



RESERVE
BANK

O F N E W Z E A L A N D

JAMES BERRY AND

NEW ZEALAND'S 1967 DECIMAL COINS

R. G. JAMES BERRY, OBE (1906–1979)

Reginald George James Berry is perhaps best known for more than a thousand stamp and coin designs completed during a busy lifetime.

Berry began his working life in London as an insurance clerk, emigrated to New Zealand in 1925 and worked for two years as a farm cadet. His career took a new direction in 1927 when he joined the Goldberg Advertising Agency of Wellington as an artist – where, among other things, he drew radio circuit diagrams. He went on to work as a freelance artist before joining *The Dominion* as an artist in 1935, a position he held for some years.

His career as a freelance designer began in the early 1930s. He tried designing airmail stamps in 1932. The following year he designed stamps for a health issue, beginning a career in stamp design that stretched over the next 47 years. In 1933 he joined the New Zealand Numismatic Society, beginning a life-long passion for collecting coins.

By the 1960s Berry was at the top of his profession as a stamp and medal designer. In 1964 he was invited, with others, to submit sketches for proposed decimal currency. One of his four sets was accepted by the Royal Mint in 1966, and used on the first decimal coin issue of 1967. The decision catapulted Berry to new fame. He was named '1966 Man of the Year' by *The Dominion Sunday Times*, and awarded the OBE in 1968.

In later life Berry received a succession of awards and honours and continued to pursue his interests in landscape painting. He spent an extended period in Britain and Ireland during the late 1970s, and died suddenly in 1979 while back in New Zealand.

In 2007, the Reserve Bank Museum exhibited a selection of coins, designs and memorabilia from Berry's personal collection, in commemoration of his life's work and to mark the fortieth anniversary of decimalisation in New Zealand.



James Berry in his Nevay Road studio, Wellington, November 1952.

(Photographer unidentified, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, PAColl-7985-91)

THE 1967 DECIMAL COIN SERIES

The switch to new-design decimal coins in 1967, part of the wider shift to decimal currency, took several years of planning and preparation.

Authority for coins was then vested in The Treasury, which formed a Coinage Design Advisory Committee and commissioned several designers – including Berry – to produce ideas. Six designs, separately contributed by several of the designers, were approved by Cabinet, including a five cent showing mountains rising from the sea, a twenty cent showing a 'vigorous conception of a typical New Zealand club footballer', and a fifty cent that paid 'tribute to the farming industry of New Zealand'. These were sent to London

in November 1965 for comment by the Royal Mint Advisory Committee, which was then headed by HRH Prince Phillip the Duke of Edinburgh. Unfortunately the committee did not much favour the New Zealand designs, and Prince Phillip's own comment on the twenty cent piece was: 'I can't, repeat can't believe even rugby footballers would like to see this on a coin'.

The Coinage Design Advisory Committee decided to call for fresh designs and met five designers in December 1965 to start the ball rolling again. What to include remained debatable, particularly as the British committee had given little real direction. Some of the favoured themes still reflected the New Zealand of the mid-twentieth century with its male-oriented focus on pastoral production, rugby and racing, though translating these into workable coins remained difficult. 'The principal objection to this,' one designer noted in regard to the idea of a footballer, 'is Prince Phillip's ridicule of the subject matter'.

After extended discussion, punctuated by media leaks in early 1966, James Berry was commissioned to produce designs for all the coins. He developed four design series, each with their own theme, such as birds. A 'wealth production' series featured sheep, cows and a racehorse. Others were more abstract.

Such protracted development paid off. The designs finally selected proved enduring, and Berry's ten and fifty cent coin designs remain in use today.

THE NEW ZEALAND 1967 DOLLAR

One of the lesser-known details of the transition to decimal currency in 1967 is that plans were seriously floated for a one-dollar coin, instead of the note. This was a significant coin – the equivalent value in 2007 money, relative to 1966-67 values, is around \$14.50. Berry came up with a number of proposals, culminating in a design featuring a 'distinctive Kiwi at the centre' superimposed over a Taiaha crossed with the Black Rod. At the time much play was made of the sterling value of the new currency, and the design featured the words 'ten shillings'. Other proposals included the words '100 cents', again reflecting the novelty of decimalisation. In the end the 1967 dollar coin never went into circulation, and it was 1986 before the decision was taken to 'coin' the dollar note. The first dollar coin, a very different design, was issued in 1991.



Left: The favoured 1967 dollar coin design.



Above: One of James Berry's proposed designs for the two cent piece.

Below: Six of the proposed 1967 dollar coin designs by James Berry, including one featuring an atomic theme.

Not to scale.

