

A Contemporary Counterfeit Irish Base Shilling of Elizabeth I, c.1559

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The recent acquisition of an interesting contemporary counterfeit of a base Irish shilling of Elizabeth I has prompted this note. The original catalogue entry gave a provenance as ex. G. Brady and nothing more.⁽¹⁾ When the coin arrived, it came with a ticket in Chris Comber's hand, stating "ex Brady, Millennial collection." A copy of the page from the April 2000 "Millennial Collection" catalogue was found⁽²⁾ which in turn referred to a hoard report by Brady & Dolley from 1970 and this is where revisiting the story starts.⁽³⁾

In 1966 a large, corroded lump of coins were offered to a Dublin coin dealer (probably Emil Szauer). There was no find spot, but a vague suggestion of County Tipperary. It was suspected that some of the coins from the hoard had already been sold in London. The mass was separated and conserved (cleaned) to reveal 63 coins as shown in the table below.

	Shillings (Irish)	Sixpences (Irish)	Groats (Irish)	Threepence (Irish)
Henry VIII		3		
Edward VI		5		1
Mary				
Philip & Mary	1		42	
Elizabeth	3+ 1 Counterfeit		7	

Table 1. Composition of the Tipperary hoard.

The total face value is £1 5s 7d Irish and a full breakdown of the types, mintmarks and mints represented (London, Bristol and Dublin) can be found in Brady and Dolley's 1970 report.⁽³⁾ The discovery of the hoard was just in time to become an entry in Brown and Dolley's inventory of hoards 1500-1967.⁽⁴⁾ It is listed as IN 13 on p72, and it is noted that the hoard was divided between three private cabinets.

That the hoard contained only debased coins and none of the "fine" silver (11 oz, 0.916) that was issued in Elizabeth's name in 1561 leaves only a very narrow window for the deposition of the hoard 1558-1560 and the creation of the counterfeit. The pattern of deposition of hoards in Ireland with a terminal date in the reign of Elizabeth is discussed at length by Dolley in 1970 where the Tipperary hoard is entry No. 40.⁽⁵⁾ Of the 48 hoards listed, 13 terminate at the end of the first base issue. Hoards with later depositions typically include both Irish and English fine silver coins.

The counterfeit base shilling was given special mention by Dolley in 1970.⁽⁵⁾

63 'white money' coins which range in date from 1547 to the very end of the 1550s are believed to represent the greater part of a hoard which may not even have come from within the county. The most interesting coin is a forgery of the base Anglo-Irish shilling of Elizabeth. Concealment may be presumed to have occurred c. 1560 or only a very little later.

The piece was also illustrated and discussed by Brady and Dolley in their 1970 paper.⁽³⁾

... the contemporary counterfeit of the Elizabeth Shilling. The metal is not notably worse, in appearance at least, than that of the genuine coins, and it is clear that the counterfeiter had his profit more from a reduction of one third in the weight than from any deceit in the alloy. The series is not one where forgery has been suspected by modern students and it is to be hoped that publication of this coin may lead to the identification of other specimens of the counterfeiter's handiwork. For all its crudity, the coin is not without merit in the execution, and one is reluctant to believe that the dies were the only ones to be engraved by the particular forger.

In reply to Brady & Dolley, 53 years later, this is the only example of this counterfeit and this engraving style that the present author has seen.

The following sections will look at this counterfeit in more detail, compare it with a genuine coin and present a third piece that was considered to be a cast counterfeit shilling of the same issue. All images shown $\times 2$.



- Obv. ELIZABETH D : GA : NG : ERA : N : HIBREG mm. Rose.
The Z of ELIZABETH is rotated, appearing as an N, and the Z after FRA is also rotated.
- Rev. POSVI : DEVM : ADIVTOREM : MEVM : mm Rose.
All V's are an inverted A, E in MEVM is reversed, the crowned E to the left of the harp is very misaligned.

