

South African coinage during World War 2

By Joel Potgieter



Preface

- Last year, in September, I gave a presentation at the 3rd quarterly meeting of the WCNS about the coins minted at the SA Mint for foreign countries during the war.
- This presentation is intended to follow up on my previous one, focusing on the South African coins manufactured during this period.
- Both presentations will be made available on the WCNS website (www.wcnumsoc.com).

Introduction

- In the history of numismatics, the production of coins during wartime has led to the creation of some of the most interesting and important (and some of the most expensive) coins ever made.
- Take for example these emergency gold coins struck by the Greek city of Athens, with the iconic design of the Athenian owl. These were struck towards the end of the Peloponnesian War as long ago as 407 BC.
- Popular South African examples include the expensive Single- and Double 9 overstamped ponde; the curious rimmed and rimless blank ponde; and of course, the famous Veldpond coins. All of these were made during the Second Anglo-Boer War.



Images taken from
Numista.com

Introduction (continued)

- World War 2 was by far the largest war in modern history, and its effect on world numismatics was enormous. However, compared to most other countries, South Africa's coinage was virtually unchanged by the War.
- Nonetheless, this period in the history of our mint still has some interesting features which inevitably influenced the production of our coinage. We will take a closer look at this in the rest of this presentation.

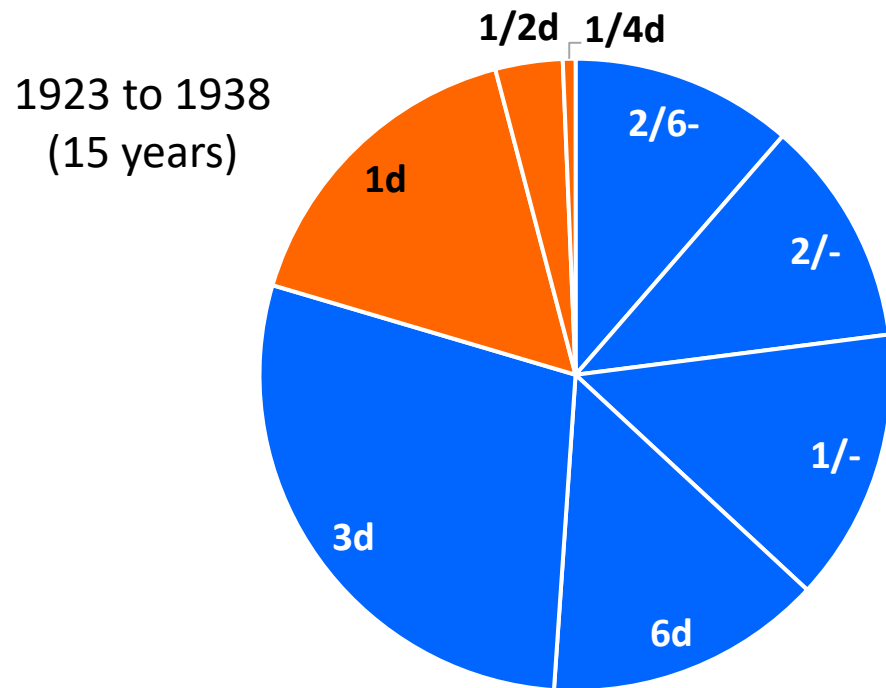
Changes at the SA mint

“The need for money when war is raging is a parallel to the need for ammunition, and the supply must be continuous and in unlimited quantities throughout the war period”

