

A Die Study of Victorian Shillings Dated 1879

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Introduction

The year 1879 is the last year for which die numbers were used on the shillings.

The death of T.J. Minton on 18th April 1879, the chief engraver and the person responsible for finishing the dies and adding the die numbers, was quickly followed by a change in mint practices where a master for the whole reverse die was made. Though die numbers were no longer added to the reverse dies, both the obverse and reverse dies continued to be finished by hand by the engraver.

The following table summarises the known die numbers for the shillings of 1879.

	1	2	3	4	5	6		8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
	21	22			25	26		<i>28</i>	

Table 1. Die numbers on shillings dated 1879. Black – illustrated, Bold – extremely rare, Bold Red - to be discussed, Blue italic – not confirmed, probably a misreading.

This note will begin with descriptions of the three obverse and two reverse types that are found on the shillings of 1879. This is followed by the catalogue of the known die numbers, with each illustrated.

The highest die number has been recorded as a 26 for many years and this appears in the early editions of ESC⁽¹⁾ and the 1979 listing by Ron Stafford⁽²⁾. Ron Stafford's article queried the existence of a 28 that had first been published in 1974⁽³⁾. The latest edition of ESC has contradictory information with 26 in the main entry, but 28 in the itemised listing⁽⁴⁾.

A previously unrecorded dn 25 has been found along with several that are a clear dn 26. Close inspection reveals several details that are common to both dies – a die flaw below the 9 and a fine die fracture running through the date from the lower loop of the 8 to the base of the 7. This will be discussed later in the note.

Acknowledgements

The sources for the images in the catalogue will be listed later, but it is appropriate to acknowledge here the individuals who have freely given their knowledge to help with this Blog.

Thanks to Dave Morey (DM2) and Andrew Wide (AW) via the Shilling Appreciation Society on Facebook for providing several upgraded and new illustrations. Thanks also to David Price (DP) for more photos, David Morley (DM1), Ron Stafford (RS), Malcolm Wootton and Michael Marshman for all the years of eye strain and careful cataloguing without which this work would not have been possible.

Obverse Die Variations

Three main obverse varieties are known on the shillings of 1879.

For this catalogue of 1879 shillings, Victoria's portrait will be classified according to Peter Davies' excellent book *British Silver Coins Since 1816*⁽⁵⁾ The shillings of 1879 can be found with Obverses 5, 6 and 7. Shillings bearing die numbers are known with Obverses 5 and 6, always paired with reverse B. The later issues without the die numbers are known with all three obverse dies 5, 6 and 7 paired with reverse die B and also a new reverse die C.

The differences are subtle, and some of them are described in the images below. These details usually remain visible even on the most worn specimens.

