

# Counterfeit Shillings of George III 1816-1820

## (i) Reference Collection and Statistics

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This is the first of a series of short notes looking at the counterfeits of the shillings issued during the recoinage of 1816-1820. This will begin with a statistical analysis of a reference collection which, at the time of writing, contains 1,490 pieces. Subsequent notes will look at the metallurgy, methods of manufacture and ultimately a die study. A study of contemporary reports and convictions for coining, uttering and possession for the period 1810-1850 in Somerset has been published<sup>(1)</sup> and a more national study is in preparation elsewhere.<sup>(2)</sup>

### Introduction

Since the invention of coinage, there has always been a constant undercurrent of counterfeiting. Every now and then social, economic and legislative factors (amongst others) lead to an upsurge in counterfeiting. If there is an opportunity to profit and people have; the skills (metallurgical and manufacturing), the opportunities to offload their products and the gain outweighs the perceived risk, then the counterfeiters will get to work.

For most of the reign of George III the silver coinage was in a sorry state. Much of the milled silver dated from the recoinage of William III a century earlier, the crowns hardly circulated and the other denominations were worn smooth. Slap tokens, foreign coin and blank discs of silver passed as coin. The sixpences and shillings of 1787 were held back by the Bank of England and few were seen in circulation. This is confirmed by the absence (so far) of any contemporary counterfeits from this issue. The oval and octagonal countermarked dollars and later Bank of England dollars and silver tokens went some way to filling the vacuum in the circulating silver. The unofficial silver tokens were rarely issued in large enough numbers to have more than a local impact. All of these stopgaps were counterfeited, sometimes extensively. A review of the circulation of silver during the period 1697-1817 has been published elsewhere.<sup>(3)</sup>

The government eventually took notice and a recoinage of the silver was begun in 1816. The old silver (what was left of it) was called in and melted and a new coinage of crowns, half-crowns, shillings and sixpences was issued at a rate of 5s6d per troy ounce instead of the previous standard of 5s2d per troy ounce. An excellent analysis of the period around the recall and the recoinage can be found elsewhere.<sup>(4)</sup>

In numerical terms, the reduction in the coin weights was small, but conceptually it was a huge step, as this was now a token coinage, with a face value higher than the bullion value, making them almost immune to melting or export. The coin standards were maintained until the debasements of 1920 and 1947 and pieces struck during the recoinage of 1816-17 were sometimes, though not often, found in circulation around the time of decimalisation. The very last pieces disappeared during the silver culls of the late 1970s.

At the time of the issue of the new coins, all of the factors were in place for the counterfeiters to start work immediately. The industrial revolution is picking up speed, with large scale machinery, metalworking skills, metallurgy etc. well understood and an increasing population living and working in towns and cities where cash was the only currency. The counterfeiters were also well practiced having worked for several years on the Bank tokens. Counterfeits are known of all the denominations, the crowns being quite rare and only seen as later pewter issues, the sixpences and half-crowns are scarce and the shillings the most commonly met with.

As will be seen later, the quality of some of the early counterfeits is outstanding, with die struck pieces and complete silvering, they can be very deceptive even today. A few years ago a shilling of 1817 was seen in a dealer's tray, essentially uncirculated, but it was not quite the right colour with a narrow trace of copper visible on the edge. It was overpriced, even if genuine, and the price was not negotiable – one that got away. There was also a notice in the Numismatic Chronicle in the 1870s (seen many years ago, eludes me now), warning against buying copper proofs and patterns of the recoinage as they were all counterfeits. Of the whole silver coinage 1816-1820, ESC lists just one copper proof of an 1817 halfcrown, ESC 617A<sup>(5)</sup>, 2094<sup>(6)</sup>, both giving a rarity R<sup>6</sup>.