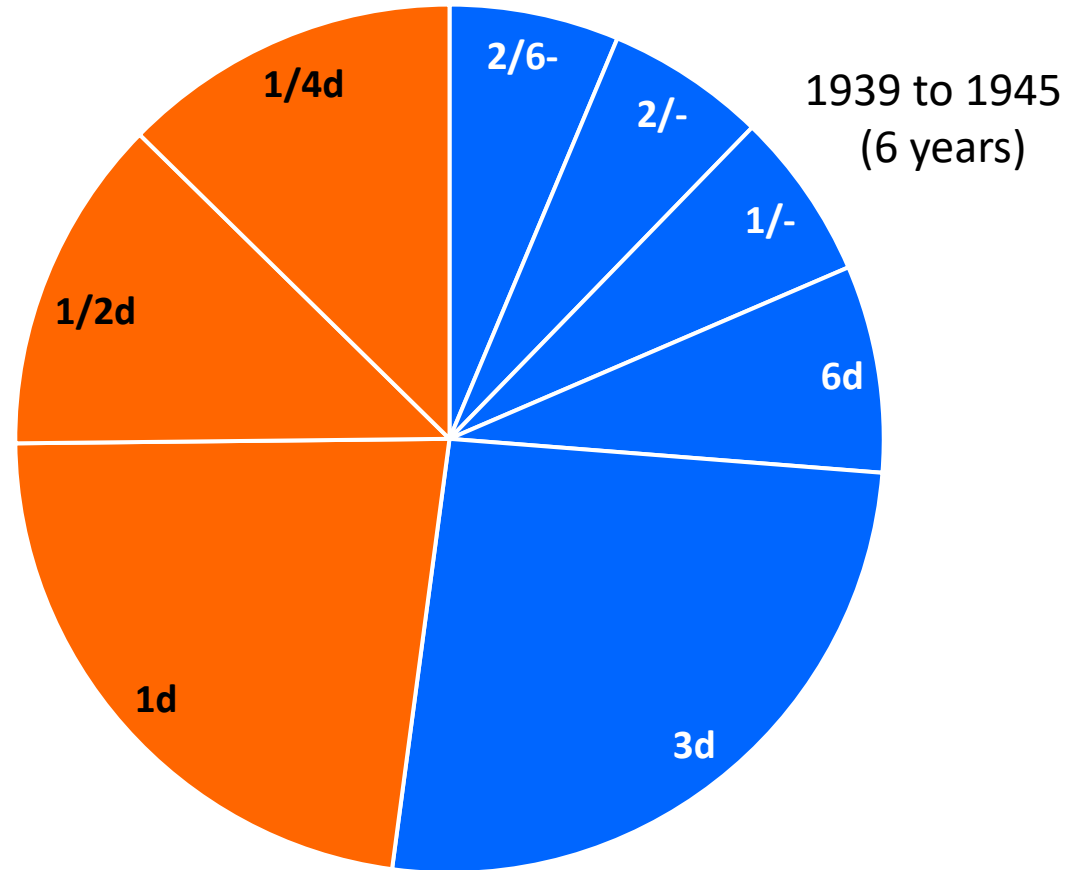
J. P Roux, mint director

- During the first stages of the War, South Africa experienced an age-old problem: there were not enough coins in circulation to satisfy demand.
- The late J. P. Roux, one of the mint directors during the War, wrote in 1946 that at one time, early in the war, it was feared that one would go to a shop with a 10/- or £1 note and would have to purchase items to its full value as you could not expect to receive any change. However, the mint mitigated this problem by implementing a new and improved production program.

Changes at the SA mint (continued)



Total: 91,032,498



Total: 184,260,768

General decline in quality of minted coins

- Due to the massive increase in the number of coins produced, quality control was put under strain, and many more errors slipped through. Overall, the general quality of the coins produced also declined.
- It is very common to see cracked dies on the coins produced during this time, particularly from 1942 onwards, when the mint started operating 24 hours a day. The dies were being used to mint far more coins than before, as dies are expensive and difficult to make. During wartime, dies are pushed further than normal.
- Coins minted during this time often have a weak strike. This may have been deliberate to ensure that the dies would last longer. A similar thing happened on the ZAR ponde of 1898 and 1900.

General decline in quality of minted coins (continued)

- A few examples of some of the wartime errors that slipped through quality control at the Mint.