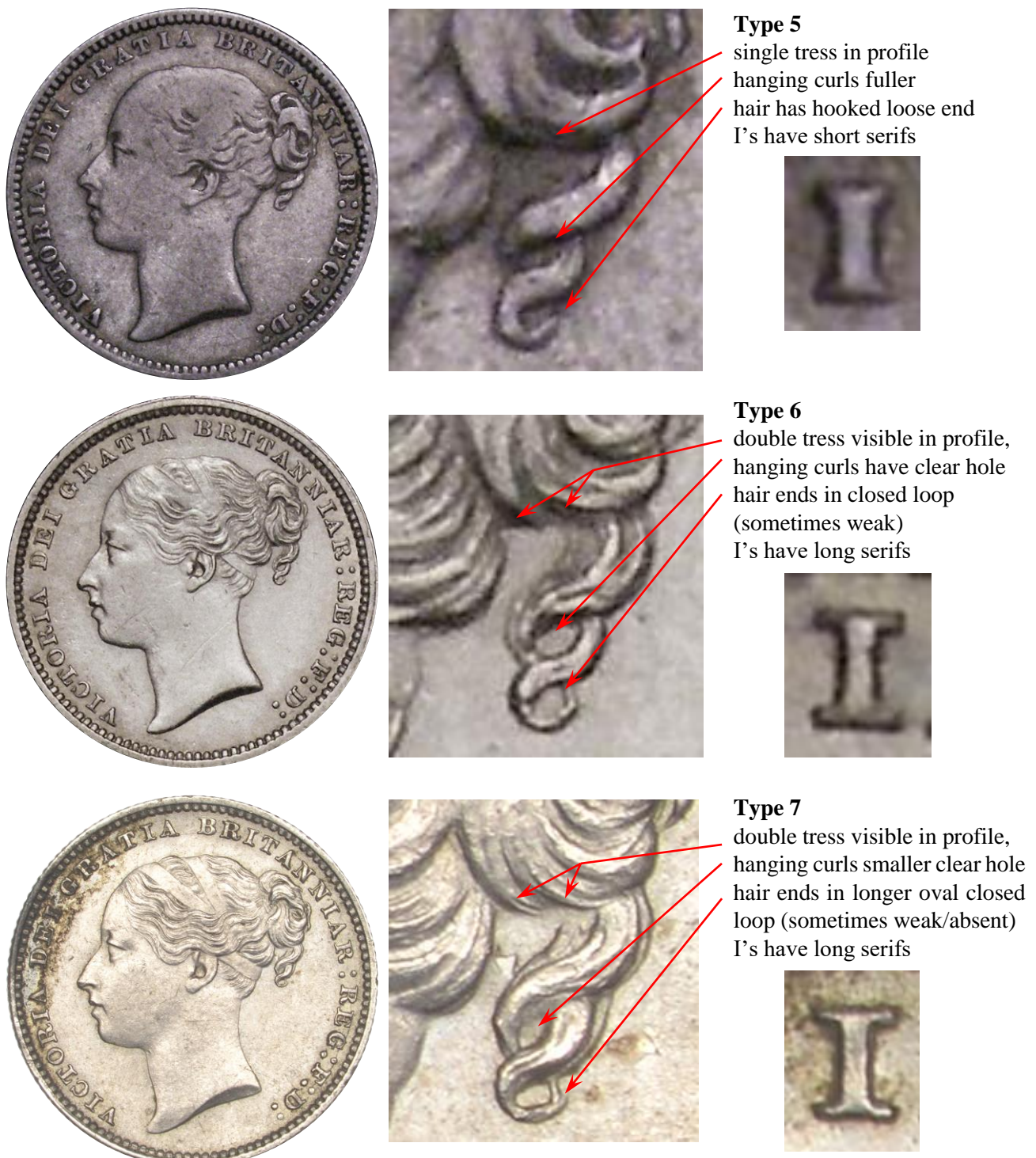


Fig. 1. Identifying obverse die varieties.

Reverse Die Variations

Two main reverse varieties are known on the shillings of 1879 – Davies types B and C – as illustrated below.

