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AUSTRALIAN COINS 1919 TO 1924

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BACKGROUND

Prior to 1910, the Commonwealth of Australia continued the Colonial practice of importing and employing British Imperial coins. In that year, the first steps were taken towards the adoption of a purely Australian coinage with the introduction of four silver denominations. Although three Branches of the Royal Mint existed in Australia, at Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, it was the Royal Mint itself which was approached by the Australian Government to prepare dies and strike these coins. This was not a throwback to colonial thinking, nor even an oversight on the part of the Government. It was a simple recognition of the form and level of technical skills which existed at the Australian Branches. They were totally incapable of undertaking the tasks of designing and preparing tools for a new issue.



Florin, 1910
Royal Mint, London

All three Australian Branches of the Royal Mint were created as a direct response to the discovery of gold. The Sydney Mint was both the first in Australia, and the first experiment with a colonial branch which the Royal Mint had undertaken. Perhaps as a result of

this, the development of this Mint was somewhat tentative. In addition to breaking new ground, the Sydney Mint differed in original concept from those which followed. Sydney was to produce sovereigns and half-sovereigns of a distinctive design and these would be legal tender only in the Australasian colonies. In addition Sydney was conceived and built early in the series of gold discoveries in Australia, and this too was a factor in determining its size and scope.

By contrast, the Branch founded at Melbourne was developed in a climate of optimism and experience. The buildings were completely new and were specialised. The Sydney Mint coins had gained international acceptance by 1868, and from 1871, Sydney was striking Imperial sovereigns. Melbourne, from the outset was to produce Imperial gold coins. Further, the Victorian Treasury offered 25% more than its New South Wales counterpart for the annual upkeep of its mint. It is possible to continue listing the advantages which accrued to the Melbourne Branch through its following Sydney, but these points are sufficient to set the scene.

The Perth Branch was a much later development. Its first coin was struck in 1899. Although it was a smaller mint, it was technically as well equipped as Melbourne. Never the less, it had only a small role in the development of the Commonwealth coinage. The prime reason for this was its isolation from the centres of population. In addition, Perth was still heavily involved with the processing of gold when the local coinage was introduced, while both Sydney and Melbourne were actively seeking other forms of income.

At all three mints it was gold and the gold sovereign which were the sole real concern in the early days. The mints were established without workshops capable of producing dies. Naturally, London wished to retain control over its gold coinage. To this end, the Royal Mint was to be the only supplier of working dies. The only recognition of the dangers and time delays involved in this method of supply was that dies were sent in two shipments. Even this had only been developed after the entire supply of dies destined for the Melbourne Mint was lost with the "Rangoon" in 1871.

In 1910, the local mints did have a role to play in the introduction of the distinctive Australian coinage. It was that of storage and distribution centres.¹ Again, Melbourne held an advantage. At that time the Commonwealth Government was centred in that city.

From 1910 until 1915, the Commonwealth arranged for all of its coins to be struck in England, through the Royal Mint. The coins were either struck by the Royal Mint itself, or, under contract to the Mint, by the private firm The Mint, Birmingham Ltd. The outbreak of the war, with its dangers to shipping led to a change in this policy. From 1916 the four silver denominations were to be struck at Melbourne, and arrangements were made with the mint at Calcutta to supply the bronze coins.



Shilling, 1916 M
Melbourne Mint
Dies sent from London



Penny, 1912 H
The Mint, Birmingham
Dies sent from London



Penny, 1916 I
Calcutta Mint
Master dies sent from London

* Abbreviations:

Ann. Rep. *Annual Report of the Deputy Master and Comptroller of the Royal Mint, London.*

VPRO. Files of the Melbourne Branch of the Royal Mint. These are held by the Victorian Public Records Office, Laverton, and are indexed by that Office by Series and Unit. Reference to Division and Registration Number is to the Mint's own filing system as held within the relevant VPRO Unit.

1. *Ann. Rep.*, 1910, 137.

The Royal Mint still played a major role. They supplied all working dies to Melbourne and sent master dies to Calcutta.² This Indian mint was better equipped than mints in Australia and could prepare its own working dies. As it happened, one of the master dies supplied to Calcutta, that for the obverse of the penny, differed in minor, but identifiable ways, from the master which London itself used in preparing Australian penny dies. The ability to differentiate between coins struck from dies which, in turn, were made with the London or Indian obverse master becomes important after 1919.



