

Grading Competition

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Introduction

For many years the topic of coin grading has vexed collectors, dealers and auctioneers alike. Any two coins from the same issue and date can be put side by side and compared in terms of the damage to the metal caused by wear etc. One will be better than the other. Do the same for several coins from the same issue and date and the coins can be ordered from worst to best. The coins than then be grouped according to the general level of wear into the grading system that has applied to British coins for the past century or so.⁽¹⁾

- Proof A very carefully struck coin from specially prepared dies, to give a superior definition to the design, with mirror-like fields.
- FDC *Fleur-de-coin*. Absolutely flawless, untouched, without wear, scratches, marks or hairlines. Generally applied to proofs.
- Unc *Uncirculated*. A coin in as new condition as issued by the Mint, retaining full lustre or brilliance but, owing to modern mass-production methods of manufacture and storage, not necessarily perfect.
- EF *Extremely Fine*. A coin that exhibits very little sign of circulation, with only minimal marks or faint wear, which are only evident upon very close scrutiny.
- VF Very Fine. A coin that exhibits some wear on the raised surfaces of the design, but really has only had limited circulation.
- Fine A coin that exhibits considerable wear to the raised surfaces of the design, either through circulation, or damage perhaps due to faulty striking.
- Fair Fair. A coin that exhibits wear, with the main features still distinguishable, and the legends, date and inscriptions still readable.
- Poor Poor. A coin that exhibits considerable wear, certainly with milled coinage of no value to a collector unless it is an extremely rare date or variety

To finesse this list, other terms can be applied such as good, about, near, almost, pleasing, brilliant, toned etc. Other damage can be noted such as scratches and piercings. Interestingly the clipping of hammered coins is rarely mentioned unless it is extreme.

The last entry in the above listing includes the most important words “value to a collector”. This is where the difficulties arise and an agreement between buyer and seller is needed for a piece to change hands. Once the transaction has taken place the grade is irrelevant until the next comparison or transaction takes place. This is all very subjective, and only works when consensus can be arrived at. The grade might be written on a receipt, invoice, catalogue page or even a coin ticket, but these are all ephemeral and the grading is repeated at the next comparison or transaction.

To obviate this, an industry, with several large and many small organisations has arisen that will encapsulate (slab) coins and include a statement of the grade of the coin inside the sealed plastic holder. Thus the coin is protected and shouldn't deteriorate, and provided the seal isn't broken, provides some confidence as to the genuineness of the coin and the grade is stated. This activity started in the USA and generally uses the Sheldon scale of grading. This numerical scale was devised in 1949 and then standardised by the ANA in the 1970s. There is an excellent Wikipedia page that goes into the details⁽²⁾, but the following table summarises the main grades.

Adjectival Grade	Equivalent Numerical Grade
Perfect Uncirculated	MS-70
Superb Gem Uncirculated	MS-67, MS-68, MS-69
Gem Uncirculated	MS-65, MS-66
Choice Uncirculated	MS-63, MS-64
Select or Choice Uncirculated	MS-63
Uncirculated	MS-60, MS-61, MS-62

It is important to note that while many of the words are the same as in the British grading system, the meanings are different! Working from the best grade to the worst. . . and with American spelling . . . though reads better working from the bottom to the top.

#	Grade	Grade code(s)	Description
58	Choice About Uncirculated	Ch. AU, AU58	Almost all of the original mint luster remains
55	Choice About Uncirculated	Ch. AU, AU55	Three-fourths of the original mint luster remains.
50	About Uncirculated/Almost Uncirculated	AU, AU50	Traces of wear at the highest points of the coin. At least half of the original mint luster remains.
45	Choice Extremely Fine	Ch. Ex. Fine, EF45	Slight, overall wear is seen at the highest points of the coin (examples being raised features). All the details are full and very sharp. Mint luster may show only in protected areas of the coin's surface (Such as between the star points).
40	Extremely Fine/Extra Fine	Ex. Fine, EF40	Overall sharpness. Light wear seen at the highest points of the coin. Details of the coin are sharp. Traces of mint luster may show.
35	Choice Very Fine	Ch. VF, VF+, VF35	All lettering and major features are sharp. Light, but even wear is seen on the surface and high points of the coin. Traces of mint luster may show.
30	Choice Very Fine	Ch.VF, VF+, VF30	All lettering and major features are sharp. Light, but even wear is seen on the surface and high points of the coin.
25	Very Fine	VF25	All lettering and major features are sharp. Light to moderate, but even wear is seen on the surface and high points of the coin.
20	Very Fine	VF, VF20	Moderate wear on the higher surface features.
15	Choice Fine	F+, F15	Slightly more detail in the recessed areas of the coin.
12	Fine	F, F12	Some deeply recessed areas show detail. All lettering is sharp. The letters in the word LIBERTY show completely in coins with this feature, but may be weak. Moderate to considerable, but even wear throughout the coin.
10	Choice Very Good	VG+, VG10	Slightly clearer design-features, with five or possibly six letters of the word LIBERTY showing in coins with this feature.
8	Very Good	VG, VG8	Slight detail shows, with two to three letters of the word LIBERTY showing in coins with this feature.
6	Choice Good	G+, G6	Rims of the coin are complete. Peripheral lettering is full.
4	Good	G, G4	Rims of the coin are slightly worn, design is visible, but faint in areas, with many parts of the coin worn flat. Peripheral lettering nearly full.
3	About Good	AG	Readable lettering although very heavily worn. The date and design may be worn smooth.
2	Fair	FR	Some detail shows
1	Poor	PO	Clear enough to identify, date may be worn smooth with one side of the coin blanked. Coins that are very badly corroded may also fall under this category.