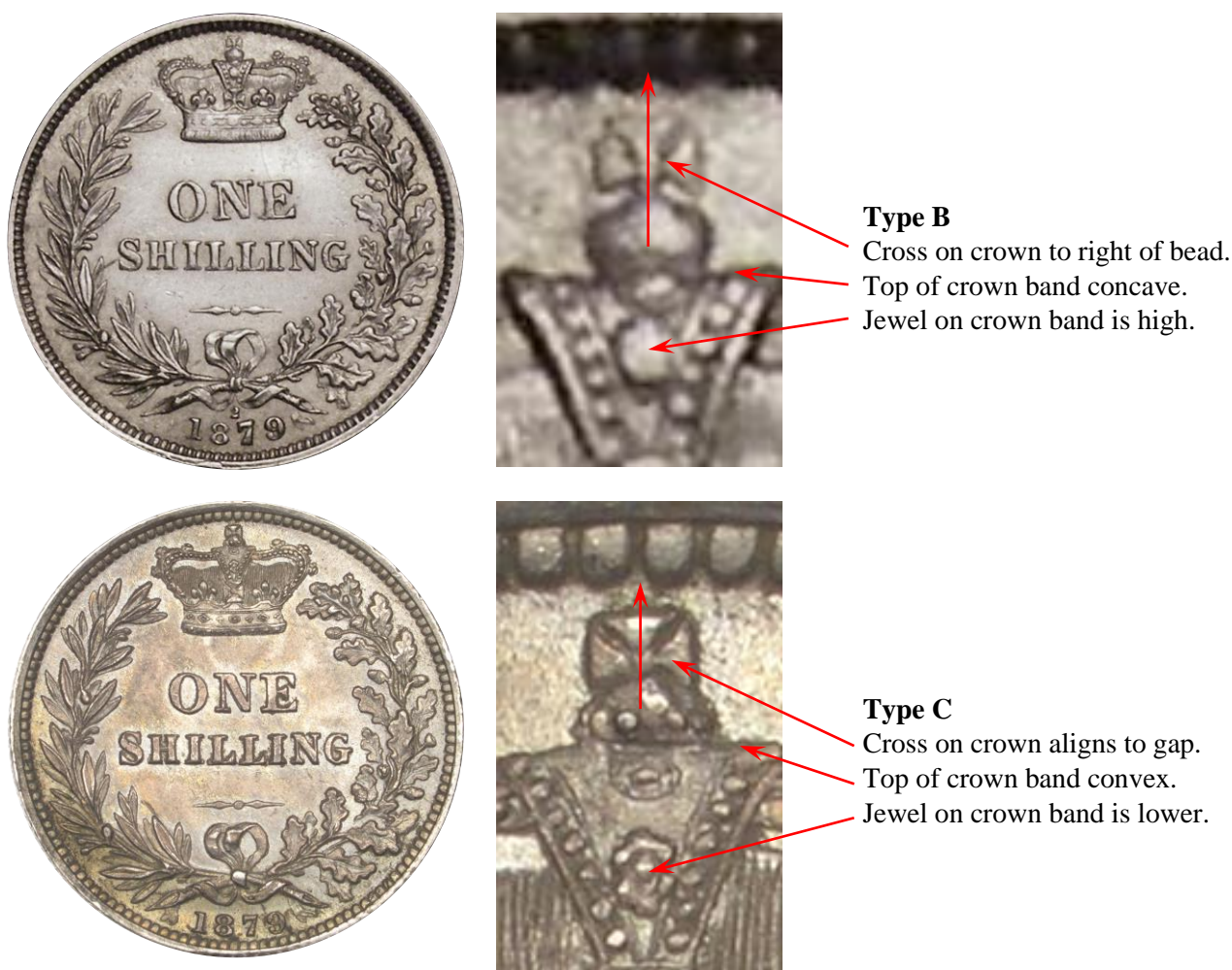


Fig. 2. Identifying reverse die varieties.

Die Combinations

The following diagram shows the eight known die links, more than doubling the number listed in ESC^(1,4) and Davies⁽⁵⁾.

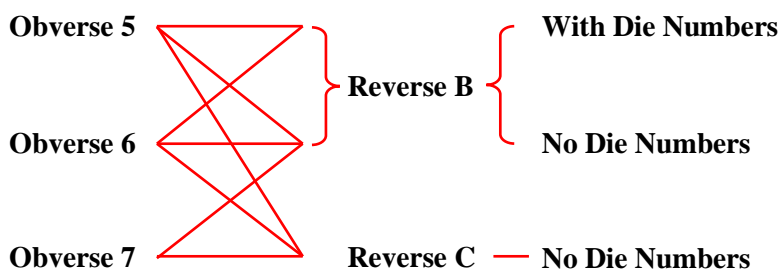


Fig. 3. Known die combinations on 1879 shillings.

The catalogue is presented in two parts. Firstly coins with die-numbered reverses: with Obv. 5 on the left and Obv. 6 on the right. Outlined circles and rectangles indicate known pieces, but no illustrations were available at the time of writing. Secondly coins that do not have die numbers, with Obv. 5 on the left, Obv. 6 in the middle and Obv. 7 on the right.

Notes have been added in small text adjacent to the relevant images. Extra images have been added to help the identification of difficult or interesting pieces.

The Catalogue

Sources of images will be found at the end of the catalogue.

1879 With Die Number

1879-1



6B

1879-2



6B

1879-3



6B

1879-4



6B

1879-5



6B

1879-6



6B

1879-7

Not Known

1879-8



6B

1879-9	GRATIA			6B		
1879-9	B over R to give GBATIA			6B		
1879-10			5B			
1879-11					6B	
1879-12			5B			
1879-13			5B		8 over 6 in date	
1879-14					6B	
1879-15					6B	
1879-16					6B	
1879-17					6B	

1879-18 The dn 8 is very faint indeed



1879-19 Very weak tail on the 9



1879-20 Not Known

1879-21



1879-22



1879-23 Not Known

1879-24 Not Known

1879-25 9 over lower 9, or die flaw to lower right of 9. Fine die fracture from lower loop of 8 to base of 7 to lower tail of 9. See Discussion.



