

A Day at The Fitzwilliam Museum – Defaced!

Money, Conflict, Protest

Gary Oddie

Introduction

On the evening of Monday 10th October 2022 the Fitzwilliam Museum held an opening ceremony for a new exhibition “Defaced! Money, Conflict, Protest.” The exhibition is only temporary, running from 11th October 2022 to 8th January 2023, after which a part of the exhibition will be transferred to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada.

The publicity material described the event as the “first major exhibition to explore 250 years of protest using money as a canvas for social and political rebellion”. I would add that this is the largest exhibition of numismatic material to have taken place in Britain, taking up three large rooms on the top floor of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

I attended the exhibition on 18th October as part of a group from the International Banknote Society (IBNS) and returned for a second innings on the 21st. The following are some notes about the visit and aspects of the exhibition.

Visiting the Fitzwilliam Museum

When I first saw the museum web pages announcing the exhibition, I thought there had been some clever photoshopping of the front of the building. However, that was not the case and six of the pillars on the main entrance have been decorated with posters for the exhibition!



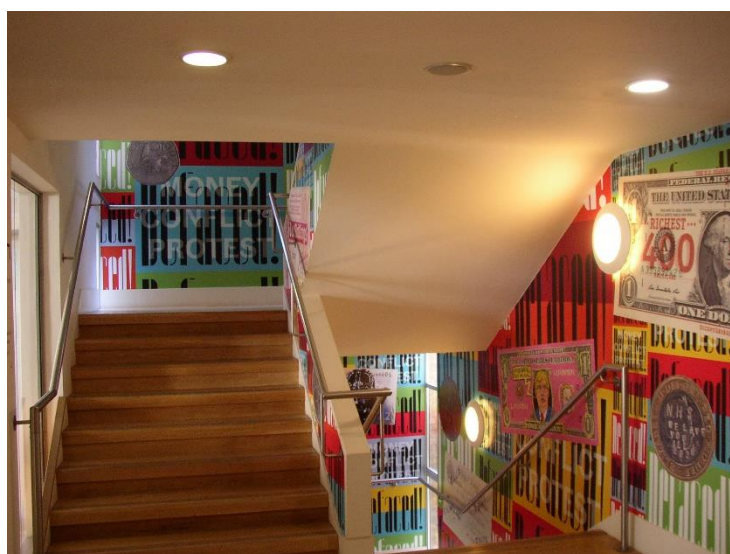
I suspect some of the old Syndics of the museum are turning in their Coptic urns! But this does give some hint as to the scale and general theme of the exhibition. Walking further down Trumpington Street to the South (Courtyard) Entrance of the Museum, a poster in the same eye-catching colour scheme guides you to the gate.



The exhibition is free and open Tuesday-Saturday 10:00-17:00 and Sundays and Bank Holidays 12:00-17:00. There is no need to book in advance.

On entering the lobby you are counted in and asked if you are here of the exhibition and pointed to the stairs or lift to the top floor. Nearby there is a cloakroom with token operated lockers for large bags. Unfortunately these are generic locker tokens, otherwise a specimen might have found its way into my collection!

There is really no need for directions to the exhibition – just follow the brightly coloured floor-to-ceiling wallpaper in the now familiar colour scheme and pattern.



At the top of the stairs, on the left, is the entrance to the exhibition. Somehow this door missed the colourful makeover typical of the journey so far!



The Exhibition

Once inside it is immediately clear that this is no ordinary exhibition, the walls looking more like a curated building site or industrial installation. The partitions and walls are covered with plain, painted or textured OSB to look like shuttering, concrete and even rusty steel with all of the internal structures held up with bare scaffolding. The walls also have also been distressed with graffiti and the odd hole punched through.

The exhibits, however, are all properly mounted and labelled in frames and boxes attached to the walls and partitions. The exhibition handbook and catalogue (see next section) lists 186 exhibits, and whilst I didn't check them all off, there is certainly enough to keep anyone with an interest in coins, tokens, banknotes, and paranumismatica entertained and informed for a few hours. As the exhibition title suggests, the overarching theme is world politics and the history of conflict and protest from the last 250 years as appearing on modified and custom-made money.

The section on Thomas Spence, his tokens and countermarked coins, is particularly interesting with copies of his books "Rights of Man" and "Pigs Meat" on display.

