

Commonplace coins in Victorian England, C.1851

To be able to recreate the lives and times of the poor and labouring classes of the Victorian era (C.1851), we have to understand and trade with the currency of that time. With this article I will clarify, what coins were in circulation and which would be commonplace.

Money in the Early Victorian period was divided into:

Pounds
Shillings
Pence

The coin that represented the pound was called a 'Sovereign' and was made of gold.

There are twenty (20) shillings in a pound and twelve (12) pennies in a shilling.

Giving us a total of 240 pennies in a pound, of which each penny was made of pure copper (until 1860)

The above values are represented by symbols:

Pound - £ or l (L)
Shilling - S or /-
Penny - d

Simple.

But wait it doesn't end there, if it were that simple, we wouldn't be scratching our heads, trying to work out who Bob was.

The penny was further sub-divided into halfpennies (pronounced Hay'p'ny) and quarter pennies (called farthings).

This means that a farthing (1 quarter of a pence) was the lowest denomination, in regular use, in the UK.

Still with us?

Now we know how a pound and a penny is divided and that farthings, are the pittance the poor Victorians are trying to scrape together. We may now start to understand, what other coins are in regular circulation and what their value is.

The following coins represent the 'pound, shilling and penny' system. Not all of them would be easily recognisable to all classes, and to many, acquiring a coin with a value higher than a 'crown', would mean they'd hit the jackpot!

Farthing = One quarter of a penny ($\frac{1}{4}$ d)

Halfpence (Hay'p'ny) = 1 half of a penny ($\frac{1}{2}$ d)

Penny = One penny (1d)

Thruppence = Three pence (3d)

Sixpence (a 'tanner') = Six pence (6d)

Shilling (a 'bob') = One shilling (1s or 1/-)

Florin (a 'two bob bit') = Two shillings (2s or 2/-)

Half crown = Two shillings and Six pence (2s 6d or 2/6)

Crown (a 'bull') = Five shillings (5s or 5/-)

Half sovereign = Ten shillings (10s or 10/-)

Pound or Sovereign (a 'quid') = One pound (1l or £1)

The penny and lesser valued coins (**highlighted in brown**), are made of copper and therefore referred to as 'Coppers'. Thruppence - Crowns are made of silver and the most valuable coins (**highlighted in blue**), were made of gold and would not be found knocking about in most peoples pockets.

When speaking of an amount made up of shillings and pence, we would not say (for example) 3 shillings and 6 pence (3/6), but would pronounce it '3 and 6' or '3 n 6'.

Confused yet?

Don't be. No matter what else is said, you've just been provided with the bare bones of the system. The first eight coins were doing the hard graft, so if you learn nothing else you'll be fine. After-all, it's highly unlikely the likes of the labouring classes and below, would know much more themselves!



'Farthing'
(1/4d)



'Hay'p'ny'
(Half penny, 1/2d)



Penny
(1d)



'Thruppence'
(Three pence, 3d)



'Tanner'
(Six pence, 6d)



'Bob' - Shilling
(1s or 1/-)
The accumulation of 12 pennies



'2 Bob bit'
(Florin, 2s or 2/-)



Half Crown
(2/6)

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'Bull' - Crown
(5s or 5/-)



Half sovereign
(10s or 5/-)



'Quid' - Sovereign
(£1 or 1l)

The accumulation of 20 shillings

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Of the street seller of squirrels

The street squirrel-sellers are generally the same men as are engaged in the open-air traffic in cagebirds. There are, however, about six men who devote themselves more particularly to squirrelselling, while as many more sometimes "take a turn at it." The squirrel is usually carried in the vendor's arms, or is held against the front of his coat, so that the animal's long bushy tail is seen to advantage. There is usually a red leather collar round its neck, to which is attached some slender string, but so contrived that the squirrel shall not appear to be a prisoner, nor in general (although perhaps the hawker became possessed of his squirrel only that morning) does the animal show any symptoms of fear.

I am assured by the best-informed parties that for five months of the year there are 20 men selling squirrels in the streets, at from 20 to 50 per cent. profit, and that they average a weekly sale of six each. The average price is from 2s. to 2s. 6d., although not very long ago one man sold a "wonderfully fine squirrel" in the street for three half-crowns, but they are sometimes parted with for 1s. 6d. or less, rather than be kept overnight. Thus 2400 squirrels are vended yearly in the streets, at a cost to the public of 240l.