1879-26 Suspiciously similar to the 25, but three seen like this. Same die flaw lower right of 9, same die fracture from lower loop of 8 to base of 7 to lower tail of 9. See Discussion.



1879-27 Not Known

1879-28 Not confirmed, probably a misreading of a 26



1879-dn?

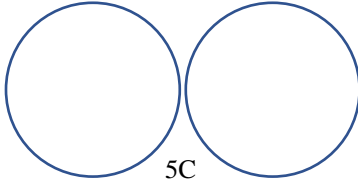


1879 No Die Number – the [Px] refers to the provenance of the images, to be found in the next section.

[P1]



RS and DP have identified 5 dies from the positioning of the hand-entered date digits 7 and 9.



Single specimen noted by David Morley (DM1) and another reported.

[P2]



Milled edge proof muling the earliest obverse 5 with the new reverse C. Single specimen found in Australia in an 1879 proof set with a provenance back to 1880.

[P3]



RS and DP have identified 21 dies from the positioning of the hand-entered date digits 7 and 9.

[P4]



RS and DP have identified 3 dies.

RS and DP have identified 2 dies.

[P5]



See discussion below for 4 obverse die varieties.

[P6]



Milled edge proof of the new type. Two found, both ↑↑

[P7]



Sources of Images and Acknowledgements

[001]	worthpoint	[011]	eBay	[022]	DP	[P1]	LCA
[002]	LCA	[012]	eBay			[P2]	VMA
[003]	eBay	[013]	SCA			[P3]	LCA
[004]	LCA	[014]	MJ Hughes	[025]	eBay	[P4]	AW
[005]	MAshops	[015]	DM2	[026]	DM2	[P5]	LCA
[006]	worthpoint	[016]	LCA			[P6]	Noonans
		[017]	DM2	[028]		[P7]	Heritage
[008]	eBay	[018]	DP				
[009]	(GR) KB Coins	[019]	DM2				
[009]	(GB) Noonans						
[010]	DP	[021]	DP				

The following are thanked for the use of their images: Keith Bayford at KB Coins, the Victoria Museum of Australia (VMA - <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/75133>) and especially Steve Lockett and Semra Cetin at London Coin Auctions (LCA) who have been looking for varieties and cataloguing by Davies number for many years, thus making this work much simpler. Also Dave Morey (DM2), Andrew Wide (AW) and David Price (DP).

Discussion

The dn 25 and 26 require a much closer look. Firstly there is a very fine die fracture on both dn 25 and dn 26. A later die state also has a small, raised dot between the 2 and 6 and the die flaw below the 9 is larger.



One example seen



Small die flaw

Identical fine die fractures

Small raised dot on two examples



Three examples seen



Develops into a larger flaw

Fig. 4. Die fractures and flaws near the date of 1879(25) and 1879(26).

And then the die number itself. The shape, location and orientation of the 2 relative to the ribbon appears identical in both dn 25 and dn 26.

