

A Punch for the Octagonal Countermark of 1804⁽¹⁾

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Several years ago on the well-known web based auction site, a German vendor offered the item shown in figure 1. The item was correctly identified as an octagonal punch used for revaluing Spanish American dollars around 1804. It was suggested that it might have been used by a contemporary counterfeiter.



Fig. 1. Octagonal Punch, 51mm long, enlarged detail of face.

The face showed signs of rust but had been harshly cleaned. The other surfaces show a fine oxide layer typical of high-grade tool steels. The striking end showed no signs of use, and there is a hairline fracture visible on one of the sides. Further correspondence with the vendor revealed that this had been bought along with a collection of George III copper coins, but no provenance. At the time, this wasn't an area of interest to me and I sent emails to three museums where this might have found a good home. Only one replied and wasn't interested. The buy-it-now price was negotiated, and the punch went into my box of curiosities.

The quality of the punch design compares very well with published illustrations⁽²⁾ of genuine countermarked dollars and looks indistinguishable from the portrait on a Maundy penny of 1800 that I had. As with the punch, the penny wasn't perfect condition.



Fig. 2. Octagonal Countermark on a "shilling". (150%).

Some years later the acquisition of a shilling-sized silver disc with an octagonal countermark, described as a trial piece, rekindled my interest in the punch⁽³⁾. This also made the punch relevant to my shilling collection.

The fracture in the side of the punch made me wary of testing it using a hammer(!) or pushing it into anything harder than plasticine.

With the acquisition of a screw press and the experiments in striking seventeenth century tokens⁽⁴⁾, I now had some understanding and an easy way to control the force required to create impressions, along with a supply of pewter and soft brass discs. A chuck was made to support and locate the punch exactly vertically in the screw press. The chuck also had screws that gripped the slightly tapered sides of the punch so that the force was not just applied to the top end where the hammer would normally strike. The first few strikings in pewter and brass are illustrated below.



Fig. 3. Testing the punch in pewter (with close-up), brass and a larger force in pewter.

The first surprise was how much clearer the struck image appeared to be than the face of the punch. This must be an optical illusion caused by the punch being incuse and also the bright cleaning of the punch face. It is also clear that it is very easy to use too much force and completely deform the soft pewter blank. In the last case there are visible flow and stretch marks radiating out from the portrait created by the metal movement.

As a final test of the punch, a damaged silver dollar of Charles III struck at the Potosi mint in 1786 was used. The dollar was annealed and then placed in the screw press.



Fig. 4. Testing the punch on a 1786 Potosi Mint Dollar of Charles III.

The piece was placed in my trays with an extortionate price, so as not to sell but to attract collectors and seek opinions. It was then let out for a year and it was found to be easily good enough to convince specialists, and so was retrieved.

In order to save future confusion a punch was commissioned with my name. This was used to further identify this coin as can be seen in figure 5.



Fig. 5. Countermarking the countermark.

It is notable that the **G.ODDIE** punch, though applied after the octagonal, did not impact the octagonal image which was much more deeply impressed. However it is possible to see which punch was used first from the flow of metal in the area of overlap and the edge of the octagon is slightly deformed.

It is difficult to find high grade and well struck Maundy pennies of 1800. The figure below shows a reasonable specimen compared with a reversed image of the punch. Using a drawing package to create a “fingerprint” of the design shows that the two were created from the same punch. However, the octagonal countermark also has a tiny 8 (or B) in the folds of the drapery, which I had never noticed before.



Fig. 6. Comparing the 1800 Maundy penny and the Punch (reversed).

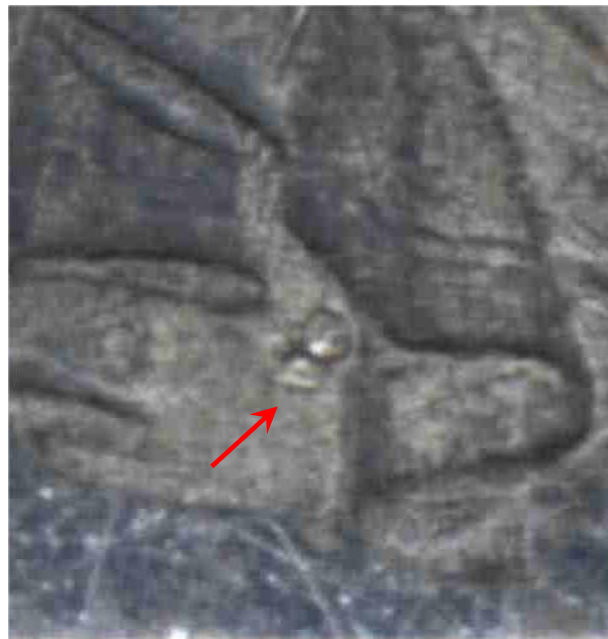


Fig. 7. “8” or “B” in drapery folds (reversed image).

The 8 (or B) is incuse on the punch, so raised on the struck coins. The style of the punch, its fabric, shape, all edges chamfered and surface finish are exactly in the style of single hallmark punches used by goldsmiths for the past few centuries. These combined with the quality of the portrait, which has survived the harsh cleaning, leads me to the conclusion that this punch is probably an official issue from 1804.

A closer examination of the piece shown in figure 2 shows that it also has the same little mark. A similar piece exists in the British Museum⁽⁵⁾.

Examination of several photographs of countermarks that are considered genuine, reveals this small mark to be present. Whether a B or 8, its location looks deliberate, and it may be speculated that this is a secret mark used to identify genuine punches.

References and Acknowledgements

- (1) Originally published in the *Token Corresponding Society Bulletin*, v12n3, June 2017, pp90-93. Recently uploaded to the TCS website:
https://thetokensociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Volume_twelve-1.pdf
Also in *Coin News*, March 2023, pp48-49.
- (2) H.E. Manville. The Bank of England Countermarked Dollars, 1797-1804. BNJ v70, pp103-117, 2000.
- (3) St James's Auction 18, 27 September 2011 lot 282. Though sold without provenance, this piece looks to be the same as Manville plate 11 no 2 where it is described as "Silver trial plate of the octagonal mark (A.J. Byrne collection)".
- (4) G. Oddie. How to Make a Seventeenth Century Token. TCSB v11n10 pp369-376. March 2016.
- (5) M. Dickinson. Observations on recent work by Manville on British and Irish countermarks. SNC June 2003, p130-132.

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