

GUNMONEY AND THE LIMERICK MINT

BY GERARD RICE

Of the many claims of Limerick to distinction there is at least one numismatic one. It was the last centre in Ireland at which a native coinage was struck until the Irish Mint was set up at Sandyford in 1976.

From the Norman conquest, coins have been struck at Limerick. There are scarce halfpennies struck (1190-1199) by King John when he was Lord of Ireland. Limerick coins of one penny and half-penny were also struck by him as king (1202-1211). Limerick, too, was a centre of minting among many other cities in Ireland in the reign of Edward IV (1465-1478), when groats, half groats and pennies are known to have been minted and which are quite scarce today. But it was only in the reign of James II that Limerick became significant as the mint city of a coinage struck there and at Dublin which was of real significance in the history of Ireland and in the monetary history of Europe as well.

Since Henry VIII moved the striking of Irish coins to London (he could control the minting most readily there; striking of coins was a jealously protected royal prerogative), with the exception of a few emergency issues struck during the great rebellion of 1641-1652, no Irish coins were struck in Ireland until 1681, when at a mint in Dublin, halfpennies were struck by Charles II. James II struck halfpennies there too in 1685, 1686, 1687 and 1688.

But when the war of the three kings began after the deposition of James and the ascent of William III and Mary to the English throne, a whole new set of circumstances demanded a major coinage in Ireland. James II landed in Ireland as a way of reconquering England and Scotland with the help of

Louis XIV, and he had no real source of income with which to pay his army. The gold and silver of the Kingdom had gone to earth (literally and metaphorically) or had been transported with many Protestants, fearful of a Stuart restoration, to England. In any case the normal income of the Irish Government (about £100,000 – £140,000 per annum) was not nearly enough to pay for an army of the size of the one raised by James's viceroy in Ireland, the Duke of Tyrconnell. It was obvious in the spring of 1689 that the future of the three kingdoms, England, Ireland and Scotland, was to be determined on the battlefield in the spring or summer of 1690. James had the problem of paying his army with no adequate source of gold or silver to do so or be forced to cosher it on his loyal Irish subjects, who in consequence would most certainly have withdrawn their support from him.

A Quaker genius, William Bromfield, by turn surgeon, financier, politician and spy, came up with a dazzling answer to the problem. He advocated a massive issue of base coinage made of easily available brass scrap, with a few devices built in to make it acceptable to the people. It was well designed and, in addition to the year date 1689 and 1690, it had the name of the month put on it to show how seriously the king took his promise to redeem it in silver and gold when he 'came into his own again'. (The promise was never – perhaps fortunately for one's trust of regal words – tested by success in battle).

The press that had struck the halfpennies of Charles II and James II was taken up and a mint established in 27 Chapel Street, Dublin. On 18 June, 1689, sixpences were proclaimed in Dublin, and in July were joined by half-

crowns and shillings. Soon the mint was producing £100,000 in coinage a month. In all, £1,100,000 was issued, ten times the national income in 1687. Soon two presses were at work in the mint, the James press called, of course, after the king and the smaller duchess press called (it has been suggested) after the Duchess of Tyrconnell, one of the two famous Jennings sisters, the second of whom became Duchess of Marlborough on the Williamite side of the political divide.

Because of the varying density of the scrap metal used in the process and the consequent possibility of speculation on the part of the mint employees, it was necessary, by a series of relatively occult privy marks, to distinguish the product of one press from that of another. Certainly it is possible to day to distinguish the produce of the presses from November, 1689, onward. The half-crowns were all struck at the James press as were the sixpences; and shillings were struck at the both presses. The duchess pieces had a set of pearls on the upper band of the crown on the reverse of the shillings, while the James press products had a foliated design on the same band.

From the beginning of the issue, there were suggestions for establishing a mint at some centre outside of and away from Dublin which would serve as a means of attracting local sources of the scrap metal, which itself became scarce as the appetite of the government for coins became more voracious. Athlone was suggested by the French Ambassador in the autumn of 1689, but by March, 1690, it was decided that Limerick should house the second mint. It had the advantage of being a convenient centre for imports of scrap metal from France as well as being a centre for collecting scrap from both Munster and Connaught.



In any case, some time before Lady Day, 25 March, 1690, the beginning of the financial year, the duchess press, with its shilling dies, was sent down to Limerick to the Deanery there and it became the Limerick mint. In those days, the calendar year began on 25 March, so that coins dated March, 1689, and March, 1690, were struck in the same month before and after the 25th.

