

Then there were 'six': The discovery of a proof Australian 1936 half penny



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One of the great mysteries of numismatics is the existence of extremely rare proof bronze coins (Fig. 1) from the Royal Melbourne Mint during the reign of King George V, who was King of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, and Emperor of India, from the 6th of May 1910 until his death in 1936.

The first distinctively Australian Bronze coins featured an effigy of the new king by the Australian sculptor and medallist Sir Edgar Bertram Mackennal (signed as "BM" in the truncation on the obverse; Figure 1) and appeared on the new coins from 1911.¹ The Australian half pennies and pennies were initially minted in England at the London Mint and subsequently also the Heaton Mint (H mint mark) up to and including 1915, and then the Calcutta Mint in India (with capital "I" mint mark) from 1916-1918 due to the supply chain difficulties during the first world war. At the conclusion of the war, the Royal Mint in England required Australia to undertake

minting bronze coinage for the domestic Australian economy at local mints due to manpower and facility shortages in England. Thus, for the rest of the reign of King George V from 1919 through to 1936, all new Australian bronze half pennies and pennies were made within Australia.^{2,3}

When initially set up, the branches of the Royal Mint in Australia had been authorised to mint gold sovereign coinage at respectively the Sydney Mint from 1855, the Melbourne Mint from 1872 and the Perth Mint from 1899.^{4,5}

As bronze coinage uses planchets made of a much harder metal alloy, as is required for

circulated coinage enabling low denomination transactions, a different set of processes and, in some cases, new equipment were required to produce quality circulating coins.^{2,3} Dies and other minting equipment for striking bronze coins were dispatched to Australia, and the change process produced some interesting outcomes like, for example, both London Die and Indian Die obverse varieties on several penny varieties.⁶

Whilst all three branches of the Royal Mint in Australia produced some bronze coinage during the reign of George V, a logistical focus and thus most

◀ Figure 1 - An Australian proof 1936 half penny that was validated in 2025 via processes at the Professional Coin Grading System (PCGS PR63RB). The certificate number registers the coin as the only known professionally graded Red-Brown (RB) proof specimen (PCGS full code 16704.63/56908727).

contracts with treasury were given to the Melbourne Mint.^{2,3} One very interesting example of this change process is the 1924 proof penny for which a small number of specimen coins are known to have been produced, and fortunately, a couple of these important coins are still held in the official museum collections. Figure 2 shows a proof 1924 penny, currently held 101 years later, by the Melbourne Museum. This coin is very significant to Australian numismatics as the mint staff in Melbourne in the early

1920s had only recently acquired the ability to modify dates in the master die and hub production stages to enable the production of quality Australian coins with different dates. Before this local machine shop solution, master dies for respective years had to be sent from the Royal Mint workshops in London. This achievement of modifying dates by staff at the Melbourne mint led them to prepare specially polished dies, called proof dies, and strike a small number of proofs, including coins to be sent to a major exhibition of the products of the British Empire being held in London in 1924.^{7,8}

The Royal Mint Museum (RMM) in England still holds both examples of the 1924 proof penny coins sent to England (currently labeled RMM 8712 and RMM 8713 respectively, in the RMM archive system).⁹ On inspection of the online high-quality photographs, the surviving proof example at the Melbourne Museum, and both of the two proof Australian 1924 pennies at the RMM, all three coins have identical small die cracks near GEORG on the obverse showing that these 1924 pennies were indeed made at the same time with the same die pair. The small die cracks on all three known proof coins that have been in respective museums for over 100 years evidence showing the difficulty of producing well struck bronze coins in the 1920s, as the bronze planchets were so hard they could easily damage the dies which likely required some test strikes to confirm even pressure across both the obverse and reverse sides of the high

quality proof coins that were to be struck as coins of record. The museum records do refer to these important collection items as proof coins, the probable logic for which is explained below. The 1924 proof pennies in England, whilst having an acquisition date stating from Melbourne Mint, 24.3.1926, also have a note “Originally supplied for display at British Empire Exhibition 1924” validating the reason they were struck and subsequently stored as coins of record. These proof coins were key in establishing the capacity of the Melbourne Mint to produce high quality bronze coins and thus win contracts with treasury to manufacture circulating coins, and indeed from 1927 the Royal Melbourne Mint became the sole provider of bronze coins up until the events of World War II. Small details or slight imperfections in striking dies have indeed become important validation evidence for identifying the very rare proof bronze coins of George V, like the 1930 penny, for which known proof/specimen coins show evidence of common denticle faults at about the 1 o'clock position of the coin reverse.¹⁰ It is also known that through museum deaccession processes that some duplicate George V proof bronze coins have been released to the market over the years.^{10,11} These very rare coins are indeed highly prized and valuable, but the few proof coins that were struck run a risk of being lost in history once they leave museums and collected pieces are passed on without appropriate documentation being maintained.



