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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NINETEENTH CENTURY COINAGE

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The recent introduction of one and two dollar coins has lifted the number of current coins to six. We have lost the one and two cent 'copper' coins, heirs to an ancient line of copper pieces, and gained the two new denominations which are debased successors to an equally ancient gold coinage.

Little more than a century ago a wide variety of real copper, silver and gold coins made up the legal coinage of New Zealand (see Lampard 1981). The great majority of coins were, of course, British, New Zealand not having its own coinage until 1933. Some idea of what was available is given by the recovery of two time capsules in central Auckland in 1989 and 1990.

### HIGH COURT TIME CAPSULE

The first was found at the High Court development site off Anzac Avenue. Within a glass jar were several 1865 newspapers and a New Zealand Insurance Company almanac of that year, all of which had been reduced to pulp. There were also six current coins of the realm (Plate 1).

An 1864 gold sovereign (Plate 2) is marked SYDNEY MINT/ AUSTRALIA. This colonial mint began production of sovereigns in 1855. Outside New South Wales the Sydney coins were at first greeted with suspicion, and were discounted one shilling at Melbourne and London banks. However, the gold sovereign, like other coins at this time, had a weight of metal more or less equal to face value: the Sydney mint used a gold/silver alloy rather than the gold/copper alloy of the London mint and thus contained a slightly greater value of rare metal. Sydney sovereigns soon became acceptable not just in New South Wales but in other colonies as well (Andrews 1921:131-132).

Other coins found at the High Court were an 1843 half-sovereign (also gold), and an 1826 half-crown, 1857 florin, 1860 shilling and 1842 sixpence, all silver. The half-crown dates from the reign of George IV whose famous vanity is reflected in the noble profile on the obverse side. All the other coins show Queen Victoria.

The florin marks a premature mid-19th century agitation for decimal coinage. The two shilling piece was to be a first step towards decimalisation, being one-tenth of a pound (or sovereign). It was first introduced in 1849 with the infamous 'godless' florin - the formula DEI GRATIA ('by the grace of God') being omitted. The queen was not amused and ordered the coin discontinued

(Seaby 1952:99-100). The florin re-emerged in 1851 in the so-called 'Gothic' style seen on the High Court coin, which was continued in production until 1887.

The florin was to have replaced the half-crown (two shillings and sixpence), and for many years after 1850 the larger coin was not issued. But it seems the banks liked the half-crown and it was minted again from 1874, the two denominations continuing in use in New Zealand until the introduction of decimal coinage in 1967.

Reporting on the time capsule, *The New Zealand Herald* of 10 November 1865 states that there were other coins also deposited, including an English sovereign, crown and other small denominations in silver and copper. It is not known what happened to the missing items.



Plate 1. The High Court cache. Top row, left to right: florin, half-crown, sovereign. Second row: sixpence, half-sovereign, shilling.



Plate 2. The High Court sovereign.

## FREEMASONS HALL CAPSULE

The second time capsule, consisting of two glass jars in a crimped lead box, was uncovered at the old Freemasons Hall site in Princes Street next to the Grand Hotel (Plate 3), in May 1990 (see *N.Z. Herald* 3 May 1990). The capsule had been laid in the foundation of the old building in early 1881 (*N.Z. Herald* 31 March 1881). Along with the thirteen coins were various papers and documents all of which were totally destroyed by water over the years.

The complete list of coins is as follows: gold: sovereign and half-sovereign; silver: crown, half-crown, florin, shilling, sixpence, fourpence (groat), three pence, and three half-pence; copper (actually bronze since they date from after 1860): penny, half-penny and farthing. All date from the reign of Queen Victoria.

The gold coins both came from the Sydney mint. The sovereign made good time over the Tasman as it is dated 1881, the capsule being buried at the Princes Street site in March of that year. Unlike the 1864 coin from the High Court site, the Princes Street sovereign is of the same design as the then current British sovereign. Only a small 's' beneath the queen's head tells of its origin. A similar small 's' beneath the shield on the reverse gives the origin of the 1875 half-sovereign.

The gold coins share with other Victorian coinage the Latin inscription BRITANNIARUM REGINA FID: DEF:. This may be translated as, Queen of the Britains (i.e. of Great Britain and the British colonies overseas) Defender of the Faith (Fidei Defensor). Often it appears only in abbreviated form, for example as BRIT:REG:F:D in the copper coins from Princes Street.

