

Trial of the Pyx

by Mike Rendell

The Trial of the Pyx may sound like the title of a Harry Potter novel but it is in fact the name given to a long-running series of judicial trials which has been going on, largely unchanged, for nearly 750 years. At heart it is simply an analysis of the coinage of the Kingdom, and in many ways it has changed little since the first recorded trial in the 13th Century.

It is easy to understand the origins of the trial – the King would have appointed a Master of the Royal Mint and he would have access to precious metals – usually gold and silver – and be charged with the task of making a set number of coins to a particular value. How could the King be sure that an unscrupulous Master did not issue light coinage, or debase it with alloys? What was to prevent fraudulent Master getting rich at the expense of the King? And so the Monarch would call for a sample of each minting to be set aside for independent checking. The coins selected were placed in a pyx or boxwood chest (from the Greek “pyxis” meaning a small chest). For every specified weight of gold and silver coins produced the Master had to set aside one coin and place it into the pyx, which was kept by the King in the Pyx Chapel at Westminster Abbey. The ratio of referrals varied but at one stage was one coin for every fifteen pounds in weight of gold, and one in every sixty pounds of silver. In the Middle Ages the trials might be held several times a year, and they were in every sense a judicial trial. They still are, with the proceedings presided over by a judge (known as “The Queen’s Remembrancer”), being the Senior Master of the Queen’s Bench.

Originally the trials were held at Westminster Hall and later moved to the Exchequer. Five hundred years ago Queen Elizabeth ordered the trials to be placed under the supervision of the Goldsmiths’

Company (which made sense since they actually carried out the assays) and in 1870 the trial moved to Goldsmiths Hall where it has remained ever since.

The whole purpose of the Trial being held somewhere other than the Mint itself was to ensure that it was completely independent and free from any risk of the tests being ‘doctored’. Throughout the Middle Ages the actual minting of the coins would have been carried out at The Tower of London. When mechanisation came in during the 18th Century, with rolling machines to ensure that the metal was of a uniform thickness, and with screw presses to replace hand striking of coins, the Tower ran out of space and in 1809 the Mint moved across the road to Tower Hill (East Smithfield).

At the Trial of the Pyx there is a jury of assayers. Nowadays this consists of the Prime Warden of the Goldsmiths’ Company with the three supporting Wardens, the Head of the Assay Office, and a selection of the Company’s Liverymen. The actual size of the Jury will vary from year to year depending on how many coins are to be tested. Originally the Monarch would keep a set of test pieces - the Trial Plate - against which the selected coins would be benchmarked. The oldest remaining Trial Plates date from the 13th Century. Nowadays, it is the Weights and Measures Laboratory which provides the weights and metal samples against which modern coins are measured, weighed and analysed.

Historically the Master of the Royal Mint was allowed a margin of error, known as the Remedy. The Remedy was set out in the Act of Parliament which ordered the coins to be struck. Exceed the Remedy and the Master was liable to be charged with Treason, the penalty for which was a gruesome hanging and dismemberment.

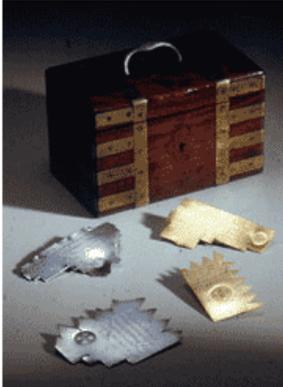


Goldsmiths' Hall in Foster Lane, venue of the Trial of the Pyx

At the first stage of the trial the Queen’s Remembrancer (or King’s Remembrancer) enters the Hall. He still wears formal robes and a full-bottomed wig, perched on top of which he wears a tricorne hat (a symbol that he is holding the office of the last remaining member of the old Court of Exchequer). As it is a Court of Law, photography is not allowed. The judge swears in the jury in accordance with the requirements laid down by the Treasury. In front of each juror are two bowls, one wooden and one made of copper. Officials from the Royal Mint duly dole out fifty coins to each juror from however many coins have been set aside to be tested. The juror selects one coin and places it in the copper bowl. This is sent away to be assayed at the Assay Office. The other 49 coins are sent away to be weighed. Why is this still important? Well just imagine the chaos

continued...

Trial of the Pyx (cont.)



*Historical Trial Plates and Pyx.
Image: Goldsmiths' Company.*

if vending machines, payphones, fruit machines, toll booth buckets etc were unable to operate because of fluctuations in the weight and size of individual coins. They have to be of a known standard. In the same way the metal composition of each coin is important in ensuring quality and hard wearing. We don't want a repetition of what happened in the reign of Henry VIII when the highest part of his face, namely his nose, became worn before the rest of the coin, revealing the copper base metal used for the coin and giving rise to the King's unflattering nick-name: 'Old Copper Nose'!

Nowadays much of the counting and weighing of samples is done electronically in a side room at Goldsmiths' Hall but a small sample is still weighed manually in front of the jurors.

There is a legal requirement under the Coinage Acts for the trial to take place at least once in every year in which the Royal Mint strikes any coins. In practice coins are struck every year, so the trial is annual, usually in February, on a date selected by the Treasury.

Legal requirements are placed on the Mint, now housed at Llantrissant near Cardiff, to store a sample of all the coins minted for the trial. In modern times most coins are cupro-nickel, and the Deputy Master of the Mint is required to place one coin out of every 50,000 bi-metallic coins minted for use in the Pyx. But the Trial also

includes the bullion coinage minted each year – the sovereign, the Britannia and so on, as well as the silver Maundy Money minted each year and which the monarch hands out to selected recipients on the day before Good Friday. One in every 150 Maundy coins is set aside for testing.

The second part of the trial takes place some months after the original court sitting – basically everyone is called back to hear the results. Much formality and tradition is observed - last year on May 6th George Osborne as Chancellor of the Exchequer and in his capacity of Master of the Royal Mint turned up in person to receive the results, and of course to partake of a fine meal courtesy of the Goldsmiths' Guild. The tables are published and no doubt these form part of the Royal Mint's sales drive in persuading other countries to let us mint their coinage, since accuracy and consistency is essential. On the other hand, it has to be admitted that the trial is largely ceremonial.

The coins subjected to trial each year – just under sixty thousand in total - could just as easily be measured electronically without the aid of men in funny clothing, or following procedures harking back to the Middle Ages; but there again, wouldn't the world be a poorer place without such traditions?



*The table showing the wooden and copper bowls laid out before the jurors arrive.
Image: the Royal Mint.*



About Mike Rendell

Mike Rendell is a retired lawyer who lives in Spain. His first book about his Georgian ancestor Richard Hall has recently been published: Journal of a Georgian Gentleman. Mike has an excellent blog here and a web site here. And he's on Twitter as @GeorgianGent. Mike is currently doing research for further historical publications.