.

The business of the Bank of Ceylon was heavily tied up with coffee growing, a fatal flaw given that the bank over-extended its resources in making loans for mortgages on coffee plantations. Most accounts state that the Bank failed in the late 1840s and that its business was taken over by the Oriental Bank around 1849. However, its name seems to have been retained for a few years, because the Perkins Bacon records show that they were still drawing and engraving one pound notes for the Bank of Ceylon in September and October of 1850. By autumn of 1851, these references have ceased, and the firm was working on Oriental Bank Corporation notes for issue at the Colombo and Kandy branches.

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12 The Bank of Western India was founded in Bombay in 1842, but three years later the head office was moved to London and the name changed to the Oriental Bank. It later absorbed the business of the Bank of Ceylon and was granted a Royal Charter to trade as the Oriental Bank Corporation. (See Compton Mackenzie, Realms of Silver: One hundred years of banking in the East (London, 1954), p. 10.)

13 Minute of Governor Sir Henry Wood, 28 December 1855, quoted in Fernando, as in n. 6, p. 26.

14 Engraving Book 1847-52, entries for 4 September and 7 October 1850. (RPS).

15 Engraving Book 1847-52, entries for 22 and 25 September, 10 and 30 October, and 3 November 1851. In October 1852 they were adding native characters to the five and ten rupee notes. The bank's other branches in Ceylon were at Galle, Badulla, Newara Elia, Haldamulle and Jaffna.
Based in London, the Oriental Bank was incorporated by Royal Charter as the Oriental Bank Corporation in August 1851, and permitted to trade in any British possession east of the Cape of Good Hope. With only a few exceptions, the notes issued in different places, from Ceylon to Shanghai or New Zealand, carried the same basic design, and yet again they firmly proclaimed their British origin. They were in typical Perkins style, with the Royal coat of arms and machine-engraved medallions, panels and borders. (Pl. 18, 7) From the 1850s to 1870s, notes for five and ten rupees were decorated on the back with circular rosette patterns of engine-work (Pl. 18, 8); comparable rosettes can be found on British notes produced by Perkins, such as a twenty pound note for the Union Bank of Scotland in 1867. (Pl. 19, 9) The Perkins’ design for the Oriental Bank’s 100 rupee note had a slightly more elaborate design than the lower denominations, but as with the others, there was no pictorial element to identify the notes with Ceylon. The Royal Arms were the main graphic feature on the front, while on the back was a romantic scene of Neptune, god of the sea, in a chariot drawn by seahorses frolicking with cherubs. (Pl. 19, 10) An exact prototype for this vignette can be found on a trial note design Perkins submitted to the Bank of England c. 1819 to 1821 (Pl. 19, 11), and it recurred with slight variations on notes in several British colonies. This is a good example of a stock design turning up in distant and disparate lands, but it was appropriate symbolism for a commercial bank operating across an empire largely founded on and sustained by sea-borne trade. It is also a striking instance of western imagery and mythology being applied in a different culture.

That trend continued with later note issues of the Oriental Bank Corporation, which from about 1881 were printed by Bradbury Wilkinson and Company, another major British firm of security printers, founded in the mid nineteenth century. The new designs were quite different from the earlier issues, and particular to Ceylon. Although some of the Perkins’ notes had been printed in ink of one colour (as opposed to black), the backs of these notes were printed in bands of soft colours which gradually merged into one another – a technique appropriately called ‘rainbow’ printing and strongly, though not exclusively, associated with Bradbury Wilkinson. The images on the front of the notes were a curious mixture: in the centre and to the right were the Royal Arms and a vignette of Mercury; the vignette to the left showed a female allegorical figure, but the pillars and lions flanking her throne are rendered in a less traditionally British idiom, while in the distance are palm trees, pagodas, and a catamaran. (Pl. 20, 12) Slightly more effort seems to have been made to represent Ceylon, at least as imagined by an engraver in London, though neither the architecture nor the lions bear much resemblance to Sinhalese design. As with the earlier issues produced by Perkins Bacon, the general appearance of these notes has the distinctive character of other work done by Bradbury. For example, Bradbury Wilkinson notes for the Bank of New Zealand in the early twentieth century make similar use of microscopic lettering for panels and borders, in this case framing scenes of Maoris and Kiwi birds. (Pl. 20, 13)

Most writers agree that the development of banking in Ceylon in the later nineteenth century was closely linked to coffee planting, which is also seen as a British innovation in Ceylon’s economy. The benefits brought by that industry are debatable: against the stimulus to trade must be set the difficult question of labour imported from India specifically for the plantations; and it has been argued that the plantations were an example of foreign economic control achieved at the expense of traditional agriculture. In any event, the coffee industry was a short-lived wonder in Ceylon, collapsing in the 1880s as a result of persistent leaf

16 By this time notes were denominated in rupees, acknowledging the fact that in practice Indian silver rupees were the most commonly used coins in Ceylon, although they were not officially declared to be legal tender until 1869.