Penny struck from die from
London obverse master
Last stroke of N in OMN
aligned with rim bead



Penny struck from die from
Calcutta obverse master
last stroke of N in OMN
between two rim beads

In 1919, the Commonwealth Treasury placed an order for £10,000. in bronze pence with the Melbourne Mint.³ At the same time, the Sydney Mint was requested to undertake a coinage of bronze halfpence. The Commonwealth did not believe that this distribution of work was ideal, as part of the issue of each denomination would have to be transported to the other mint city. However, the Commonwealth was led to believe that the machinery at Sydney could not cope with the extra stresses involved in striking the physically larger coins.

Both mints reacted to their orders in their established manner.

They cabled to London for the necessary working dies.⁴ At London there was some concern at a request that no mint mark be placed on the dies. On earlier occasions the dies for Australian coins had always had these marks. "H" for The Mint, Birmingham Ltd. (Heaton) from 1912 to 1915, "I" for Calcutta (India) from 1916 to 1918, and even "M" for Melbourne from 1916 to the then current silver issues. Only the coins from the Royal Mint itself bore no mark. They cabled Melbourne to point out that other mints might later strike the penny denomination and suggested that an "M" should be placed on the new issue of dies. Presumably, an "S" was also suggested to the Sydney Mint. The Melbourne Mint replied that it held no objection to this inclusion, but the Commonwealth Treasury had specifically stated that there were to be no such marks as they wanted the dies to be interchangeable between mints.⁵

NICKEL PATTERNS

The original Commonwealth order for 1919 bronze pence began: "Pending the introduction of nickel coins . . .", and shows that the mint authorities believed that the introduction of nickel pence was imminent. This belief had a major impact on their planning.

2. *Ann. Rep.*, 1916, 12.

3. *Ann. Rep.*, 1918-19, 91.

4. VPRO., Series 644, Unit 23, 20 Feb. 1919.

5. *op. cit.*, 26 Feb. 1919.

Discussions and plans for such a nickel coinage were already well advanced when the order for bronze pence had been placed. The final drawings for the proposed nickel pieces were available in February 1919 when London was cabled for the dies for the then urgently needed bronze pence issue. From the outset, it was planned that the dies for the nickel pieces would be made at the Melbourne Mint. To this end in April the mint ordered 32 bars of die steel from London.⁶ After that, Douglas Richardson was set to model the relief and Stokes and Son were asked to sink the lettered dies.



Pattern nickel penny, 1919
Dies produced in Melbourne

The importance of these plans for nickel pence to the operation of the Branch in 1919 does not shine forth from the *Annual Report*. There is a brief mention of the nickel coins, but most discussion relates to the actual production of the bronze pence and the difficulties to be overcome in obtaining dies. A. M. Le Souef, at the time the superintendent of the coining department, simply states that during the year (1919) there was an increase in demand for pence which left no time for new dies to be imported from London. As a result, the Mint was forced

to prepare hubs from a pair of dies in stock and from these to produce the needed working dies. This sounds quite reasonable, but may be a whitewash covering confusion between the Mint and the Commonwealth Treasury.

The authorities at the Melbourne Mint were fully aware of the time required to obtain dies from London. Two orders for bronze pence dies were placed with the Royal Mint in 1919, the first in February and the second in May. Normally, the Melbourne Mint placed its orders for dies for the following year in July. These dies would therefore be available by late November or early December if needed. In 1919 this procedure was followed, and the dies thought necessary for 1920 were ordered in July. Significantly, no bronze pence dies were requested at that time. The penny dies ordered in February and May were not available in Melbourne until August 1919. Had standard procedures been followed, and further bronze pence dies been ordered in July, there should therefore have been little difficulty filling all requests for pence for that year and Le Souef's discussion of the difficulty of obtaining dies in the *Annual Report* for 1919 would have been unnecessary. It is surely no coincidence that in July, instead of ordering bronze pence dies for 1920, Melbourne was forwarding its first specimen of the nickel coinage to the Treasury.⁷ At the time they had on hand the die steel which they thought would be used to produce the dies for the first major issue of nickel pence early in the next year. The Mint authorities clearly acted throughout 1919 in the belief that there would be no call for 1920 bronze pence.

In August 1919, the last twelve pairs of bronze pence dies arrived from London. As suggested, in normal circumstances, this would have sufficed until the 1920 dies arrived. However, in November, instead of dies, Melbourne took delivery of 17 cwt. of nickel. But by then signs of panic were apparent. At the end of

6. *op. cit.*, April 1919 and 8 May 1919.

7. *op. cit.*, 15 July 1919.

October the Deputy Master had written to the Treasury to ask for an estimate of nickel pence requirements for 1920 and enquired after the amount of nickel that had been ordered. The Mint had been ready for the production of nickel pence from the end of September when directions for the production of dies had arrived from London.⁸ Even the possibility that the request to employ the uncrowned head of George V might be rejected had been taken into account by using a sixpence die to produce a crowned head obverse. But the orders from the Commonwealth did not arrive, just further requests for bronze pence.



