

The Australian Copper Coins of 1920

By Jon Saxton



1920 was the second year in which Australian mints struck copper coins and the events leading up to this had a significant effect on the coins themselves, especially the pennies.

Halfpennies

The halfpennies seem relatively simple. They were all struck at the Sydney Mint using working dies supplied directly from the Royal Mint in London. These dies were prepared from the same tools which had been used to press dies for all earlier years and so only one obverse and one reverse pattern is observed in the 1920 issue.

In common with the coins of many of the preceding years, there were variations in the position and alignment of the digits of the date. John Dean¹ reported a narrow date variety with a dropped 9 and a wide date variety. Robert Clarke² reported three varieties, normal, one with a high zero and one with thinner letters and digits. The thin lettering is a bit of a puzzle admitting several possible explanations but without seeing an example I am not willing to speculate on its authenticity or origin. Meanwhile it is quite likely that the other two of Clarke's varieties correspond to those reported by Dean (see fig. 1) although Dean's descriptions seem more apt. Certainly the dates are different in width but to me Dean's dropped nine and Clarke's high zero both seem to be illusions with the real difference being in the height of the leading 1.

Explaining the 1920 halfpenny varieties presents some difficulties. Something like forty working reverse dies would have been used and it seems unrealistic to expect that the Royal Mint engravers would have hand-punched the date onto so many dies. If they had then each working die would be slightly different and we'd expect to see a much larger number of varieties. The contrary hypothesis is that a fully-dated punch was used to make working dies and if we accept that premise then it is obvious that at least two such punches were used because the differences in the date are too great and are not of the type to have occurred as a result of distortion in the hobbing press. Unfortunately that is not a sufficient explanation. If the working punches were pressed from the same matrix then they'd have been identical so we'd have to infer that they were made from two separately-dated matrices. That seems very unlikely, particularly if we assume the working punches were prepared at the same time. A slightly more plausible speculation is that just one working punch was originally made but for some reason a second one was needed later on. All that is pretty thin reasoning. An examination of

the die records of the Royal Mint may reveal the true story but pending that, my own inspection of a pitifully small sample comprising just six 1920 halfpennies lends some support for the hand-punching hypothesis.

Pennies

The pennies of 1920 comprise one of the most complex issues of the entire Australian Commonwealth coinage in any year or denomination and are rivalled only by the pennies of 1919 and 1952. No fewer than seven distinct varieties exist. As in 1919 dots were added to the reverse but in five configurations rather than three. In addition, two obverse die patterns were used.

Published research by John Sharples³ tells us that throughout 1919 and 1920 the Melbourne Mint had been expecting government approval to strike nickel pennies and halfpennies in a new and radically different design and had even procured a considerable quantity of nickel for the purpose. Mint officials must have been fairly confident of that approval because they did not order dies for the 1919 issues until February of that year and did not order any 1920 dies at all. This put the mint at a considerable disadvantage when an order for bronze pennies was placed in May 1920 and in the interest of expediency, it ordered twenty pairs of dies and a pair of punches from the Calcutta Mint. Of course the tools supplied from Calcutta were all of the same pattern as used at that mint for striking Australian pennies in 1916-1918 so the majority of 1920 pennies have a Calcutta obverse and reverse (fig. 2). However the Melbourne Mint had three obverse dies left over from the coining of 1919 pennies; those were London pattern dies and the use of these obverse dies gave rise to scarce London/Calcutta die pairings.

Table 1 lists the combinations of dies and dots that are known to exist.

Variety	Obverse	Reverse	Dots
1C-//	London	Calcutta	None
1C-//.	London	Calcutta	Below lower scroll
2C-//	Calcutta	Calcutta	None
2C-//.	Calcutta	Calcutta	Below lower scroll
2C-./	Calcutta	Calcutta	Above lower scroll
2C-//	Calcutta	Calcutta	Above upper scroll
2C-//.	Calcutta	Calcutta	Below lower and above upper scroll



Figure 1. 1920 halfpenny in two date configurations, a wide date with a normally-positioned 1 and a narrow date with a high 1.

All 1920 pennies have a Calcutta reverse. Most have a Calcutta obverse also but a few have a London obverse.



