

The Obverse Die for the Macniven and Cameron Imitation Spade Guinea c.1970

Gary Oddie

The phrase “Imitation Spade Guinea” or ISG, brings to mind the common brass counters, the most familiar of which have an obverse portrait of George III and legend GEORGIVS III DEI GRATIA and on the reverse a crowned spade-shaped shield and the legend IN MEMORY OF THE GOOD OLD DAYS and a date typically from that reign. Pieces in gilt brass and copper are also known and these were sold throughout the nineteenth and into the 20th century. In the 20th century they were often sold in boxes of 144 pieces. The boxes themselves or a small leaflet inside advertised the issuing company. Half guineas are also known and the generic pieces were used as counters for card games etc.

There were many manufacturers of ISGs and many pieces also include legends advertising businesses such as Sainsbury’s, Fattorini, Macniven and Cameron etc.

A few of the pieces were catalogued by Batty in the 1880s,⁽¹⁾ but serious collecting and study did not start till Hawkins published his first listing in 1963.⁽²⁾ This publication brought many new pieces to light, resulting in two quick supplements^(3,4) and by the time the third supplement was published in 1983, the catalogue described about 250 pieces.⁽⁵⁾

Hawkins’ interest had stemmed from his studies of the many manufacturers that included their names and addresses on the pieces they struck for their customers. Hawkins’ notes were serialized in Seaby’s Coin and Medal Bulletin in the 1960s and 70s and were brought together in his “Dictionary of Makers” in 1989.⁽⁶⁾

The next generation of students of this series got to work and David Magnay gave a general talk on the subject at the Token Congress held in Exeter in October 1994. Notes from this were published in 1995.⁽⁷⁾ Several collectors were now sharing their notes and a new catalogue, published in 1997, listed about 500 pieces.⁽⁸⁾

The collecting, cataloguing and study of ISGs continued amongst a small group of dedicated specialists. In 2003 the combined efforts of several collectors resulted on a new catalogue which described over 1000 different pieces.⁽⁹⁾ The most recent catalogue of the series published in 2013 (with two supplements in 2017 and 2021) now lists about 1300 pieces.⁽¹⁰⁾

In 2007, Ivor Stilitz, a leading member of the Writing Equipment Society,⁽¹¹⁾ came to the subject from a different perspective. He gave a talk at the Token Congress held at Swindon in October 2007 – “Guineas in Context – The Case of Macniven and Cameron”. A few months later the notes from the talk were published.⁽¹²⁾ Following a brief history of handwriting, from quills to the introduction of steel nibs, in about 1825, there followed by a very detailed history of the Macniven and Cameron company. The company advertised its various nib designs both in printed media and by the issue of a series of ISGs. The information could be combined to give quite precise date ranges for the issues of the ISGs.

Whilst pen manufacture had ceased at Macniven and Cameron in 1964, a final ISG commemorating the firm’s bicentenary was issued in 1970 (reference N8270 in 1000 guineas plus⁽¹⁰⁾). This is in the style of their ISGs from over a century earlier and advertises ‘Waverley’ and ‘Rhapsody’, which were both brand names for the paper and stationery still being manufactured.

Obv. **GEORGIUS III DEI GRATIA 1770** around wreathed bust to right.

Rev. **MACNIVEN & CAMERONS / WAVERLEY & RHAPSODY** and in small letters **THEY COME AS A BOON / AND A BLESSING TO MEN** around a crowned spade-shaped shield with **1770 TO 1970**

Details Brass, plain edge (in a collar?), 25.19mm, 5.924g. Shown 150%. N8270.

Metals: Cu 69.7%, Zn 30.2%, Sn 0.033%, Fe 0.018% - C260 Cartridge Brass.



Uniface examples struck using the obverse die are known and one is illustrated below.

Obv. **GEORGIUS III DEI GRATIA 1770** around wreathed bust to right.