As might be expected with displays containing paper and fabric exhibits, the lighting is subdued throughout all three rooms. Even with local LED lights pointing at the engraved and countermarked coins, the darkly toned bronze pieces are a challenge to see inside their display boxes. This has been raised with the Exhibition Curator (Richard Kelleher) and as a postscript (27/10) magnifying glasses have now been provided.

However a very simple and effective solution to the "indistinct dark brown disc" is to use the imaging capabilities of the cameras built in to most modern phones and tablets. The automatic image adjustment (brightness and focus) and zoom capabilities work wonders on the most obscure objects. The piece shown here is just visible to the naked eye, but by phone-camera, the whole design becomes clear. It is also worth remembering that many if the engraved coins are double sided and the other side must be viewed from the other side of the wall and there are captions on both sides of the wall.



The exhibits are mostly from the Fitzwilliam Museum collection that has been put together over the past few years by Richard Kelleher with purchases made by the Art Fund, including the collection of 550 politically countermarked and engraved coins and tokens formed by Gavin Scott. This has been augmented with gifts and pieces on loan from private collections and other museums. Further pieces have been borrowed directly from the original artists.

The exhibits are a who's who of political protest through money: from Cruikshank's anti-hanging note to a sheet of Banksy's "Di-Faced Tenners" to coins countermarked during the troubles in Northern Ireland to a pound note issued during the siege of Mafeking along with Baden-Powell's original sketch book and a real Wolf Gun that formed part of the design. The largest exhibit, taking up most of the second room is a three-dimensional installation of the fragments of a Ford Transit van that was exploded as part of a payday loan campaign called "Big Bang 2". Crowd funding was used to buy up £1.2M of debt and the receipts put inside the van and then exploded in a field with the City of London as a backdrop.

Around the three rooms are several screens with videos describing the items on display and the final screen in the third room poses some fundamental questions about the future of money, both physical and virtual and the areas of society dependent on cash and those dominated by purely electronic transactions. One final small exhibit has an Aspen card, which was a new concept to me. A preloaded credit card given to refugee migrants to the UK for food and other essentials. One user had visited friends some distance away and used the card. On returning home the migrant was visited by the authorities and interrogated about the travel.

The exhibition is on the top floor, and the catalogues, posters and other souvenirs of the event can be found in the Museum shop back down on the ground floor. Prior to the visit Richard Kelleher had given a brief introduction to the IBNS party and at the end of the visit, having passed through the souvenir shop to buy the book, Richard took the time to answer questions and comments before we left.

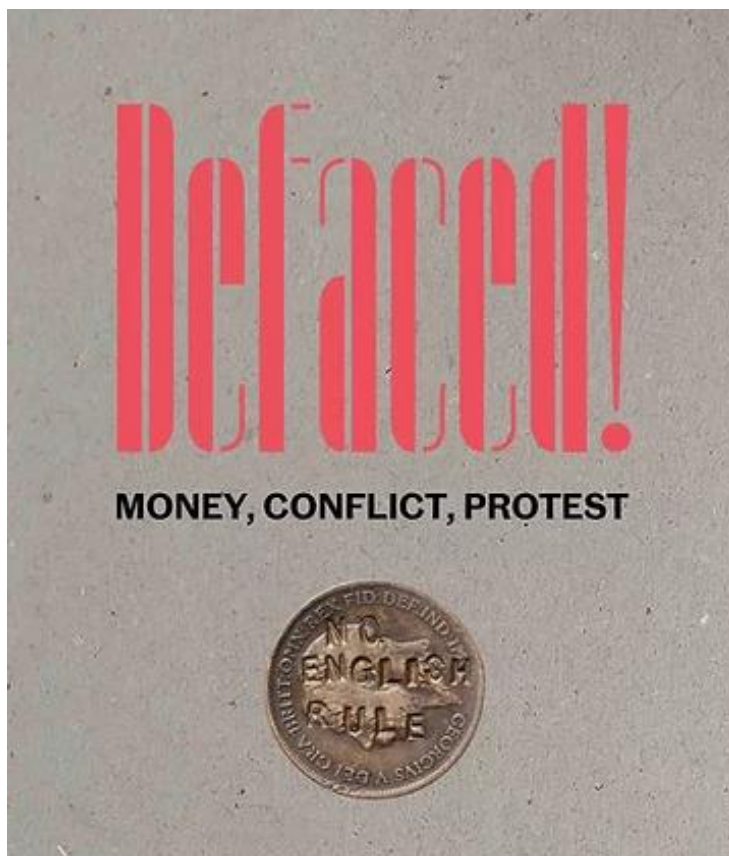


A brief introduction to the exhibition can be found on YouTube.⁽¹⁾

The Book and Exhibition Catalogue

The handbook and catalogue for the exhibition has been published by Paul Holberton Publishing.⁽²⁾ It is available from the Museum shop and the publishers for £25. The book is 168 pages, soft cover and full colour throughout.

