

Revisiting an Enigmatic Charles I Pattern Shilling

Gary Oddie

The piece discussed here can be found in the British Museum tray of Charles I silver patterns and finework pieces. The BM catalogue number is 1868,1228.11, though the illustration is not yet online. The coin was purchased from the dealer William Webster in 1868 and was initially considered to be a medal relating to the erection of the Royal Standard in 1642⁽¹⁾. The woodcut illustration in Hawkins' *Medallic Illustrations* is "too round" and the legends shown are "too regular". The attribution as a medal continued to 1904 where the piece is illustrated by Head & Gruuber in their collotype plates for *Medallic Illustrations*⁽²⁾.

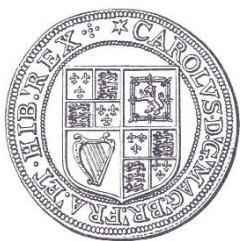


Illustration from Hawkins, 1885⁽¹⁾.



Illustration from Head & Gruuber, 1904⁽²⁾.

The colour photographs below show the piece at 2x life-size.

Obv. **CAROLUS·D·G·MAG·BR·FRA·ET·HIB·REX·:**

The initial mark is partially off the edge of the coin, but from the spacing of the points is more likely a Star rather than a Mullett.

This is around a beaded border and the shield of Charles I. The borders of the shield are irregular and the right-hand border is quite curved, a feature more often seen on some shillings of James I.

[British Museum 1868,1228.11]



Rev. **EXURGAT·DEVS·DISSIPENTER·INIMICI·**

Note the die sinker's error in **DISSIPENTVR**.

This is around a beaded circle and crowned portcullis with square link chains.

This legend is a shortened version of Psalm 67 and translates as 'Let God arise and his enemies be scattered' and previously appeared on the first issue gold and silver coinage (1603-4) of James I.

For both obv. and rev. the letter punches are very similar to Tower mint issues, especially with the top of the A and base of the V having a distinctive chamfer. This first appeared on some dies in the mid 1630s.

[British Museum 1868,1228.11]



Edge. Quite thick and irregular.



Details. Copper alloy, 29.2↔×29.3↑mm though very irregular, 10.710g.

A metallurgical analysis carried out by Mike Cowell (British Museum Research Lab.) and published by John Kent in 2005⁽³⁾ gives the composition as follows: Cu 95.5%, Sn 3.0%, Pl 1.1%, and As 0.45% where the Pl is likely a typographic error for Pb. The method of analysis is not stated but is likely XRF of the surface and confirms the piece to be struck in a low-tin bronze. Bronzes are usually about 12% tin and the absence of zinc means this is not a brass, though most copper alloys were called brass in the seventeenth century.

The tickets with the piece are shown below and give two further suggestions as to the original intention of the piece.



The first ticket, in a 19th century hand, as well as giving the Webster provenance on the reverse, describes the piece as ‘Æ 8^{3/4}. A copper coin (as a Shilling?) of Charles I. said to have been struck for India.’. The Mionnet diameter of 8^{3/4} is about right (within 1mm), especially as the scale is not used consistently by different authors⁽⁴⁾. Similarly the weight is close enough for the ticket to belong to this piece. The suggestion of a colonial use likely stems from the chained portcullis design, which is the same as appeared on the 8, 4, 2 and 1 Testern coins issued by Elizabeth I in 1600, for the first voyage of the incorporated ‘Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies.’ I have found no other sources that corroborate or even duplicate this suggestion, though Head and Gruuber cover their options - ‘This may have been a pattern for a coin, as it is not unlike the Portcullis money of Elizabeth, which was issued for colonial currency’⁽²⁾.

The second ticket, in modern ball point pen, has a bolder statement ‘1640 PATTERN for BILLION COINAGE’. As billon would typically contain 2-30% silver and this piece is a low tin bronze with no traces of silver, it must be considered a trial or pattern.

The suggestion of a pattern for a base metal coinage is now accepted in consequence of the documents to be presented below^(3,5). If the initial mark star had been used consistently with the silver and gold coinage, as tested at the trial of the pyx, the piece would have been struck sometime between 27 June 1640 and 15 July 1641⁽⁶⁾.

