

The Last Coins Struck at the Limerick Mint

PAUL DUFFY

Limerick first had a mint during the period (1190-99) when Prince (afterwards King) John was styled 'Lord of Ireland'. Again, when King, John continued to have coins struck at Limerick.¹ Later, during the reign of Edward IV (1461-83), coins were struck at Limerick. The third and final time that a mint operated in Limerick was during the Jacobite Campaign. Needless to say the output during this phase of the mint's existence was considerably greater than during the previous two periods combined.

As Ireland was chronically short of coin, James had no money to pay his army. The vast bulk of precious metal which could be used for coinage was in the hands of the Protestant planters who were not sympathetic to James' cause. Accordingly James' officials had to scour the countryside for whatever metals they could get. Simon² quotes a letter dated January 4th, 1689, from Wat. Plunkett of Limerick to John Trindar of the Capel Street Mint, Dublin:—

Sir, Last Tuesday the carriage parted from whence with six thousand six hundred weight of gunn mettle, six hundred a quarter and two pounds of fine pewter, and a thousand weight of steele. They will be eleven or twelve days a goeing because the roads are very deep.—The pewter cost ten pence per pound and steele six pence. You may expect soon a further supply of mettle for I have made an agreement with two eminent dealers from Corke who have five or six thousand weight of copper and brass which they are to send here. I must have an order from the lords of the treasury, for sending it to your mint; there are foure or five broken bells in the country, which I can have if you send an order for seizing them for the King's use; there is an useless cannon at Gallway, and one or two at Kingsaile; I forgot to send you some of our coyne as you desired; by the next occasion I will not faile: I cannot buy fine pewter now under eleven or twelve pence the pound, for they say you give fourteen or fifteen pence in Dublin, the rates of carriage from hence to Dublin is eight shillings the hundred weight.

I rest your humble servant. Wat. Plunkett.

The letter is worth quoting in full for several reasons, but primarily it shows that the Limerick mint was in operation some months earlier than Dolley surmised in his 'Reflections on the 'Brass Money' of James II'.³ Dolley has reckoned that the mint came into operation in the late spring/early summer of 1690 (note: at this time the new year began on March 25th so that March 1689 finished in 1690). In the same paper Dolley has argued, reasonably convincingly, that the Limerick output was approximately ten percent of that of Capel Street mint, *i.e.* £100,000. It is possible that this figure could be increased, but not substantially so, as although the mint was in operation some three months longer than Dolley's estimate it would seem that its primary function was to gather metal for the Dublin mint. The letter also bears out the baseness of the metal used for the coinage—the "brass money" of popular Orange ballads. It would also seem to indicate that the pewter coinage of James was struck only in Dublin; why else would Plunkett wish to convey both the purchase and Dublin delivery price to Trindar? It would be interesting to find out if Plunkett ever forwarded coins of the Limerick mint to Trindar, and if Trindar

¹ For an excellent account of the coinage of this period see M. Dolley and W. O'Sullivan, "The Chronology of the first Anglo-Irish Coinage", in E. Rynne (ed.) *North Munster Studies*, Limerick 1967, pp. 437-478.

² James Simon, *An Essay towards an Historical Account of Irish Coins and of the Currency of Foreign Monies in Ireland, with Mr. Snelling's Supplement*, Dublin 1810, App. LXXXIX, p. 160.

³ *Seaby's Coin and Medal Bulletin*, Dec. 1974, pp. 377-383.

ever commented on them. It is generally assumed, amongst collectors, that the pieces from the Limerick mint are somewhat cruder than those emanating from Dublin.

