

Soho Mint

Summary

From time to time, the Board of Directors in London contacted various people in England, particularly Boulton and Watt, with a view to their producing coins for use in India or, as we have seen, even complete mints. Many tons of coins were produced for the Madras and Bombay Presidencies at Boulton and Watt's Soho factory in Birmingham. As far as the Bengal Presidency was concerned, only proofs and patterns were produced and these were never turned into a full circulating currency. This chapter discusses those proofs and patterns.

Copper Hexagonal Patterns

Pridmore originally assigned these very rare hexagonal coins (Cat. No. 10.1 to 10.4) to the Bombay Presidency as possible patterns for coins to be used on the Malabar Coast. However, David Vice has investigated these coins further¹ and discovered correspondence that shows they were patterns for a possible copper coinage to replace cowry shells, then in use in various parts of the Bengal Presidency. The relevant letters are reproduced herewith.

On 16th September 1792 a Mr Robert Wisset, of the EIC in London, wrote to Matthew Boulton:

...When you were last in town I had some conversation with you on the subject of a coinage for Bengal to supersede the cowries. I have since mentioned this subject to Mr Inglis who falls cordially into the idea and wishes that a few specimens could be instantly set about to shew to the new Governor General who is about to depart for that country. He will go say in about a fortnight or so. I understand from Mr Inglis that they need not go lower than the quadruple of a cowry for the want of the natives. My own opinion nevertheless is to banish the cowry altogether and to substitute a manufactured commodity instead. If I could have a few of them up in time, I will endeavour to push the business forward. The device must be left to your fancy or after consideration say however the company's mark and the scales as for Bombay to begin with, and note the copper in sizes so as to give an avoirdupois pound for the current rupee...

This letter was received by Matthew Boulton's son, who duly sent it to his father. His father replied on the 19th September:

The letter from Mr Wissett was in consequence of a conversation I had with him in which I offered to coin copper pieces of the value of cowries which are reckoned after the rate of 1280 to a rupee and a rupee is = to 2 shilling English and these I offered to deliver at that price and each such piece would have been = to 5.½ grains but I now see that they will do even if they are the quadruple of that weight viz. 22.½ grains each. Now as these cowries or shells are the universal small money of India and as I know many inconveniences arise from their breakage and other causes too tedious to mention; it is the opinion if small copper coins can be made of the size and value aforesaid that small coin would universally take place of the cowries and some hundred tons would be coined.

I have thought of the means of making such small coins very cheap at least at such expense as I can afford to sell 1 pound of them for 2 shillings even if they were 1280 to the lb. or 5.½ grains each and much more so at 320 to the pound or 22 grains each. I have therefore wrote by this post to Mr Wissett to tell him that specimens shall be sent him by coach as quickly as possible so as to arrive before the Governor Generals departure - This may probably lead to a more general copper coinage in India and far more extensive than a British coinage, I therefore beg you will order 2 pairs of dies to be done instantly, Viz: one pair about the size of a small silver penny to weigh 5.½ grains and another pair about as large as a silver 2d to weigh 22

grains – but they must be six square  and thus no metal will be lost in cutting them out nor any will require to be melted.

When the dies are sunk, hardened and polished lay the bits in carefully by hand and strike them say about 100 specimens of each no matter what they cost. It will not be necessary to make puncheons from the dies as I shall not use dies to strike them one by one but in a more wholesale way without striking at all. On one side may be the scales and on the other the East

India Mark  the same as before but the letters and impression must be very shallow or they will not come up

By the mode I mean to make them there will be no annealing, or pickling, or milling, or striking, or waste, or remelting of scrap – but you need not mention what I say unless to Mr Brown or Lawson. Pray set Ponthon about the dies instantly and you must guess as near you

can the size, perhaps a small thread or cord round the outside may not be amiss  and when there is 100 bits struck of 22 grains send them to Mr Wissett and if you can get the 5½ grains you may also send them but make sure of ye 22 grains. This may enable me not only to sell my copper at £105/ton which was the price ye India Co. paid lately but may enable me to employ my rolling mills and sell 100 ton at £224/ton x by 100 = £22.400. Hence you may see out of trifles money may be got.

P.S. a bee's honeycomb will show you that hexagon money may be cut out without making any scrap or waste.

Fifty specimens of the 22 grain pieces were sent to Mr Wissett on 26nd September 1792 and Wissett replied on the 29th September:

I received yours from Cornwall and since have received a parcel of coins of 320 to the rupee or what we supposed the gundah of 4 cowries. Your agent also promised me the cowry piece as soon as possible. I have shown the piece I have to Mr Inglis and Mr Bensley, who seem well pleased therewith, and approve the idea. On consulting the table, I fear we are nevertheless wrong in our divisional parts. I learn that

4 cowries are	a gundah
20 gundahs	a pun
16 puns	a cawn and
4 cawns	a rupee

If this is correct, the smaller piece or quadruple of what I have, which we suppose to be the cowry, will only be the gundah and cowries will not be able to be struck out at last. I wish therefore you will turn in mind what is the lowest possible piece that can be struck and advise me – I shall as soon as I get the other piece show them to Mr Shore, the new Governor General, and consult him both as to a device and to the best divisions to be adopted. I have written your agent by this post to press forward the smaller piece

Copper Pattern Pice 1795?

The date of production of the copper pice listed as Cat. Nos. 10.5 to 10.8 is not known for certain. The coins appear to be copies of the 37 sun pice produced in 1795. The coins appear to have been produced in England and the most likely place that this would have been done is at Boulton and Watt's manufactory.

Copper Patterns 1809

A series of copper patterns bearing the date 1809 also appear to have been produced in England, presumably at Soho (Cat. Nos. 10.9 to 10.24). The coins consist of pice and half pice with the arms of the Company on one side and an inscription in three Indian languages on the other. One type of half pice has a lion standing holding a crown, the crest of the East India Company, whilst another is a mule between the Bengal coins and an Isle of Man coin. This last is presumably a later striking created after the contents of the mint were sold later in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, Pridmore quotes Clay in stating that the design differs from the normal Manx coins in having a 6 in the middle of the triskeles and a broader rim. The example shown in the present catalogue has none of these features. Perhaps there is another type yet to be discovered.

References

- 1 Vice D, (1998). A Pattern Cowrie Coinage for Bengal Presidency. Format, Vol. 58, pp. 2-5.