Rev. Uniface

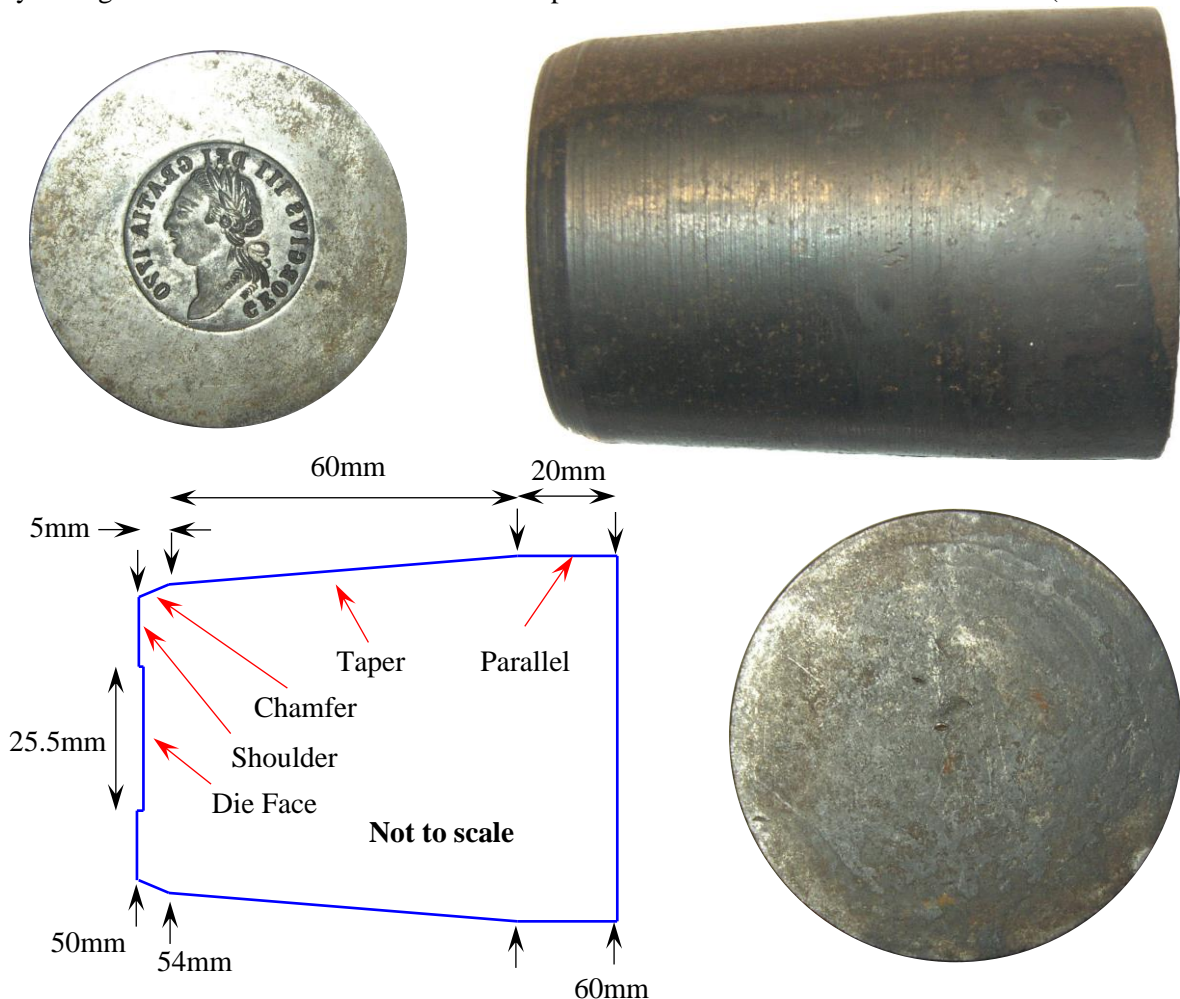
Details Brass, plain edge (without collar), 25.49mm, 5.940g. Shown 150%. N8280.

Metals: Cu 71.3%, Zn 28.6%, Ni 0.07%, Mo 0.045%, Fe 0.03%, Sn 0.009% - C260 Cartridge Brass.