The Limerick mint, like the duchess press in Dublin, struck only about 10% of the coinage in any month, making its coins quite scarce. In March, 1690, shillings with the duchess device of pearls on the upper band of the crown were struck, along with half-crowns, having a new and crude bust of James on the obverse. No sixpences were struck until May and then with a foliated upper band on the reverse crown to distinguish them from the sixpences struck on the James press in Dublin, which, unlike the shillings from the same press, had pearls on the upper band of the crown on the reverse.

In April and May, half-crowns were struck at Limerick with a bust similar to that of March, 1690. By April, 1690, it was realised that though the whole coinage was slipping in value partly because French soldiers fighting in Ireland demanded and got paid in silver and were supported by their king, and partly because people were losing faith in the coinage with there being no end to its production, there was still an insatiable need for more brass scrap for coinage. In April, 1690, in Dublin, it was decided to issue smaller half-crowns and shillings and to turn the large half-crowns, restamped by a new design, into crown pieces. Limerick followed suit in May, after producing a small issue of large half-crowns in the beginning of that month. The May small half-crown of Limerick can be distinguished from that of Dublin by a bust of the king which continued to be used in Limerick until October, 1690; the Dublin mint was closed in July, 1690, after the Battle of the Boyne.

In April, 1690, Limerick produced a small shilling with flower-shaped stops on the obverse or reverse or both and a form of the royal initials 'J.R.' peculiar to itself. These were produced in May also, but then not again until September, 1690. Dublin produced its own small shillings in May (after an issue of large shillings in March and April, 1690) in and also in June, though its chief product was the new crown piece, struck over the large half-crown (the design is quite handsome but often spoiled, and indeed ruined, by the design of the large half-crown showing through the new design). As already stated, Limerick produced a small issue of sixpences in May.

When Dublin fell to King William in July, 1690, the Dublin mint ceased to

LARGE HALFCROWNS



Dublin Bust



Limerick Bust

SMALL HALFCROWNS



Dublin Bust

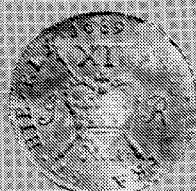


Dublin Bust

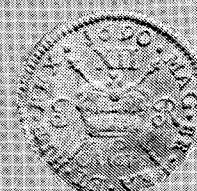


Limerick Bust

LARGE SHILLINGS

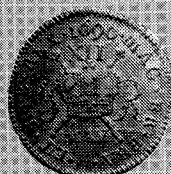


Duchess Reverse

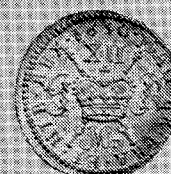


James Reverse

SMALL SHILLINGS



Limerick Reverse

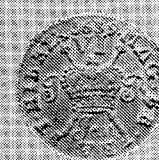


Dublin Reverse

SIXPENCE



Duchess Reverse



James Reverse



produce coins. Indeed its dies were sent to the Tower Mint in London, where in the eighteenth century coin collectors like Bishop Rawlinson, who left his coins to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and the future George III, who left his coins to the British Museum in 1760, came and, as 'sports', had the gunmoney dies struck again in gold, silver and good brass pieces for their coin collections.

Limerick, still striking on a small scale, struck small half-crowns in June, July, August and October and a small issue of shillings in September, 1690. The last of the gunmoney was struck at Limerick in October, 1690. In 1691, when the city was besieged by the Williamite forces, even small change was scarce. The gunmoney had been devalued by William after the Boyne to 1d + 1/2d + 1/4d and in February, 1690, demonetized completely. So the Limerick Mint overstruck, on the old large and small shillings coins, halfpennies and farthings with James II on one side and an image of Hibernia or Ireland on the other with the date 1691.

With the surrender of Limerick, the

coinage of course ceased and, with the exception of tradesmen's tokens, no money was struck in Ireland until 1976 when, using blanks made in the English mint now at Llantrisant in Wales, Irish pieces were struck once again in Dublin. Limerick has still to wait for its place in the numismatic sun.

