

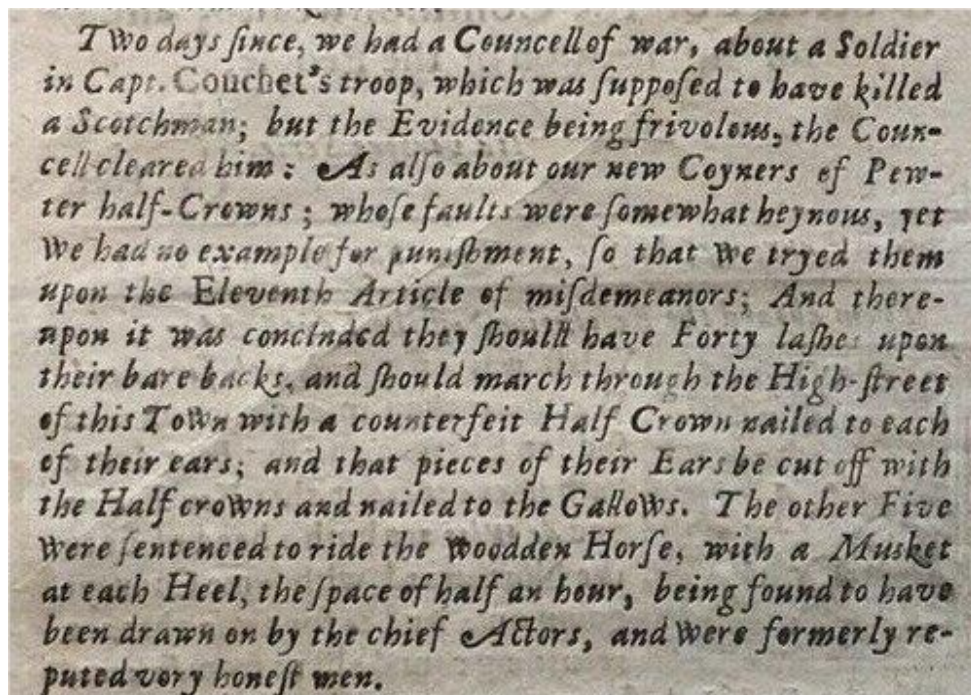
A Notice of Counterfeiting and Punishment from 1653

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This short note describes a contemporary reference, from 1653, to the counterfeiting of silver coin using pewter and the unusual punishment meted out to the perpetrators. The crime took place in Aberdeen and the perpetrators were soldiers. The main actors were mutilated and hanged and their accomplices received severe corporal punishment.

Marchmont Nedham (1620-1678) had been a pamphleteer and propagandist for both sides of the conflict during the civil war. After a short spell in Newgate in 1649 he changed sides and received a £50 payment to start his new venture, the *Mercurius Politicus*. A weekly magazine published between June 1650 and May 1660, it supported the republican governments and from 1655 to 1659 it had a monopoly on news publication. Nedham remained the editor for the whole period.

Issue 152 carried the usual snippets of news and announcements for the period Thursday May 5 to Thursday May 12, 1653. On page 2415 a short note from Aberdeen, dated April 25, was included regarding the apprehension and punishment of several soldiers for coining pewter halfcrowns (Fig. 1.)



Two days since, we had a Councellof war, about a Soldier in Capt. Couchet's troop, which was supposed to have killed a Scotchman; but the Evidence being frivolous, the Councell cleared him: As also about our new Coyners of Pewter half-Crowns; whose faults were somewhat heynous, yet We had no example for punishment, so that we tryed them upon the Eleventh Article of misdemeanors; And thereupon it was concluded they should have Forty lashes upon their bare backs, and should march through the High-streets of this Town with a counterfeit Half Crown nailed to each of their ears; and that pieces of their Ears be cut off with the Half crowns and nailed to the Gallows. The other Five Were sentenced to ride the Wooden Horse, with a Musket at each Heel, the space of half an hour, being found to have been drawn on by the chief Actors, and were formerly reputed very honest men.

Fig. 1. Notice of coining from *Mercurius Politicus*, issue 152 p2415, 5-12 May 1653.

The mutilation of the main perpetrators and their forgeries prior to hanging was not unusual. However the punishment of their accomplices using a *wooden horse* required further investigation. The wooden horse had been a technique of torture developed during the Spanish Inquisition. All references point to the technique being adopted by the army after about 1640 and being regularly used as a punishment for crimes ranging from drunkenness and disobeying orders, but insufficient to warrant the death penalty.

Francis Grose described its use in 1788⁽¹⁾: "Riding the wooden horse was a punishment formerly much in use, in different services. The wooden horse was formed of planks nailed together, so as to form a sharp ridge or angle about eight or nine feet long, this ridge represented the back of the horse, it was supported by four posts or legs, about six or seven feet long, placed on a stand made moveable by trucks; to complete the resemblance, a head and tail were added. . . . When a soldier or soldiers were sentenced by a court-martial, or ordered by the commanding officer of the corps, to ride this horse, for both were practised, they were placed on the back with their hands tied behind them, and frequently, to increase the punishment, had muskets tied to their legs, to prevent, as it was jocularly said, their horse from kicking them off; this punishment being chiefly inflicted on

the infantry, who were supposed unused to ride.” The punishment could lead to permanent injury or even death and was discontinued in the British army in the early 1700’s. Its use continued in the armies of the American colonies up to the 1760’s. Grose goes on to mention that “the remains of a wooden horse was standing on the parade at Portsmouth, about the year 1760”.

Returning to the counterfeit halfcrowns, these are also very unusual in that they are described as being made of pewter. In the middle of the seventeenth century, casting, especially by amateurs was not good enough to make viable counterfeits. The majority of counterfeit silver coins of this period were struck in base silver, or silvered base metal, using false dies. Thus when a counterfeit halfcrown is found struck in pewter, one’s interest is awakened. Figure 2. Shows such a piece⁽²⁾.



Fig. 2. Counterfeit Charles I halfcrown struck in pewter⁽²⁾. Note the retrograde G in REGNO.

Three other pieces are known from the same dies: One in pewter⁽³⁾, one in what appears to be good silver and good weight⁽⁴⁾, and a fourth again appearing to be good silver and good weight but on a lozenge shaped flan⁽⁵⁾. If the last two pieces are good weight and good silver, it would not lead to a very profitable counterfeiting business.

This latter piece is Brooker 1186 and when sold in 2019 had the following footnote. “At the Sotheby sale of 23 June 1898, lot 115 featured "an impression in pewter of a Tower Halfcrown, type 2c, m.m. on rev. ton", the dies of which the cataloguer added: "are said to have been found beneath the Houses of Parliament and that only two examples were struck, the second one being in the BM".

This does leave several questions remaining: Have any contemporary counterfeits struck in pewter survived from the middle of the seventeenth century? Are there any halfcrowns from the same dies as figure 2 that have a solid contemporary provenance such as a hoard? Are there any pewter halfcrowns of this period in the BM? If they are from the same dies as the piece shown in figure 2 then that tidies up a loose end. Of the dies seen in 1898, where are they now located?

If any readers can add to this note, please get in touch.



References

- (1) Frances Grose. Military antiquities respecting a history of the English Army, from the Conquest to the present time. Volume II, 1788 pp199-200. Volume I was published in 1786.
- (2) DNW, Auction 89, 29 September 2010, Lot 2297.
- (3) Spink Coin Auction. 20004, 24 March 2020, lot 263.
- (4) DNW, Auction 157, 21 March 2019, Lot 120.
- (5) Spink Coin Auction, 19025, 28 January 2019, lot 1694.