17 See for example S.A. Pakeman, Ceylon (London, 1964), chapter 6, on the economy under British rule.

disease. One of the casualties was the Oriental Bank Corporation, which went out of business in 1884—partly because of management difficulties in its international network, but also because, like its predecessor the Bank of Ceylon, it could not recover the costs of heavy lending to coffee planters.

The bank failed on 3 May 1884 with a note issue of over three million rupees, causing, it is claimed, immediate and severe panic among all classes of the community. The British governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, attempted to calm the situation by promising that the Colonial Exchequer would honour any Oriental Bank notes still in circulation, and he wrote to the Secretary of State in Britain urging that, to avoid a repeat of such disaster, the notes should be replaced by a government issue of paper currency. Questioning the rather laissez-faire approach of earlier colonial regulations, he warned that

What has happened in the case of this bank, may, and probably will, happen again in the case of any bank that may take its place with the privilege of a note issue. We shall again see the paper currency of the country depreciate in a day 50 per cent. within a stone's throw of the bank itself, and rendered wholly valueless in more distant places; we shall again see a universal dislocation of all business and a total collapse of credit, including that of the Government itself, threatened.  

However, earlier policies reflected the Treasury's preference for the least possible intervention and expense in such matters. Now the Secretary of State was less than wholly enthusiastic about this unilateral decision to transfer responsibility to the British Government, and suggested other solutions the governor might have tried, such as persuading merchants and leading citizens of Colombo to back the notes. At the Treasury, there was even some grumbling about reversing established policy on the recommendation of a Governor who, it was suggested, may have over-reacted to the situation because he was not sufficiently experienced in economic matters. In response Gordon firmly defended his position, retorting that if anything he had understated the calamity, 'having failed to describe with sufficient strength and vividness the actual state of affairs'. He pointedly went on: 'I have not much leisure for careful writing, and it is quite possible that I have been far too influenced by my reluctance to paint highly coloured and sensational pictures.' Gordon was backed by the legislative council in Ceylon, who recalled that the British Government had in effect given its backing to the Oriental Bank's notes in 1855 when it had withdrawn its own Treasury issues, and had agreed to accept notes issued by the Oriental Bank Corporation in payment of taxes. In the face of these arguments, and accepting that the crisis in Ceylon was exceptional and serious, the government followed Gordon's advice.

Ordinance No. 32 of 1884, the 'Paper Currency Ordinance', established a Board of Currency Commissioners for Ceylon, initially consisting of the Colonial Secretary, the Treasurer and the Auditor-General. The Board was empowered to issue notes payable on demand at the Treasury for Indian silver rupees or gold coin which was legal tender in Ceylon, and the notes were to be backed by a reserve of silver and gold coin of at least half the value in circulation. For a limited period, currency notes would be given in exchange for Oriental Bank notes in circulation at the time of its failure. Notes for five, ten, fifty and 100 rupees were introduced in 1885; a 1000 rupee note was issued in 1899. The notes were printed in England by Thomas De La Rue and their appearance contrasted strongly with the ornate Bradbury designs for the Oriental Bank Corporation: they were extremely simple, printed only on the front in black and
green with lettering and some machine-work, but no pictorial element. (Pl. 21, 14) Other than the place names and the inclusion of Sinhalese and Tamil texts, there was no attempt to give any visual indication of the country of issue, a point made even more evident by comparison with government issues in other British dominions, such as those of India or East Africa, which were produced by the same printer and had a very similar format. (Pl. 21, 15)

Facing the common necessity of producing low denomination notes to replace scarce coin in wartime, the Commissioners issued notes for one and two rupees in 1917. Both had more complex designs and colours than the higher denominations, and the one rupee note was also printed on the back. It remained unchanged, other than slight changes in the colour tones, for over twenty years, but in 1918 the two rupee note was issued in a black and green design conforming to the other notes.