Photo credit NGC and the author

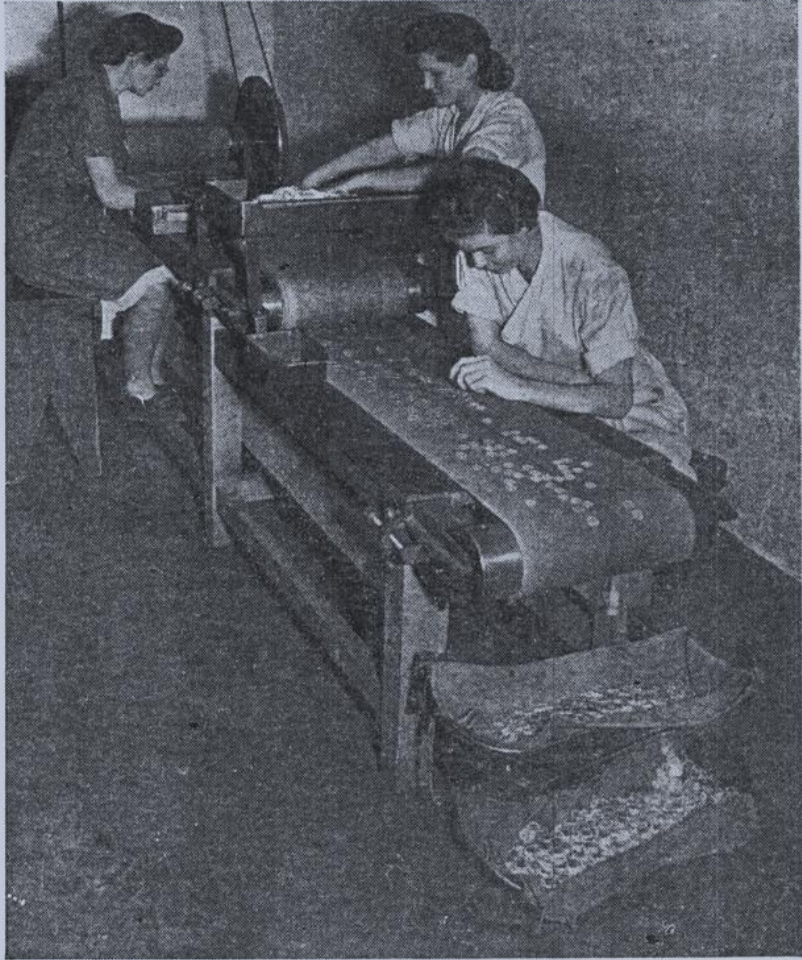


Fig. 7.

The overlooking belt. Both reverse and obverse of the coins are shown. Imperfect coins are picked out by hand.

A 1940s photograph of mint workers examining freshly minted coins for defects. Probably not the most interesting job in the world, especially at 3 o'clock in the morning!



Coin photos courtesy of Anthony Govender and Reghardt Smit (2/- photo from Bobshop)

The 1945 over 1943 overdate tickeys

- These fascinating tickeys are very unusual in our numismatic history, as they represent only the second time that the mint re-engraved a new date over a previous date on the dies, the first time being in the case of the extremely rare 1935 over 1933 tickeys.
- I have a theory about these tickeys, which I will explain in 2 slides time.
- As far as I can tell, there are 2 basic types, which I have nicknamed the “bridged” 5 and “spiked” 5 varieties.

The 1945 over 1943 overdate tickkeys (continued)



Normal coins (1943 and 1945)



"Bridged" 5 overdate variety



"Spiked" 5 overdate variety



The 1945 over 1943 overdate tickeys (continued)

- Nobody knows for sure why these coins were made, but one possible theory about the minting of these coins is as follows:

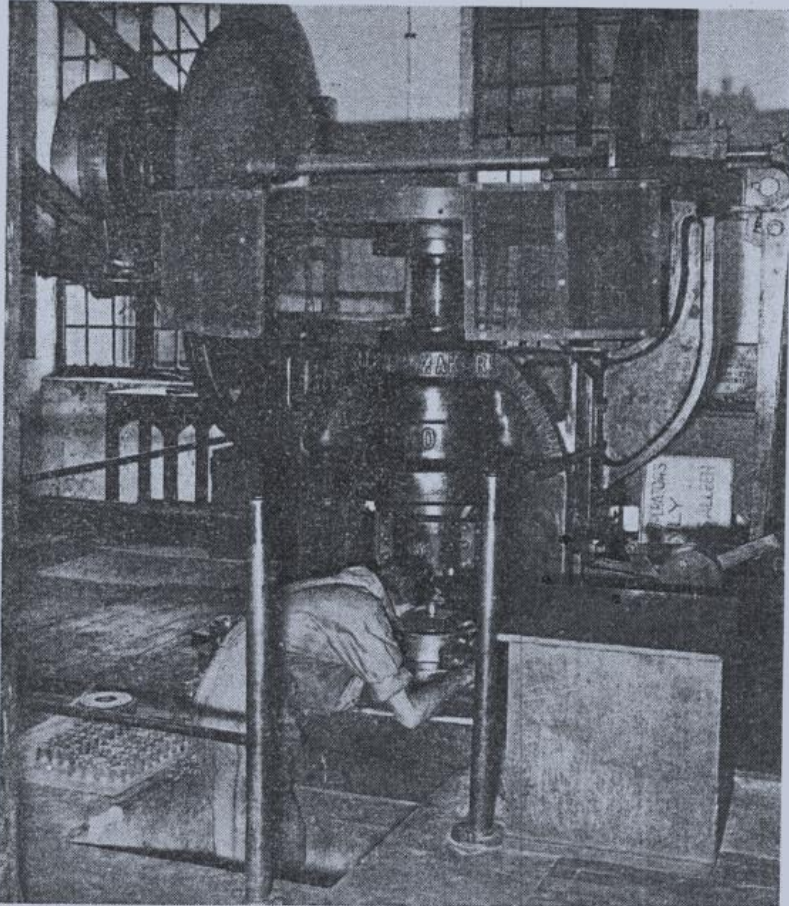


Fig 12.—A die-reproducing press. This machine is used for reproducing dies from master-punches.

- In this photograph you can see a mint worker making dies using a master die, which works in a very similar way to how a working die strikes coins. A tickey master die is the smallest and therefore the most easily mixed up: all the design is on an area roughly the same size as your thumbnail.
- If the 1943 master dies were accidentally used instead of the 1945 master dies, that is to say, they were mixed up, then the mint would have a whole bunch of 1943 tickey dies in 1945.
- To fix this problem, they make a small die stamp (to impart a tiny bit of design to one part of the die) of the last 1 or 2 digits of the date (either 45 or just 5) and use the machine to stamp this over the last 1 or 2 digits of the date on the dies (43).
- Part of the way through this process, the punch is shifted a fraction of a millimeter to improve the striking. Here we get the 2 types of the over-date, the “bridged” and “spiked” 5.

Rarities minted at the SA mint during the War

- Although the mint was producing coins by the ton, there are still a few rarities from this time.
- After 1939 the minting of proof sets (special high-quality coins for sale in sets to collectors) was suspended due to the war. However, thirty 1939 proof sets were produced. The 1939 proofs are the rarest South African coins minted during the war.
- The minting of proof sets resumed in 1943 and has never stopped since. All the war-time proof coins are very rare, with only 104 sets made in 1943, and only 150 sets in 1944 and 1945 respectively.



Rarities minted at the SA mint during the War (continued)

- Of all the standard circulation coins made during this time, the 1944 shilling is by far the rarest. Only 48 thousand were minted, and so far, only one has ever surfaced in MS condition! It was graded UNC details, obverse cleaned by NGC (see photos).
- Other coins with low mintages include the 1941 farthing and the 1945 shilling, both with mintages of less than 100 thousand.



Pattern coins

- There are surprisingly few South African pattern coins from this period, at least far fewer than patterns of the other foreign coins minted at the mint during this time.
- Nevertheless, there are still some very interesting South African pattern coins from this time, but they are extremely rare. Should they ever come up for sale again, they will undoubtedly fetch enormous prices.
- Minor alloy variations, like in the case of the differently coloured 1942 bronze coins (especially the farthings), are not considered patterns.