Nickel pence, 1920

At some point, it must have become apparent that the Commonwealth was not going to finalise their arrangements nor authorise the production of the nickel coins in the immediate future. From September, the Mint had written directions for the production of dies available, so the very earliest date for their next step would have been late that month. However, it is more likely that it should be placed after the enquiry for estimates of nickel coin production, in

late October 1919. The step was described by Le Souef in the 1919 Annual Report. A pair of unused bronze penny dies were employed to produce punches from which further working dies could be prepared.⁹



Penny struck from die "cloned" at Melbourne Mint.

MELBOURNE 1919 "CLONE" PENCE DIES

The dies which were available for this cloning operation were all produced from the London master. As such, the obverse dies produced at Melbourne all match the London obverse. However, they were not as well produced as the original dies, they were, after all two steps removed from them. Today, it is only on uncirculated examples of the coins which they produced that the differences are really apparent. The Melbourne dies produced coins with a more rounded look to their relief, and the gemstones down the front of the King's crown were not struck up. Even the specimens retained by the Mint itself, and now in the Victorian State Collection,¹⁰ show these weaknesses.

The Mint elected to place marks in the form of a small beads on the reverse of their 1919 bronze pence dies. Exactly what these were to indicate is uncertain. Had there been only one form, one could espouse the view that they were to indicate that the dies were made at

8. *op. cit.*, 30 Sept. 1919.

9. *Ann. Rep.*, 1918-19, 91.

10. Registration Numbers 4832 and 5517.

Melbourne. However, two forms occur: a bead below the bottom scroll and beads both below the bottom scroll and above the top scroll. Similar marks occurred on the dies for the 1920 bronze pence.



Penny, 1919 Bead below lower scroll



Penny, 1920 Bead below lower scroll

As already noted, no dies for bronze pence for 1920 were ordered in 1919. The dies at Melbourne were all dated 1919, and so all of the Melbourne clones bore that date. As a result, all penny production for the early part of 1920 would have been dated 1919. In early March 1920, the Mint destroyed 93 obverse and 100 reverse bronze penny dies, all worn. This left a balance of five pairs on hand at their stocktake on the

5th of that month.¹¹ It would appear that this marked the end of this phase of pence production, as no further action was taken for that denomination until May.

In all patience, the Mint had again been waiting for the authorisation to proceed with the production of the nickel pence. On May 19th, they were again disappointed. On that date they must have received notice of an urgent order for pence, as they broke with precedent and cabled an order for dies to Calcutta. At first they requested twenty pairs of dies, but when Calcutta replied that they could only send soft, unturned dies as they did not know the fittings for the presses in Australia, Melbourne added a request for a pair of punches.¹²

BEADS ON 1919 AND 1920 PENCE

At about this time it was also decided that later in the year the Sydney Mint would produce pence. By July 1920, the shortage of pence must have been severe. The dies ordered from Calcutta had not arrived, and Sydney was therefore forced to purchase three pairs of 1919 dated penny dies from Melbourne.¹³ Fortunately, the tools and working dies arrived from Calcutta in mid-August and Melbourne was able to finish off seventeen pairs and forward them to Sydney in time for the ceremonial striking of the first penny at that mint on October 6th.¹⁴ All seventeen pairs of dies supplied in this second batch were manufactured at Calcutta though finished and hardened at Melbourne. As such they were the product of the Indian master dies, not the London. They can therefore be differentiated from the earlier dies sent to Sydney on details other than their date. This could be important since Sydney had three 1919 dated dies which could have been used. If they were, it may throw some light on the nature of Melbourne's

11. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 71, Reg. 81/20.

12. VPRO., Series 644, Unit 27, 25 May 1920.

13. *op. cit.*, 9 July 1920.

14. Forwarding dies, *op. cit.*, 16 Sept. 1920. Striking first penny at Sydney, *Ann. Rep.*, 1920-21, 81.

use of beads. However, before that possibility can be examined, the remaining information about the bead issues needs to be outlined.

Coins bearing the date 1920 occur with all three bead forms known for 1919: no bead, bead below the bottom scroll, and a bead both below the bottom scroll and above the top scroll. In addition, beads were placed on the 1920 dies in two other positions: above the top scroll, and above the bottom scroll. That is, there was a total of five variations on 1920 dies.

