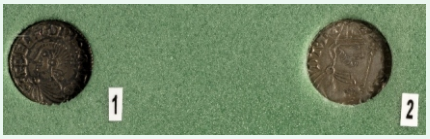
Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

BRITISH COINS H 159/A

Replica Aethelred Penny (1) and Replica Edward the Confessor Penny (2)



The first copper penny was minted in 1797 - before that date pennies were always made of silver. The first copper farthings were made during the reign of James I (1603-1625), but copper coins of any kind were rare until the eighteenth century.

The roots of the English penny go back to Roman times. Before decimalisation in 1971, the abbreviation for penny was a letter d, rather than the letter p, as it is today. The 'd' stood for *denarius*, which was originally a Roman silver coin.

The Anglo-Saxons called these coins *sceattas*, which meant wealth, or treasure. Gradually the term penny became more widely used, although the origins of the word are obscure.

Many Anglo-Saxon pennies feature a cross as part of the reverse design, and this roughly coincides with the British conversion to Christianity. From 978 King Eadgar's pennies introduced the king's head as the main obverse design, a feature which had been common on many Roman issues. In the reign of Aethelred II (reigned 978-1016), the cross was extended to the edge of some coins, largely as a counter-measure against clipping or filing the edges. This device continued, and was used also on other denominations, until the reign of Charles I (1625-49), when a beaded circle was used for a similar purpose, and eventually milled coinage with milled or lettered edges made the long cross redundant.

Aethelred II was also known as Aethelread to Unready, a nick-name derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *in-raed*, meaning 'no counsel', or that he was unwise. Edward the Confessor reigned from 1042 to 1066

Edward I Penny (3)



During the Anglo-Saxon and early Medieval period there were many mints scattered around the country. During the reign of William the Conqueror there were nearly seventy. This sometimes meant the quality of the coins produced was poor and by the second half of the thirteenth century the issue of coinage had been centralised at London and Canterbury (though occasionally mints in other towns were opened for brief periods).

Continued on page 2.

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Not that this could stop people clipping bits of silver off the edge of pennies. In the early part of Henry III's reign all the coins minted featured short-crosses on the reverse (Henry III reigned from 1216 to 1272). However, in 1247 a fresh coinage was ordered in which the cross was extended to the edge of the coin to prevent the spoiling of coins. The Edward I penny in this box is of this kind. Edward I reigned from 1272 to 1307. Edward I continued to issue long-cross pennies (and some ha'pennies and farthings). He also introduced the groat a coin worth four pence.

Already at this early date the absence of coins with a low value was causing problems. Small-scale transactions were impossible if the coins were made of a precious metal like silver. Henry III produced both silver ha'pennies and farthings, but these coins are very rare, which suggests few were made. To get round this shortage people often cut silver pennies into pieces. Often the coins would be cut along the lines of the cross. A ha'penny was, in common practice, literally a half of a penny. Similarly a farthing was a fourth-ing a piece of a penny which had been cut into quarters. Cut ha'pennies and farthings are common in the thirteenth century, being one hundred times commoner than in the late Anglo-Saxon times.

Elizabeth I Sixpence (4)



Elizabeth's reign was notable for the large number of different denominations issued, from gold crowns to a three-farthing piece, which was introduced to provide change if a penny was tendered for a farthing purchase. The Elizabethan sixpence in this box dates from 1569.

In Elizabeth's reign the sixpence, threepence, threehalfpence and threefarthings were marked with a rose behind the queen's head to distinguish them from the shilling, the groat, halfgroat and penny. The crown emblem between the words 'Regina' and 'Elizabeth' is a mint mark which was used between 1567 and 1570.

Charles II Groat (5)



A groat is worth four pence. This Charles II groat dates from 1683. It is made of silver. Several of King Charles II's coins use the interlinked C monogram, which can be seen on the reverse of this example. Pennies had a single C, two-pennies had two, three pences had three and groats had four.

William III Sixpence (6) and Shilling (7)

During the reign of William III (1694-1702) a great recoinage was undertaken to replace the hammered silver that made up most of the coinage in circulation, much of it being clipped and badly worn. This recoinage began in 1696. Branch mints were opened in several provincial towns to help with this procedure. Coins made in thee mints are stamped with an identification letter below the bust of the king. The shilling has a letter 'B' stamped below the bust, which indicates that it was produced in Bristol.



Anne Shilling (8)

The Queen Anne shilling dates from 1708. After the Act of Union in 1707, which unified the kingdoms of England and Scotland, the rampant Scotch lion and the three English lions were united on two of the shields on the reverse. The letter 'E' below the bust of the Queen indicates that this example was produced in Edinburgh.



George II Sixpence (9)

A very battered example!



George IV Sixpence (10)

This coin was issued in 1829. A hole has been drilled through it so that it can be used as a pendant.



