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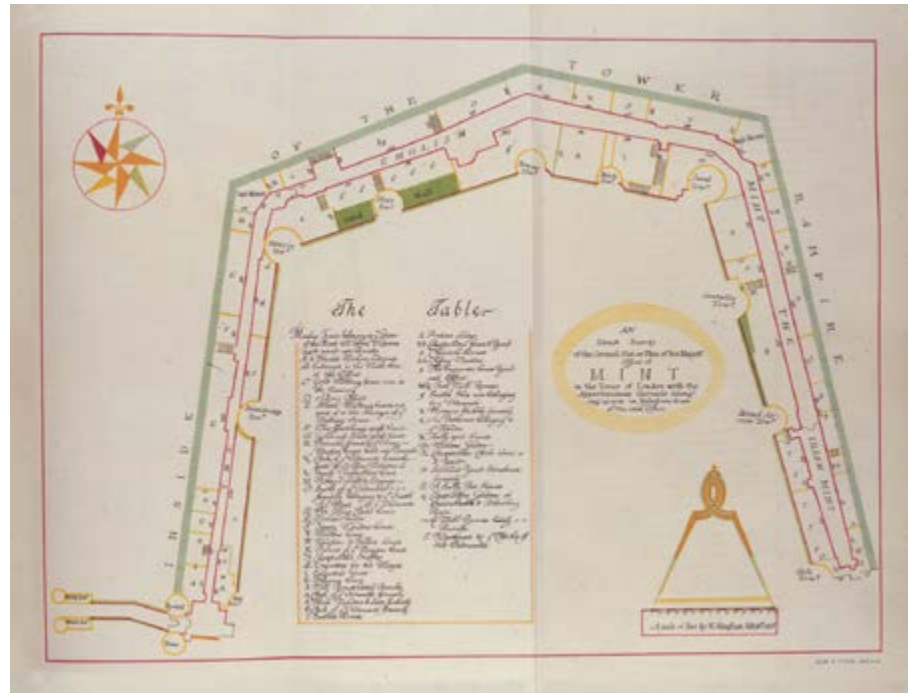
# Locations of the Royal Mint

Kevin Clancy

The Royal Mint has a history of over 1000 years and through that time has had three principal homes: The Tower of London, Tower Hill and Llantrisant. But its locations and the locations where coins in Britain have been made are not necessarily the same. For many hundreds of years, the coins used by the peoples of Britain were produced by a myriad of manufacturers scattered throughout the country operating under licence from the monarch. In the late Anglo-Saxon period, during the reign of Ethelred II (978-1016), coins were being made in upwards of 70 towns and, even after London became more dominant from the fifteenth century, there remained regional centres of minting. Coins issued forth from ecclesiastical bases, like Canterbury and Durham, and commercially or strategically significant towns, like Calais, retained the right to issue money on behalf of the English crown.<sup>1</sup>

What a mint looks like and the type of buildings it occupies are closely aligned to the technology of the age governing the ways in which coins have been made. In Anglo-Saxon and early medieval times, a mint was probably not a great deal more than a few men armed with a furnace and an assortment of tools for cutting, weighing, assaying and striking small flat discs of metal. But for all the folksy nature of this description, there would have been an ordered sequence to the manufacturing process to enable the production of large quantities of coins.

At some point during the latter half of the thirteenth century the Mint was based in secure quarters within the walls of the Tower of London and prior to that was probably located near St Paul's Cathedral, in an area of London known as a centre for goldsmiths



*A plan drawn up by William Allingham in 1707 shows the Mint occupying the whole area between the inner and outer walls of the Tower of London on the three sides not bounded by the Thames*



*Illustrations of late Anglo-Saxon minting processes showing melting, shaping blanks and striking*

<sup>1</sup> Published accounts of the history of the Royal Mint include: J. Craig, *The Mint. A History of the London Mint from AD287 to 1948* (Cambridge, 1953); C. E. Challis (ed.), *A New History of the Royal Mint* (Cambridge, 1992); G. P. Dyer, *An Illustrated History of the Royal Mint* (Llantrisant 1986); second edition by K. Clancy (Llantrisant, 2016). There is an extensive archive of Royal Mint records at The National Archives and the Royal Mint Museum retains a library and collection relating to the history of the Mint.



*Illustration providing an impression of the confined nature of Mint buildings in the Tower of London during the sixteenth century*



*View of one of the coining press rooms in the Tower of London c.1809 from towards the end of the Mint's time in the Tower*



*The coining press room at Tower Hill, equipped with Matthew Boulton's steam-powered presses, contrasted sharply with the arrangements in the Tower*



*Engraving from the 1830s of the Mint at Tower Hill*

and silversmiths. From the sixteenth century the gradual evolution of the Mint in the Tower into a centralised hub from which all the nation's coinage was made had become a reality. Within the narrow lane between the inner and outer walls the buildings extended as far as Legge's Mount on the western side of the Tower by the end of the fifteenth century and by the beginning of Elizabeth I's reign (1558-1603) some 50 years later, stretched all the way round to the Salt Tower on the eastern side, thereby covering almost two-thirds of the whole perimeter. Extensive alterations had accompanied the Lord Chancellor Thomas Wolsey's reform of the currency in 1526, including the erection of a new house involved with the production of gold coinage and a receipt office. From the description of the materials used, the latter was particularly grand, being adorned with the Royal Arms, stone chimney pieces, 22 feet of Burgundy glass and 88 feet of Normandy glass. Further building work was undertaken in 1566, and again in 1585 when a timber-framed office was erected with a 'grete duble chimney' and a 'great Baye window'.