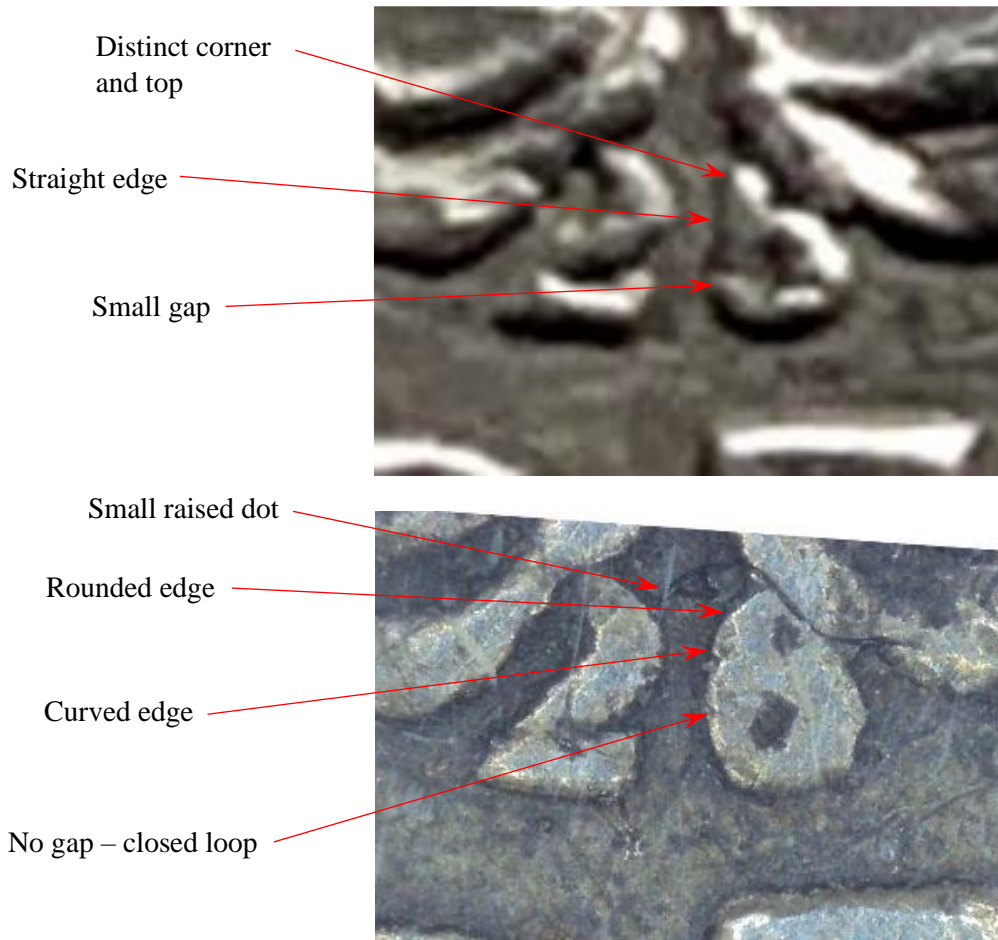


Fig. 5. Close up of the die number on the 1879(25) and 1879(26).

The images have been superimposed with the 26 on top of the 25 and the images aligned exactly using details of the digit 2 and the edges of the ribbons. By varying the transparency of the 26 from 0% (i.e. only the 26 visible) and 100% (only the 25 is visible) and sliding backwards and forwards between the two it is possible to see that the image of the 5 is almost wholly contained within the image of the 6. However there appears to be a very small protrusion from the upper left curve of the 6 which coincides with the upper left corner of the 5.

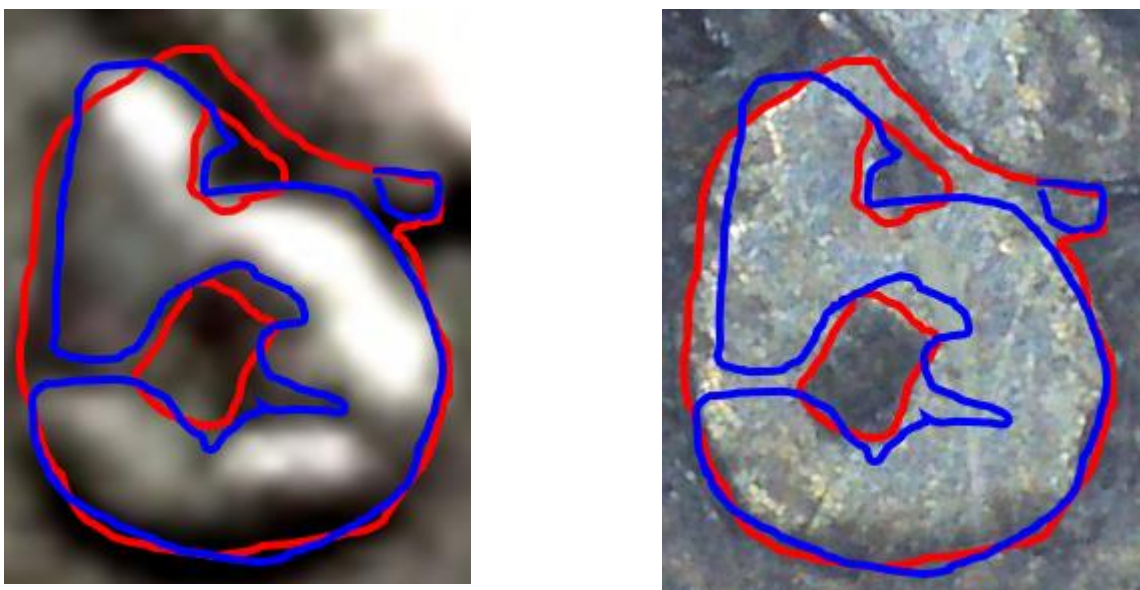


Fig. 6. Close up of the second digit of the die number on the 1879(25) and 1879(26)