Details: Base silver, 32 mm, 6.259 g, 90° , density 8.693 g/cm^3 .

XRF analysis of metals:

Cu 67.9%, Ag 29.7%, Sn 1.0%, Zn 0.7%, Pb 0.3%, Au 0.2%, Sb 0.07% and Bi 0.04%.



- Obv. ELIZABETH : D : G : ANG : FRA : Z : HIB : REGINA mm. Rose.
Slightly double struck so the B and T of ELIZABETH look like a D and I respectively.

Rev. POSVI : DEVM : ADIVTOREM : MEVM : mm Rose.

Details: Base silver, 33 mm, 8.971 g, 30° , density 9.052 g/cm^3 .

XRF analysis of metals:

Cu 63.1%, Ag 35.8%, Pb 0.5%, Sb 0.2%, Zn 0.1%, Au 0.1% and Bi 0.05%

Officially the coins should be 144 grains and 3 oz fine, i.e. 9.331 g and 25% silver which gives a pure silver content of 2.333 g. Interestingly the genuine coin (002) is under weight (more than would be expected for that amount of wear), but is much better silver than expected with 8.971g at 35.8% which equates to 3.211 g of pure silver. The counterfeit (001) is also light at 6.259g and the silver high at 29.7%. This converts to 1.859 g of pure silver and quite a reasonable profit margin of 20% on the metal (1.859 g vs 2.333 g). This is not the first time that the author has found genuine debased coins of this period with silver contents higher than the official specification. This points to difficulties in reliably creating silver/copper alloys at fractions around 25% without it separating during smelting.

The final coin from the author's collection (003) is included because it appears to be a silver-washed copper core, though could equally be a surface enriched base silver coin. The latter method was used on the basest issues of testoons of Henry VIII, leading to the term copper nose being applied to pieces when the enriched surface had worn off. Surface enrichment of silver might also occur in acidic soils, or with chemical or electrolytic cleaning. The surfaces do show slight porosity.



Obv. ELIZABETH : D : G : ANG [. .] Z : HIB : REGINA mm. [.].

Rev. [. .] SVI : D [. .] M : ADIVTOREM : ME [.] M : mm [.].

Details: Base silver ?, 32 mm, 6.880 g, 30°, density 9.137 g/cm³.

XRF analysis of metals:

Cu 75.4%, Ag 22.9%, Pb 0.42%, Fe 0.42%, Au 0.33%, Zn 0.21%, Sb 0.2%, and Bi 0.03%.

The XRF measurement is an average over an area about 6mm diameter, so repeat measurements were made at various points on the obverse and reverse where the metal appeared to be more “silvery” and “coppery”. The results were consistent with the copper and silver values within 1% and the other elements within 0.2%.

With the composition of coin 003 and its density both being similar to those of the genuine piece (002), it is likely that 003 is just a low grade genuine coin and its silver content is much closer to the official specification of 0.25%.

The density of the counterfeit (001) is 4.0% and 4.9% lower than the density of the genuine coins (002 and 003 respectively). This may point to inclusions/bubbles in the metal, possibly combined with lower forces being used during the manufacture of the silver sheet and the striking of the coin.

References and Acknowledgements

- (1) St James's Auctions No. 79. *The Christopher Comber Collection part IV*. 17th October 2023. Lot 972 (part).
- (2) Whyte's Auction. *The 'Millennial' Collection*. Dublin, 29 April 2000, lot 415.
- (3) G. Brady and M. Dolley. A Parcel of Irish 'White Money' from (?) County Tipperary. *Numismatic Society of Ireland, Occasional Papers 12*, pp. 15-19, 1970.
- (4) I.D. Brown and M. Dolley. *Coin Hoards of Great Britain and Ireland 1500-1967*. Royal Numismatic Society & Spink, Special Publication No. 6, 1971.
- (5) M. Dolley. The Pattern of Elizabethan Coin-Hoards from Ireland. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, Third Series, Vol. 33, pp. 77-88, 1970.

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