Whilst Charles had financial difficulties through his reign, and for a few weeks in 1626 had issued lightweight silver shillings⁽⁷⁾, even during the most dire periods of the Civil War the Royalist mints did not debase the coinage. However, there had been a serious consideration of issuing a debased coinage.

In 1641, Parliament published its *Grand Remonstrance*, listing its issues with the King and the way the country had been run. Item 33 in the list went as follows^(3,8).

And not only private interest, but also public faith, have been broken in seizing of the money and bullion in the mint, and the whole kingdom like to be robbed at once in that abominable project of brass money.

The ‘seizing of the money’ refers to an event of 27 July 1640 when the King’s men entered the Mint and took a third of the silver, that had been sent for coining, for his own use. He promised repayment within 6 months and an interest payment of 8% per annum⁽⁹⁾. In a stroke, this removed any credibility the mint had with merchants, guilds and foreign governments, as a secure place to store and convert bullion to coin. This was noted by a contemporary witness, the Venetian ambassador, Giovanni Giustinian, who also wrote on the 17 July 1640^(9,10).

Besides this measure they have decided to coin 500,000 of their pounds with three parts of copper and only one of silver, to be of the same value as those which are all silver. They are now devoting their ingenuity to find a way to put this in practice. Everyone recognizes the harmful consequences and those who are most skilled believe that it will involve insuperable difficulties, for as the people here are not accustomed to use such base money, it will be difficult to oblige them to take it. The merchants of the India and Levant Companies oppose the decision strongly, more than others interested in trade, and are making vigorous efforts to have it rescinded .

In a letter dated 21 July 1640, Edmund Rossingham wrote to Edward, viscount Conwy^(9,11) described the brass money that would be issued as shillings:

... concerning the brass money thus the last week the merchants of London, the several companies, namely, the East India Company, the Merchant Adventurers, the Turkey Company, they all preferred their several petitions to his Majesty to show the mischief which would accompany the introducing of the brass money. The king read only the Merchant Adventurers' petition, but finding no other way to relieve his present necessity his Majesty resolved to go on with the coining of brass money, whereupon Mr. Attorney was ordered to make haste to perfect the proclamation and Mr. Sergeant Heath was joined with Mr. Attorney to draw this proclamation. The stamps are made, which are the king's arms on the one side and the portcullis on the other side of the coin. And I hear the king does promise in his proclamation to call in all that money again when his necessity is over. Yet his Majesty did not so resolve to coin brass money but he would waive that way of supplying himself if so be the City would lend him 200,000/. upon interest and good security and also to let fall the ship money for this year in the City. But the citizens pretend to great poverty as they know not how to spare and supply his Majesty with that sum of money, wherefore the brass money is like to go on. But more of this hereafter

This document is the crucial piece of evidence that connects the piece being discussed with the proposed debasement of the coins in 1640. It is very unusual for a contemporary document to describe the design of a coin in such detail. It is also interesting to note that the strategy of issuing a base coinage, to be recalled when the financial emergency was over, was exactly paralleled by James II in Ireland with his gunmoney coinage.

The debate in Parliament lasted several days in late July 1640 and finished with Sir Thomas Rowe's speech at the Council Table, against the proposal, 'touching Brass Money, or against mixing Brass Money with Silver; with many notable Observations thereupon'. This has been transcribed in full⁽¹²⁾.

The proposal was also very unpopular at the mint. Sir Ralph Freeman, master of the mint, declared to Lord Strafford, that the servants in the mint-house would refuse to work the copper money; to which the earl replied, 'that then it were well to send those servants to the house of correction'.⁽¹³⁾ It is interesting to note, that upto this date the Mint had not worked with base metal coins, and the project for striking copper farthings had been put out to the Patentees.

There is, however, a document in the Mint accounts from 1640-1 that describes the charges for preparing the Irish Mint houses (at the Tower) for the striking of 'copper money to have been coyned there this yeare.' This likely refers to the same project⁽⁶⁾.

On 17 August 1640, the Venetian Ambassador wrote again to the Doge and Senate^(9,14).