The Mint records which are available in Victoria give almost no guidance to the meaning of this bizarre series of combinations. In 1944 an employee at the Mint recollected that he had stamped small dots onto dies that were to be sent to Sydney. However, this recollection of a minor job, almost a quarter of a century earlier is not too valuable. Other information, from numismatic circles closer to the date of production prove that he was aware of only part of the picture.

There is almost no doubt that the presence of a bead above the lower scroll on the 1920 penny indicates that a coin was struck at the Sydney Mint. On October 28, 1920, Dr. Arthur Andrews exhibited such a coin at the meeting of the Australian Numismatic Society in Sydney. He described the piece as being struck at the Sydney Mint from a similar die to the 1920 penny struck at Melbourne (also exhibited), but distinguished by having a dot above the lower scroll rather than below it.¹⁵ This is a valuable piece of information as the first striking of pence at Sydney occurred exactly three weeks before this meeting. Further, his statement is partly supported as the Melbourne Mint preserved two specimen pence which they struck in 1920 and these have the bead below the lower scroll.¹⁶

With this information, it is tempting to allocate the third 1919 form, the double-dot type, to the dies sent to Sydney in July 1920. There is some nice circumstantial evidence which would appear to support such an attribution. For a start, the 1919 double dot coins are quite scarce as would be expected from an issue from three dies. Further, it could be argued that the bead above the top scroll had a similar meaning to the bead above the lower one, and if Dr. Andrews is believed, that could mean that the coin was struck at Sydney. This would then be supported by the existence of 1920 double dot and dot above the top scroll varieties. A third shipment of dies to Sydney did occur, and it included dies manufactured at Melbourne as well as the last of those imported from Calcutta. This third shipment took place after the meeting of the ANS noted above, so that Dr. Andrews could not have known of these variations if they were struck at Sydney. One can even point to the earliest recorded display of the 1919 double dot variety as evidence for its late striking, it was at the September meeting of the Numismatic Society of Victoria, not in 1919, but in 1920.¹⁷

If this concept is accepted, a pleasantly simple sequence seems to fall into place. In 1919, no dot occurs on dies supplied direct from London, they were after all supplied hardened. The dies manufactured in Melbourne were designated by the addition of a dot below the lower scroll, and the three pairs supplied to Sydney had an extra dot placed above the top scroll. In 1920, the dies supplied from Calcutta were not hardened, so it was possible to indicate their origin by placing a dot above the bottom scroll. All of these were sent to Sydney so that no additional marks were needed. Then came the second batch of dies produced at Melbourne. And the same forms employed in 1919, with the addition of one new combination, bead

15. *Spinks Numismatic Circular*, May/June 1921, Vol. XXIX Parts 5-6, Col. 219.

16. Registration Numbers 4833 and 4834.

17. *Spinks Numismatic Circular*, Jan./Feb. 1921, Vol. XXIX, Parts 1-2, Col. 36-37.

above the top scroll, were repeated. Presumably, as no dies were sent from London in 1920, the practice was discontinued later in the year as the Commonwealth did not want Mint Marks, and so the 1920 penny with no bead became the common form.

This theory has the advantage of explaining in a simple manner a rather complex series of die variations. However, it lacks solid support and that support, whilst it should exist, has not been found despite an extensive search. The 1919 dated dies which were supplied to Sydney were Melbourne clones of the London dies. The Indian masters did not arrive until a month after their delivery. As such, the obverse dies from this first batch can be differentiated from those of the second, and subsequent batches. The dies, though supplied in pairs, were not used in that manner. When a die wore out, it was replaced, not the pair. Further, it is known from Dr. Andrews, that Sydney began striking with the 1920 dated dies. If the 1919 dies were used at all at Sydney, they should therefore fit the pattern of 1920 combinations. To seek this proof, a survey has been undertaken of the Collection of the Museum of Victoria, coins in trade and a private collection. The results are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey of 1919 and 1920 bronze pence.

| | LONDON DIE | INDIAN DIE | TOTAL |
|--------------------|------------|------------|-------|
| 1919 | 176 | 0 | 176 |
| 1919 bead below | 156 | 0 | 156 |
| 1919 double dot | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| 1920 | 0 | 96 | 96 |
| 1920 bead below | 8 | 36 | 44 |
| 1920 double dot | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| 1920 bead above | 0 | 24 | 24 |
| 1920 top bead only | 0 | 3 | 3 |

This survey offers no support for the proposed allocation of bead variations to mints, indeed it is positively damning. The 1919 double dot fits perfectly into the pattern of 1919 dated coins and the only use of the London obverse on coins dated 1920 is with those which are firmly

attested to have been struck at Melbourne. It would appear that Sydney used neither obverse nor reverse of their first batch of penny dies.