The gunmoney coinage of James II is unique in that it bears the month of issue as well as the year, on all denominations save the crown. Those pieces struck after the Boyne debacle can be definitely attributed to the Limerick mint, *i.e.* those pieces carrying the dates August, September, October 1690. A detailed study of the die varieties of the coinage from these months would give a good indication, when compared with the die varieties of the pre-Boyne period, of what percentage of coinage pre-July 1690 emanated from the Limerick mint. A further useful study would be to analyse the various finds of gunmoney particularly from the West of Ireland. Two hoards have been published from Kerry, at Scarta Glen⁴ and Causeway⁵. The account of the Causeway discovery contains a summary of various finds from throughout the country—regrettably most of them are not properly recorded. This writer knows of two further hoards, both from the Athlone area—the larger, from Coosan, Co. Westmeath, contained nearly three hundred coins but was unfortunately dispersed without any record being made of them. The smaller find (only four coins) will be published in a future issue of the local historical journal. There is also a considerable body of single coin-finds, *e.g.* a gunmoney shilling from Ardcloon, Co. Mayo,⁶ which have not received any proper attention from numismatists. A start at a card index listing has been made, listing finds from all over the West of Ireland. Combining a study of the die varieties from the Limerick mint with the various coin-finds would, I believe, yield a much more accurate estimate of the output and circulation of coins from this mint.

A feature of gunmoney, that may at first glance seem strange, is the different sizes of coins used. There are two different sizes of halfcrowns and shilling. As metal reserves ran low, the large halfcrowns were withdrawn from circulation and overstruck as crowns. The large shillings were similarly called in to be melted down, and smaller-sized shillings were issued; a considerable body of the larger-sized pieces still remained in circulation, however.

As already mentioned, Plunkett's letter shows the baseness of the metal used in the coinage. This resulted in the coinage having an extremely high face value compared to its intrinsic metal content value—the crown had an actual metal content value of one penny. After the Boyne, William, by proclamation,⁷ reduced the value of the gunmoney to its approximate intrinsic value, *i.e.*, the crown was to pass for one penny as was the large halfcrown; the small halfcrown was to pass for three farthings; the large copper shilling for a halfpenny, and the small shilling and sixpence as farthings. The pewter pennies and halfpennies were not devalued, but left to circulate at their face value presumably because their intrinsic and face values were at par.

Such drastic devaluation was in fact the only remedy available to William in order to restore some semblance of financial stability to the Irish monetary system. If it damaged James's supporters then this would be by way of an added bonus. James had, by way of proclamations⁸ laying down strict penalties for non-acceptance of the base coinage,

⁴S. N. Lane, "A Late Seventeenth-Century Bronze [Coin-] Hoard from County Kerry", *Brit. Numis. J.*, 34(1965), 126-131.

⁵M. Dolley, "A Hoard of the So-Called Gunmoney from Causeway", *J. Kerry Archaeo. Hist. Soc.*, 7(1974), 146-148.

⁶E. Rynne, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 86(1956), 209-210.

⁷Simon, *op. cit.*, App. XCIII, p. 162.

⁸*Ibid.*, Apps. LXXV-LXXVII, LXXXI-LXXXVIII, pp. 148-160.

