



VOLUME 15

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JOURNAL OF THE  
NUMISMATIC ASSOCIATION  
OF AUSTRALIA INC.

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# Sir William Dixon, Benefactor

Tom Hanley

*This article is from a manuscript written by the late Tom Hanley shortly before his death in 2000.<sup>1</sup> Tom was long time secretary of the Australian Numismatic Society, and had worked at the State Library of NSW for some years cataloguing the numismatic collection. Tom's widow, Joyce, arranged for the article to be typed out, believing that some of the information it contained had sufficient historical significance to warrant publication. The manuscript was apparently written by Tom in preparation for a talk to members of the Australian Numismatic Society.*

## William Dixon

Australia has had its fair share of men and women who have benevolently bequeathed their collection to a public institution. One such public spirited person was Sir William Dixon, whose generous gift has made possible the now famous and important Dixon Collection held by the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

William Dixon was born in Sydney on 18 April 1870, the son of Sir Hugh and grandson of Hugh Dixon. He attended All Saints College, Bathurst and in 1889 went to Scotland to complete his education and qualify as an engineer.

His father and grandfather had pioneered the Dixon Tobacco Co and William was destined to join its operation. The Dixon Tobacco Co amalgamated with the Cameron Tobacco Co of Melbourne at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to form the British Australian Tobacco Co, the largest firm of its kind in Australia. William Dixon was later to become a director of this company. He

was also made chairman of the directors of the City Bank and no doubt, this position enabled him to acquire many significant pieces of paper money. About this time he began what was to become a lifelong passion for collecting.

Another philanthropist and a consummate collector of Australiana was David Scott Mitchell. He decided to leave his vast and valuable collection to the public and on his death in 1907, his collection formed what is now called in his honour, the Mitchell Library. He also bequeathed a sum of money to enable the continued acquisition of items for the collection. His will, however, did not enable the library to purchase pictures, and it was in this area that Dixon now decided to specialise. Dixon's decision meant the eventual acquisition of such treasures as Webber's 'Death of Captain Cook' and Phillips' large painting of Sir Joseph Banks. In 1919, Dixon presented the trustees of the library with a large part of his collection of paintings. The NSW government made special funds available for continuing to

add to the library collection.

Dixson's collecting was not confined to just paintings, of course. He had already amassed a large collection of books and manuscripts, as well as maps, coins, medals, curios, relics, postage stamps, bookplates and even a coin press from the old Sydney Mint. His business position allowed him the time and financial means to continue his collecting.

Like his father, Dixson was a generous man and gave regularly to various charities and public institutions. When the University of New England opened, he presented a cheque for a generous amount to enable its library to purchase books. He also helped individuals. In 1922, Dr Arthur Andrews wrote to Dixson and expressed a desire to sell his collection as he was experiencing slight financial difficulties and did Mr Dixson think that asking £120 for the collection was excessive. Dixson replied by sending Andrews a cheque for £125 for the collection. Among Dixson's own collection of tokens was a type series encrusted with black scale, probably burnt in a fire. Dixson certainly didn't need these tokens and I believe that he had purchased them from some luckless collector in need of money.

Jim Noble adds to Dixson's reputation as a generous man with his story of an elderly woman who some time back showed Jim a holey dollar. She explained that as a little girl she had been playing outside Dixson's home, when Dixson had come out and said she should be collecting coins and, to start her off, had given her one—a holey dollar. Perhaps Dixson's greatest gift to the public

was the magnificent bronze doors that grace the main entrance to the Mitchell Library wing, given in honour of David Scott Mitchell. Dixson also donated the stain-glass Chaucer windows that are in the reading room as well as the candelabra in the Shakespeare Room.

In 1939, Dixson was created a Knight Bachelor. He remained unmarried all his life. When he died on 17 August 1952, the Premier of NSW paid tribute to him in Parliament.

