Contemporary Counterfeit Shillings of James I 1603-1625 Circulating to 1696-7

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This note takes a small detour from the die studies being carried out for the shillings of the various issues and mint marks of James I and looks at contemporary counterfeits of the shillings of this reign.

The issues of silver coins by James I are fairly straight forward for the shillings: three coinages, a continuous run of mintmarks but a very variable output, being low for 1612-15 and extremely small 1615-19. The silver coins went into circulation joining those of Elizabeth I, Philip and Mary and the fine silver of Edward VI. Those that survived the melting pot and were not exported as bullion would stay in circulation or be deposited in hoards (especially during the Civil War) until the recoinage of 1696-1697.

During the recoinage, unclipped and almost full weight silver coins were allowed to continue to circulate at full value after being officially pierced through the centre. The piercing was designed so as not to remove any metal. Any subsequent clipping would be obvious and illegal, and the coins would no longer be accepted in official payments[1,2]. However, coins that still showed the inner circles were also received at face value. This clippers' charter resulted in many coins having their full legends removed in one piece. Hoards of these clippings have been found, though a clipping that shows the whole legend from a James I shilling has not yet been seen by the author. The figures below show two James I shillings centrally pierced, and two pieces clipped almost to the inner circles.

Fig. 1. James I shillings centrally pierced during the 1696-7 recoinage,
(a) 3rd coinage, 6th bust mm lis, 5.745g and (b) 3rd coinage, 6th bust mm trefoil, 5.614g.

Fig. 2. James I shillings clipped close to the inner circles sometime c.1696-7,
(a) 1st coinage, 2nd bust, 3.313g and (b) 2nd coinage, 5th bust, mm trefoil, 4.000g.

This long period of circulation would result in wear and clipping. The average weight (and diameter) of a circulating hammered shilling would systematically decrease across the whole period 1603-25 to 1696-7, but especially after the introduction of the milled coinage in 1662-3, with no new full-size hammered coins entering circulation.

Combined with the diversity of hammered shilling designs circulating up to the 1696-7 recoinage all of these factors created opportunities for counterfeiters to operate.

The Counterfeits

The pages below illustrate and record James I shillings that are considered to be counterfeit and contemporary to the original circulation of the coins (1603-1625 to 1697). These are from three main sources. Firstly there are the specimens found in the Baldwin Forgery Cabinet (12 examples accumulated over the past 140 years [B001-B012]). The second group is the author's collection (14 specimens acquired over 35 years [GO001-GO014]). The British Museum holdings (3 early 20thC acquisitions [BM001-BM003]) are also presented along with a piece provided by Mark Davidson [MD001].

The pieces are presented in the same chronological order as the issue of the official shillings. Pieces too worn to identify coinage/bust/mm are placed at the end. Where more than one piece has been found from a particular coinage and mintmark, the pieces are placed in order of decreasing weight. See later for a discussion of this.

A contemporary counterfeiter's die pair held by the Royal Mint Museum is also illustrated. An example struck from these dies on a square lead flan has been found for sale in 1949 and reappearing at auction in 1951. Though not illustrated, the description leaves no doubt. The 1949 sale also included three further contemporary counterfeit shillings of James I (without illustration) and these are included for completeness.

First Coinage

mm Thistle, 2nd bust

Obv. IACOBVS D G ANG SCO FRA ET HIB REX
Rev. EXVRGAT DEVS DISSIPENTVR INIMICI
Details. Silvered brass, 30.0mm, 4.381g. [B008].
Struck using false dies?


001

mm ?, ? bust

Obv. [. . . . .] NG SC [. . . . .]
Rev. [. . . . .]
Details. Base Silver, 24.5mm, 2.381g. [GO008].
Cu 71.7%, Ag 27.0%, traces of S, Si, Zn and Bi etc [GO014].
Notes. Just enough of the obv. legend visible to identify the coinage.


002

First/Second Coinage Mule

mm Lis, 3rd bust

Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRIT FA ET HIB REX
Rev. EXURGAT DEVS DISSIPENTVR IMICI
Details. Silvered, 29.5mm, 5.108g
Ag 82.3%, Cu 16.7%, Pb 0.4%, traces Si, Zn, Au, Bi. [GO001 ex Seaby Black Museum, 1992].
Struck using false dies.