Just over 500 coins were involved in this survey, but they should not be considered a random sample. The Museum's collection contains just over 200 pence of these two years, and was specifically gathered for coins showing die variations. It alone is the result of an earlier survey of many thousands of coins and its failure to contain a single example which would support the proposal is highly significant.

In addition, the survey is not a good indication of the relative scarcity of the rarer varieties. The coins in trade were made up in sets to fit the standard albums, so the varieties which are not included in standard sets are poorly represented, while those which are included are present in numbers which may belie their scarcity.

The simple allocation of the beads as potential indicators of mint does not appear to work very well. The beads do seem to relate to where the dies were made and may have also indicated the source or type of steel from which they were made. By chance, Sydney received all twenty Calcutta dies, so the mark of a bead above the lower scroll, meant to indicate the Calcutta origin, also indicates the Sydney striking. However, the third shipment of dies to Sydney in November 1920 contained nine reverse dies which would not have that mark. On the basis of the occurrence of the different types it is most likely that they were plain.

SYDNEY PENCE STRUCK IN 1921 WERE DATED 1920

It is significant that the last shipment of pence dies to Sydney for this period was in November 1920. It happened to be that month too when Melbourne again decided that it could wait no longer for authorisation to proceed with the nickel coinage, and ordered punches for the

1921 bronze pence!¹⁸ From this, it is clear that the Sydney Mint could not have struck coins dated 1921, even though they continued to strike pence into that year. Sydney reported striking 146,160 pence in 1921, all in January. At that time the Deputy Master informed the Commonwealth that no further work with this denomination could be done until the machinery was upgraded. A note to this effect appeared in both the 1920 and the 1921 Reports, but this was not the result of two events. The 1920 Annual Report was not compiled until February 1921 by which time the minting of pence for that year had finished.¹⁹

PERTH PENCE, 1921

At the end of 1921 the Commonwealth approached the Perth Mint for a supply of bronze pence. Perth, in turn, asked both the Melbourne and Sydney mints if they were able to supply dies for this order. Sydney offered her unused obverse and 1920 dated reverse dies, but Melbourne was able to supply immediately three pairs of 1921 dated dies.²⁰ Perth was therefore able to strike 93,600 pence dated 1921 in December of that year.²¹ For some reason, this issue has been neglected by the standard catalogues. All of these coins are known to have been put into circulation through the Western Australian banks. As it happened, Melbourne, being ever optimistic, had delayed ordering punches for the 1922 bronze penny, and was therefore unable to supply Perth with dies bearing that date until much later. Out of the total of sixteen pairs of dies supplied to Perth for its "1922" coinage, eight were dated 1921.

It would appear that a mixture of London and Indian obverse dies were supplied to Perth. A survey of 1921 and 1922 pence indicates that the London master tools came into use at Melbourne towards the end of 1921. It is probable that this occurred after the first batch of dies were supplied to Perth. As a result, while Perth went into the 1922 issues with the older Indian obverse dies, Melbourne used the new London dies for that year. If that was the case, all 1922 pence with the Indian obverse can be allocated to the Perth Mint.

Table 2. Survey of 1921 and 1922 Pence.

| | LONDON DIE | INDIAN DIE | TOTAL |
|------|------------|------------|-------|
| 1921 | 4 | 153 | 157 |
| 1922 | 235 | 48 | 283 |

1919 SHILLING AND 1920 STAR PATTERNS

The year 1921 saw another development at the Melbourne Mint, the production and supply of halfpenny dies to Sydney. Up until that year, Sydney had obtained all of these dies from London. But by 1921 London was happy to encourage local autonomy in die production. The reason for this was that the Royal Mint was fully employed with a re-coinage of the British silver denominations. An immense rise in the international price of silver had forced the British to abandon sterling silver as their standard, and adopt a new coinage alloy of 50% silver and 50% copper.²² Australia too, though a silver producing nation, was rocked by the price rise. Legislators here however were undecided as to the new alloy. At first .625 fine was chosen and the 1919 pattern shilling was struck as an experiment with that alloy.²³ Later it was

18. VPRO., Series 644, Unit 27, 24 Nov. 1920. The cable read: "owing delay nickel pair penny punches required urgent"

19. *Ann. Rep.*, 1920-21, 81 and 86. Sydney completed work on pence in January 1921 but the 1920 report was not compiled until February 1921.

20. VPRO., Series 642, Unit 121, Div. 1H, Reg. 335/21 and 338/21.

21. *Ann. Rep.*, 1920-21, 124.

22. *op. cit.*, 5-7.

23. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 41, Div. A, Reg. 250/19. It is believed that the 1918 shilling from defaced dies (Spink (Australasia), Sydney, 19 & 20 Nov. 1981, Lot 942) was also struck at this fineness. The threepence from the same sale, Lot 943, however seems to be struck at .925 fine.



Pattern Shilling 1919
.625 fine silver alloy

decided that the British lead ought to be followed and .500 fine was recommended. Still Later, as nothing had actually been done it was decided to leave it at that. After all, by then, the demand for silver had been greatly curtailed and the price and subsequently dropped.

The statement "as nothing had actually been done" is true of course only in terms of actual legislation. Much background work had taken place, and the Melbourne Mint had been heavily involved. In 1920, Melbourne had worked hard to be ready to produce both the nickel and .500 fine silver coins.

The normal order for 1920 dies for the silver coins had been placed in July 1919, but in March 1920 the debasement was

imminent and a new set of dies, with smaller date figures to differentiate the debased coins from the earlier issues, were ordered.²⁴ London, being already pressed, cabled back to suggest that the addition of a star above the date would serve that purpose and could be produced more easily and quickly than reworking the date. This change was accepted by Melbourne, and working dies for 1920 and punches for 1921 were ordered with the star.²⁵ By August, Melbourne had received thirty pairs of working dies for the florin and shilling denominations dated 1920 and bearing the star. In September, two sets of punches for each silver denomination, dated 1921 and also carrying the star also arrived. The mint was ready for another order which never came.

24. VPRO. Series 643, Unit 70, Div. IQ, Reg. 55/20.

25. *op. cit.*, Reg. 59/20.



Pattern florin & shilling, 1920 star
The star was to indicate a lowering of the silver alloy.

1921 STAR SHILLING

In November 1920, Melbourne again sent an urgent cable to London. This time they needed a set of 1921 dated punches without the star.²⁶ London obliged by polishing the star off a set of punches they had on hand and these arrived in January 1921.²⁷ In addition to the work being carried out for Melbourne, London was also helping the Sydney Mint meet its orders. Halfpenny dies were supplied in 1920, as were the usual dies for the gold sovereign. Late in 1920 however, Sydney ordered working dies for a denomination she had not struck before, the shilling. The Royal Mint had punches available, and filled the order in exactly the same manner that Melbourne's recent needs had been filled. The only difference was that Sydney wanted its dies dated 1921 and not 1920 as Melbourne. This caused

no problem as punches had been prepared dated 1921 for Melbourne and London retained a full set for emergency use. Unfortunately, the star on these punches was not going to be needed, but by the time this information arrived in London in November 1920, the 1921 star shilling dies had been sent to Sydney (the order for thirty pairs of dies was completed in London on 13 October 1920).²⁸ As already noted, the spare set of punches did see further service. The stars were removed and they were sent to Melbourne.



Shilling, 1921 star
Produced at Sydney Mint
Dies supplied from London

1921 HALFPENCE

The halfpence dated 1921 present some interesting problems. The Sydney Mint recorded the production of 5,280,000 halfpence during 1921, but the source or sources of their dies is unclear. It is known that Sydney completed its order for pence in January 1921 and proceeded to strike shillings and then sixpences, the dies being provided by London and Melbourne respectively. It is also known that until 1921 London supplied the halfpenny dies. However in February 1921 Sydney asked Melbourne to produce dies for the halfpenny although dies for that year had been ordered from London as early as March 1920. As it happened, the February order was cancelled,²⁹ but not before Sydney had sent a pair of reserve

26. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 70, Reg. 314/20.

27. *op. cit.*, Reg. 322/20.

28. Information supplied by Mr. G.P. Dyer, Curator and Librarian, Royal Mint from the 1919-21 die ledger. Museum of Victoria File 360 G, dated 17th. August 1984.

29. See note 28. London had the first six pairs of 1921 dated dies ready by Feb. 6th, and the full order of 40 by mid-March.

specimen dies to Melbourne to guide them for the fittings required and to act as masters for further die production.³⁰

The matter of dies for the halfpenny came up again in September 1921. Sydney acquired dies from London after cancelling the order to Melbourne in February, and they forwarded another reverse die in September, presumably dated 1921. On this occasion Sydney appears to have required hubs so that they could make their own working dies. On October 4th, three hubs, two for the obverse and one for the reverse, were sent north. However, the scheme was less than a perfect success, though not a total failure. By the end of October Melbourne had begun to supply working dies,³¹ but a further reverse hub, dated 1922, was sent up in March 1922.³²