Mayhew, Henry
London Labour and the London Poor, volume 2

Carrying on

You maybe able to barter for a loaf of bread now, but if you'd like a complete understanding, here's the entire low-down.

Now that we have a clearer vision of how pennies accumulated into shillings and how shillings became pounds, we have a few more coins left to throw into the hat. Though thankfully due to limitations in production and circulation, they were not commonplace on the streets of the UK, circa 1851.

Half-farthing = $\frac{1}{8}$ d

Tuppence (or Half-groat) = Two pence (2d)

Four Pence (or Groat) = (4d)

Half-guinea = 10 shillings and 6 pence (10/6d)

Guinea = One pound and one shilling (£1/1s or 1/1/-)

Two pound coin = £2 (2l)

Five pound = £5 (5l)



'Half Farthing' ($\frac{1}{8}$ d)



'Tuppence' (2d)



'Fourpence' or 'Joey' (4d)



'Half Guinea' (10/6)



'Guinea' (£1, 1s or 1/1/-)



'Five pound' (£5 or 1l)

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Of the Street-Sellers of sheep trotters (feet)

The capital required to start in the business is very small. A hand basket of the larger size costs 1s. 9d., but smaller or second-hand only 1s., and the white cotton cloth on which the trotters are displayed costs 4d. or 6d.; stock-money need not exceed 1s., so that 3s. is all that is required. This is one reason, I heard from several trotter-sellers, why the business is over-peopled.

If I lay out 2s. on the Saturday—there's 15 sets for 1s., that's 60 trotters—they'll carry us on to Monday night, and sometimes, if they'll keep, to Tuesday night.

Sometimes I could sell half-a-crown's worth in less time. I have to go to Bermondsey three or four times a week. The trade was far better six years ago, though trotters were dearer then, only 13 sets 1s., then 14, now 15. For some very few, that's very fine and very big, I get a penny a piece; for some I get 1 1/2d. for two; the most's 1/2d. each; some's four for 1 1/2d.; and some I have to throw into the dust-hole. The two of us earns 5s. a week on trotters, not more, I'm sure. I sell to people in the public-houses; some of them may be rather the worse for drink, but not so many; regular drunkards buys nothing but drink. I've sold them too to steady, respectable gentlemen, that's been passing in the street, who put them in their pockets for supper. My rent's 1s. a week.

Mayhew, Henry

London Labour and the London Poor, volume 1

So why didn't we use all the coins, all the time?

Put simply, in 1816 the UK had a coin over-haul to create the 'pound, shilling & penny' system. This system took a while to settle in and for the old coins to leave circulation. Of the new coins, because of their size and/or weight, some were popular and some were not. The highest valued coin's, would only be in circulation amongst the higher classes, therefore not commonplace on the streets.

British coins were used far and wide. However, outside of the UK you will find some have been divided again, for example; the farthing was divided into halves, quarters and thirds. These coins were never meant for use in the UK, however, in 1842 the half-farthing was made legal tender in the UK. Due to its small size, it was not a popular coin and with-in 13 years, it had stopped being minted, being withdrawn from circulation in 1869.

The tuppence had replace the half groat, but its use fell to the way-side in the UK. After its initial production it was only produced for collectors (Maundy) and was not common place.

The crown was the largest coin of them all, which was unfortunately its downfall. Its size made it an extremely unpopular coin and it was not often carried about.

In the late 1840s there were discussions of decimalisation. It resulted in the florin coin being produced in 1849. It was valued at 2s. which is 1/10 of a pound. It was a popular coin and ran alongside the half crown for many years.

Though the thruppence was already in circulation, its use was thrust upon the market in 1845 (though temporarily halted whilst deliberation about decimalisation was being had). It proved to be a very popular coin, forcing the fourpence out of production in 1855.

'Joey', was originally a name given by cabbies to the fourpenny piece, largely at the insistence of Joseph Hume, the economist and Member of Parliament, who said it would be useful for paying short cab fares and the like. After the four pence went out of commission the name was transferred to the thruppence instead.

The guinea and half guinea were a gentleman's coin. They were never produced after 1816 though still used. Their value had previously been subject to fluctuation, but was now fixed at 10/6 and 1/1/-. They were often kept out of business finances and more often than not, used as a noble way to pay artisans.