The 1845 crown is a magnificent coin, an inch and a half across (37 mm - our 50 cent piece is about 31 mm). The Victoria 'young head' crown was issued only in 1844, 1845 and 1847. After this new crowns were not circulated again until the jubilee year of 1887. In the 20th century they were largely discontinued except for special issues.

On the edge of the crown is the legend DECUS ET TUTAMEN ANNO REGNI VIII. The first part of this translates from the Latin as "a decoration and a safeguard", which refers to the letters protecting the coin from being 'clipped' or reduced in size for the silver content. The second part refers to the eighth year of Victoria's reign.

Interesting among other silver coins are the four-pence or groat and the three half-pence. The groat is worn almost smooth on both sides. The date may be 1839. Groats were discontinued in 1855. A hole has been hammered through the top of this coin indicating use as a pendant - much use if we are to judge from the worn appearance.

The 1843 three half-pence also has been holed but the coin has suffered little wear. This unusual denomination was circulated in colonial territories such as island West Indies and British Guiana. It was issued only for a few years in the reigns of William IV and Queen Victoria (Remick *et al.* 1971:206-207).



Plate 3. The Grand Hotel and the Freemasons Hall facades have survived as part of the recent Peat Marwick Centre development. The Freemasons Hall cache was at the right front corner of the smaller building.

## 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY COINAGE

The three half-pence was not the only little known British denomination issued in the 18th or 19th century. The full list of coinage includes six copper, twelve silver and no less than nine gold coins. Many of these might turn up in New Zealand.

During Victoria's reign half farthings were struck for colonial use, third-farthings for use in Malta and a quarter-farthing for Ceylon (see Remick *et al.* 1971:187-188). The last was only a sixteenth of a penny - equal to about one-twentieth of the value of our discontinued one cent coin. Such is the power of inflation.

The only silver denomination of Victoria's reign not represented at Princes Street was the double florin of 1887-1890.

The silver half-groat or two-pence circulated as currency in the 18th century but was later issued only as traditional Maundy Money. From 1811 to 1816 the Bank of England issued tokens of one shilling and sixpence and three shillings which were widely used as currency and may therefore have reached this part of the world (see Remick *et al.* 1971:233, 242).

Until 1813 gold coins were based on the guinea (twenty-one shillings). There were quarter, third, half and one guinea pieces issued in the 18th century, mostly the half and one guinea denominations. In 1817 the sovereign and half-sovereign were introduced. Two pounds and two and five guinea gold coins were also occasionally issued.

Some of the denominations mentioned above were not readily available as currency in the late 19th century. To put together their 1881 collection those responsible for the Freemasons Hall cache used two coins apparently from necklaces or pendants.

There was nonetheless a wide range of British coins commonly in use. Earlier in the century there were also many foreign coins circulated in New Zealand to make up the shortfall of available British currency. These were given standard values relative to the British coinage. Thus business might be transacted in Spanish, French, U.S. and East India Company coins, or coins from a whole range of Latin American or other countries for which the gold or silver content was to be trusted (Lampard 1981:15).

## OTHER LOCAL FINDS

Recent archaeological excavations at Chancery Street in central Auckland have yielded half-farthings and a Dutch two cent piece of 1838, as well as other low denomination copper and silver coins (Macready and Goodwyn 1990:97). A gold guinea from the reign of George III was recovered from the filled-in cellar of the old Victoria Hotel site in Shortland Street (Brassey and Macready 1990:180).

Half-farthings were also found during excavations in 1990 and 1991 on Kawau Island (Rod Clough pers. comm.) suggesting that this denomination was not uncommon in mid-19th century New Zealand.

More intriguing still is the recent gift to the Auckland Museum of a Brazilian gold coin, a 6400 reis piece of Jose I, minted at Rio de Janeiro in 1773. This coin was found some years ago in a defensive trench of the abandoned Queen's Redoubt near Pokeno, occupied in the early 1860s during the advance of troops in the Waikato War. Presumably an unlucky soldier lost his nest egg, held for security in gold.

#### ON DISPLAY

The High Court cache can now be seen in the foyer of the old court building off Waterloo Quadrant. The Freemasons Hall coins are on display in the foyer of the Peat Marwick Centre behind the old Grand Hotel facade in Princes Street.

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