The left edge of the 5 is just too clear and sharp to be the result of a die flaw or die infilling of the 6 and thus the only plausible conclusion is that die 25 has been modified to 26 at some point during the production run. This development was quite unexpected.

This (GO) interpretation of the dn 25 is not unanimous, with DM1 sceptical and RS and DP believe the 25 to be a 26 that has been damaged post striking/issue. I will leave the entry in the blog in anticipation of another and better specimen becoming available for inspection.

And now for an analysis of the shillings without die numbers.

When the die numbers stopped being used, the dies for the older obverses 5 and 6 and reverse B continued to be brought into service.

The Royal Mint report for 1879 states that there were 157 obverse dies and 140 reverse dies used for the shillings that year⁽⁶⁾. The die numbered coins account for about 20 of these and with the exception of the DN 9 GBATIA variety, the obverses within each type (5, 6, and 7) are challenging to identify. This means that there are about 120 die pairs to be found without die numbers.

A previous analysis based on the annual mintage figures, and the average number of coins struck per die based on the die numbers arrived at a similar estimate for the un-numbered dies⁽⁷⁾. This is consistent with the observation that the 1879 shillings without die numbers are four or five times commoner than those with die numbers.

The images below show some of the subtle variations in the lower hair curl on obverse 7 created by the die finisher.



Fig. 7. Varieties of obverse 7 created by the die finisher.

That's the first four, many more to go!

To add even further complexity, if there were 157 obverse dies and 140 reverse dies, then on average there were 1.12 obverse dies for every reverse die. Thus some of the reverse dies will be paired with more than one obverse die. One example of this has been found with dn 9, with one obv die being a normal GRATIA and the second reads GBATIA, the R being over punched with a B. Without such obvious distinguishing features the other obverse dies will be significantly more difficult to identify.

RS and DP have identified three obv dies paired with dn 1 and one of these is paired with dn 3. Along with the die varieties of obv.7 shown above, this is a whole new level of detail that will be left for others to finish.

Conclusions

This note has presented a die study of the shillings of 1879. The year began with the reverse dies being numbered in the same manner as the previous years. Obverse dies 5 and 6 were used with the numbered reverse dies. This was followed by a new un-numbered reverse die C paired with a new obverse die 7. Pieces were also struck with the new un-numbered reverse die C combined with the older obverses 5 and 6. A unique proof is known with obverse 5 and reverse C along with extremely rare circulation coins with this die combination. The proofs with die numbers suggested by Davies have not been found.

The majority of the 1879 shillings are un-numbered type 7C.

Minor details in the obverse dies combined with the numbered reverse dies can be used to show that multiple dies were used with a given reverse die. This is due to the variation in positioning of the hand-entered elements of the design. Similar variations caused by the hand finishing of the dies used for the un-numbered issues can also be found.

References

- (1) P.A. Rayner. *English Silver Coinage Since 1649*. 5th Edition, Seaby, 1992.
- (2) R. Stafford. The Die Number Experiment, Part 2 (The shilling series). *Coin Monthly*, October 1979, pp65-76.
- (3) M. Mapleton. Victorian Die Numbers, *Coin Year Book*, 1974, pp79-83.
- (4) M. Bull. *English Silver Coinage Since 1649*. Fully revised 6th Edition, Spink, 2015.
- (5) P.J. Davies. *British Silver Coins Since 1816*. 1982.
- (6) Royal Mint Reports from 1870 onwards. 1870 includes die data back to 1868.
<https://library.royalmintmuseum.org.uk/archive/royal-mint-annual-reports>
- (7) G. Oddie. A Die Study of Victorian Shillings Dated 1865. Part 2 – The Die Numbers. *BNS Blog* 5th July 2022. <https://britnumsoc.blog/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/377-1865-pt2-oddie-blog-004.pdf>