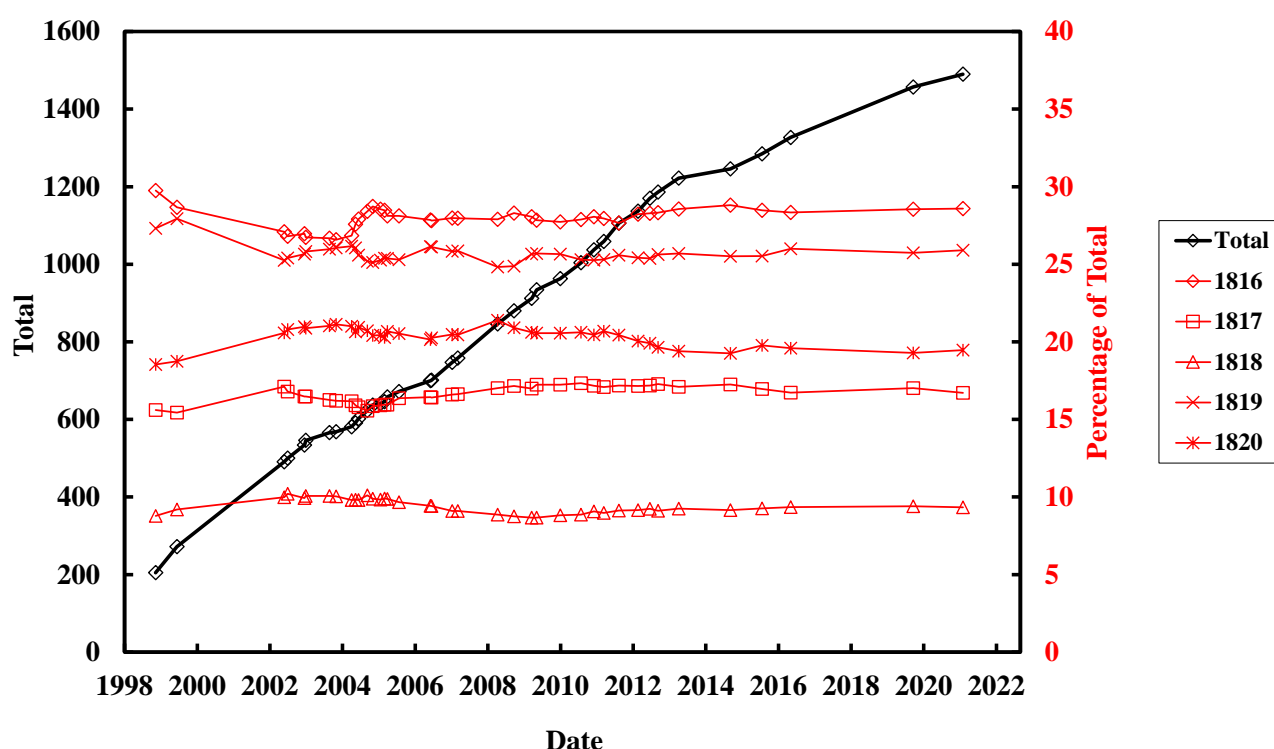
Whilst the majority of the counterfeits (especially brass and copper based) were manufactured before the mid-1820s it is likely that counterfeits dated 1816-1820 continued to be made for many decades afterwards, becoming easier to copy as the official coins lost detail due to wear.

## The Reference Collection

The first counterfeit shilling was acquired in 1987, dated 1820, with almost complete silvering, the brass was showing through on the high points. It was obviously struck using dies, and in a collar, so the edge looked good too. A few years passed, others were acquired, different dates, brass, copper, white metal, cast, struck, fully silvered, no silver etc, etc. In 1999 a short note was published about the accumulation, which by then totalled 205 pieces.<sup>(7)</sup>

The diversity of the dies looked intriguing, so in 2002 it was decided to take this group of counterfeits more seriously and an announcement was made to delegates at the Token Congress and in the TCSB with an advert requesting suitable pieces.<sup>(8)</sup> The only criterion for acceptance into the accumulation was that the counterfeits displayed a clear date. Pieces without a clear date have been discarded. At regular intervals, the numbers for each date have been totalled.

Figure 1 shows a plot of how the accumulation has grown over the years (in black), including the percentage that each date contributes to the total (in red).



**Fig. 1.** Reference collection growth 1999-2021 and percentage of the total with each date 1816-1820.

Thus the collection has grown from 205 pieces in 1999 to 1,490 in 2021. Interestingly the proportions represented by each date 1816-1820 have remained roughly constant throughout the period of accumulation with averages for 1816 at 28%, 1817 at 17%, 1818 at 9%, 1819 at 26% and 1820 at 20% of the total. Table 1 shows the Royal Mint official mintage figures for the shillings<sup>(9)</sup> and compares them with the reference collection of counterfeits.

	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820
Counterfeits	426	249	139	386	290
Royal Mint Mintage	26,139,960	23,031,360	1,342,440	7,595,280	7,975,440
Ratio counterfeits / million	16.3	10.8	103.5	50.8	36.4

**Table 1.** Comparing counterfeit survival with Royal Mint mintage figures for shillings 1816-1820.

At a first glance the counterfeit shillings dated 1818 are scarcer than the other dates, and this is consistent with the smaller official mintage of that date. If the counterfeiters copied what was to hand we might expect the ratio of the counterfeits to the RM mintage figures to be about constant. Something else is happening here. It is known that due to production difficulties the 1816 shillings were not issued until 1817, but this does not explain the over representation of the counterfeits dated 1818-1820 and especially those dated 1818. It will be interesting to repeat the comparison when the number of different dies/moulds for each year has been estimated.

The figure below shows a selection of shillings from the reference collection, the good the bad and the ugly.



