

An Unrecorded Pattern Shilling of 1840

Gary Oddie

Introduction

The shilling shown below was recently seen at auction with the following description.⁽¹⁾



Victoria, proof shilling, 1840, young head left, *rev.* ‘face’ value within wreath, crown above, date at bottom, milled edge (S.3904; ESC2984), certified and graded by NGC as Proof-65, attractive deep toning, a nice choice proof of record, mintage unknown but minuscule, struck for placement in museums.

The only one graded as Proof-65 by NGC, none higher. [Images thanks to St James’s Auctions].

At a first glance, all seems normal, a rare proof catalogued as 1286 in the old ESC⁽²⁾ and 2984 in the new ESC⁽³⁾ and given an R⁵ in both, suggesting 5 – 10 examples known.

On closer inspection the piece displays all of the characteristics of a proof with mirror-like fields, the portrait is slightly frosted, and less usual, the hair is more heavily frosted. The raised parts of the lettering are also frosted. The edge of the die and the blank is carefully prepared so that the metal outside the beads is very flat and traces of chamfering of the blank are visible. The latter guarantees that the special strikings have very clean edges with no fine raised lips of metal, as is often seen on high grade circulation pieces and some of the larger issue proofs (e.g. 1839 proof shillings).

However, looking at the images more closely, especially the reverse, something isn’t quite right. The design is correct, all of the elements are there, in the right place, but still there is something that doesn’t fit. My first thought was, maybe it’s an optical illusion in the photography, or a delusion, the result of spending many years looking for varieties and details!

The only way to check is to find a decent specimen of an 1840 shilling and make detailed comparisons. Though the 1840 shilling is priced similarly to the surrounding dates, both ESCs give its rarity as R² (very rare), and it is surprisingly difficult to find examples or good images of a high grade specimen.

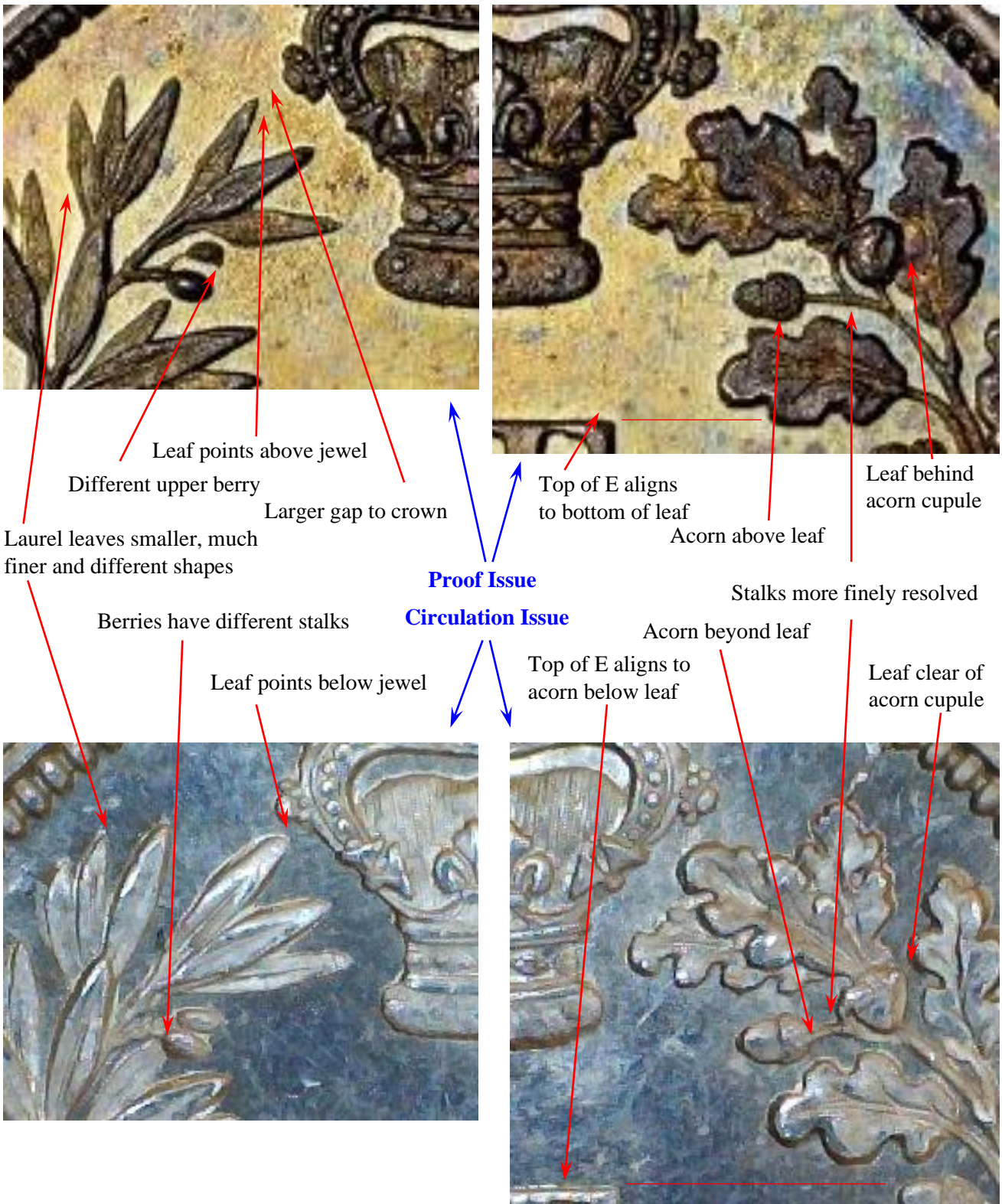
The following pages show detailed comparisons between the proof 1840 shilling shown above and a reasonable circulating shilling of the same date. Starting with the reverse.