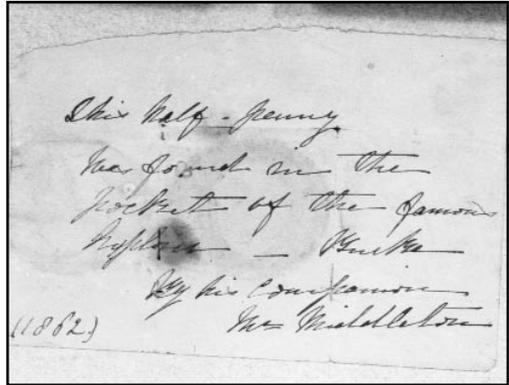
### The Dixson Collection

Dixson's collecting covered a wide range of fields, but we are here interested only in the numismatic items. He apparently kept neither diary nor records of his numismatic purchases, but fortunately among his papers are snippets of information that provide us with some significant historical insights.

Dixson built up a practically complete set of proclamation coins, all in at least very fine condition. He built up a large collection of holey dollars that are now listed in Spalding's 'The World of the Holey Dollar'.<sup>2</sup>

Among these is one with the T. Knight counterstamp, while another dated 1791 appears to have CS(?) stamped over the ES of WALES. The holey dollar host coins came from the following mints:

Mexico	36
Potosi	7
Lima	7
Seville	1
Madrid	1



Figures 1-2. The 1862 Holloway 1/2d token (A672) fixed to the lid of the wooden box and the attached label which reads, ‘This half-penny was found in the pocket of the famous Explorer–Burke by his companions’, and is dated and signed, ‘(1862.) JW. Middleton’.  
(Courtesy, Dixon Library, State Library of NSW)

Unidentifiable	2
Spurious	2

*five ingots were struck* <sup>4</sup>.

There are over 100 dumps in the collection.

Dixon acquired two specimens of the Adelaide ingots. The collection also has examples of copies of the ingots that were done recently. I suggested to the library that these should be stamped S for specimen or F for facsimile, but to date this has not been done. Deacon lists a total of eight ingots<sup>3</sup>. His fourth is identified as being in the Murdoch Sale of 1903, but Dixon claims that the Murdoch example may be spurious:

*At the Murdoch sale in London a few years ago an Adelaide ingot was disposed of. It is said that Mr Murdoch despaired of ever getting one and had a set of dies made. He struck one out of solid gold and destroyed the dies. It is presumed he copied an electrotype but which die is not certain. Dr Watson states that only*

In the collection are six examples of the Adelaide Pound, four of die 1 and two of die 2; two of the pounds are holed and two have mount marks. The Australian gold series is extensive. Of the Sydney mint sovereigns there are seven dated 1855 and one 1856. An earlier catalogue lists two 1857 sovereigns as restrikes, but I believe these to be proofs. Two shield sovereigns of 1857 are forgeries, probably contemporary. Five 1893 jubilee and veiled head sovereigns have had their edge milling ground off, either to obtain the extra gold or to pass them as proofs. Five sovereigns, one dated 1920, two 1922 and two 1926, appear to have been gold plated. The £2 and £5 pieces with the three mintmarks may be restrikes.

One of the four 1855 Sydney Mint half sovereigns has had the date altered and then been gilded. Of the halves up to 1866, the 1856 example stands out because of its excellent condition. The 6 of the 1860 half



Figures 3-4. The Knight Grand Cross of St Michael and St George (GCMG) awarded to Sir Henry Parkes, 'father' of Australian federation.

(Courtesy, Dixon Library, State Library of NSW; DN/M 1281-

83)

stands considerably higher than its other three date digits. Perhaps the most unusual and probably unique half sovereigns is a mis-struck example whose date, although not shown, is probably 1857, as it is of the 'second head' type. Among the shield reverse half sovereigns is a jubilee head enamelled in four colours.

When Le Souef, deputy master of the Melbourne mint, came to Sydney in 1927 to finalise the closing of the Sydney mint, Dixon apparently made a request to obtain specimens struck from all the dies held there. Le Souef was in favour of this as he wrote to Dixon saying, 'I have given consideration to your request and since you intend that your collection be given to a public institution I will grant your request'.

The collection has nearly four thousand Australasian tradesmen's tokens, one

hundred of which are silver. Some of the rare issues are missing, however, such as Allen's Kiama penny, the Mason and Culley penny and Hogarth and Erichsen's threepence featuring the Aboriginal figure (A.692)<sup>5</sup>.

