

The 1931 Pennies and Halfpennies Revisited

By Jon Saxton



This article is a follow-up to Ian McConnelly's article *The 1931 Halfpenny & Penny (mis)MATCH* in the May 2002 issue of this magazine. It attempts to provide answers to some of the conjectures which Ian made.

Ian is absolutely correct in his assertion that only one obverse master die was used for the 1931 halfpennies. Only two halfpenny obverse patterns were ever used in the entire George V series. Obverse die type 1 was used for halfpennies struck at London, Birmingham, Calcutta, Melbourne and Sydney from 1911 to 1936. This is what Ian, with some justification, calls the "London" obverse. Obverse die 2, or what Ian might with even more justification call the "Indian" die, was only used on a very small number of halfpennies struck at the Calcutta mint in 1916. No 1931 halfpennies with a different obverse are waiting to be discovered. This issue has been well researched and described by others¹.

The 1931 penny is different. As Ian correctly says, it occurs with two distinct obverses, the "London" (type 1) and the "Calcutta" (type 2) patterns and of these, the Calcutta obverse is quite rare. What Ian doesn't say explicitly is that the coin also occurs with two distinct reverses, type A and type B. Type A is colloquially known as the London reverse because it was first used on 1911 pennies struck at the Royal Mint in London. Type B is known as the Birmingham reverse because it was first used on the 1912 pennies struck at the Heaton Mint in Birmingham. (There is a third reverse pattern, type C, which is known as the Calcutta reverse.) As mentioned in my own article, *Varieties of Varieties*, in the October 2002 issue of this magazine, the 1931 penny occurs in four die pair varieties:

- 1A London obverse, London reverse
- 1B London obverse, Birmingham reverse
- 2A Calcutta obverse, London reverse
- 2B Calcutta obverse, Birmingham reverse

The London reverse for 1931 has a misaligned 1 in the date. This is what Ian refers to as the "dropped 1" variety.

The 2B type is rare and the 2A type is extremely rare. The majority

of 1931 pennies are of the 1A and 1B types and it is these which I shall discuss from here on.

In 1964 John Dean² listed the value of the 1A variety at about 20% above the value of the 1B variety, implying that it was slightly scarcer. Robert Clarke³ listed the two as equivalent in value and said "The author has found the misaligned 1 variety to be slightly more plentiful than the normal date." In my "spares" book I have 12 type 1A and 39 type 1B but of all the dates amongst my pennies collection that is likely to be the most biased sample. The majority of my 1931 pennies came from Australia,



Figure 1. The date area of a 1931 halfpenny and of a 1931 type 1A penny scaled to the same size. Note that the orientations of the 3 and the final 1 are different. These could not have been produced from the same model by any sort of reduction process.

and those comprised mostly 1B specimens. The rest (18 coins) came from USA sources and these were about equally divided (eight 1A and ten 1B). I suspect that the USA-sourced coins are actually more representative of the mintage because there was never any selection pressure culling the "dropped 1" coins from the samples.

It seems safe to say that the 1931 pennies with the London reverse, i.e. the "dropped 1" variety, are common and comprise somewhere between 30% and 55% of the total mintage. When you see an eBay listing or a dealer advertising a "1931 penny - scarce dropped 1 variety" be careful that you don't pay a premium.

In his May 2002 article, Ian says: *It has been touted that the "Dies" used for the 1930 Pennies were recut to produce the 1931 Pennies but I am ... a bit sceptical. ... The standard production (non-variety) pieces could well have been minted from these recut dies;*

however the varieties most certainly were not.

Since I am the "tout"⁴ to whom Ian refers, I need to explain a few things.

There was definitely experimentation going on in 1930 to produce better coining dies. We have the words of Bill Mullett who was actually at the Melbourne Mint in 1930 and who speaks with some authority. Bill's writings are supported by annotations in the die account books for the period where the recorder explicitly mentioned the destruction of dies which were experimental, had the wrong convexity or which were just unsuitable for coining. As near as I can determine from the die books, there were eleven 1930 reverse dies produced as well as three experimental 1921 and 1922 reverses. Those three together with five of the 1930 reverses were destroyed in December 1930. The remaining six were destroyed in December 1931 along with four 1931 reverse dies which are noted as being unsuitable for coining. The first 1931 reverses were produced in August of that year. The late date for commencement of production together with the notations in the die account books suggest to me that experimentation with die shapes was going on well into 1931. Indeed, it seems possible that most of the 1930 pennies were actually struck in 1931.

When I speculated that the 1931 pennies may have been the result of an extension of the 1930 experiments, I was suggesting a possible explanation for the scarcity of the type 2 obverses for that year. We know that from 1932 until 1936 all pennies were of type 1B, i.e. they were struck with the London obverse and Birmingham reverse. I guessed that as a result of the experimentation in 1930 and 1931 the Melbourne Mint managed to produce better hubs for those particular designs. I doubt that it was a deliberate choice based on aesthetics, but simply one of technical advantage realised in the hobbing press.

In his May article, Ian notes the strong similarity between the date on the 1931 halfpenny and that on the 1931 London reverse penny and goes on to suggest:

I have reason to believe that the new Dies for the ("Dropped 1") 1931 penny and halfpenny could have originated

in the Reduction Machine and in the preparation of the "Reduction Punches" that are necessary to produce the "Master Die(s)".

I see three problems with this hypothesis.

Firstly, as Ian noted in his article, the alignment of the final 1 is slightly different on the two coins (fig 1.) He doesn't mention that the orientation of the 3 is also different. Now if the two dates were produced from the same model on a reduction machine then they'd be identical except for size. There are just too many points of difference for that to be plausible.

Secondly, reductions are done on an entire model, not just a specific portion. There's no way to isolate the date in the reduction process and there are several quite noticeable differences between the lettered penny and halfpenny reverses of George V.

Thirdly, in 1931 the Melbourne Mint didn't have a reduction machine. It did not make master tools directly from models; that was done at the Royal Mint in London. Melbourne produced its derivative (reverse) master tools by re-dating earlier hubs and dies. I don't have any records for 1931 but I have seen an eloquent description of the making of a 1926 sixpence reverse in the Melbourne Mint die account books⁵:

Melb 1923 hub - struck from 1923
London matrix (Royal Mint,
London, 1922)
3 removed for 192 punch
1926 master die (6 inserted)
1926 hub (Melbourne)

Thus Melbourne never made its dies in a reducing machine but always by fiddling with tools supplied by the Royal Mint.

The explanation for the similarity of the dates on the 1931 halfpenny and the 1931 London reverse penny is likely to be much simpler than the one Ian proposes. The adding of the final 1 to a 193_ die (or the 31 to a 19__ die) was done in the Melbourne workshops by an engraver using a hand punch. It is tempting to speculate that the same engraver did both dies but the similar alignment (or mis-alignment) of the final 1 on each coin is probably just coincidence.

1. Holland, Paul M., *A Classification Scheme for Master Die Type Variations in Australian Halfpennies* in *Journal of the Australian Numismatic Society*, 1994

2. Dean, John, *1965 Australian Coin Varieties Catalogue* (1st ed.), Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1964

3. Clarke, Robert L., *The Coins and Tokens of British Oceania* (5th ed.), Malter-Westerfield, California, 1971

4. <http://triton.vg/P31.html>

5. *1926 Hubs and Master Dies* in *Dies and Hubs*, Handwritten records of the Melbourne Mint, 1922-1927