**Fig. 2.** Some examples of counterfeit George III shillings - the good, the bad and the ugly. (150%).

### Quantitative Analysis

Having counted the pieces, the next step is to make some quantitative measurements. This begins by giving each counterfeit a unique number, followed by other measurements and observations, all entered into a spreadsheet, as follows.

Number.

A unique seven-digit number - first four digits are the date and the last three are the number of the specimen, inked on the obverse field. Apologies to the purists, but if a tray of 80 pieces was accidentally nudged or dropped it would be more than a challenge to put back in order!

Weight (g).

Measured on a digital balance to 5 decimal places, rounded to 4.

Diameter (mm).

Measured from top to bottom of obverse using a digital calliper to 2 decimal places.

Thickness (mm).

Measured from top to bottom of obverse using a digital calliper to 2 decimal places. This just catches the high points of the rim or design, but may be useful later.

Metal by visual inspection.

- A Unidentifiable copper based alloy: copper, brass, bronze etc. Usually with a green/black oxide layer.
- B Brass - yellow coloured.
- C Copper - a definite pink colour.
- S Silver coloured alloy – some may be genuine silver coins.
- T Tin - zinc, lead, pewter based alloys that go dull grey or black, often with blistering corrosion. (Tin pest).

Grade. Treated as if a genuine coin, thus 'as made' pieces may still only be a VF (40). The advantage of a numerical grade is that it can be used to plot charts. The highest grade in the collection is a 55.

- 70 Perfect
- 60 Uncirculated
- 50 EF
- 40 VF
- 30 F
- 20 fair
- 10 good
- 0 poor, corroded, damaged, but readable date etc.

Silvering (%).

A visual estimate of how much of the obverse and reverse is silvered. Silver coloured metals score 0% unless visibly plated.

Density (g/cm<sup>3</sup>).

Determined using Archimedes' water displacement method on the digital balance.

Note that the die axis rotation is consistently around 0°. An exception is 1816210 with die rotation 290°.

Some time later the measurements were complete! The table below shows the results for the counterfeits shown above in Figure 2.

Number	Weight (g)	Diameter (mm)	Thickness (mm)	Grade	Metal	Silvering (%)	Density (g/cm <sup>3</sup> )
1816107	4.5138	23.68	1.32	30	B	0	8.207
1816110	4.3113	23.61	1.29	10	B	95	8.291
1816118	4.2116	23.86	1.61	35	T	0	7.019
1816172	5.0775	23.80	1.75	50	B	100	9.067
1819136	4.8852	23.75	1.54	40	S	0	8.423
1819140	4.4804	23.80	1.41	35	S	0	8.454
1819142	4.0313	23.58	1.22	25	B	0	8.399
1820125	5.4092	23.71	1.86	40	B	90	8.586

**Table 2.** Measurements and details of the counterfeits shown in Fig. 2.

A more detailed analysis of the whole data set will be presented in the next note.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This note has presented a reference collection of counterfeit shillings dated 1816-1820. The collection was accumulated without prejudice, the only requirement being a readable date. There is expected to be much duplication, but hopefully it is reasonably representative of the counterfeits that were once in circulation. That the collection continued to grow, even during the pandemic suggests that there is still a huge number of surviving counterfeits from this period.

When produced, most of the counterfeits would have been silver coloured, either from plating or the alloy used. Alternatively, the counterfeits were made “dirty” to blend in with circulating coins. Some of the silvering is extremely thin and would have quickly revealed the base metal below when in circulation. Several contemporary records state that the utterers kept their counterfeits wrapped singly in paper, and this would be to protect the delicate surface prior to passing. In 1985 a small hoard of counterfeit George III shillings was reported where residues of the original paper was found between the counterfeits which had been uncirculated when lost.<sup>(11)</sup>

Once detected, the counterfeits would be removed from circulation, though poor handling and storage (e.g. dealers’ junk boxes) will have resulted in more loss from the surface. A significant number show no residual trace of silvering, so it has been lost sometime between detection and the present accumulation.

Several notes into the future I will be attempting a die study based on the pioneering work of Peter Poulsen<sup>(10)</sup>. He has confirmed that the designs of the struck pieces, especially the reverses, are made up from a limited number of punches and hence from a relatively small number of active workshops. If anyone else is working in this area or knows of other studies, the author would be pleased to hear.

## References and Acknowledgements

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- (8) Counterfeit shillings of George III, TCSB v7n5, p 223, December 2002. Subsequent sources include the usual dealers in paranumismatica; Alan Judd (Coins of Beeston), John Whitmore<sup>†</sup>, Paul and Bente Withers (Galata), Ralph Hayes<sup>†</sup>, Brian Hennem<sup>†</sup> and Duncan Pennock (Tokens for Sale). A special mention goes to Gavin Scott and Alan Cope who have provided several hundred specimens over the years and to Mr Cobwright with a bag of 70 at the 2019 Token Congress.
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