1942 Smaller head or “tickey” head farthings



The reason for the reduced head size on these patterns is not known to me.

Pattern coins (continued)

- A very rare pattern 1941 sixpence exists that is struck in brass. I actually think that this was a wrong planchet error, not a pattern.



Photos credit PCGS.com

- In September 1941, French Equatorial Africa commissioned the SA mint to make a series of brass 1 franc and 50 centimes coins (However, all these coins produced are dated 1942).
- These 50 centimes coins are about the same size as a sixpence coin, and a stray planchet or two might have found their way into the sixpence striking process.

Artist's impression of the 1941 brass sixpence



Some history about the Mint...

- In 1932 South Africa and the rest of the commonwealth went off the gold standard. This meant that no more gold coins would be made, and all gold coins would no longer circulate.
- It also meant that there was far less work for the mint to do and, as a result they diminished in size and production. To supplement their small annual output of coins, the mint also produced various badges, medals, tokens, etc. for various organisations and government departments.
- However, starting in 1937, production at the Mint took a rather different angle...

Some history about the Mint (continued)

- In 1937 the mint approached the Minister of Defence with the suggestion that the mint equipment (such as furnaces and rolling mills) and the experience of the mint staff could be used to manufacture certain types of ammunition. This was eventually approved, and in early 1938 production began.
- At this time, the only ammunition being produced at the mint was .303 cartridges.
- By the time war broke out a year later, the mint had been able to adjust to the change, and production was smooth and efficient.
- The war, of course, changed all that.

- When war was declared, the SA mint received orders to immediately start producing as much ammunition as possible.
- Several additional buildings and plants were constructed to help increase production.
- Not only .303 cartridges were manufactured, but also components of howitzer shells, 18- and 25-pounder shells, anti-tank solid steel shots and much more.
- However, the .303 cartridges still represented the bulk of the work.



Location of the old SA mint

Location of Mint loading fields for the .303 cartridges

Grand magazine or Sentraalmagazyn

Voortrekker monument

Southwest Pretoria (from Google maps)

A few pictures from J. T. Becklake's book, *'From real to rand'*



Above: Visit by Sir Patrick Duncan, then governor of South Africa to the Mint ammunition factory



Below: General Jan Smuts's visit to the Mint ammunition factory

The explosion

- Sadly, there is an inherent danger when working with explosives, no matter how well organised and well-managed you are.
- On March 1st, 1945, at 2:57 in the morning, all the ammunition and explosives in the Grand magazine on Magazine Hill exploded.
- The magazine was built into the hillside several feet under the ground, and yet the fallout from the explosion resulted in damages as far as 2.3 Km away in Church Street.
- A total of 34 people were killed - mostly from the nearby Mint loading fields working the early morning shift - and 231 people were injured.

The explosion (continued)

- Medals are not something I specialise in, but while I was wrapping up this presentation, I stumbled across information about medals that were given to individuals that had shown extraordinary bravery at the site of the explosion
- The reverse of the medal features the famous scene of Wolraad Woltemade upon his horse, rescuing 2 drowning sailors from the shipwreck of the “*De Jonge Thomas*”.
- The King’s Medal is the highest civilian decoration for bravery, although according to Wikipedia it could also be granted to military personnel for non-combatant acts of bravery during the Second World War.
- Of the 34 total issued, 17 of them were for acts of bravery in the aftermath of this explosion.

BRAVERY AT MINT EXPLOSION; KING’S MEDAL AWARDED

The King has approved the award of the King’s Medal for Bravery (Silver) to the following members of the Union Defence Force, who endangered their own lives in saving or attempting to save the lives of others, on the occasion of the explosion of the Grand Magazine, Pretoria, on March 1:

T/Captain Herbert Stranack Fisher, T.S.C.
T/Captain Alfred Leslie Hope Warner, T.S.C.
T/Lieutenant (now T/Captain) Herman Israel Solomon, S.A.M.C.
Warrant Officer II Henri Chris Bruyns, G.S.C. (V).
W/S Warrant Officer II Leslie Murcia, S.A.M.C.
T/Staff-Sergeant Peter Francis du Plessis, S.A.M.C.
W/S Sergeant Charles Pentz, S.A.M.C.