The gunmoney was of European significance, as it was the first regal issue of a completely base coinage of such magnitude issued since the late Roman Empire. James's need and Bromfield's ingenuity had accomplished the dream of the alchemists of old; they had turned base metal into the equivalent of gold and silver. Though the Irish, as they were bankrupted and really robbed by the experiment, lamented the James brass or gunmoney as a failure – a Protestant toast of the 18th century hailed William for saving them from:

*Pope and Popery
Knavery and Slavery
Brass money and wooden shoes*

The civil servants of Europe, eager to

finance their governments' wars and to avoid raising taxes too much, soon took to issuing banknotes instead of coins in precious metals. The Bank of England was set up in 1696 to solve the national debt problem by issuing paper money and national loans, and in France a Scottish Jacobite, John Law, attempted to pay off the French national debt by issuing shares in the Mississippi Company, which was to return the issue price of the shares many times in profits. Of course, as has happened many times since, people discovered too late that their money was gone and their paper valueless. The French Revolution assignats were of the same order, and now, ironically enough, we have only paper money and base coins sustained by the belief that, backed by the State, they will somehow keep their value for ever.

King James and William Bromfield, the Dublin and Limerick Mint have rather a lot to answer for, as they were the first to hit on a method of making money for the Crown that is internationally accepted today.

APPENDIX

THE DUBLIN MINT JULY 1689–25th MARCH 1690

The large halfcrowns were all struck at the James press.
The large shillings with a foliate band on the crown were struck by the James press.
The large shillings with pearled bands were struck by the Duchess press.
The sixpences with the foliated bands were struck at the Duchess press and those with a pearled band at the James press.

THE DUBLIN MINT 25th MARCH 1690–JULY 1690

All the Crowns belong to the Dublin Mint as do the pewter groats, pence and half pennies.
The large halfcrowns of March 1690 and April 1690 with the bust of James II found on earlier large halfcrowns were struck at Dublin.
The April small halfcrown was struck at Dublin. The May small halfcrowns with milled edge and one of two Dublin busts were struck at Dublin.
The large Dublin shillings of March 1690 and April 1690 have scrolls or foliage on the upper band of the crown on the reverse.
The small shillings of May and June which have a cursive May or June and shackles on the uprights of the J.R. on the reverse were also struck at Dublin.

There are no sixpences from the Dublin Mint after February 1689 (1690).

THE LIMERICK MINT 25th MARCH 1690–OCTOBER 1690

The large halfcrowns with a new bust having an incuse effect larger than that of the Dublin Mint struck for March April and May 1690 were struck at Limerick.
The large shillings with a pearled band on the crown struck in March 1690 belong to Limerick.
The small halfcrowns of May, June, July, August and October 1690 which have a leafed edge and a bust of James II different from either of the two Dublin busts belong to Limerick as do the small shillings of April.
The small shillings of May with the month date in Roman script and twisted or 'barly sugar' uprights on the royal initials on the reverse and often with cinque foil stops belong to Limerick as does the September 1690 small shilling.

Finally, the scarce sixpences of May 1690 which have a foliate band on the Crown belong to Limerick as well.

THE DUBLIN MINT JUNE 1689–MARCH 1689

	Large Halfcrowns	Large Shillings	Sixpences
June 1689			James Duchess
July 1689	James	James	Duchess
August 1689	James	James Duchess	James Duchess
September 1689	James	James Duchess	James Duchess

	Large Halfcrowns	Large Shillings	Sixpences
October 1689	James	James	
November 1689	James	James Duchess	James
December 1689	James	James Duchess	James
January 1689 (1690)	James	James Duchess	James
February 1689 (1690)	James	James Duchess	James
March 1689 (1690)	James	James Duchess	

THE DUBLIN MINT 25 MARCH 1690–JUNE 1690

	Large Halfcrowns	Small Halfcrowns	Large Shillings	Small Shillings	Sixpences
March 1690	✓	–	✓	–	–
April 1690	✓	✓	✓	✓	–
May 1690	–	–	–	✓	–
June 1690	–	–	–	✓	–
July 1690	–	–	–	–	–

THE LIMERICK MINT MARCH 25 1690–OCTOBER 1690

	Large Halfcrowns	Small Halfcrowns	Large Shillings	Small Shillings	Sixpences
March 1690	✓	–	✓	–	–
April 1690	✓	–	✓	✓	–
May 1690	✓	✓	–	✓	✓
June 1690	–	✓	–	–	–
July 1690	–	✓	–	–	–
August 1690	–	✓	–	–	–
Sept. 1690	–	✓	–	✓	–
Oct. 1690	–	✓	–	–	–

*In the 17th Century the financial year began on March 25th; hence March 1689 and March 1690 were in the same calendar year of 1690 and January 1689, February 1689 were also in the calendar year of 1690.