003

Second Coinage

mm Lis, 3rd bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MA BRIT FRA ET HI REX
Rev. TERPESOMEMTI XVUINOC SOꝺEAVQ
Details. Copper, 31.5mm, 6.174g. [BM001].
Notes. The reverse legend has been engraved forwards on the die resulting in a backwards legend on the counterfeit.
Struck using false dies.


004

mm Lis, 3rd bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MA BRIT FRA ET HIB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIV [. . .] EMO SEPRET
Details. copper, 30.5mm, 5.809g
Cu 95.4%, S 1.2%, Si 1.0%, traces Al, Sn, Zn, Pb. [GO008].
Struck using false dies.


005

mm Lis, 3rd bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRIT FRA ET HIB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Lead?, 31.0mm, 5.749g
Sn 66.5%, Pb 31.1%, Si 1.8%, Cu 0.5% traces Ag. [GO007].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


006

mm Lis, 3rd bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG [. . . .] RA ET HIB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Plated brass, 29mm, 5.347g
Cu 70.4%, Ag 27.8%, S 0.6%, Si 0.5%, Pb 0.1%, P 0.1% and others. [GO004].
Notes. The silver reading is likely just from the surface.


007

mm Lis?, 3rd Bust
Obv. [. . . .] G BRI FRA ET H [. . . .]
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONI [. . . .]
Details. Copper, 26.0mm, 4.829g. [B012].


008

mm Lis, 3rd bust?
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BR FRA ET HET REX
Rev. QVAB DE [. .] CONIVNXIT NEMO SER [. .]
Details. Copper, 28.0mm, 4.720g. [B004].
Bust looks similar to a Scottish 12 shilling.
False dies/moulds


009

mm Lis, 3rd bust?
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRI [.] AN ET HIB REX
Rev. QVE DEVS CONTVXIT NEMO SEPAET
Details. 29.5mm, 4.123g
Cu 99.0%, Pb 0.4%, Ag 00.2%, Traces Zn, Fe, Sb.
[GO014].


010

mm Lis, 3rd bust? 2nd Coinage?
Obv. IACOBVS D G MG RITA EH IREV BR E X
Rev. QVA EVS CON IVXI I NEMO SEPREAT
Details. Brass, 27.0mm, 3.845g. [BM003].
Struck using false dies


011

mm Lis, 3rd bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG [. . . .] IB REX

Rev. QVAE [. . .] CON [. .] XIT NE [. . .]

Details. brass, 29.0mm, 3.629g
Cu 98.4%, Fe 0.9%, Pb .2%, Sb .2% traces Zn, Sn. [GO012].


012

mm Lis, 3rd bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MGRI [. . . .] HIR EV B REX
Rev. QVAE VS CONIV [. . .] NEMO SEPREAT
Details. Base silver?, 27.5mm, 2.788g
Ag 61%, Hg 30%, Cu 7%, traces Sn, Fe, Ba, Zn.
[GO007]. Struck? with false dies.
Notes. The XRF initially appeared odd, but when mercury was added to the analysis, the use of an Ag/Hg/Cu amalgam became clear.


013

mm Rose, 3rd bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRIT FRA ET HIB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Base silver?, 32.0mm, 5.231g. [B013].


014

mm Rose, 4th bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRIT FRA ET HIB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Base silver?, 31.0mm, 5.644g. [B007].
Cast? using moulds taken from genuine coin.


015

mm Scallop, 4th bust

Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRIT FRA ET HIB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. base silver, 28.0mm, 3.845g
Cu 53.9, Ag 42.2%, S 2.0%, traces Si, Zn, Fe. [GO006].
Cast? using moulds taken from genuine coin.


016

mm Coronet, 4th bust?

Obv. [. . . .] MAG BRIT FRA ET HIB REX
Rev. CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. base silver, 29.5mm, 3.162g
Ag 55%, Cu 23%, Hg 14%, As 4%, traces Pb, Fe, Sn, Zn, Sb. [GO015].
False dies/mould.