The 1921 halfpenny has long been recognised for the variety of alignments of its date numerals, especially the last "1".³³ These variations are the result of the fact that the London Mint did not produce a working punch dated 1921. Graham Dyer suggests that an earlier dated punch was used to produce the 40 dies London made for Sydney. If this was the case then at least the last two numerals of the date (21) would have been entered by hand on the working dies (this approach may also have occurred in 1919 and 1920 in which case alignment problems should occur on the halfpence bearing those dates).³⁴ In addition to these there is another common problem with the halfpence of 1921. That was that the word "ONE" of the denomination was difficult to strike up.³⁵ This was common on dies supplied by Melbourne. It was a result of the lack of convexity which could be obtained on the working dies as the original pattern had not been

a master die. Melbourne assured Sydney that this problem would not occur with the 1922 dated dies, as these, first supplied in February 1922, were from a new punch received from London.³⁶

1923 HALFPENCE

In 1922, Sydney continued to produce sixpence and halfpenny coins. Although the Commonwealth had installed two new coining presses in 1921, it was the capacity of the crushing mill which made the return to the production of pence impossible. Melbourne supplied Sydney with most, if not all of its Commonwealth die requirement for 1922. This included 47 obverse and 45 reverse halfpenny dies.³⁷ The last of these were sent in August 1922. In the December 1922 stock-take, Melbourne had no halfpenny dies, nor were any manufactured in the June half year of 1923, Sydney did not order them.³⁸

The year 1923 was one in which the future of the Sydney Mint looked very limited. The Commonwealth had placed no new orders for coin with any of the mints. While this might have afforded an opportunity to repair its buildings and machinery, the lack of financial viability both that year and for the foreseeable future forbade Sydney this move.³⁹ The last of its orders were completed early in



Halfpenny, 1923
Produced at Melbourne Mint

30. VPRO., Series 644, Unit 27, 2 Feb. 1921.

31. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 51, Reg. 59/22.

32. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 70, Reg. 162/22.

33. eg. Hanley and James, *Collecting Australian Coins*, Sydney, 1966, 108.

34. See note 28 above.

35. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 116, Div. 1C, Reg. 40/22.

36. *op. cit.*, Reg. 45/22.

37. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 71, Reg. 5/23.

38. *op. cit.*, Reg. 163/23.

39. *Ann. Rep.*, 1923, 83-84.

the year, all of the halfpence bearing the date 1922. In fact, no coins bearing the date 1923 were struck anywhere in Australia until March of that year.⁴⁰

The future of the Sydney Mint was not assured until after a conference between State and Federal authorities held in Melbourne in December 1923. At that meeting it was decided that in future Sydney would receive 42% of Commonwealth coin orders and an upgrading of its machinery was then undertaken.

The popularly held belief that the 1923 halfpence were struck at Sydney and are rare despite the recorded mintage of 1,113,600 pieces because Sydney employed many 1922 dated dies is incorrect. Sydney received no dies for halfpence dated 1923, all of its issue that year bore the date 1922.

On 10 July 1923, the Melbourne Mint received an order for £1000 (480,000 pieces) of halfpence.⁴¹ Following this, on 20 September, three pairs of dies were issued from the workshop. However, one pair was almost immediately returned for further work.⁴² That the remaining two pairs were responsible for the entire striking of 1923 halfpence is suggested by a survey of circulated coins. Twenty five pieces were examined and these two combinations of die cracks were discovered.

All but five of the coins exhibited die

cracks and these were all either the combination A/1 or B/2. Fifteen of the twenty with die cracks had the combination A/1. It would appear that the coins are rare because the dies failed very early in their use.

Six reverse dies for the 1924 halfpence were delivered from the workshop on 22 Jan., 1924 and by 18 Feb. specimens of the 1924 issue were being forwarded to London for the British Empire Exhibition.⁴⁴ Melbourne was very proud of its 1924 coinage as this was the first time that the final date figure for all denominations had been changed at their own workshops. It is therefore unlikely that a further coinage of 1923 dated halfpence occurred even though the third reverse die was returned from the workshop on the 6th of March. This die does however appear to have been used, but only to strike specimens. The Le Souef 1923 specimen halfpenny was struck from the same obverse die as the specimen 1924 halfpence retained by the Melbourne Mint.⁴⁵

Estimates of the number of 1923 halfpence actually produced cannot be usefully made at this stage. The dies did not have an "average" life and so cannot be compared with other production figures. All that can be said is that a small, perhaps very small, portion of the 681,600 halfpence delivered to Treasury in 1924 bore the date 1923.

Obv. A

~~GEORGIVS V D.G. BRITT: OMN: REX: F.D. IND: IMP:~~

Rev. 1

~~COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA: 1923~~

Obv. B

~~GEORGIVS V D.G. BRITT: OMN: REX: F.D. IND: IMP:~~

Rev. 2

~~COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA: 1923~~

40. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 70, Div. 1Q, Reg. 77/23. In communicating with the Royal Mint, London, on 17 March 1923, Melbourne mentioned that the new punches for 1923 were being used for a trial coinage of sixpences.