Even the book continues the unorthodox theme of the exhibition, 24x28cm with a hole in the front cover revealing an image of a coin printed on the title page (NO ENGLISH RULE on a George V penny). As with the cover, the paper inside has an interesting and unusual texture – slightly rough and noticeably different to usual glossy handbooks and publications. The whole book has the quality and attention to detail that is typical of a Holberton product. All of the images are excellent and crisp. The font used for the image captions, and exhibition catalogue at the back of the book, looks like an old daisywheel font, somewhat in keeping with the irregular nature of the exhibits.



There are many sections to the text with twelve authors in addition to Richard Kelleher contributing throughout. I will leave it to others to review the book, but will just list below the headings and authors from the contents page.

- Director's Foreword – Luke Syson
- Editor's Acknowledgements – Richard Kelleher
- Introduction: Defaced! Money, Conflict, Protest – Richard Kelleher
- 1. Value and Control - Richard Kelleher
 - Paper Revolutions: Money, Propaganda and Finance in America and France - Richard Kelleher
 - The Cost of War - Kevin Clancy
 - A Piece of the Action: Money and the Anglo-Boer War - Richard Kelleher
 - Currencies as Weapons Of Economic Disruption and Violence - Adrian Popescu
- 2. Radicals, Reformers and Regicides - Richard Kelleher
 - 'The Idiot King': Popular Politics and Defaced Coins in Britain - Tom Hockenhull
 - Money of the People: Coins and Tokens Of Eighteenth-century Protest and Propaganda – Bridget Millmore
 - Nelson and Wellington to Peterloo: Money, Memory and the Social Legacy of the Wars with France – Richard Kelleher
 - Le Misérable Vampire Français: Napoleon III and the Humiliation of Sedan - Richard Kelleher
- 3. Caught in the War Machine - Richard Kelleher
 - Coveted, Silvered, Inscribed: Currency as Mementoes of Colonial Military Campaigns – Nicole M. Hartwell
 - Identity, Place and Memory in First World War Trench Art Coins - Nicholas J. Saunders
 - Extreme Ideologies: Coin Defacement and the Spanish Civil War - Richard Kelleher
 - The Language Of Coins and the Trench Art of Military Occupation - Gilly Carr
 - Ab/use of Coins in the Context Of Northern Ireland - Laura McAttackney

4. Money, Art, Activism - Richard Kelleher
Exchange Value - Monica Steinberg
Made Of Money: Defaced Banknotes as Art and Activism in the 21st Century –
Richard Kelleher
The Churchill Fiver Reboot - Wankers Of the World
Dream Boat II - Aida Wilde
Big Bang 2 - Hilary Powell

Checklist of Exhibited Works

Bibliography Of Works Cited

Contributor Biographies

Photographic Credits

Summary and Conclusions

This whole project stemmed from a small exhibition in the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2017 – two display cases of siege and emergency money, ranging from antiquity to World War II, with the title “Currencies of Conflict”. A new project was then conceived with a broader remit and the working title “Currencies of Conflict and Dissent”. The successful application for an Art Fund New Collecting award provided the means and a plan that resulted in the exhibition we can see today under the title “Defaced! Money, Conflict, Protest.”

The primary driver for the whole project is Richard Kelleher who, with the help and input of many people and organisations, has put together an exhibition with Money related entries dating from 1746 all the way through to the 21st century. Many classical museums have overlooked this period and by taking on the non-traditional numismatics as a theme, the Fitzwilliam has created a collection and exhibition that is unlikely to be brought together again.

Having now been through the exhibition a few times, I would recommend buying and working through the handbook before making a second visit. The handbook and the different perspectives of the authors (numismatic, historical, artistic and political) add nuances and background to many of the exhibits that are only briefly described in the exhibit captions. And don't forget to take your camera/phone!

References

- (1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sz0PXcqc5nE>
- (2) <https://www.paulholberton.com/product-page/defaced-money-conflict-protest>