... After careful enquiry into the disadvantages that might follow the introduction of copper money, and hearing the determined statements of the merchants that they will not take it, the execution of the order has been postponed. With the ever pressing need of money the king has taken the step of asking this city, for the third time, for a loan of 200,000l. promising, in order to make the way easier, that it shall not be used for warlike purposes, but to establish a beneficial peace in this kingdom. All the same the Council met and by a unanimous vote answered frankly that they could not satisfy the demands of his Majesty, as the grant of money ought to depend on the judgement of Parliament alone and not on this city only and a small member of that body. From these last experiences all hopes of obtaining succour without a fresh convocation of Parliament, which is universally longed for, have fallen to the ground. . .

This is not quite the end of the story, however, and for his involvement in the seizing of the bullion at the mint and the project to debase the coinage, Lord Strafford was impeached.

On 3 November King Charles recalled Parliament after an 11 year hiatus (the Long Parliament), initially to raise money and bring the governments' finances into order. One of the first acts of the Long Parliament, was to impeach Lord Strafford initially for his 'high misdemeanours' and his use of the army in Ireland. By the time of his trial, there was a long list of accusations and the 26th Article of Impeachment was as follows⁽¹⁵⁾:

That the said Earl of by his wicked Counsels, having brought His Majesty into excessive Charge, without any just cause, he did in the month of July last (for the support of the said great Charges) Counsel and approve two dangerous and wicked Projects, viz.

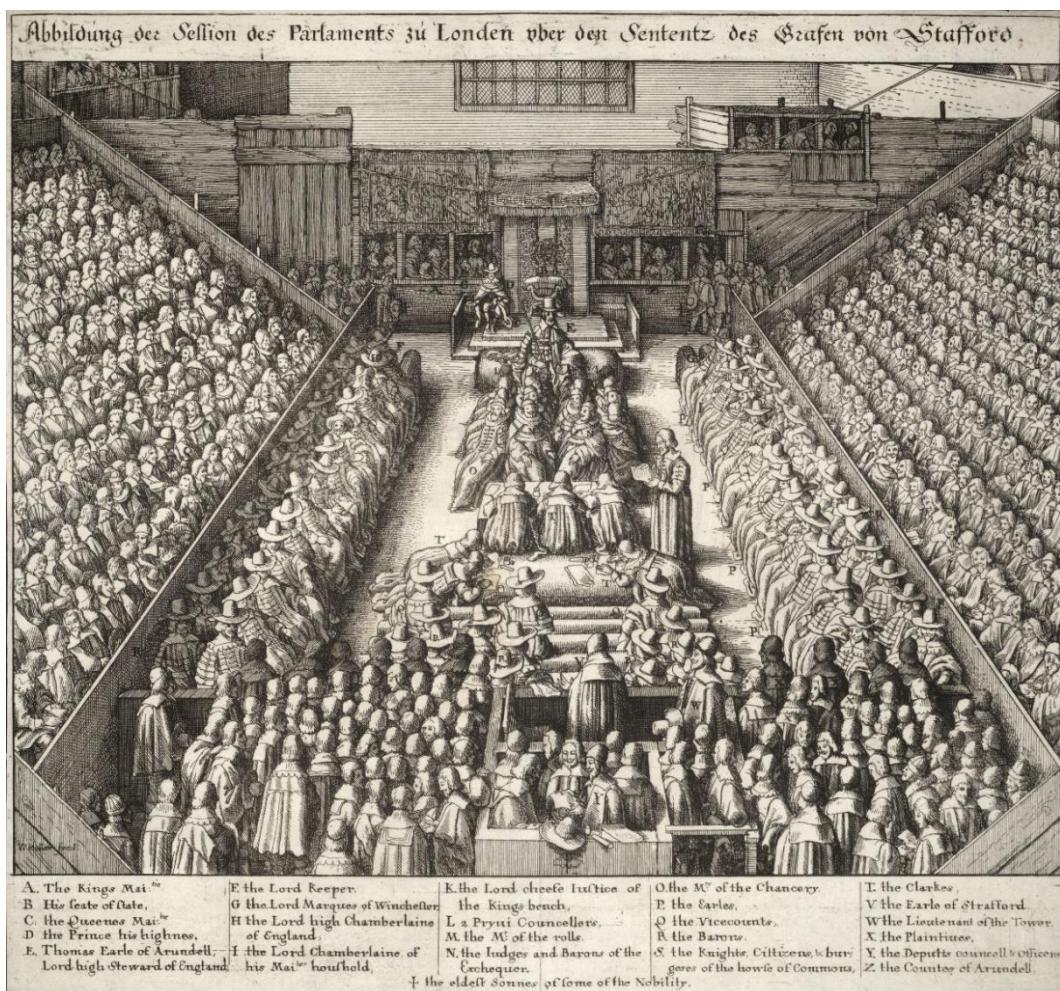
To seize upon the Bullion, and Money in the Mint.