When Gilbert Heyde compiled his catalogue of tokens<sup>6</sup>, he did not have access to the Dixon Collection. He listed separately, tokens and related issues in an attempt to identify those he believed were restrikes and never intended for circulation. Thus, twenty-four were designated NS (not sighted). Thirteen specimens of eight of these are in the Dixon collection. Heyde also omitted nine tokens that Andrews had included<sup>7</sup> and which are in the Dixon Collection.

Some tokens, perhaps part of the Andrews collection, have a straight line scored across them, apparently to clarify

die orientation. There are also a number of counterstamped tokens that Dixon may have acquired after Andrews sighted the collection; one is an Allen Jamberoo penny with an arrow across its centre. In the New Zealand series is a halfpenny brockage. The rare mules are obviously restrikes done between 1910 and 1920. Presumably the people that struck them did not know which dies went with which and coupled dies at random. These restrikes have a copper finish and show pimples where the dies had begun to rust.

The silver pieces include seven Macintosh and Degraeves shillings, three Campbell, fifteen Thornthwaite and one hundred and ten Hogarth and Erichsen threepences. Among the latter is a mule of A.686 obverse and A.687 reverse. There are sixty-three examples of the Andrew Mather penny (A.356), making it the most prolific token in the collection.

A handwritten note by Dixon in his copy of Andrews offers information on Professor Holloway's tokens in NSW:

*The Holloway 1/2d and 1d were issued in NSW by Messrs Sarpy and Musgrove, Auctioneers, King St, Sydney who were agents for Holloway. This information was obtained (06.01.1910) from a Mr Jenkins an auctioneer, Pitt St, who remembers the firm.*

Perhaps the token with the most tragic background is a Holloway halfpenny of 1858, mounted on the lid of a box made to look like a book (Figures 1-2). A faded, ink inscription on paper on the inside of

the lid reads:

*This halfpenny  
was found in the  
pocket of the famous  
explorer—Burke  
by his companions  
(1862.) JW. Middleton*

The few Australian coins present are in uncirculated condition. These include florins, shillings and threepences from 1911 and a 'star' 1921 shilling. Two pennies are labelled 'first from Sydney Mint' but as both coins cannot be first, my guess is that they were from the first batch. Another note in Dixon's copy of Andrews states:

*These bronze were made of the following metals, copper 95%, tin 4% and zinc 1%. In the beginning of August, 1921 the proportions were altered to accord with the British Standard which is copper 95.5%, tin 3% and zinc 1.5%. Information supplied by Mr Williams, Acting Deputy Master of the Sydney Mint 16.08.1924.*

Two 1921 sixpences are labelled as being struck on silver from German New Guinea coins and are mentioned in W Mira's book *From Cowrie to Kina*<sup>8</sup>.

New Zealand coins are few and include two Waitangi crowns, while a cased 1937 proof set, from 1/4d to £5, features among the few British coins.

The decorations and award medals include some important items and groups. The highest British award present is the Knight Grand Cross of St Michael and St