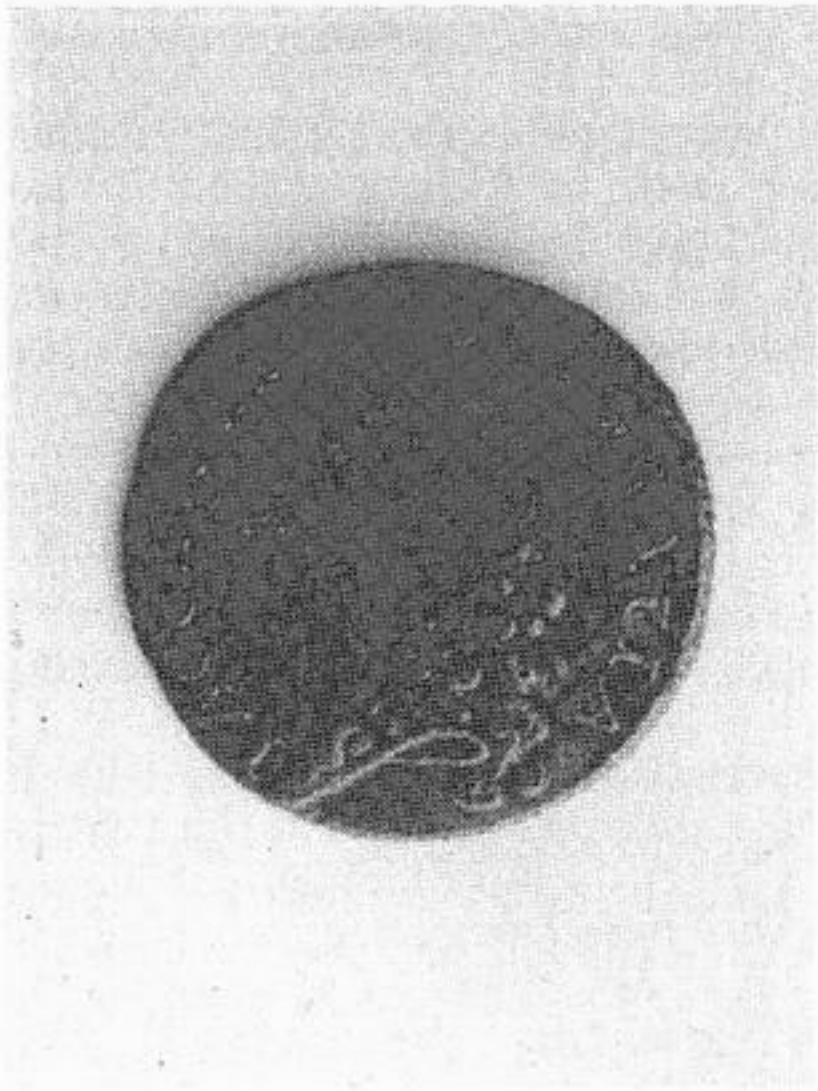


Fig. 1. Obverse and reverse, large gunmoney shilling, November 1689. (Photo: G. Hitching).



Fig. 2. Obverse and reverse, Limerick halfpenny, 1691. (Photo: G. Hitching).

forced the gunmoney on the populus, both Catholic and Protestant, so William's devaluation would also affect some of his own supporters.

Even prior to William's devaluation, James was having considerable difficulty in maintaining the face value of his coinage. The letter book of Richard Talbot, Earl of Tyrconnell,⁹ throws some light on these difficulties. In particular, a letter dated February 20th, 1689 (1690 by present-day reckoning) shows that only with considerable difficulty could the gunmoney be passed in the markets for one-third its face value:—

the great quantityes wee are forced to coine of it (gunmoney) has already rendered it soe despicable that wee have much a doe to make it pass, though it bee with noe loss than paying treble the value for all things that are sold even in the marketts.

Talbot goes on to mention the extremely vocal opposition of the French soldiers to acceptance of the coinage with the fear that this might reduce further its actual purchasing power.

The first concrete admission of the gross over-valuation of the coinage came with the last issue of the Limerick mint. The defending army staring reality in the face (or trying to quieten the remnants of the French soldiery?) over-struck the large gunmoney shillings as halfpennies, and the small shilling and sixpence were over-struck as farthings. Simon¹⁰ further suggests that a considerable body of the larger denominations was melted down and recoinced into halfpennies and farthings. These pieces are commonly called 'Hibernias' as they show a seated figure of Hibernia with a harp and bear the inscription "HIBERNIA 1691". The halfpennies have a reversed N [N] in Hibernia whilst the farthings have either the normal or reversed N. On many of these pieces the traces of the original coin show through.

Illustrated here are a large gunmoney shilling dated November 1689 (Fig. 1) and a Limerick halfpenny dated 1691 (Fig. 2). As can be seen on the obverse (front) of the halfpenny, part of the crown and sceptres from the reverse (back) of the gunmoney shilling show through, as also part of the legend, the lower edge of the bust and some curls, show on the reverse.

The gunmoney coinage was designed by Rosettier and is considered to be one of the finest designs ever produced. When one considers the mediocre monarch that it was wasted on, one can understand Simon's statement:

What then became of all the Gold and Silver, the produce of this copper money, if those who stood for and in defence of that Prince and should have shared in the spoil were so great sufferers?

He ran away with their substance and left them to shift for themselves. Glorious recompense for so much blood spilt in his service.¹¹

⁹British Museum, Add. Mss. 38145. For an interesting summary from Talbot's correspondence see E. FitzGerald, "Early References to Irish Brass Money", *Seaby's Coin and Medal Bulletin*, August 1966, pp. 282-285.

¹⁰*Op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹¹*Ibid.*