Proof Issue

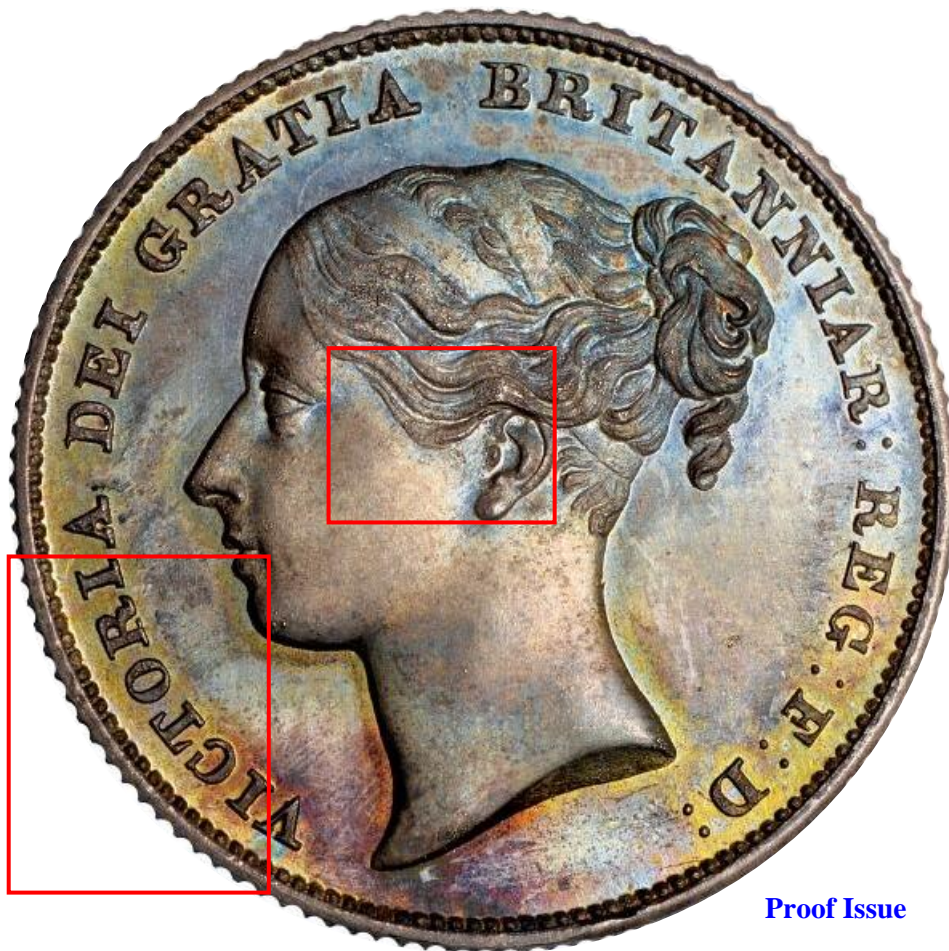


Circulation Issue



Working round the whole of the wreath, every detail of the circulating coin design has been engraved to produce larger leaves and stalks, thus reducing the amount of “open space” between the elements of the design. This is quite subtle, but is systematic across the whole of both sides of the wreath.