The elongated horseshoe arrangement of the Mint, stretching around the perimeter of the Tower not bounded by the Thames, was now firmly in place, with the various processes distributed somewhat inconveniently among several houses and rooms.

For all the care exercised over these renovations, the environment would have assailed the senses. Walking between the line of buildings a Mint worker would have heard the metallic ring of coins being struck echoing off the stone walls, smoke from the furnaces would have filled the air, mixed with the stench from the open moat into which all manner of waste would have been tipped. Carts heavy with bullion would have rattled between houses and the bustle of a close-knit community would have coloured the whole atmosphere. The physically confined nature of the site, combined with the longevity of service of those employed in making coinage, created an extended family and the Mint was also part of the wider community of the City of London, senior figures in the Mint's history frequently being drawn from influential livery companies and the

City Corporation itself. If the teeming world of the Mint were not enough, just beyond the ad hoc factory and still within the bounds of the Tower, members of the Royal Court came and went, prisoners were interned, a garrison was housed and the swarming life of the Thames washed against the walls. Those who worked at the Mint would surely have felt close to the centre of important aspects of London life.

As technology advanced during the mid-seventeenth century to the use of screw presses to strike coins and horses to power the heavy rolling mills that reduced ingots to uniform strips of metal, so the buildings became larger and the process took on the appearance of a more industrial sequence of production. There were periods of substantial investment in machinery, such as during the 1690s when a major recoinage of silver was undertaken, requiring new presses and the construction of new buildings, under the supervision of Sir Christopher Wren, to cope with the huge increase in production. But there were other times when the fabric of the Mint was not well maintained. One description condemned the



*Aerial view of the Royal Mint in Llantrisant taken circa 2008*

buildings as ‘largely of wood; the chief of them were two-storied; most were crazy with age, held up by timber shores and pinned together with clamps of iron’.

The business of making coinage, though, was to change markedly from the mid-eighteenth century when the entrepreneur and industrialist, Matthew Boulton, set up his own private mint in Birmingham. He started by making tokens for local issuers but from the start his ambition was to produce the nation’s official currency. His mint consisted of factory buildings containing deafening and physically imposing steam-powered presses. It was a truly industrial affair. In the rolling green countryside of Soho, a suburb of Birmingham, he laid out his complex of functional and soundly built buildings. By the late eighteenth century, his operation stood in stark contrast to the improvised circle of structures that had evolved over several centuries against the walls of the Tower.

Boulton secured his contract for making official copper coins in 1797 but plans were soon afoot to modernise the state

mint. Ever the opportunist, Boulton helped equip the Mint in London with his own machines when it was relocated in around 1810 to purpose-built accommodation on Tower Hill, a stone’s throw from the Tower and the Thames. The new Mint was a grand architectural statement. The main building, designed by James Johnson and finished by his successor Robert Smirke, had an imposing façade. It was in every way splendid and 150 years later the poet Sir John Betjeman, a great saviour of landmarks and historic buildings, described it as one of the finest buildings in London. Smirke went on to design the British Museum, the old Covent Garden Theatre and several West End London clubs. The main building, which in time became known as the Smirke Building, was intended as a residential block, with dwellings for senior officers, such as the Deputy Master and the King’s Assay Master, but there was space on the ground floor for offices and for a stronghold. Behind, and separated from it by an open quadrangle, were buildings that housed the new machinery. With a

clearly thought-out layout, they permitted a logical flow of work from one process to the next and to the Mint officers, accustomed to the cramped conditions of the Tower, it all seemed ‘stupendous and beautiful’. Up to this point the organisation had been referred to as His or Her Majesty’s Mint in the Tower but from now on the designation Royal was, with some justification, increasingly used.

It was a Mint for a new age of empire. What was produced at Tower Hill was used by the burgeoning population of industrial Britain and by people around the world through the deliberate circulation of British currency in parts of the empire. The grand main building of Tower Hill came in time to mask a Dickensian rabbit warren of workshops, the walls of which seemed to be in a state of constant flux of refurbishment and re-purposing. As the work of one department increased, the walls of another would be demolished to allow for increased capacity, stimulated by higher production volumes. But the grandeur was nonetheless there and when the director of the 1968 film

The Charge of the Light Brigade was looking for a location for the office of Lord Raglan, played by Sir John Gielgud, it was the office of the Deputy Master of the Mint that was chosen, reflecting nineteenth-century imperial ambitions through the high-ceilings and Georgian elegance of Tower Hill's interior.