017

mm Coronet, 5th bust

Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRIT FRA ET HIB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Copper, 28.5mm, 5.132g
Cu 91.5%, Sn 4.4%, S 2.0%, Traces Si, Pb, Zn, Ag. [GO002].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


018

mm Coronet, 5th bust

Obv. IACOBVS D G [. . .] G BRIT FRA ET HI REX
Rev. [. . . . .] S CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Copper, 29.0mm, 4.687g. [B006].


019

mm Trefoil, 5th bust

Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRI FR ET HIB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Copper, 30mm, 4.854g
Cu 97.2%, Si 0.8%, S 0.4%, Zn 0.4%, Pb 0.2%, Sn 0.2%, Sb 0.1% and others [GO005].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


020

mm Trefoil, 5th bust

Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRIT FR ET HI REX
Rev. [. . . .] DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. copper, 29.0mm, 3.234g
Cu 96.8%, Si 1.6%, Sn .6% traces Pb, Sb, Zn. [GO016].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


021

Third Coinage

mm Thistle?, 6th bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G [. . . . .] ET HI REX
Rev. [. . . .] DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARE [.] T
Details. Brass, 28.0mm, 4.447g. [B010].
Cast in hand engraved moulds.


022

mm Lis, 6th bust?
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BR [. . . .] HIB REX
Rev. [. . . .] DEVS C [. .] IVNXIT NE [.] O SEPAR [. .]
Details. Brass, 29.0mm, 6.178g. [BM002].
False dies/mould.


023

mm Lis, 6th bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRI FRA ET HIB RX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. copper, 29.5mm, 4.299g. [B003].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


024

mm Lis, 6th bust
Obv. IACOB[9] D G MAG BRI FRA ET HI REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Copper, 29.5mm, 4.195g. [B009].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


025

mm Lis, 6th bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRI FRA ET HI REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Silvered brass, 28.5mm, 3.927g. [B011].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


026

mm Trefoil, 6th bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MA BRI FRA ET HI REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. copper, 29.5mm, 7.110g. [B002].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


027

mm Trefoil, 6th bust
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRI FR ET HI REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEMO SEPARET
Details. Lead?. 31.0mm, 4.0g, [MD001].
Cast using moulds from a genuine coin.


028

Unidentifiable Coinage

mm Lis?
Obv. IACOBVS D G MAG BRI T FRA [. . .] IB REX
Rev. QVAE DEVS CONIVNXIT NEM [. . . .]
Details. Brass, 32.0mm, 5.177g
Cu 63.9%, Zn 25.1%, Si 3.8%, Al 2.1%, Fe 1.8%, Pb 1.6% traces S, Mo. [GO003].


029

Mm ?
Obv. [. . . .]
Rev. [. . . .]
Details. Base silver, 20.0mm, 2.152g. [B001].


030

A Counterfeiter's Die

The following two items can be found in the Royal Mint Museum collection(3).

Fig. 3. Counterfeiter's die pair for a James I shilling. Image thanks to and © the Royal Mint Museum.

The existence of the die was noted in 1910 and it was initially considered to be a genuine die pair for a third coinage, 6th bust, mm Lis shilling[3]. Whilst the die engraving is of exceptional quality there are several features that are "not quite right"[4]. The obverse legend is unusual in that it ends **ET.H.RX**. Additionally the design of the harp on the reverse shield is not correct for a James I shilling and this style of harp is typically post 1630[5].

The presence of a square collar which looks to be permanently attached to the trussel would not be conducive to a speedy or efficient coining operation, especially if a coin became attached to the reverse die. The state of the trussel suggests that this has been used to create 2-3,000 pieces – thanks to Dave Greenhalgh for this insight.

Though the survey above includes no pieces struck by this die pair, a specimen, struck on a square lead flan has been found being sold in 1949 and again in 1951.

The Raymond Carlyon-Britton collection was sold over several months by Seaby in 1949[6]. In the October issue appeared the following item:

3063	Pattern shilling of sixth coinage, mm. lis, IACOBVS . D'. G'. MA G'. BRIT'. FRA'. ET. H'. (sic) RX (sic). Pellet stops on rev. Struck on large square flan in lead. Probably unique VF, RRRR £9/10/-

Two years later the piece reappeared as lot 1265 in the H.M. Lingford sale[7].

