

Another UK Merchant Countermark Find.

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Recently an Australian enthusiast of this series has drawn my attention to a bulk lot, including what appears to be a Scottish countermark.¹ (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1

The lot was made up of 14 coins, but the one of interest was described as *'counterfeit base metal Spanish dollar countermarked with Beith 5/- mark, coin split with part missing'*. The obverse and reverse of this coin are shown as figs. 2 & 3 respectively. The weight of the coin is 23.26 grams.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The part of the description that indicates *'part missing'* is erroneous because all the lettering round the flan, obverse and reverse, is still legible and present. The split must have occurred at the striking stage and opened up under the pressure. The top of the countermark in Fig. 2 is not as well struck up as the lower part, presumably due to the coin splitting.

Acknowledgements. My thanks are due to Ken Eckardt, Mike Shaw and Tom Ward for discussing this issue.

¹ Roxbury's Auction House No. 118, Brisbane, Australia, 1-3 March 2023, lot 2499.

The countermark is read as **R. SPEIR&C^o BEITH. Around 5** (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4

The style of the **5** looks contemporary as does that of the ampersand and the long pointed serifs on the other letters. The punch has the look of having been engraved in the period manner, particularly in the thin outer oval. It would, therefore, appear to be a genuine, contemporary countermark for the period 1801 to 1815 when the value of 5 shillings could have been viable in trade.

There is another issue known from Beith listed by Manville.² The issuer was **•J.FAULDS.&Co.• BEITH AROUND 5/3** (Fig 5)³.



Fig.5

² Manville, H.E., 2001. Tokens of the Industrial Revolution – foreign silver coins countermarked for use in Great Britain, c.1787–1828, BNS Special Publication 3 (London). (Manville.) Pages 25-8.

³ © The Trustees of the British Museum ref. 1996-10-1-08.

Close examination of the word **BEITH** in Figs. 4 & 5 above, leads to the conclusion that they could have been cut by the same smith.

We now come to a study of the host coin. As there is no part of the coin missing, the low weight must be due to the metal content, being less dense than silver. An average silver 8 reales would weigh approximately 27 grams.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

On the reverse of the host (Fig. 3) at about 8 o'clock is the Mexico City mint mark (Fig. 6) where the small o touches the capital M below. A genuine Mexico City mint mark would be as seen in Fig. 7. This then is a clear indication that the host is false and more than likely a product of Birmingham, England.⁴ Also on the reverse of the host, this time at 10 o'clock is what appears to be a capital H (Fig. 8). The position of this letter is generally used for the second assayers' initial. The date of this false host is 1800 (Fig. 2) and for Mexico City the assayers' initials should be FM. From 1803 these initials change to TH. It would therefore appear that the obverse or reverse of this host are from incorrect dies. This is an error I have never seen before with counterfeit hosts and would be extremely interested to hear if anyone else has come across this anomaly.

Why has the countermark been made on a false coin? This could be a trial run and therefore any large coin would do. It may also have been retained as having no intrinsic value, thereby giving us the opportunity to know the mark.

The next task is to try to find the issuer in contemporary documentation or business directories. This has not proved straight forward. The closest match at the present time is from a Glasgow Directory in the City and Suburbs for the period July 1811 to February 1813 where on page 127 is listed Speirs, R. & Co. rum and porter cellars, 155 Stockwell and then Speirs, Robert, jun. agent, Tontine buildings. Both these names have the s at the end of the surname and are in Glasgow. However, in a Commercial Directory of Ireland, Scotland and the four most Northern Counties of England for 1821-3 on page 357 under Beith is listed Speir & Love, linen & woollen drapers & seed merchants, Cross.

The search will continue.

This new countermark can now be numbered **010A** to continue the sequence originally set up by Manville.



⁴ Bordeaux, M.P., 1915. 'Counterfeit Spanish Piastres issued at Birmingham' *NCirc* 25, 558–64.