The Whistling Man

I often had sixpences, shillings, and half-crowns thrown me. I only wish I had such luck now, for the world's topsy-turvy, and I can't get hardly anything. I used then to earn 3s. or 4s. a-day, and now it don't amount to more than 1s. 6d. After I'd worked London pretty well, I sometimes would start off a few miles out to the towns and villages; but, generally, it wasn't much account. The country chaps like such tunes as "The Barley Stack," or "The Little House under the Hill." I often used to whistle to them while they danced

Mayhew, Henry
London Labour and the London Poor, volume 3

Initially, in 1816, the new coinage system included a two pound coin. This coin was not used and never produced in the early Victorian period, though it was eventually produced as a Maundy coin in the late Victorian era, to celebrate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee.

Don't be fooled by 'model' money. "Model" coins are essentially "play" money and are NOT legal tender. They were originally counters in card games, the most common of which, were brass imitations of guineas and half-guineas. The *Prince of Wales model half-sovereign* was the monopoly money of Victorian children's games.

In 1860, there was another review of the coins in circulation, though this time it was the materials being used that were in question. A size of a coin was (up-to this point) made to reflect the value of the metal used. For example a copper penny was made of 1pence worth of copper. This proved problematic due to the fluctuations in price of the metals, so it was decided to use a “much more convenient and agreeable” coinage.

So there we have it!

When all is said and done, 8 coins were the driving force of the Great British economy, constantly being haggled with, swapped, stolen, dropped, lost, found and bartered with, many with a name, that seems to have no relation to their value. No wonder we find it confusing!

It took till 1971 for sanity to prevail and for decimalisation to finally take over, making managing our finances much easier and giving birth to the phrase “what’s that in old money?”

The London Street Markets on A Saturday Night.

The pavement and the road are crowded with purchasers and street-sellers. The housewife in her thick shawl, with the market-basket on her arm, walks slowly on, stopping now to look at the stall of caps, and now to cheapen a bunch of greens. Little boys, holding three or four onions in their hand, creep between the people, wriggling their way through every interstice, and asking for custom in whining tones, as if seeking charity. Then the tumult of the thousand different cries of the eager dealers, all shouting at the top of their voices, at one and the same time, is almost bewildering. "So-old again," roars one. "Chestnuts all'ot, a penny a score," bawls another. "An 'aypenny a skin, blacking," squeaks a boy. "Buy, buy, buy, buy, buy— bu-u-uy!" cries the butcher. "Half-quire of paper for a penny," bellows the street stationer. "An 'aypenny a lot ing-uns." "Twopence a pound grapes." "Three a penny Yarmouth bloaters." "Who'll buy a bonnet for fourpence?" "Pick 'em out cheap here! three pair for a halfpenny, bootlaces." "Now's your time! beautiful whelks, a penny a lot." "Here's ha'p'orths," shouts the perambulating confectioner. "Come and look at 'em! here's toasters!" bellows one with a Yarmouth bloater stuck on a toasting-fork. "Penny a lot, fine russets," calls the apple woman: and so the Babel goes on.

Mayhew, Henry

London Labour and the London Poor, volume 1



The above display case of coins were issued in 1853. It gives us an extremely good view of how the coins compared to each other. The largest coins is the 'crown' with a 38mm (1½") diameter, the smallest working coin is the thruppence, which has only a 16mm (5⁄8") diameter.

The display case is a Victoria proof set. It holds within it 16 coins: A Gold Sovereign, Half Sovereign, Silver Crown, Halfcrown, Florin, Shilling, Sixpence, Groat, Maundy 4d, 3d, 2d, 1d, Copper Proof Penny, Halfpenny, Farthing and Half Farthing. The heart-shaped case is the original case of issue, it is gold blocked on the outside simply as "PROOF COINS" and inside bearing a Royal Crown and the inscription in gold : R & S Garrard & Co., Goldsmiths and Jewellers to the Queen, His Royal Highness The Prince Consort, and all the Royal Family."

The 'Ragged Victorians' continue to research the contents of the above subject matter and may occasionally make revisions to the article, as and when necessary. We are committed to authenticity and with the right provenance are more than ready to receive any information anyone might have to forward.

Ref:

Henry Mayhew - Londons labour and Londons poor Vol 1-4

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