1265.	m.m. lis, a striking of a shilling on a thin square lead flan. reading MAG '. BRIT'. FRA'. ET. H'. RX '. on obv. And usual rev. reading, having stops between words, this has been described as a pattern, but in view of the '. stops and the abbreviations of HIB and REX, also the Charles I type harp, it is most likely an impression in lead from a forger's die. Very fine and interesting. Ex R. Carlyon-Britton collection. (Sold for £2-0-0)

The legend reading leaves little doubt that the piece was struck from the dies shown in figure 3, though in both sales, the connection with the dies in the Royal Mint Museum had not been made. That the striking is on a square piece of lead suggests that there was no intention for circulation. The Royal Mint Museum records give no provenance or date of acquisition for the dies, but I suspect the square lead piece was struck using the dies in the late 19th or early 20th century.

Three Further Counterfeits

The sale of the Raymond Carlyon-Britton collection by Seaby also included three further counterfeit James I shillings as follows[6].

3064	Second coinage, third bust, mm. lis, in lead. Perhaps a contemporary forgery, but if so from exceptionally well-copied dies F 15/-
3065	Another, in silver, from crude dies, HI . BRI . X—OVADE : VS fair 8/6
3066	Another, in silver mm. mullet, also not official F 21/-

The description of item 3064 matches #006 of the survey above but is very unlikely to be the same piece. Items 3065 and 3066 are a new legend reading and mintmark respectively. Unfortunately, none were illustrated.

Discussion – Dating the Counterfeits

Contemporary counterfeit James I shillings are rare, and as a series appear with a similar frequency to the counterfeit shillings of the Commonwealth[8] and maybe ten times less frequently than contemporary counterfeit shillings of Charles I. (An ongoing project has accumulated images of approximately 250 contemporary counterfeit shillings of Charles I.)

These hammered shillings would remain in circulation until the recoinage of 1696-7, by which time many of the genuine shillings had been clipped to the inner circles.

For a counterfeit to blend in with the circulating medium it must not attract attention by being too heavy or light, too big or too small and generally the dies or moulds required to make a low grade counterfeit require less effort than those required to manufacture a detailed high-grade copy.

The author suspects that there was a continuous undercurrent of counterfeiting throughout the seventeenth century and that the counterfeiting operations expanded significantly during the Civil War and Commonwealth. With the introduction of milled silver coinage under Charles II, it is likely that the diverse designs of the worn and increasingly clipped coins would be the primary target of the counterfeiters.

The counterfeits presented in the survey above show a range of qualities, weights and diameters. Once detected and discarded a counterfeit would only suffer weight loss by corrosion as the wear and clipping associated with normal circulation would cease. In order to see if any trends can be seen in the surveyed counterfeits, each counterfeit was given a grade and then grouped: nF-gF, fair, good and good+ and finally poor. The chart below plots the measured diameter against the measured weight and colours each data point by the assigned grade.