Perhaps inevitably, given the simple designs, there were problems with forgery, despite penalties of up to twenty years' imprisonment for forging notes, and up to five years simply for possessing a forged note. In 1926–7 rainbow tints of colour were added to the background of the two, five and ten rupee notes. By then they were also printed on the back, with the image of an elephant between two palms (now centre-stage and without Britannia) framed by an elaborate ornamental panel (Pl. 22, 16), but these changes were apparently not enough. We have evidence of the problems and questions which concerned the government of Ceylon in correspondence spanning the 1930s between the Crown Agents and Dr A.J. Bull of the London County Council School of Photo Engraving and Lithography, who acted as an external consultant and adviser on printing.23 Signs of trouble appear in a report made in 1928 by W.W. Woods, the Colonial Treasurer, and sent to Bull in 1933. Woods was keen on cutting costs: he suggested reducing the size of notes for five rupees or more, to save money on paper and freight and because, he claimed, they would fit better into pocket books and so would be more popular with the public. In fact smaller-size notes were issued from 1929. But Woods' main concern was with forgery, to the extent that having been 'feeling apprehensive about the security against fraudulent reproduction of our notes', he spent some of his leave in 1927 visiting De La Rue, Bradbury Wilkinson and Waterlow, three of the main security printers in England. After much consideration, he proposed adding rainbow tints and printing on the back of notes which did not already have these features, in order to stop the success of hand-drawn forgeries which had been fooling the public. But Woods' whole attitude to preventing forgery was rather contradictory, for while he appears to have been very interested in comparing different technical possibilities, he did not consider that either the public or the forgers merited too much effort. He stated that there was no point in using high-quality expensive intaglio plate-printing, because they were not dealing with high-class counterfeiters, but with

The local forger, and he can generally succeed, so far as his immediate victims are concerned, if he can obtain an appropriate resemblance to a genuine note. The ordinary member of the public in Ceylon has shown himself quite unable to appreciate even obvious defects in forged notes.... 24

A handwritten comment in the margin of his copy of the report suggests that Bull took a more positive view on this matter: 'Can they be educated a little?' At the same time, however, he did not think much of the notes, referring back to his comments in an earlier letter: 'Upon the whole I have not formed a very high opinion of this set of notes. Their security value is low... There are moreover no distinctive outstanding features that can easily be remembered.'25 Bull

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23 Copies of this correspondence are contained in the Cartwright Papers in the collection of the Chartered Institute of Bankers, which is placed on loan with the Department of Coins and Medals in the British Museum.


25 Bull to the Crown Agents, 1 August 1910, Cartwright Papers.
was also unimpressed by Woods' suggestion of rainbow tints, which he believed could be copied, as could designs on the back of notes. Instead he recommended greater use of geometric patterns of white and black line work, a well-engraved portrait, and above all, a good watermark (the only aspect of the existing design which really pleased him), which should be fully visible in a panel free from any printing. This last point became a source of continuing argument, as the Ceylon government did not want a plain white panel in their notes; but Bull insisted that any form of printing would obscure the watermark, and he suggested compromising with off-white paper.

Despite all this discussion, nothing happened for some time - perhaps because the government was more interested in economising than in innovation. But in 1937 the subject came up again because Ceylon's notes were to be made legal tender; that is, there was no longer any obligation on the government to exchange the notes for coin. The wording on the notes had to be changed, and this presented an opportunity to make more radical alterations to the design. For the next three years, letters sped back and forth between the Crown Agents and Bull, the government apparently looking for the cheapest possible option. They kept sending Bull sketches from various printers, including the Indian Security Press; Bull kept replying that the best designs were those offered by Thomas De La Rue. At one stage the government peevishly asked Bull to confine his considerations to security value rather than artistic appeal; he snapped back 'Questions of art I agree have rarely much to do with note design, but the questions of appearance and security are inseparable . . .' 27

Gradually, however, a rather grudging consensus emerged. The notes should have a portrait of the British monarch, George VI, the Ceylon lion for the watermark, geometric line-work for added security, and a picture on the back - although there was some trouble over that. The representative of the Ceylon government wrote 'I find that many countries incorporate pictorial matter in their notes: His Excellency the Governor has expressed himself definitely in favour of such a feature in Ceylon notes.' Dr Bull replied that this was 'almost invariably the easiest part of the note to imitate .... Should it become necessary to include pictorial matter, then I hope it may be relegated to the back of the note.' 29 Evidently his view prevailed.