Figure 2a. London and Calcutta obverse features. London obverse has short tail to R in BRITT, O of OMN is further from cross at top of crown and final leg of N in OMN points at a gap between denticles. Calcutta obverse has long tail on R, O is closer to cross and final leg of N points directly at a rim denticle. London obverse has 177 denticles, Calcutta has 178.



Figure 2 b. London, Birmingham and Calcutta reverse features. Note the alignment of the letters ALIA with respect to rim beads. The London reverse has AL aligned, the Birmingham reverse has IA aligned and the Calcutta obverse has just the L aligned. London reverse has 174 denticles, Birmingham has 177, Calcutta has 178.

1920 was the first year that pennies were minted in Sydney and while a dot above the lower scroll certainly indicates a Sydney strike, the dots cannot be construed as mint marks in the normal sense. The dots were hand-punched directly onto the working dies and so the exact positions vary. Conceivably, given a large enough sample, one could use the dots as markers to identify each reverse working die and match the frequency of occurrence to the lifetimes of those dies. It is not an exercise which I have the patience or the means to undertake.

John Sharples investigated the idea that the dots signify the origin of the dies and presented an attractive hypothesis along those lines but then went on to say that the frequency of occurrence of the varieties does not support it.

On that note it is worth presenting the results of two surveys. The first is taken from John Sharples' article and represents the frequency of occurrence of each variety amongst 170 coins held by the Melbourne Mint Museum in the mid eighties. The second is from my own collection and is as close as I can get to an unbiased sample. It comprises just 32 coins; 26 of those were taken from 10,000 pennies from a commercial hoard in April 2001, while the remaining 6 came from a U.S. dealer's stock book. As far as I know, neither of these small accumulations had been scanned for varieties.

Variety	Sharples	Saxton
1C-//	0	1
1C-//.	8	1
2C-//	96	15
2C-//.	36	2
2C-./.	24	6
2C-//	3	0
2C-//.	3	1
2C-?.		6
Total	170	32

The last row in the table does not signify a new variety, it just means that I could not honestly assign six of the coins to any of the other rows.

The two surveys were one state and fifteen years apart and despite some biases in the Melbourne sample mentioned by Sharples, they are remarkably consistent. The only significant difference is the relative frequency of the "dot under lower scroll" variety. One thing that should be immediately apparent is that 1920 pennies with no dot are more common than all of the other varieties combined.

The popular catalogues (Renniks & McDonald) give high valuations to the plain varieties of the 1920 penny regardless of the obverse type but this seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon. The following table shows the valuations given in several catalogues for a single grade (VF). Note that most of the catalogues do not take the important obverse die into account:

Early catalogue values seem to bear some relationship

Variety	Gartner 1964	Dean	Clarke	Renniks 10th 1976	Renniks 19th 2000	McDonald's 8th 2001
1C-//						
1C-//.		£7/10/-	\$1.25			
2C-//	7/6	7/6	\$1.50	\$5	\$250	\$375
2C-//.	10/-	7/6	\$2.50	\$4	\$35	\$35
2C-./.	£1	£1	\$4.00	\$6	\$35	\$35
2C-//						\$650
2C-//.	£5	£3	\$6.00	\$12*	\$55*	\$250

* Extrapolated from the value given for F.

to the rarity of the varieties but recent values for the no-dot reverse seem ridiculously high. Amongst 1920 pennies this is a common coin yet its catalogue value exceeds that of its scarcer contemporaries by a considerable margin. For example, the double-dot coin is much rarer and yet the catalogue compilers would have us believe that it is worth less than the common, plain variety.

I invited comment from the catalogue publishers. To date I have received no reply from Ian Pitt but Greg McDonald did respond and elected to defer his remarks until after this article is printed.

1. Dean, John, 1965 Australian Coin Varieties Catalogue, Hawthorne Press, Melbourne, 1964
2. Clarke, Robert L., The Coins and Tokens of British Oceania (5th ed), Malter-Westerfield, San Clemente, 1971
3. Sharples, John, "Australian Coins 1919 to 1924" in Journal of the Numismatic Association of Australia, Vol 1, 1985