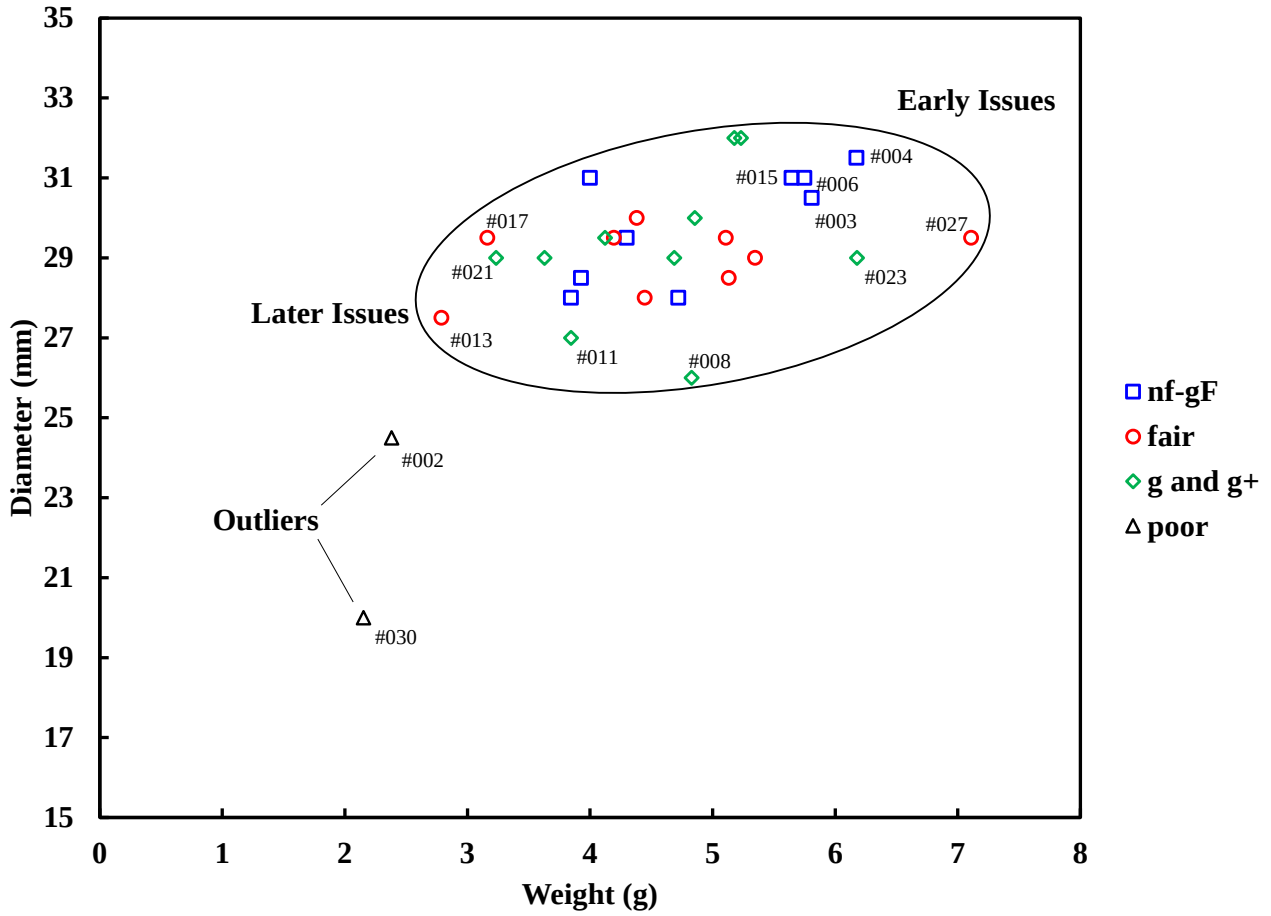

Fig. 4. Plotting the weights, diameters and grades of the 30 counterfeit shillings.

As might be expected there is a slight trend with the smaller diameter pieces being of lower weight, but there is no clear trend with the grades. However, it might be expected that the points in the upper right refer to pieces

of earlier manufacture, maybe pre 1640 and those in the lower left of the main group are later issues from 1670-97. The number of specimens is really too small to draw any more detailed conclusions.

Two of the counterfeits, however, do stand out from the main group. Counterfeits #002 and #030 are much smaller and lighter and less circular than the other pieces and are clipped inside the inner circles. These are the only pieces that grade as poor. Because of their weight, it might be suggested that these pieces of "silver" have been brought back into circulation in the late 18th and early 19th century where they would easily blend in with the slap tokens and other discs of metal that were passing as coin.

Conclusions

This note has presented 30 contemporary counterfeit shillings of James I. These could have been manufactured at any time between the issue of the genuine coins into circulation (1603-25) and the withdrawal of the hammered coins during the recoinage of 1696-7.

The counterfeits are very variable in terms of weights, diameters, composition and die/mould quality, but must have all been sufficiently good to pass in circulation at some point in the seventeenth century. Though loss of original silver plating and the corrosion of the counterfeits whilst in the ground for three centuries will have affected the appearance, but not significantly the weight and diameter of the counterfeits. In order to blend in with the circulating hammered shillings, the heavier and fuller counterfeits are expected to be of early manufacture and the lighter and smaller pieces would likely have been made closer to the 1696-7 recoinage.

Two of the counterfeits have weights and diameters significantly below the others and have been clipped inside the inner circles. It is suggested that these pieces saw a second circulation during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries alongside the slap tokens and other metal discs that passed as coins prior to the recoinage of 1816-17.

The survival of a counterfeiters die pair is extremely unusual, but unfortunately no specimens struck from these dies has been found for examination.

References and Acknowledgements

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