And to imbase His Majesties Coyn with the mixtures of Brass

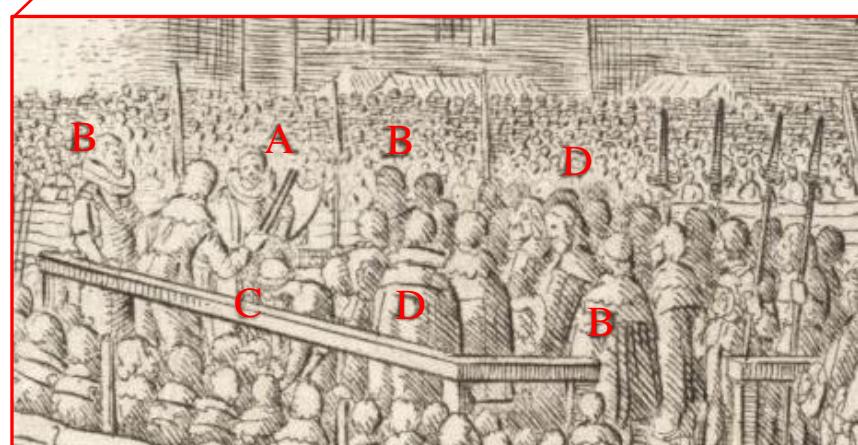
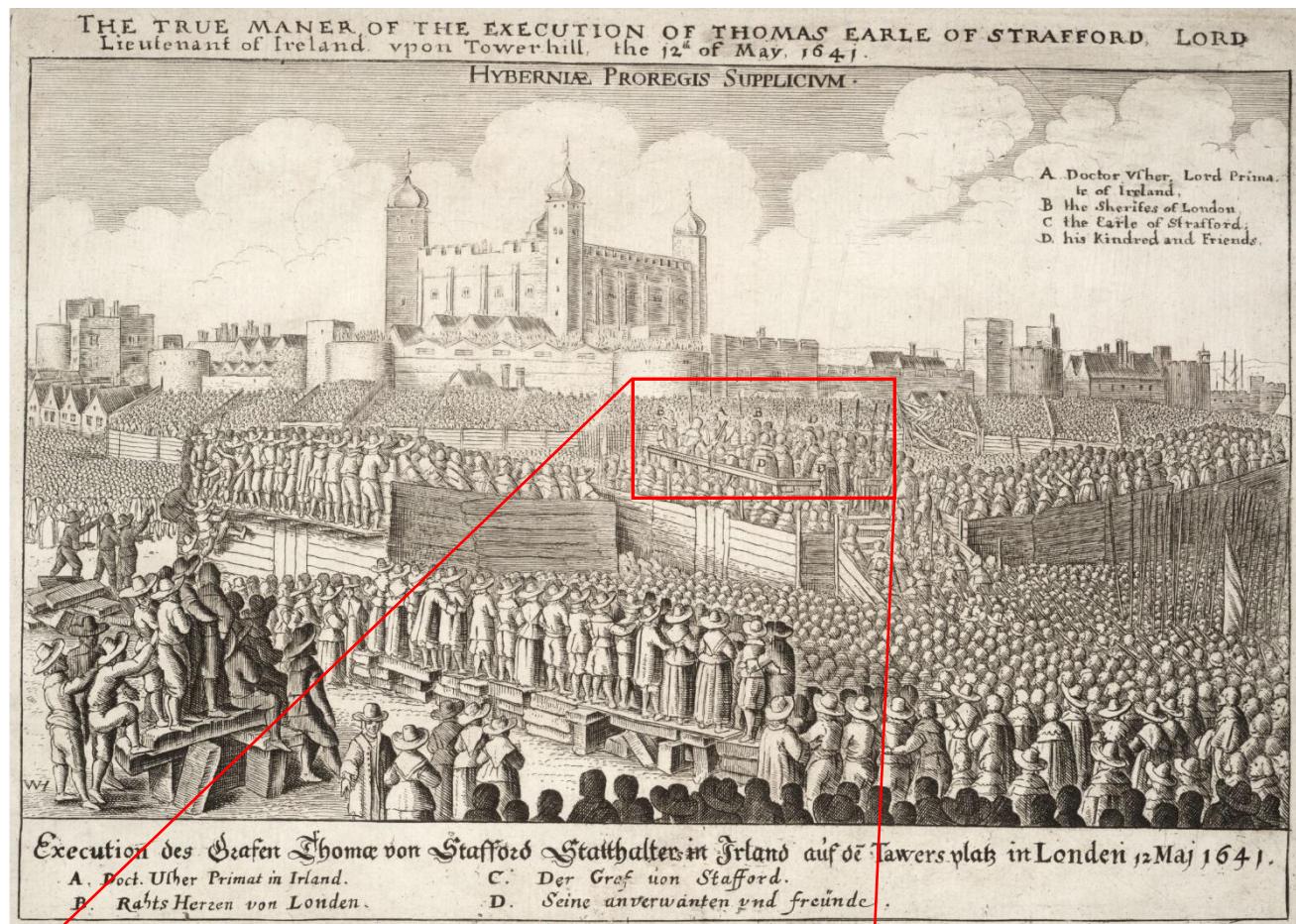
And accordingly he procured One hundred and 30000 l. which was then in the Mint, and belonging to divers Merchants, Strangers, and others to be seized on, and stayed to His Majesties use. And when divers Merchants of London, owners of the said Bullion and Money, came to his House, to let him understand the great mischief that course would produce here, and in other parts, and what prejudice it would be to the kingdom, by discrediting the Mint, and hindring the importation of Bullion: he the said Earl told them, that the City of London dealt undutifully and unthankfully with His Majesty: And that they were more ready to help the Rebels, than to help His Majesty: And that if any hurt came to them. they may thank themselves; and that it was the course of other Princes, to make use of such Money's to serve their occasions.