The results of these deliberations and altercations emerged in a new issue of government notes introduced in 1941, the last series of paper money in the colonial history of Ceylon. The notes were printed in colour by Thomas De La Rue. All carried a portrait of George VI on the front, with dense patterns of machine-engraving and white-line work, and a stylised Sinhalese lion as the watermark, fully visible in a circle devoid of printing. On the 100 rupees note, there was also elegant pairs of palms framing the portrait and the watermark - an echo of the palms which had appeared so often in the vignettes on nineteenth-century issues. (Pl. 22, 17) The backs of the notes were indeed filled with pictorial images, each denomination illustrating a different indigenous scene or landmark. An elephant appeared on the one rupee note, the lion rock of Sigirya on the two rupees, Thuparama Dagoba (the country's oldest stupa) on five rupees, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy on ten rupees (Pl. 22, 18), a paddy field on fifty rupees, Laksapana Waterfall on 100 rupees, and a fishing boat off a palm-fringed coast on the 1000 rupee note.

Of course the portrait of a British king was a clear reference to continuing British authority; nevertheless, there is a shift of emphasis in these designs, with a more realistic representation

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26 That is, machine-engraved patterns of fine white lines on a dark background, or black lines on a pale background.
27 Comments by the government of Ceylon passed on in a letter from the Crown Agents to Bull, 10 Jun 1939; Bull to the Crown Agents, 29 June 1939, Cartwright Papers.
28 Experts in the natural history of Ceylon may observe that the lion is no more native to the island than the camel; however, unlike the lifelike camels which appeared in the earlier vignettes, a mythical lion is at the very source of Sinhalese culture. According to the Mahavamsa, the legend of the founding of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese people are descended from a North Indian prince who was the grandson of a lion (Sinha). The lion is therefore a symbol of power and national identity.
29 Crown Agents' letter to Bull, 10 June 1939; Bull to the Crown Agents, 29 June 1939.
of Ceylon compared with earlier note issues. The camels have disappeared; Britannia has
gone, taking with her the British lion, whose place is taken by the lion of Ceylon; and the
symbolic elephants and palms are transformed into naturalistic views of the country. These
changes are typical of general trends in note design at this time, which can be explained partly
by the wish for more elaborate printing to deter forgery, but their significance surely reaches
beyond merely practical considerations. A.J. Bull dismissed pictures as easy to copy, yet note
designs are concerned not only with security, but also with establishing an identity. From the
earliest coins to our own currency today, images on money have been used to define and
declare the geographical and cultural identity of the issuer and the place of circulation. Viewed
in this light, the last British paper money in Ceylon signalled the forthcoming change in the
country's status from colony to independent state, and the national note issues of the Central
Bank of Ceylon.

KEY TO PLATES 15–22

1. Vignette by Silvester from a Ceylon Treasury £5 note design, c. 1827.
2. Vignette by Silvester from an unissued £1 note of the General Bank, Plymouth, c. 1820s.
4. Detail of vignette from Ceylon Treasury notes, c. 1850.
5. Detail of vignette from Bank of Ceylon £2 note, 1840s.
6. Britannia and Hibernia in a vignette from a note design by Perkins for the Provincial Bank of Ireland, 1825.
7. Oriental Bank Corporation, 10 rupees, 1862, by Perkins Bacon (front).
8. Oriental Bank Corporation, 10 rupees, 1862 (back).
10. Neptune and seahorses on the back of a 100 rupee note of the Oriental Bank Corporation, 1876.
15. Government of India, 10 rupees, 1919, by Thomas De La Rue.
17. Government of Ceylon, 100 rupees, 1945 (front).

No. 1 is reproduced by kind permission of William Barrett. The notes in nos. 3–8, 10 and 12 are from the
collection of the Chartered Institute of Bankers, placed on loan with the British Museum. The remaining notes are
all in the British Museum collection of paper money.
HEWITT: BRITISH NOTE ISSUES FOR CEYLON (1)
(NOT ACTUAL SIZE)
PLATE 16

HEWITT: BRITISH NOTE ISSUES FOR CEYLON (2)
(NOT ACTUAL SIZE)
HEWITT: BRITISH NOTE ISSUES FOR CEYLON (3)
(NOT ACTUAL SIZE)
HEWITT: BRITISH NOTE ISSUES FOR CEYLON (5)
(NOT ACTUAL SIZE)
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HEWITT: BRITISH NOTE ISSUES FOR CEYLON (6)

(NOT ACTUAL SIZE)
PLATE 21

HEWITT: BRITISH NOTE ISSUES FOR CEYLON (7)
(NOT ACTUAL SIZE)
HEWITT: BRITISH NOTE ISSUES FOR CEYLON (8)
(Not actual size)