Quite apart from how Tower Hill was transformed by the Mint, the history of the site itself was rich, sustaining over the centuries an unusual range of functions. It was the location of a Cistercian Abbey, Our Lady of Grace, the Eastminster counterpart to the great Abbey of Westminster. Later it became the site for a tobacco warehouse and was a place of execution before becoming the home of industry and money. For a single location to play host to religion, commerce, the law and industry is in no way common. Moreover, when the Mint eventually moved out in the late 1970s it was occupied for a time by Barclays Bank and now, to make an even more complete sweep of functions, it is being converted to serve as a place of diplomacy as the planned new home of the Chinese Embassy.

Ensuring the continuous supply of money is regarded as a strategic national concern and because mints and central banks are often to be found in capital cities they were regarded as vulnerable to enemy attack during war. In 1938 the Bank of England started preparing for wartime evacuation by transferring some of the work of the printing department to Overton in Hampshire to be closer to Portals, the Bank's sole supplier of security paper. Lloyd's of London moved into the mansion house on the site of Pinewood Studios in Buckinghamshire a few days before hostilities started in September 1939 and the Royal Mint soon followed. Its location adjacent to the London Docks meant it was at risk and so, in great secrecy, production of nickel-brass and bronze coins was moved out to Pinewood. The new Mint began operations in June 1941 and, being equipped with furnaces, rolling mills, blanking presses and eight Heaton coining presses, it was entirely self-sufficient. In recent years the studio had been struggling and the joke went around that now it was no longer making any films it was finally making money.

As well as function determining the nature of Mint buildings, in the 1960s social and economic pressures had a strong influence on location. The government actively used assets at its disposal to help address regional areas of unemployment and, in

conjunction with the decision to decimalise Britain's 1000-year old currency system, it was judged the Mint should move out of the capital. The whole strategic initiative can be seen as part of the broader modernisation of Britain in the 1960s. As far as the Mint was concerned, the target of government attention was the post-coal mining community of the Welsh Valleys and it was Llantrisant, at the foot of the Rhonda Valley, that was chosen as the site for the institution's new home – a location strongly influenced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and local Cardiff Member of Parliament, James Callaghan. The macro-economic judgements of the government of the day certainly played a role, but the way in which coinage was made also forced it out of London. Continuous advances in production volumes required larger factory buildings and the chemicals involved in making money mitigated against a central London location. The few acres occupied by Tower Hill had started to look increasingly unsuitable and there had been calls for some time for a new location to be found. Having a green-field site of 40 acres about 10 miles outside Cardiff came to provide much greater liberty to expand operations without bumping into the planning regulations of an inner-city council.

The architecture of the Llantrisant Mint contrasted sharply with that of its former London homes. While the moat and fortifications of the Tower projected unassailability and the high walls and military guard of Tower Hill conveyed the sense of a well-protected institution, the emphasis in Llantrisant was even more firmly on security. Surrounded by two rows of razor wire fencing, the site is populated by concrete-clad buildings that would not be out of place in a military compound. The new Mint, opened by the Her Majesty the Queen in December 1968, was still imposing but in a sternly modernist mode.

The locations occupied by the Mint might reflect how the importance of coinage has shifted. In Anglo-Saxon times, mints were located in trading centres for the convenience of those using money. When the Royal Mint was in the Tower, it was inside a centre of royal and military power at a time when coinage was a deeply personal instrument of the monarch and when, ostensibly, coinage was the money supply. Being on the banks of the Thames, too, a type of

medieval motorway, would have made a great deal of practical sense. The Mint's move to Tower Hill, admittedly not far, meant it was adjacent to the City of London, and being only a ten-minute walk from the Bank of England will have had its advantages in view of the close alignment of these two organisations. Moving to South Wales reflected the pressures of a different age when government sought to use the Mint as an agent of economic redevelopment at a time when advances in technology and transport made the presence of the Mint at the centre of a town, or for that matter, in the nation's capital, less crucial. Coinage today is still a potent symbol of royal authority and new coins are still given final legal sanction under the prerogative powers of the crown, but coinage is no longer the fulcrum of the money supply and the criteria attaching to where precisely it should be made can consequently be attended with much greater flexibility. ●

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#### Author Profile

Kevin Clancy is Director of the Royal Mint Museum. He joined the Royal Mint in 1992. He is a historian who has written and lectured extensively on the history of the Royal Mint and British coinage.

As Director of the Royal Mint Museum he has played a central role in shaping the future of the Museum as a charity through its education, publication and exhibition programmes, including the creation of a permanent exhibition on the history of the Royal Mint at the Tower of London and at the Royal Mint Experience. His publications include *Designing Change* (2008), *A History of the Sovereign: chief coin of the world* (2015), *The Royal Mint: an illustrated history* (second edition, 2016) and *Objects of War: currency in a time of conflict* (2018).

Since 2003 he has been Secretary to the Royal Mint Advisory Committee on the design of United Kingdom coins, seals and official medals. In 2016 he was elected President of the British Numismatic Society.

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