Figure 2 - A proof 1924 Australian Penny struck at the Melbourne Mint and now held by Museums Victoria. Copyright Museums Victoria / CC BY. Photographer: Naomi Andrzejeski, Museums Victoria, <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/55842>

The processes for producing proof coins were very different in the era of King George V to what we experience in modern times, where proof finish coins are readily made commercially available to the public at a modest cost via multiple outlets. Sourced from the archives of the Royal Australian Mint during an ongoing research project into proof coins, Figure 3 shows previously unreported correspondence from 1937 between the famous numismatic collector Sydney V. Hagley and the Melbourne Mint that provides an important window on why George V proofs are so rare. In January 1937 (when a new king was on the throne), Hagley wrote in a handwritten letter requesting to purchase coins directly from the mint, and would have received a typed response for which the handwritten draft letter is what survives as the original paper file, now housed at the Public Records Office of Victoria.¹² Importantly, the response letter (shown here in full for transparency) from the Royal Melbourne Mint wrote

"Dear Sir, I reply with regard to your letter of the 2nd of Jan. I regret to have to state that it is contrary to Mint practice to issue specimen coins of any year to any but public museums." Whilst it has long been appreciated that Australian King George V proof coins are very rare, this important letter shows why (i.e. it was mint practice to typically only supply coins to official public institutions like museums). Indeed, during most of the period of George V, very few proofs were made, and these were typically only for display purposes at official museums so that shop owners and the public could view the coins to see a proof specimen example of what a genuine coin of the realm should appear like. The

term proof, which does get used in some Royal Melbourne Mint correspondence and museum records, likely refers to the intent for which these specially struck coins of record might be used as evidentiary "proof" of what a genuine coin struck by the mint looked like should authorities need a point of absolute reference to prosecute anyone trying to pass a non-genuine coin. Such a practice of producing proofs for museum display was likely to reduce the chance of forgeries being created and passed, which was a major concern to authorities

during the George V era as is nicely encapsulated in the book "The Shadow" which discusses how the undercover N.S.W police officer, Frank Fahy, went to great length to help bring to justice coin forgers.¹³ Figure 3 thus suggests authorities, probably including government, police and mint staff, did not wish to risk that the proofs of what would be widely circulated coins might become available to the general public in a way that might enable close magnified inspection, and potential copying of security features like bead positions relative to lettering.

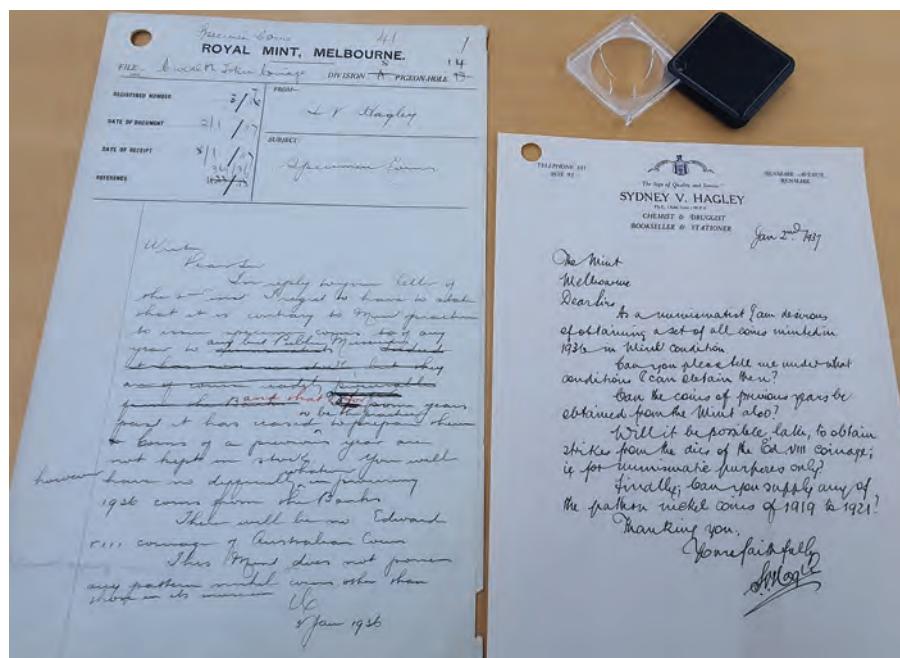


Figure 3 - Correspondence from 1937 between Sydney V. Hagley and the Melbourne Mint on file at the Public Records Office of Victoria shows that it was contrary to mint practice to release proof-specimen coins to the public (see text for details).¹² Photograph by AG Dyer.