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BRITISH COINS H 159/A

George III Cartwheel Penny (11)



The 'Cartwheel' twopence and penny were the first coins to be produced by steam power and the cartwheel penny of 1797 is the first ever to be made in copper, rather than silver.

They were made by Matthew Boulton. Boulton was born in Birmingham in 1728. In 1762 he established the famous Soho Manufactory, two miles north of Birmingham, which undertook the manufacture of objects in metal. In 1773, Boulton went into partnership with the inventor James Watt. For the next eleven years Boulton's factory produced and sold Watt's steam-engines. These machines were mainly bought by colliery owners who used them to pump water from their mines, but Boulton and Watt also turned their attention to the problems of the coinage, particularly copper coins that were being counterfeited. Boulton applied his engineering success to ways of producing coins efficiently using steam power. He proposed using a retaining collar to ensure a constant diameter, which would protect the design from wear, and also deter counterfeiting because of the heavy equipment need to strike the coins. In 1797, Boulton was given a contract to supply 20 tons of twopences and 480 tons of pennies. These magnificent and impressive coins weighed two ounces and one ounce respectively - the twopences are the largest and heaviest British coins ever issued. A further order for the same quantities was received the next year. Unfortunately for collectors, these were issued with the same date as the first issue - 1797.

William IV Groat (12)

This coin was issued in 1836.



Victoria Groat (13)

This coin was issued in 1839, two years after Victoria became Queen.



George II Half Penny (14)

A very worn example and difficult to date.



George III Half Penny (15)

This coin was issued in 1806.



George IV Half Penny (16)

This coin was issued in 1826.



George IV Crown (17)

This coin was issued in 1821. A crown was worth five shillings. The famous design of St George slaying the dragon on the reverse was by Benedetto Pistrucci (1783-1855; his initials can be seen beneath the dragon). The design was first used in 1817, during the reign of George III.



Pistrucci refused to copy the work of any other artist or engraver, and insisted that all his work was his own original work. Because of his Italian origin, he was not officially recognised as the chief engraver at the Royal Mint, and there were rivalries with other the other prominent nineteenth century coin engravers, particularly William Wyon, the official chief engraver at the Royal Mint from 1828 until his death in 1851. Wyon modelled the head of Queen Victoria which was used on both coins and stamps in the early part of her reign.

William IV Half Penny (18)

This coin was issued in 1831.



Edward VII Farthing (19)



This coin was issued in 1909. A farthing is worth a quarter of a penny.

Until decimalisation in 1971, the British monetary system was duodecimal. The duodecimal system is a numeral system using twelve as its base. In many ways it is a more useful system to use than the decimal system, which is the one we now have, as the number 12 has four factors, which are 2, 3, 4 and 6 and is therefore a more convenient number system for computing fractions than the decimal, which has only two factors, which are 2 and 5.

In the duodecimal system there were 12 pennies in a shilling and 240 pennies in a pound which meant there were 960 farthings in a pound!

George V Silver Three Pence (20)



This coin was issued in 1920. At the end of the reign of George V the small silver threepence like this one was thought to be unpopular. In 1937, in the reign of George VI, a twelve sided brass threepence (or 'thre'penny bit', as it was generally referred to) was introduced to replace the traditional coin. Coin 24 in this box illustrates the design of this later coin.

George VI Penny (21)



This coin was issued in 1939.

George VI Silver Three Pence (22)



Although the 12-sided brass threepence was issued in 1937, these old-style silver threepences continued to be issued at the same time. They were finally completely withdrawn from circulation in 1942.

George VI Farthing (23)



This coin was issued in 1947. A wren, rather than the figure of Britannia, first appeared on the farthing during the brief reign of Edward VIII in 1936. The wren is one of Britain's smallest birds and it seemed an appropriate emblem for the smallest denomination coin then in circulation. The last farthing was minted in 1956.

Elizabeth II Three Pence (24)



This coin was issued in 1963.

John Wilkinson Token (25)



Trade tokens were used as far back as the sixteenth century. They have their origin in the fact that, until the reign of James I (1603-25), the Royal Mint issued only gold and silver coinage. Even pennies were made of silver. This meant that there was a shortage of small-value coinage for poorer people. As more and more people were drawn into the cash economy, rather than relying on home-produced goods and food, this shortfall became acute. Shopkeepers found it very difficult to deal in small quantities of goods, although for many the bulk of their trade involved small amounts and low value goods. Even after copper coins became more widely available in the early eighteenth century there were often production and distribution problems. The Royal Mint was situated in London, but the coins it produced were slow to percolate through to the north and west of the country. Small tradesmen responded to this shortage by producing their own tokens, such as the examples in this box. Tokens are known to have existed in the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, though the earliest in this box is dated 1659 - the last year of the English republic. Many such tokens were probably only used in a very small area - the town, perhaps even the area of the town, in which they were issued.