Other differences include that the first L in SHILLING on the proof is slightly double entered and the upright of the 4 in the date aligns to a bead on the proof and to a gap on the circulating coin.



Proof Issue



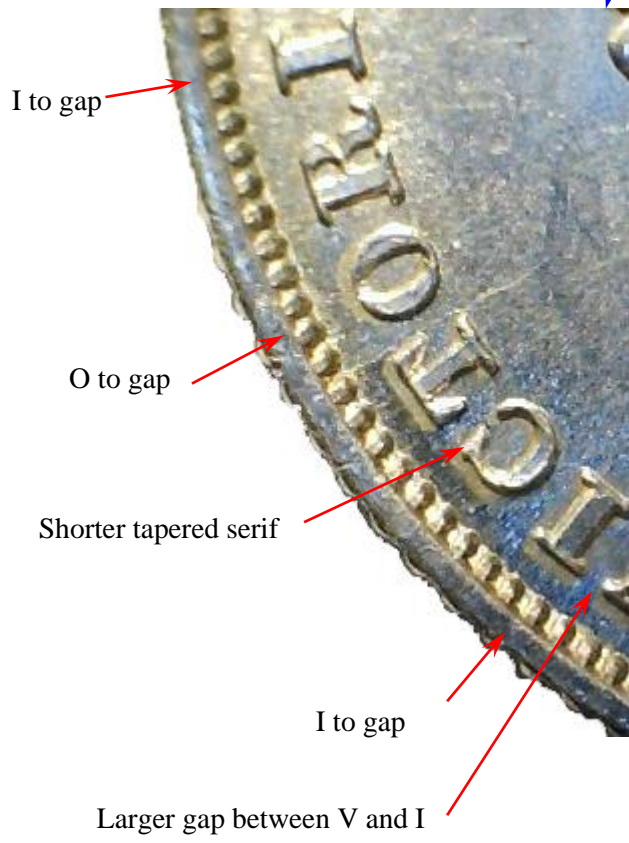
Circulation Issue



Lower tress of hair is long and thin and finishes in a single fine point
 Upper ear well defined

Proof Issue

Circulation Issue



Lower tress of hair is broader along its whole length and finishes in two fine points
 Upper ear hidden by hair

There are many other subtle differences between the two dies, such as the Is in BRITANNIA are gap-bead on the proof and bead-gap on the circulating coin and the tops of the As on the proof are all pointed whereas they are all flat on the circulating coin.

A has pointed top



Proof Issue

A has flat top



Circulation Issue

Conclusions

Close inspection of a proof 1840 shilling reveals that its dies, whilst similar to those used to strike circulating coins are different in every aspect.

On the obverse, the alignment of the legend relative to the beading is different and the whole of the hair is more finely engraved and in lower relief on the proof.

On the reverse every aspect of both sides of the wreath is more finely engraved with more “open space” between the elements of the design.

In view of these differences, and that the design is not a proof of the circulating shilling of 1840, this piece should be reclassified as a pattern.

The author would be interested to hear of any other specimens of 1840 proof shillings and if they are true proofs of the circulating coin, or from the same dies as the pattern presented here.

References and Acknowledgements

- (1) St James’s Auctions. Auction 86, The Andersen Collection, Lot 8. 28 February 2024.
- (2) P.A. Rayner. English Silver Coinage Since 1649. 5th Edition, Seaby, 1992.
- (3) M. Bull. English Silver Coinage Since 1649. Fully revised 6th Edition, Spink, 2015.

Thanks to Steve Fenton and the St James’s auction team for hosting my visit and also for the images, which are way better than I could take!