I have collected and studied Australian bronze coins for over 40 years, and the opportunity to even inspect proof George V coins is a very rare privilege. In many cases, even sourcing a quality photograph of a proof can actually be a challenging task, but the facilitation of quality online images

by museums opens some doors. This difficulty in inspecting these proof coins is nicely encapsulated by Coinworks in Melbourne who has researched the topic by looking at public auctions and known private sales on George V Proof "coppers" that have come onto the market over the last 70

years, and sold in September 2021 a proof 1936 Halfpenny that came from a Noble's Auction July 2001 as one of only five known.¹⁴

One joy of numismatics is locating and validating a scarcer, or very rare coin. Finding a proof coin when only a handful exist in the world is a very special challenge. Solving such a problem can add a lot to our shared numismatic history. To try and achieve this, it is possible to visit Royal Mint archives at the Public Records Office to read original documents, inspect many pieces at quality coin dealers, coin auctions and trade shows, and read all published material on the subject. The emergence of high-quality digital photographs and professional grading services is also enabling progress on understanding numismatic history.

In 2012/3 whilst visiting a (former: IS Wright) leading numismatic dealer in Melbourne one very interesting half penny coin, which was at the time housed in a 2x2 inch holder and pen labelled as Gem UNC/aFDC, caught my attention. The finish to the coin and especially the mirror-like fields with a red-brown patina and copper brilliance in the crown suggested this was potentially more than an ordinary coin. The dealer also commented that it was one of the finest bronze George V coins they had seen. I thus purchased the coin to have as an important reference piece of a very high-quality George V bronze coin. Since that time, no other 1936 half penny I viewed in person has looked close in comparison. With the rise of interest in professional coin grading like PCGS (Professional Coin Grading Service), which is conveniently

facilitated in Australia by Imperial Group (now Roxbury's Numismatics since July 2025), in February 2025 at the Melbourne Coin Fair I decided to submit my 1936 half penny for professional grading. This was one of the best decisions I have made about my coin collection.

Point of comparison

Up until very recently, only one 1936 half penny had ever been graded as a proof coin by PCGS (PR64+BN), and none by NGC. Erring on the side of caution I just submitted my 1936 half penny without any claims to being a potential proof, although I had noted that that my coin shared some features (Figure 4) with the known 1936 proof half penny already graded by PCGS that could be viewed in their population report as a highlighted (obviously the top pop Brown-BN) coin. A delight of the PCGS system is that they can enable high quality photographs with the grading of

quality pieces and they obviously use these as references to assist with coin grading and validation, and these photographs are made available online to create a permanent record that the broader numismatic community can view as reference material. To my delight, the 1936 half penny coin that I submitted was indeed professionally graded as only the second 1936 proof half penny struck at the Royal Melbourne Mint during the era of King George V (PCGS PR63RB; Fig. 4). Interestingly, even though the coin was previously designated with a grade Gem UNC by a dealer in Australia (and I agreed with classification due to the coins superior appearance), George V proof bronze coins considering either PCGS or NGC interpretation of Sheldon scoring metric achieve scores within the band PR62 to PR66. The proof 1936 half penny coin sits within this range, and as the only known PCGS RB proof, it was thus highlighted by PCGS as a key reference coin in their population report (again, obviously top pop



Figure 4 - The newly discovered 1936 PR63RB [PCGS 16704.63/56908727] coin is the only known Red-Brown (RB) proof 1936 half penny and was thus highlighted on the PCGS population report (PCGS#16704; population of one). In addition to the brilliance of coin fields and in the crown, the fine details of photography enable linking key features (see insert enabled by online PCGS software) to the one other professionally graded proof half penny graded PCGS PR64+BN (PCGS#16703; population of one) that can also be viewed on the PCGS population report for Australian 1936 Proof half pennies.

when the total population of 1936 Red-Brown (RB) halfpennies graded is, one). It would appear, based on this evidence, that in Australia coin grading is more relative to known mint practices of a particular era with the finest known specimens allocated a grade towards Gem UNC,¹⁵ whilst the Sheldon system as applied for coin grading in the USA appears to grade coins to a more absolute scale where typically only relatively modern mint practices can enable strikes that achieve the very highest grades (67-70). This of course, evens out in population reports where the distribution

of grades obtained for a given era can be seen, and as the sole known example of a PR63RB, the discovered proof can currently lay claim to the finest known consistent with how it had been graded in Australia.

So, after over 40 years of collecting bronze coins of the Melbourne Mint, often involving many hours searching literature and coins at shows and talking to experts in the field, it is a delight to share with Australia numismatic community the discovery of a previously undocumented proof 1936 half penny, and provide

via this article the coin slab identification number for easy online access to high quality photographs that everyone can view and use as a reference. There is still much to learn about early Australian proof bronze coins and how these sometimes come to market, and the age of more open records and the ability to share high quality photographs can potentially shed some light on this largely under researched area of Australian numismatics. ■

References can be found on page 89.

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