John Wilkinson was a leading ironmaster with works in various places in Shropshire, Staffordshire and Clwyd. He assisted in the building of the first iron bridge at Coalbrookdale and the first iron ship. He was an associate of Matthew Boulton who was the first person to produce coins using a steam engine. He also made an iron lavatory! He liked to be known as 'King of the iron world' and he obviously had no qualms about the obvious similarity of his image on this coin with that of the king. He issued several tons of coinage, with a variety of designs. This 1792 halfpenny has an image of the god Vulcan at work at an anvil (and a barge just visible in the distance, to the right).

Duke of York Token (26)



This token commemorates the death of Frederick, Duke of York and Albany, the second son of George III. Famed as the 'The Grand Old Duke of York' he was Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, between 1798 and 1809. Unsuccessful in the field during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, he is better remembered for putting down corruption in the administration of the army. In 1809, he was dismissed from office after revelations that a lady friend, Mary Anne Clarke, had been selling army commissions. This is a patriotic token, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many radical political factions issued tokens in order to publicise their cause. It is unlikely that it was used as currency.

Province du Bas Canada Token (27)



This 1837 token was issued not by a tradesman or industrialist, but by a bank, the Bank of Quebec, as can be read on the ribbon on the reverse. Other identical tokens were issued by the City Bank, La Banque du Peuple, and the Bank of Montreal. The token illustrates the multilingual nature of the province. One side gives its value as a halfpenny, while the other says it is worth one sous. The figure on the obverse (French) side portrays a French-Canadian man in traditional winter clothing. The reverse shows the arms of the city of Montreal.

Court Gazette Token (28)



The Court Gazette and Fashionable Guide was first published on 7 April 1838 and seems to have lasted until at least issue 438, which was published 4 April 1846. This token must have been issued between these dates - the young head of Victoria corresponds with that used on official coinage. Victoria was crowned in 1837. Quite how widely used a token such as this was is unclear - it may have been issued primarily as a form of advertising. This example has had a hole crudely bored through it, presumably so it could be hung on a chain.

Champion's Token (29)



This token was issued in 1835 and was probably worth a farthing. As the text makes clear it was issued by Champion's ironmongery and grocery, Nettlebed, Oxfordshire. A Thomas Champion opened an ironmongers in Wallingford in 1869. Presumably the ironmongery in Nettlebed was an ancestor of this business, which was still active in the late twentieth century. The reverse shows a mounted soldier perhaps it is meant to represent a member of the local gentleman's yeomanry (the 1st Oxfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry were founded in 1823). The 1830s were a time of widespread rioting by poor agricultural workers in Berkshire, Oxfordshire and other southern English counties and the gentlemen's yeomanry regiments were used to suppress this agitation.

John Howard Token (30)



John Howard was neither a manufacturer or a tradesman, but a prison reformer. Howard published *The State of the Prisons* in England and Wales in 1777 which drew attention to the need for sanitation, ventilation, exercise, cleanliness and spiritual support in prisons and which stimulated many local authorities to reform their gaols. He was honoured on several tokens issued by tradesmen in the late eighteenth century. This example reads 'John Howard F.R.S Philanthropist' on the obverse and 'Chichester and Portsmouth, Halfpenny, 1794' on the reverse. Around the edge these coins generally had 'Payable at Sharps Portsmouth and Chaldecotts Chichester'. Thomas Sharp was a mercer in Portsmouth and Thomas Chaldecott a silversmith and cutler in Chichester.

Victoria Jersey Half Penny (31)



In the nineteenth century British coinage was issued for use across the British Empire. Such coins often shared features with those intended for use at home, while adding text or images that were appropriate for the colony where the coin was in circulation.

Continued on page 10.

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The reverse of this 1870 coin states that it is worth 'one twenty-sixth of a shilling'. This seems odd because a halfpenny is usually worth one twenty-fourth of a shilling. However this unusual denomination can be traced back to 1834 when Jersey decreed that English, rather than French money, would be the sole legal tender on the island. At that time, 26 French livres were equal to one English pound. With 20 shillings to the pound and 20 sous to the livre, one shilling was worth 26 sous. Thus the Jersey penny or 'pièce de deux sous' became 1/13th of a shilling, the Jersey half penny or sou 1/26th of a shilling, and the farthing or 'pièce de deux liards' 1/52nd of a shilling! Jersey denominations were brought into conformity with those used in the rest of Great Britain in 1876.

George V Canadian Cent (32)

This coin was issued in 1918.



George VI South African Penny (33)

This coin was issued in 1943.



George VI East African Shilling (34)

This coin was issued in 1948. The East African shilling was used in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Somalia during colonial times. By the mid-1960s, these countries had become independent and replaced their currencies with the Kenyan shilling, the Ugandan shilling, the Tanzanian shilling and the Somali shilling respectively. The last shillings were issued in the UK in 1966, but shillings continue to be used in these African countries into the twenty-first century.