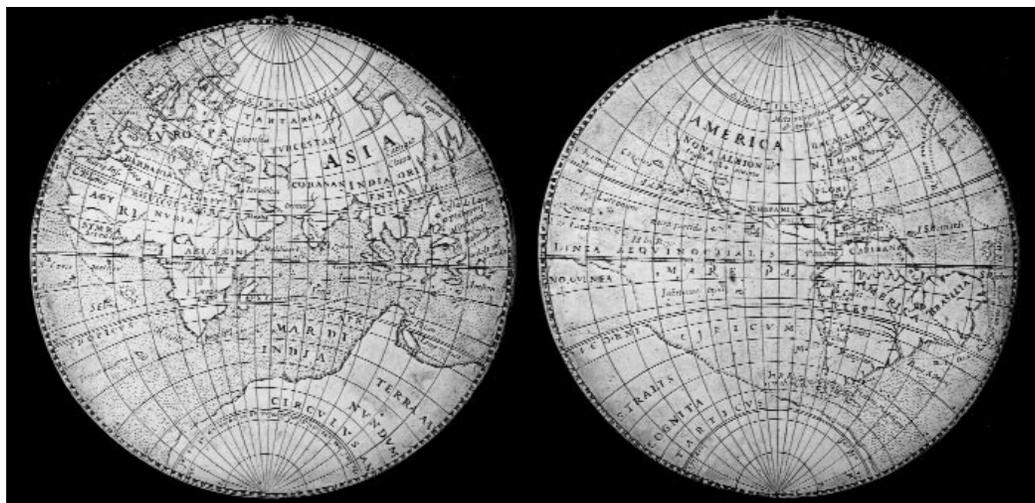


Figure 5. The silver Drake medal, hand engraved circa 1580, recording the route taken by Sir Francis Drake on his circumnavigation in the years 1577 to 1580. Terra Australis is shown as a great southern land mass, at that time still uncharted.

(Courtesy, Dixson Library, State Library of NSW; ZDN/M1144a & b)

George (GCMG) awarded to Sir Henry Parkes (Figures 3-4), the ‘father’ of Australian Federation; his 4 1/2” gold Cobden medal, awarded for fostering free trading, is also here. The Knight Commander of St Michael and St George, here, was awarded to Sir Ferdinand von Mueller, who emigrated from Germany and became government botanist in Victoria. Von Mueller discovered and named many plant varieties and was a prominent member of the Philosophical Society. He introduced paspalum into Australia and pushed for the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition. Mueller never married and in fact broke off a three-month engagement by informing his fiancé that he did not have time to get married. The

collection also has other awards given to him.

Sergeant Major Tuite’s group is here,

and includes the New Zealand 1863-66 medals inscribed incorrectly to TAITE, the Afghanistan 1878-80 medal, the Sudan Medal, the Khedive Star and, recorded for the first time, his Meritorious Service Medal. Tuite was also presented with a silver tea and coffee set by the Lord Mayor of Sydney for most outstanding service in the NSW Contingent.

A broken group awarded to L Maxwell VC is represented by the MC and bar, the DCM and the usual WW1 service medals; his VC is in the Paddington Museum.

There is a silver Royal Society Cook medal whose edge engraving indicates that it was presented to Henry Coll and Selby

on 21 January 1785 by the Duke of Northumberland. There are two bronze Perseverance medals and four Resolution and Adventure medals, two in silver and

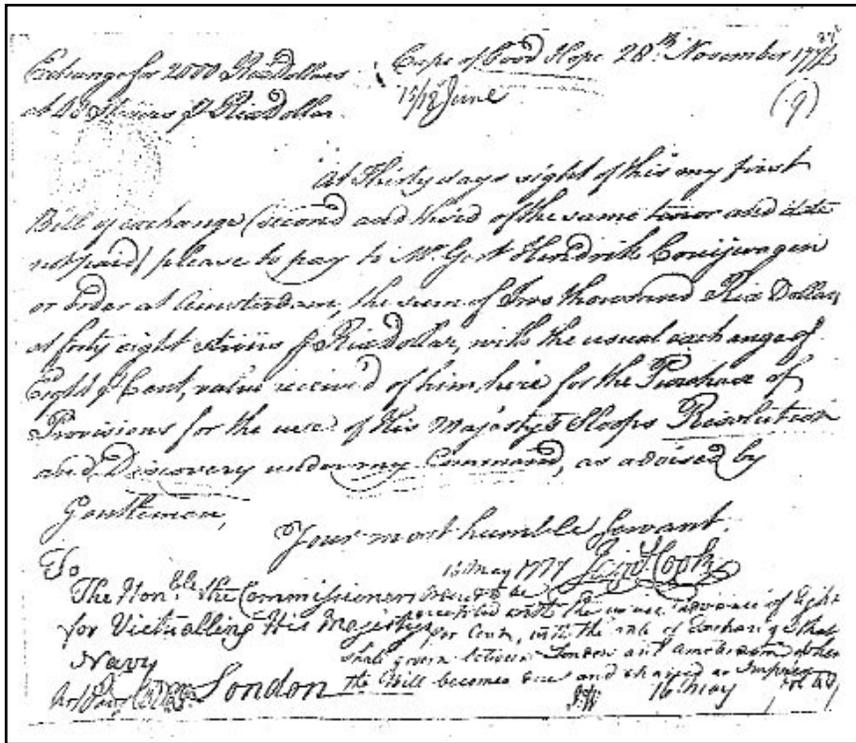


Figure 6. The historically significant 1776 bill of exchange signed by Captain James Cook and drawn on the Admiralty in London for 2,000 Rix dollars and 48 stivers, cash needed to replenish provisions for the two sloops *Resolution* and *Adventure*.