Proof coins are also covered in the same scale with the prefix PR and a numerical scale that ranges PR60-PR70 and if a proof is impaired, a grade would be applied as if it was a worn circulating coin.

So, to the competition. The following pages contain images of various coins of Queen Victoria that have been graded and slabbed. They are in no particular order or from a particular grading company, just found randomly on eBay and the internet.

Simply work through the images and give each coin a numerical grade and write it down in the table on the following page (Hint - they are all between 20 and 60) and then total the score to see how close you are to the total slabbed values. The individual answers and total will be given at the end of this blog.



#01 Sovereign 1883M



#02 Sovereign 1866



#03 Sovereign 1884S



#04 Half farthing 1844



#05 Shilling 1853



#06 Penny 1855



#07 Shilling 1839



#08 Sovereign 1885M



#09 Half-crown 1874



#10 Penny 1848/6



Coin	Sheldon Grade	UK Grade
#01 Sovereign 1883M		
#02 Sovereign 1866		
#03 Sovereign 1884S		
#04 Half farthing 1844		
#05 Shilling 1853		
#06 Penny 1855		
#07 Shilling 1839		
#08 Sovereign 1885M		
#09 Half-crown 1874		
#10 Penny 1848/6		
	Total	

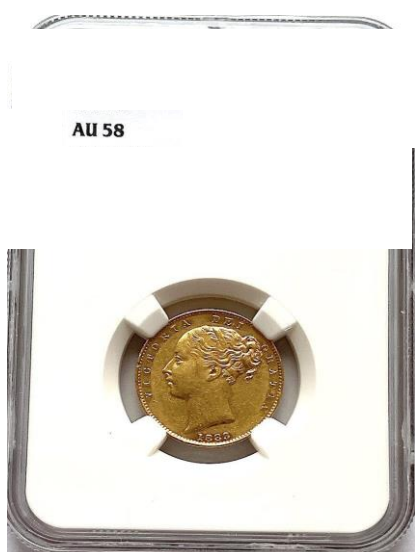
Whilst it is always best to grade a coin in the hand, in good lighting with an average strength eyeglass, often photographs such as those above are all that is available upon which to make a decision.

The above photographs were sent to a few contacts for opinions on grades and here are the replies.

Coin	UK Dealer #1	UK Dealer #2	UK Collector #1	UK Collector #2
#01	aVF	Edge hairline rubbed. Ob nick 10 o/c NEF	nEF, ek obv	VF/EF
#02	gVF	UNC	gEF	gVF
#03	VF cleaned?	UNC	gEF+	VF/gVF
#04	aVF	GVF rubbing on top points. Gunk in design?	VF dirty with corrosion spots	VF
#05	aEF	EF	gEF	EF
#06	gVF stained?	UNC	gEF (with camera reflection)	EF
#07	aEF	NEF	nEF	nEF
#08	aVF	GVF	gVF	VF
#09	EF	EF	EF	EF
#10	gVF/VF	NEF	gVF cleaned? unpleasant toning	gVF

It is fairly clear that even amongst experienced graders there isn't a consensus and only one of the pieces received the same grade from the four opinions sought (#09).

And here are what the various coin encapsulation companies, third party graders (TPGs) give. . . .



#01



AU 58

#02



AU 58

#03



AU58

#04



AU 58



AU 58 BN



AU 58



#05



#06



#07



AU 58



AU 58



AU58



#08



#09



#10

Conclusions and Discussion

The collectors and dealers consulted gave a range of grades for each coin and across the coins, and generally, though not always, they were quite similar.

However all of the pieces have been graded as AU58 when they were encapsulated. I would be surprised if any readers came to the same conclusions and a total score of 580.

Grading is subjective, and there isn't a "right answer" just two opinions that need to agree, and the price is appropriate for the coin in question, if a transaction is to take place.

It is probably stating the obvious, but the only way to grade a coin is to actually look at the coin and draw your own conclusions. The opinions of third party graders are just that and the ink on the ticket in the slab is just a statement of that opinion on the day the coin was encapsulated. That different grading companies can give different grades for the same coin when resubmitted and that a grading company can revise its opinion when a coin is returned to have a scratched slab replaced all casts doubt on the claimed objectivity of the grading process. This can be highly significant when the difference in price for an MS62 and MS63 coin can be a factor of two or more.

And then there is "eye appeal". A well-struck coin that is gEF with only the slightest hints of wear on the highest points will be more appealing than a weakly struck but truly Uncirculated coin, though the TPGs will put the Unc above the gEF. And not forgetting toning: natural, artificial, rainbow, zippy or bungled. A few centuries in a near-inert environment or a few minutes in the hands of people with the correct skills and chemicals can significantly change the whole appearance and desirability of a coin. Artificially modified surfaces, especially copper and bronze, can show their true colour within a few years, even when inside a capsule, as the treated metal surfaces are not chemically stable. Lustrous uncirculated can become an ugly black disc in a matter of years. Some TPGs are closely associated with companies that carry out "conservation", improving the eye appeal, but not necessarily the long term chemical stability of the surface. Thus about 20 years ago some TPG companies applied a time limit of 10 years to some of their "guaranteed" coin grades.

As an example, here's an 18th century token (Hampshire DH 52). On the left is the photograph of the token in its slab when sold. On the right, just a few months later, the colour changed, the token was then removed from the slab, allowing a closer inspection to reveal where the "conservators" had been at work.



In summary, look at the coin, not the ticket, use your own judgement and caveat emptor.

References

- (1) G. Edmund (Ed.). Coins of England & the United Kingdom – Pre-Decimal Issues. Standard Catalogue of British Coins, 2023, Spink.
- (2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheldon_coin_grading_scale