LED RESCUE PARTIES

During the period following the explosion, from about 3.30 a.m. to 10 a.m., Captain Fisher and Captain Warner organised and led rescue parties into burning and wrecked buildings and to the surroundings of the Mint loading field, without regard to their own safety and despite indescribable difficulties prevailing at the time. In the early hours, before daylight in particular, and also later when millions of rounds of small arms ammunition were exploding and discharging in all directions, they displayed the highest degree of self-sacrifice. They were volunteers who personally assisted in recovering or attempting to recover some of the workers and the charred remains of others who were trapped in the burning buildings while on duty. Their courage was an outstanding example and inspiration to all others present at the scene.

In the case of Captain Solomon, who entered buildings at the risk of his life in an attempt to succour victims who could be seen or heard, he assumed medical control and voluntarily carried out rescue work beyond the scope of his normal duties as a medical officer. He was particularly active in the locality nearest the scene of the exploding small arms ammunition, and it was due largely to his example and influence that other rescuers worked effectively and with such courage. His expert professional knowledge and directions undoubtedly resulted in the saving of many who might otherwise have succumbed.

IMPROVISED FIRE-FIGHTING

Warrant Officer Bruyns was conspicuous in organising the fire-fighting service, of which he is firemaster at General Headquarters, under the most difficult and dangerous conditions, particularly in the hours of darkness when there was a complete lack of water due to the bursting of the main supply line. He personally improvised a water point by directing a flow from the burst main into a large crater

arrangements to feed a number of hose lines for dealing with blazing buildings containing cordite and night shift workers, one of whom, a woman, was extricated alive by him. In entering wrecked buildings as a member of casualty recovery teams during the period when fire fighting was not possible, W.O. Bruyns risked his life in an endeavour to locate victims, of whom a number were recovered by him. These actions were entirely outside the scope of his duties as firemaster and were carried out with courage and tenacity. He set a fine example and was an inspiration to his non-European firemen.

Warrant Officer Murcia imperilled his own life repeatedly in the course of rescuing people while shells were exploding and buildings collapsing, and having volunteered for this rescue work, he rendered outstanding service and displayed great bravery and fortitude.

RESCUES FROM DANGER AREA

Staff Sgt. du Plessis also rendered outstanding service and, in the face of exploding shells, collapsing buildings and rubble, repeatedly entered the danger area and rescued several people, despite obvious peril to himself. He gave valuable first-aid and assistance in the evacuation of the injured to safety.

Sgt. Pentz volunteered for the dangerous task of assisting in rescue work and was responsible for saving a number of people despite the grave danger to his own life. He repeatedly went into the danger area, amid falling buildings, exploding shells and small arms ammunition, and continued this work until all had been brought to safety.

In addition to these awards, the King has approved of the award of Commendations (Military) for valuable services rendered during the same period by the following European officers and non-European other ranks:

T/Major Antonie Lourens Botes, T.S.C.
T/Captain Hendrik Pieter Engelbrecht, T.S.C.
Second-Lieutenant Sydney Simmons Fobb, G.S.C.
Private Joel Jack, N.M.C.
Private Dolfie Molstulle, N.M.C.

It is understood that arising out of the investigations into the cause of the explosion, it has been found that a number of civilians also displayed great bravery and rendered valuable services. Their actions have been brought to the notice of the authorities. It is possible therefore that a further list of awards for bravery in connection with the explosion will be published in due course.



- A group of medals awarded to P.F. Du Plessis. The Wolraad Woltemade medal on the left is one of the 17 issued to those who distinguished themselves in the aftermath of the Mint explosion.



One last question...

Do you think that the SA Mint made more South African coins or more foreign coins from 1923 to 1945?

*Foreign coins. The SA Mint produced a total of 360 million gold, silver and bronze coins for the Union of South Africa between 1923 and 1945. Between 1942 and 1945, however, the mint struck an astounding total of 413 million coins for other allied countries.

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