(Courtesy, Dixon Library, State Library of NSW; reel CY

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two in copper. One of the copper ones may originally have been gilt while one of the silver medals is edge inscribed: J.G. ACRELL. A Freycinet Exploration medal of 1817, a La Perouse medal of 1785, a D'Urville medal of 1826 in wooden case and the second issue of 1837 are represented.

There are many other service and commemorative medals in the collection. Awards include three Victorian Salon of Photography medals for the 1934 Victorian centenary. An account of 22 January 1935 from Stokes and Sons to Spencer Hill of

the Content Bookshop reads:

1 st. silver	15/-
1 gilt	£3/3/0
1 Tombac	6/6d
Total	£4/4/6
5% Sales Tax	4/3d
Total	£4/8/9d

There is also a letter to Hill from the salon:

*Re your query about the medals. We awarded 3 gold (gilt), 15 silver and 15 bronze to exhibitors. One bronze was sent to the National Museum at*

*Canberra at their request. Six medals were presented for services rendered. Your set is the only complete set that has been struck for a collector.*

A silver 1859 Admella Medal and a Board of Trade lifesaving medal, both presented to Thomas Tweele for his work at the Admella wreck are in the collection. Only three gold and thirty-three silver Admella Medals were awarded. Another naval medal is the US Presidential Medal, awarded to Hector R Eassie for saving master and crew of the wrecked American schooner Helen B Stirling on 23 January 1922.

Many academic and sporting awards—in particular gold medals for cycling and billiards, two sports popular early in the twentieth century—are represented. Three bronze medals were awarded to the winning school team in 1911 by the Athletic Association of the Great Public Schools of NSW. A fourth silver medal was given to the overall winner. According to Hyam Marks, writing to Dixson on 10 November 1930, one member was deemed ineligible after the race and so the medals were forfeited.

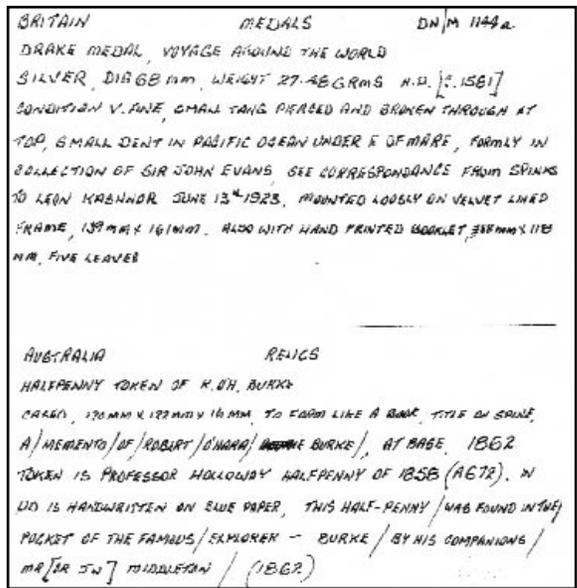
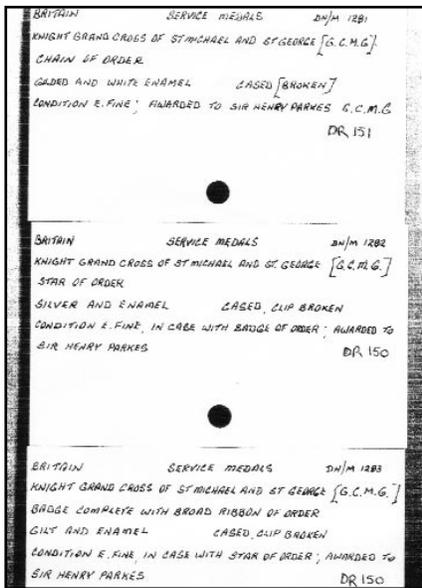
The collection has a gold medal awarded in 1909 to Alick Wickham by the Amateur Swimming Association for a dive at Lavender Bay baths. Wickham was a Solomon Islander who came to Australia and introduced the Australian Crawl swimming style. He broke the world diving record in 1918 at Dights Falls, about forty miles from Melbourne. His dive of 62.7 metres, advertised as 76 metres, is still a world record. He wore a