And when in the same month of July, the Officers of His Majesties Mint came to him, and gave him divers Reasons against the imbasing the said Money he told them that the french king did use to lend Commissaries of Horse, with Commission to search into Mens Estates, and to peruse their Accounts, that so they may know what to levy to them by force, which they did accordingly levy; and turning to the Lord Cottington, then present, said, That this was a point worthy of his Lordships consideration, meaning this course of the french king, to raise Money's by force, was a point worthy of his Lordships Consideration.

The trial began at Westminster-Hall on 22 March 1640 and the judgment was finally reached, seven weeks later, on 10 May 1641 (Old Style calendar). A full transcription can be found online⁽¹⁶⁾ and a contemporary print of the trial, by Wenceslas Hollar, is shown below⁽¹⁷⁾.



Lord Strafford was found guilty and executed 12 May 1641, as shown below in another print by Wenceslas Hollar⁽¹⁷⁾. The close-ups show the execution platform and some of the people present.



A. Doctor Usher, Lord Primate of Ireland,
B. the Sheriffs of London
C. the Earl of Strafford
D. his Kindred and Friends.

Conclusions

This note has presented a little-known base metal coin and traced its suggested identification through various published catalogues and books. Contemporary documents have been presented that describe the designs in detail as part of a failed attempt at issuing a coinage of billon shillings, all dating the piece to late July or early August 1640. The coin is a pattern, struck in a low-tin bronze, for a debased silver coinage that was never issued.

The Earl of Strafford was one of the architects of the project to debase the coinage to raise money for the King but following the recall of the Long Parliament would pay for this treason with his life.

References and Acknowledgements

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Many thanks to Tom Hockenhull for hosting my visit to the BM and to Barrie Cook for finding the piece in the trays and allowing me access.

Postscript - 12 July 2022

Thanks to David Holt, another specimen has been found in the trays of Charles I shillings at the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow. Same dies, same irregular flan, but slightly more worn. There may be more out there, but unrecognised because of the metal and weight.

