

THE TRIAL OF THE PYX

In this article, Mark Watts describes an unusual ordeal for New Zealand's new coins at the 'Trial of the Pyx'.

"Yet it may well be doubted whether all the misery which had been inflicted on the English nation in a quarter of a century by bad Kings, bad Ministers, bad Parliaments, and bad Judges, was equal to the misery caused in a single year by bad crowns and bad shillings."¹

Facing various charges, New Zealand's \$1 and \$2 coins were put on trial in a London court earlier this year. This was not a trial of the conventional type, however, but rather an ancient and typically British ritual known as the Trial of the Pyx.

Dating back to the end of the thirteenth century, the Trial of the Pyx was established to regularly test and assay the coins manufactured at the Royal Mint. It was in 1281 that King Edward I issued a warrant constituting a Court for the Trial of the Pyx and directing the Barons of the Exchequer to hold an assay "in such manner as the King's Council was wont to do". 'Pyx' is derived from the Greek, and refers to the box, or boxes, in which the coins to be trialled are placed.

The Trial of the Pyx has many of the same trappings we associate with more familiar sorts of trials, notably a judge, jury and verdict. Presiding over the trial is the 'Queen's Remembrancer'. It is the Remembrancer's solemn duty to administer oaths to each of the jurors at the commencement of the Trial in February of each year, and hear their Verdict following the Trial's completion three months later. Of course, each of these occasions is suffused with a dense atmosphere of pomp and tradition, including the wearing of "black lace gown, lace stock, full-bottomed wig and velvet court suit" by the Queen's Remembrancer, and toasts to the Queen.

The Trial jury is comprised of independent experts drawn from the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in London. The voluntary involvement of this ancient Livery company in the Trial of the Pyx can be traced through history to the reign of Elizabeth I, who called upon her "loving friends, the Wardens of the Mystery of Goldsmiths of the City of London" to test the coinage issued in her name.

¹ T.B. Macaulay, *History of England*, p.544.

How, then, do the Goldsmiths arrive at their Verdict? New Zealand's \$1 and \$2 coins were weighed and measured, and their metal content assayed, to establish whether they conformed "in every respect, subject to what is called the statutory remedy or permissible variations, with the standard design, dimension, diameter, weight, fitness and composition as laid down from time to time." Giving evidence were officials from Britain's Department of Trade and Industry, who provided the Goldsmiths with 'trial plates' of the metal - copper, nickel and aluminium - from which the coins had been manufactured.

Lots of one hundred \$1 and \$2 coins were weighed and found to be, respectively, 0.65 and 0.70 grams above the standard weight. The Goldsmiths duly noted, though, that these figures were within the permitted variation. Next, twenty coins of each denomination were weighed individually and, again, were found not to exceed the "statutory remedy", now measured in milligrams. Two other tests examined the diameter and composition of the coins, and gave the same favourable result. A Verdict of "not guilty" was therefore delivered up to the Queen's Remembrancer on 1 May 1992. New Zealand's new coins had passed the Trial of the Pyx with flying colours.

Why bother conducting a Trial of the Pyx in this modern era, when coin is no longer the predominant medium of monetary exchange? Is the Trial perhaps an anti-inflationary measure, designed to prevent any surreptitious 'clipping' of the coinage by the monetary authorities? Francis W. Hirst points out that for as long as governments have claimed the right to issue coinage, they have at the same time zealously preserved the right to debase it. Hirst quotes Adam Smith: "...for in every country of the world, I believe, the avarice and injustice of princes and sovereign states, abusing the confidence of their subjects, have by degrees diminished the real quantity of metal which had been originally contained in their coins."²

It is worth noting, however, that the "subjects" could sometimes be every bit as avaricious as the "princes and sovereign states". In his masterful *History of England*, Lord Macaulay describes the plague of 'clipping', and its attendant inflation, which spread throughout the country during the 1690s. Although new coins, manufactured at the Tower of London's horse-powered mill, had recently been put into circulation, the old 'hammered' (in effect, hand-made) coins remained legal tender. Therein lay the root of the problem, for the latter were easily clipped and passed off at their face value.

Moreover, this activity was carried on despite the draconian punishments meted out to convicted offenders. In those distant days, monetary authorities attempted to impart 'credibility' to their chosen objectives in particularly nasty ways: "Hurdles, with four, five, six wretches convicted of counterfeiting or mutilating the money of the realm, were dragged month after month up Holburn Hill. One morning seven men were hanged and a woman burned for clipping." And later, as the crisis worsened, "It was enacted that...whoever should be found in possession of silver filings or parings should be burned in the cheek with a redhot iron."³ (Debasement of the currency, moreover, could bring spiritual as well as temporal damnation. When Pope Boniface VIII learned that Philip the Fair had debased France's coinage, Philip "was threatened with excommunication...and branded eternally by Dante".⁴)

2 Quoted in F.W. Hirst, *Money: Gold, Silver & Paper*, p.59.

3 Macaulay, pp.543-546.

4 Hirst, p.62.

The consequences of the clipping were inflation and the near paralysis of trade and commerce, as the currency was regarded with increasing mistrust. It seems that while many people were happy to pass off mutilated coin, as long as they could get away with the crime, they were less than enthusiastic about receiving it themselves : “Nothing could be purchased without a dispute. Over every counter there was wrangling from morning to night. The workman and his employer had a quarrel as regularly as the Saturday came round. On a fair day or a market day the clamours, the reproaches, the taunts, the curses, were incessant; and it was well if no booth was overturned and no head broken.”⁵

Alas, Macaulay does not indicate how the good gentlemen of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths reacted to this vandalism of the coinage of the realm. Their responsibility lay, as we have seen, only in ensuring that the new coins being manufactured in the Tower of London conformed to the required standards. The inflation engendered by this widespread clipping of the hammered coin was quite beyond the Goldsmiths’, or the Royal Mint’s, control.

Hanging, burning and branding having failed, a Recoinage Act was passed in 1695. This measure ensured that the hammered coin was quickly withdrawn from circulation, leaving the milled equivalent in its place. The edges of the latter type of coin were inscribed with vertical lines, thereby making any attempt at shaving or clipping them immediately obvious. Price stability was in this way restored.

The Trial of the Pyx functions as a ‘weights and measures’ check upon the accuracy of the Royal Mint’s coin-manufacturing machinery. Macaulay notes, though, that even by the end of the seventeenth century, the Mint had virtually perfected the art of mechanised coin-making: “The pieces...produced...were among the best in Europe. It was not very easy to counterfeit them; and, as their shape was exactly circular, and the edges were inscribed with a legend, clipping was not to be apprehended.”⁶

Viewed in this light, some commentators might well argue that the Trial of the Pyx has no worth or purpose in the 1990s. They do an injustice, however, to the Trial’s long and proud tradition. It is indeed remarkable that, for almost three quarters of a millenium, the Trial of the Pyx has been carried on largely unchanged. To this day, whatever technological advances there have been in the field of coin manufacture, the Trial stands ready to convict any “bad crowns and shillings” produced by the Royal Mint.

New Zealand coins were first minted at the Royal Mint in 1934, and have been brought to trial periodically since then. It is clear that for as long as our coins continue to be manufactured by the Royal Mint, the Reserve Bank of New Zealand will retain a share in the venerable tradition that is the Trial of the Pyx.

5 Macaulay, p.545.

6 Macaulay, p.542.