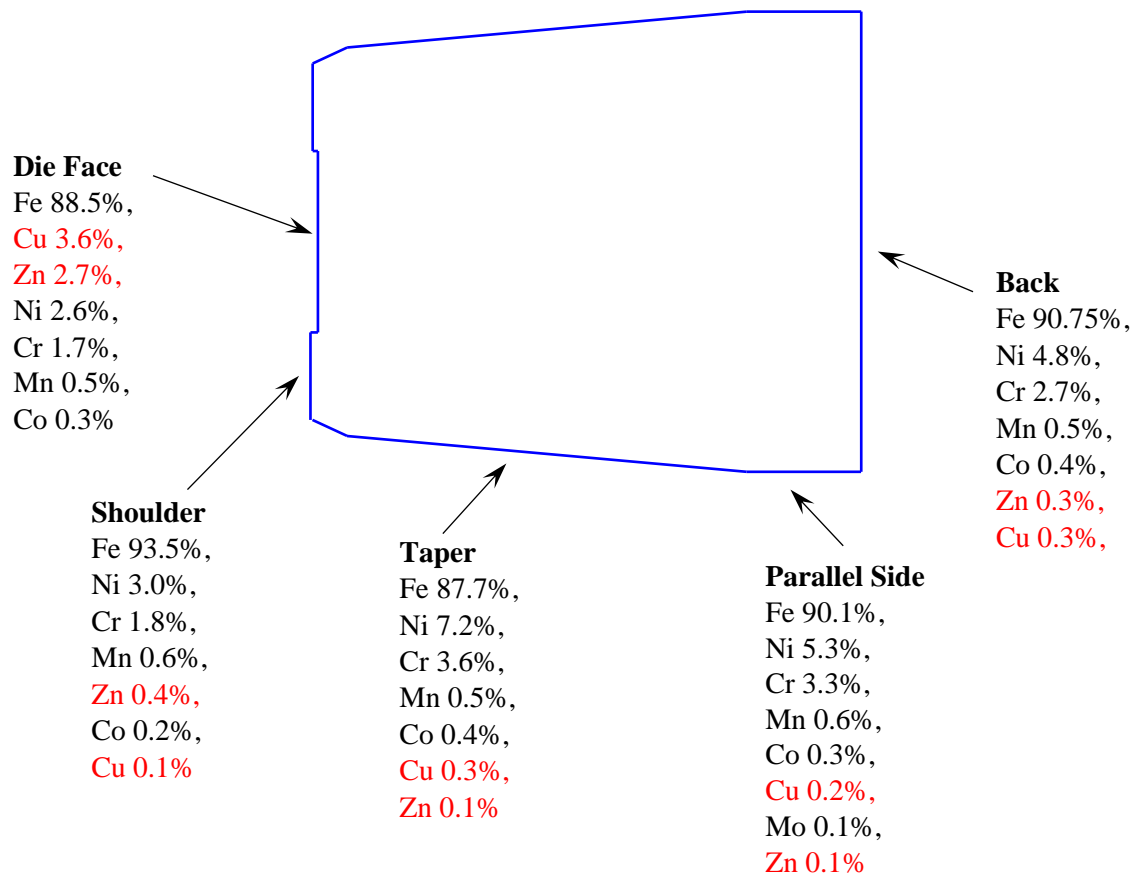
Similarly, uniface examples struck from the reverse die are known (N3440), the uniface pieces are thought to be trial strikings.

Some years ago the obverse die used to strike these pieces was found and is illustrated below. (Shown 100%)



The die weighs 1.50kg and the chamfer and taper have been added quite roughly using a lathe. There are no indications that the die has been held in a clamp and so this was probably the non-moving lower die (pile) during the striking process. Apart from some minor corrosion and a few marks, the back of the die is very flat.

Curious as to the composition of the die, several XRF measurements were made, and the results are shown below.



The back of the die is probably the closest to the original composition of the nickel-chromium-steel used to make the die. It is maybe not surprising that the back, parallel side, taper and shoulder of the die have traces of copper and zinc, which has been transferred to the rough steel surface after contact with the blanks and struck tokens during the minting process. Also it is expected that in a busy metal stamping and machining workshop there will be metal dust everywhere. I think it is fairly unlikely that copper and especially zinc would get through the steel manufacturing process (zinc boiling point is 907°C and steel melting point 1370°C) so shouldn't be in the main body of the steel.

However, the much higher proportions of copper and zinc on the die face were quite unexpected. The repeated hammering of the brass blanks into the steel has transferred that metal onto or into the steel surface. It must be remembered that the XRF measurement is very biased towards the surface of the sample and the denser the elements involved the shallower the penetration into the surface. The copper and zinc (in the form of brass particles) will be in the surface wear and scratches of the steel die – probably no more than a few microns to tens of microns deep.

References and Acknowledgement

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