41. *Ann. Rep.*, 1923, 58.

42. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 48, Div. V, Reg. 174/23.

43. Melbourne Mint Balance of Dies book. Held by Royal Australian Mint, Canberra.

44. VPRO, Series 644, Unit 26, 18 February 1922.

45. Museum of Victoria, Reg. Nos. 4895 & 4896.



Halfpenny, 1924
Last figure of date changed
at Melbourne

PENCE 1923 AND 1924

Table 3. Survey of 1923 and 1924 bronze pence.

| | LONDON | INDIAN | TOTAL |
|------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1923 | 124 | 0 | 124 |
| 1924 | 170 | 9 | 179 |

The combinations of London and Indian obverse dies on the pence of 1923 and 1924 hold no surprises. In 1922 the London master had come into use at Melbourne, and it was the only one used in 1923 and 1924. The nine coins in the survey from the Indian master are clearly the result of the Sydney Mint returning to the production of pence,⁴⁶ and using the dies supplied to them in 1920. That is, the Indian obverse in 1924 characterises a coin as a product of the Sydney Mint. Another small use of these dies occurred in 1927 after the Sydney Mint was closed and its unused dies returned for use at Melbourne. Later use of the Indian die form, from 1929 until 1931 are a different problem to be examined elsewhere.

The nickel coinage ended without issue in 1921. After becoming Deputy Master at Melbourne, Le Souef became the champion of these pieces and never gave them up. In 1922, after the government had decided to abandon the concept he wrote to the Secretary to the Treasury advancing a new series of arguments in their favour. He proposed that Australia had a major role to play in supplying coins to the entire Pacific area, and pointed to the then recent importation of Australian bronze coins to New Zealand. He suggested that the nickel coins, being of a more practical size, would see a great expansion of this development. Indeed he said "The whole of the British possessions in the Pacific form a natural coinage area and movement which would tend to weld these into one both for trade and currency, with Australia as centre, would be a most valuable empire movement." Further, he argued that the design on the nickel coins, with its use of the uncrowned head of the King, was significant as "at the present time it would appear to be of special importance that the fact of Australia forming part of the British Empire should be in remembrance both in Australia and in adjacent lands".⁴⁷



Pattern nickel penny & halfpenny, 1921
Working dies supplied from
London.

46. The Sydney Mint Die Book held by the Royal Australian Mint Canberra, records 12 good obverse dies in stock from 1920 until the arrival of new dies on 27 February, 1924. It is very unlikely that all 12 were used.
47. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 43, Div. L, Reg. 327/38. Le Souef also mentions in this letter that he carried specimens in his pocket for seventeen years and that they always aroused interest.

As the practical and economic arguments for the adoption of the nickel coins had already been rejected, these calls to Empire seem quaint and unimpressive, but they shed some additional light on the thinking of that era. In any case, they did not sway the government, but this setback did not stop Le Souef. He was still sending samples of his nickel pence to Treasury in 1938 and recommending that the new head of George VI from the threepence would be ideal for the obverse.

The period under investigation opened with the Melbourne Mint being forced to manufacture its own dies. From that point, through international necessity it came to be the sole supplier of working dies for the Australian mints. However, it still relied on London for master dies bearing each new date. In 1922 at the latest, the mint personnel began to work to end this reliance. The 1922 over 21 threepence may have been their first attempt, though a failure. It is not a newly discovered coin as some stories suggest, Le Souef had an example in his collection by about 1924.⁴⁸ In 1923 the Melbourne Mint obtained a punch for the numeral "4" from Stokes and Son and with it successfully changed the date of a florin die. They then ordered a full set of date punches from London to match the other numerals on their masters.⁴⁹ On the 1924 dies of all denominations, the Melbourne Mint for the first time inserted the last numeral of the date.

This did not mark a complete break with the Royal Mint as a die source. That was still decades away. But from then the Royal Mint was only needed for special occasions like the Canberra florin of 1927 or to supply matrices in 1930 which had no final numeral in their dates. Here, perhaps, lies the true story of the 1930 penny, but that lies outside present chronological limits.⁵⁰

48. The Catalogue of the Le Souef Collection is held by the Museum of Victoria.

49. VPRO., Series 643, Unit 70, Div. 1Q, Reg. 77/23 and 257/23. The punches were received on 8th Nov. 1923.

50. I would like to thank Vince Bonnici for his help in the survey of pence.