

Two Contemporary Notices of Counterfeiting

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When searching through newspapers and court records for notices of possession, uttering or the act of counterfeiting itself, most reports just state the bare facts; names, date, perpetrators, verdict, outcome etc. Typically the reports do not include any detail that might allow surviving counterfeits to be firmly associated with that particular case.

This short note will present two documented cases of counterfeiting where sufficient information is included to allow surviving specimens to be identified.

In the first case from Aberdeen in 1799, the present author has seen three specimens over the years, but does not have a specimen or illustration. It is hoped readers will be able to provide the missing illustrations that can be added to a revised article, to be acknowledged, initialled or anonymous as requested. Ideally illustrations of several different specimens can be found that will allow the skill and consistency of the counterfeiting operation to be assessed.

In the second case from Portsmouth in 1915, an unusual choice of metal for the counterfeit and its grade when issued makes the surviving pieces stand out from typical counterfeits of the period. Analysis of the metal reveals the metal to be a Nickel-Silver alloy (Cu-Ni-Zn).

Aberdeen - 1799

The Aberdeen Press and Journal for 29th April 1799 includes the following notice on column 5 of page 3.

Aberdeen.

A Great many counterfeit shillings are now in circulation – they are apparently of a good die; on one side is Queen Anne's head, with the ordinary inscription Anna Dei Gratia – but the reverse is that of King George I's shilling, 1720. Brun. Et L Dux. S. R. I. A. Th. et Elector. These base counterfeits when first put in circulation, are whiter than a good shilling, but may be easily detected by ringing them. In a few days wearing, the copper appears.

Information gratefully received:
Pictures of:
Obverse, Reverse,
edge if possible,
weight.

Many thanks in anticipation.
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Fig. 1. Counterfeit shilling with Queen Anne Obverse and 1720 reverse. Silvered copper. 200%.

Portsmouth - 1915

The Portsmouth Evening News of 22nd February 1915 includes the following notice on column 1 of page 3.

Counterfeit Shillings

A number of counterfeit shillings are in circulation in Portsmouth, and as they are particularly clever imitations the public generally, and housewives in particular, would do well to be on their guard. Several of the spurious coins have been taken on the Portsmouth tramcars, and they have been defaced in the cashier's department of the offices at the Town Hall.

Unfortunately these imitation shillings are so well made that detection is difficult. All of those discovered bear the date 1877, but the obverse (sic) is so "worn" away (evidently being part of the imitation) that the date can be scarcely observed. The milling is very correct, and the weight about the same as the genuine article. In short they resemble shillings which were minted during the year in question and have been in constant circulation ever since.

The illustrations below show a typical 1877 counterfeit shilling, cast in a white metal (Fig. 2.) and two specimens of counterfeits that fit the description from the Portsmouth Evening News (Figs. 3 and 4).



Fig. 2. Counterfeit 1877 shilling (die number 3). Typical cast white metal. Edge a bit rough from the cast. 200%. 3.995 g, 23.56 mm, 180°.

Obv: Sn 83.35 ± 0.68 %, Sb 15.07 ± 0.18 %, Cu 0.609 ± 0.038 %, also traces S, Pb, Bi, Zn <1%
Rev: Sn 81.69 ± 0.50 %, Sb 15.49 ± 0.16 %, Cu 0.913 ± 0.044 %, also traces Si, Pb, Zn, Bi < 1%

Typically counterfeit silver coins made after about 1825 are made from the easily cast white metals, with a high proportion of tin and are thus very underweight. These metals appear silvery when first manufactured but quickly corrode and go very dark grey and then black as the alloy is attacked by oxygen and moisture in the atmosphere/ground, to produce granular surface corrosion products such as tin pest etc.



Fig. 3. Counterfeit 1877 shilling. Unusual material, very worn, traces of plating. Very good edge milling. 200%. 5.485 g, 23.84 mm, 180°.

Obv: Cu 59.00 ± 0.25 %, Ni 22.28 ± 0.13 %, Zn 14.12 ± 0.13 , Ag 3.16 ± 0.05 %, also traces S, Si, Fe, Co < 1%.

Rev: Cu 53.56 ± 0.44 %, Ni 19.83 ± 0.19 %, Zn 11.62 ± 0.16 , Ag 12.18 ± 0.16 %, also traces S, Si, Mo, Fe, < 1%.



Fig. 4. Counterfeit 1877 shilling. Unusual material, very worn, traces of plating. Very good edge milling. 200%. 5.490 g, 23.52 mm, 180°.

Obv: Cu 53.74 ± 0.41 %, Ni 19.06 ± 0.18 %, Zn 10.80 ± 0.15 , Ag 14.88 ± 0.18 %, also traces S, Si, Fe, Co < 1%.

Rev: Cu 53.21 ± 0.38 %, Ni 18.67 ± 0.18 %, Zn 9.93 ± 0.14 , Ag 16.83 ± 0.19 %, also traces Si, Mo, Co, Pb < 1%.

Thus the counterfeits shown in Figs 3 and 4 are composed of a Cu-Ni-Zn alloy and have been silver plated. The metal analysis is carried out on a central area of the obverse and reverse and the software is designed to give a total metal content of 100%. The silver content is likely the surface plating rather than the bulk alloy below. More of the silver has been lost from the obverse of fig. 3 than the others.

The copper alloy that contains 10–20% nickel, in addition to zinc, is known as nickel silver and can be regarded as a special brass. The raw metal has a natural silvery appearance rather than the typical brassy colour, it is resistant to corrosion and is easily plated. It is often the base metal on which silver is plated to create EPNS tableware.

The alloy has many decorative, technological and industrial applications. It may be no coincidence that a year into the first world war the skills and metal working industry around Portsmouth supporting the dockyards and war effort also created some unofficial products.

To have created sufficient counterfeits to result in a newspaper report and warning suggests this was quite a large-scale counterfeiting operation.