number of swimsuits, but not only were these ripped off on impact, he remained in a coma for a week after the dive. He returned to the Solomons around 1926 and all trace of him was subsequently lost. The dive is not recorded in the Book of Records, probably because he accepted a payment of £100.

The prize of the whole collection is probably the Drake silver medal (Figure 5). The medal was produced after Sir Francis Drake's voyage around the world in the years 1577 to 1580. An American collector of Elizabethan memorabilia lists nine specimens of this medal, two in his own collection, two in the British Museum, two in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, one in the possession of Drake's descendants, one in the private collection of Henry Taylor, and one whose whereabouts was unknown. This 'whereabouts unknown' specimen is the one in the Dixson Collection. It was sold in 1904 in the Murdoch sale where it was illustrated in the catalogue. It was purchased for £44/10/- by a Rollin, after which it found its way into the Dixson collection.

The paper currency collection is extensive, particularly in the area of early colonial notes. One highly important bill of exchange on the Admiralty in London for 2,000 Rix dollars and 48 Stivers is signed by James Cook (Figure 6). It was issued on 28 November 1776 at the Cape of Good Hope; the cash was needed to purchase provisions for the sloops *Resolution* and *Discovery*.

The early colonial currency notes have



Figures 7-8. Entries from the card system Tom Hanley made for the numismatic items in the Dixon and Mitchell collections. Fig. 7 shows the entries for Parkes' decorations, while Fig. 8 shows the entries for the Drake medal and the Burke item. (Courtesy, Dixon Library, State Library of NSW)

been mounted between two sheets of Mylar. Quite a number have had to be pieced together from torn fragments as in a jigsaw puzzle. I identified one such composite 'note' as being made up from three different notes. John Hutchison seems to have been a prolific issuer as there are seventy-five specimens of his in the collection. Many Queensland outback stations were issuing notes as late as the 1920s and the Dixon Collection has a number of these. There are no Commonwealth notes.

New Zealand and the Fiji Islands are reasonably well represented, particularly by earlier issues of Fiji. There are many other types of items in the collection such as early Australian military badges from the

various States. There are a German watch and a brooch, both made of iron. These are examples of the program during WW1, of German citizens being asked to surrender gold jewellery for iron replacements to help pay for the German war effort. Handing in gold coins was rewarded with an iron medal.

This has been a brief overview of the numismatic part of the Dixon Collection. It is my hope that one day a comprehensive

catalogue of the whole collection will be produced (see Figures 7-8).

### Acknowledgements

The editors thank Les Carlisle for extensive and unstinting help in proof-reading and correcting this article and especially, for helping to obtain all the photographs and images used here. Special thanks go to Mark Hilderbrand, librarian in the Dixson Library, for his part in locating and supplying photographs. We are grateful to Jennifer Bromhead and the State Library of NSW Council, for granting permission to use all images in this article.

## Notes

1. For details on the author refer NAAJ Vol. 12, pp. 68-9.
2. Philip Spalding, *The World of the Holey Dollar*, the author, Santa Barbara, USA, 1973.
3. J Hunt Deacon, *The "Ingots" and "Assay Office Pieces" of South Australia*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, (c. 1956), pp. 49-53.
4. Dixon's handwritten note is dated 24/7/1903.
5. Arthur Andrews, *Australasian Tokens and Coins*, Trustees of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, 1921, token no. 692.
6. Gilbert Christopher Heyde, *Renniks Unofficial Coins of Colonial Australia and New Zealand*, Renniks, Adelaide, 1967.
7. Andrews, *Australasian Tokens and Coins*.
8. William J Mira, *From Cowrie to Kina*. Spink & Son, Sydney, 1986, pp. 80-81.

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