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Windows on the past

Photographs from the Royal Mint Museum

Kevin Clancy

The Royal Mint Museum has a collection of over 10,000 photographs and negatives, the earliest of which date back to the 1860s. They capture the Mint at work, documenting processes and equipment, as well as designs for coins and medals. They also reveal the Mint as a community, a living record of the people who have made the nation's money over this period of time.

The collection could be categorised in many different ways, but two of the chief themes are people and processes. Photographers have always been interested in capturing how coins are made, the types and variety of machines used, the sequence of production. Inevitably the people who worked in the factory have formed a part of this record, but the joy of the Museum's photographic collection is that something of their lives is also often revealed beyond the confines of their working environment. Images of coining presses and furnaces, blanking presses and weighing machines offer a rich visual history of how the minting technology has changed over time. The social hierarchy, too, at play in some instances can be immediately apparent. In photograph 1 a clerk wearing a top hat is sitting behind an intimidatingly large beam balance while an operative from the shop-floor lifts the heavy sacks of coins onto the scales. Especially when the Mint was at Tower Hill in London there was clear separation between the factory and the office-based staff and this is nowhere more starkly drawn than in such images.

There are discrete groups of photographs within the overall collection, such as those by the celebrated nineteenth-century photographer Sir Benjamin Stone, whose remarkable work can be seen at the Birmingham Library. He created beautiful compositions, dramatically doused in natural light, a feature also evident in a series

of photographs put together under the Deputy Master Sir John Cawston. They date from the second decade of the twentieth century and are beautifully atmospheric in their treatment of the subject matter (Photograph 2).

Another grouping is that of postcards. Taken in the early years of the twentieth century, they are amongst the most well-known photographs in the collection, being sold to visitors to the Tower Hill site (Photograph 3). They show the workings of the different departments and, assembled together, they create a narrative of the whole organisation. The Royal Mint Museum contains a good cross section of these sets which now often turn up in antique markets or on eBay. The one illustrated in photograph 4 is of the Silver Melting Room. It reveals the physicality of the job and also the dangers to which workers were exposed.

A less well documented group of images was acquired by the Museum from a private dealer in the form of an album of photographs presented to the long-serving Charles Goodwin on his retirement in December 1869 as Clerk of the Die Department (Photograph 5). Consisting of some 30 photographs, the album contains images of Mr Goodwin's colleagues. What is frustrating for us now is that, with only one exception, none of the photographs have been signed or bear any mark of identification. It is our hope, however, that contact with descendants of Royal Mint officers of the mid-nineteenth century will eventually allow many of the photographs to be identified.

Occasionally someone had the presence of mind to write down those who were in a photograph. When answering questions connected with family history research it can be hugely satisfying to provide a picture of a relative in a work setting. Some years ago we were



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1. Beam balance



- 2. Blanking press, Tower Hill, Sir John Cawston collection
- 3. Royal Mint postcards cover
- 4. Silver Melting House, postcard collection
- 5. Charles Goodwyn album
- 6. Counting machine, operated by E.J. Anning



7. The Charing Out ceremony



- 8. Mint excursion
- 9. Women working at the Royal Mint during the Second World War
- 10. Colourised image of a woman working at the Royal Mint during the Second World War
- 11. Queen Elizabeth II, Royal Mint, Llantrisant, 1968
- 12. Prince of Wales' visit, Royal Mint, 2017



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13. Royal Mint, May 1945



14. Royal Mint, Llantrisant, under construction, 1967
15. Reducing Room, Tower Hill, 1933



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16. Royal Mint Museum, 1904

17. Symbolic impact of Covid 19, coin sculpture wearing a face mask

contacted from America by a descendant of the man on the left of this photograph (Photograph 6) standing beside a large coin counting machine who we now know to be E. J. Anning. In conducting some family history research the lady knew of the connection with the Royal Mint; having bought a copy of Graham Dyer's *The Royal Mint: An Illustrated History*, she discovered her relative in this photograph. She subsequently made contact with the Museum, revealing who the man was, and we, in turn, were able to tell her about Mr Anning's career at the Mint as a packer and teller at the time the picture was taken and later how he moved up to the position of Office Keeper.

Traditional Mint ceremonies, too, have been captured, such as 'Chairing Out', when long-serving employees were honoured with a noisy send-off on a make-shift carriage, tin cans clattering over the cobbles of Tower Hill's entrance. In this instance (Photograph 7) the gentleman in the chair is William O'Shea, who, like many, spent his entire working life at the Mint. Starting as a medal hand in 1918 at the age of 16, he retired at 65, having reached one of the more senior technical grades in the Operative Department. In recognition of his many years of service, his retirement was noted in the *Royal Mint Annual Report* for 1967.

Not content with working together, there is a long tradition of Mint employees arranging trips and days out, which continues to this day. Several from this series include outings to the seaside resorts of the south-east, such as Brighton, Clacton-on Sea, Eastbourne and Margate. But it appears that an intrepid group ventured all the way to Blackpool on at least one occasion in the 1950s. The photograph shown here (Photograph 8) is one of the earliest of this sort of excursion. Neither the date nor the intended destination are known, but a handful of names have been written on the back. The gentleman seventh from the left is Harry Foulger, a workman first employed at Tower Hill in 1937, and so the photograph must have been taken at some point after that.

Images of the Mint during the Second World War represent a particularly fascinating series. Given the general shortage of men in the wartime economy, women were first employed in the actual coining processes in the summer of 1941. The overlooking table, known affectionately

as a mangle, was an ingenious device which allowed struck coins to be inspected on both sides. As far as this picture is concerned (Photograph 9), the coins were poured out onto the upper conveyor by the woman in the middle. As the coins were carried towards the rollers at the far end, the woman on the right inspected the top side and removed any faulty pieces. The coins were then flipped over by the rollers and sent back along the lower conveyor, allowing the woman on the left to view the other side. A selection of original black and white photographs from this period have now been colourised, bringing a new perspective to life at the Royal Mint (Photograph 10).

Visits from dignitaries naturally feature, such as the Queen when she came to the Tower Hill site in 1966 and again when she opened the new Mint in Llantrisant, South Wales, two years later (Photograph 11). Many other members of the royal family have crossed the threshold, eager to see how coins are produced, and our most recent royal visitor was the Prince of Wales when he came in 2017 to see for himself the Royal Mint Experience (Photograph 12).

Mint buildings have been the subject of a great many photographs. The imposing front of Tower Hill was one of the images to be found in the sets of postcards. It over-

looked the Tower of London and according to the poet Sir John Betjeman, who filmed a documentary about the Mint in the late 1960s, its late Georgian grand *façade* was one of the most handsome buildings in London. During the Second World War the Tower Hill site suffered direct hits and the main building was not spared. This image (Photograph 13) was taken on VE-Day (Victory in Europe Day) and shows the front of Tower Hill dramatically floodlit, highlighting the scars from shells that landed close by. When the Mint moved to South Wales its construction was recorded in a reasonably systematic manner. From the green-field site, it is possible to see the vast rectangular concrete-clad structures emerging, in time dominating the surrounding countryside (Photograph 14).

The photograph collection represents a vast array of images, the oldest of which are precious objects in their own right, as opposed to existing as digital files. Some of the negatives for the photographs are retained in their original glass-negative form at a reasonably large size which

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enables images of exceptional quality to be generated. One of these is a particular favourite of mine (Photograph 15). It was taken in 1933 and shows Mr Alfred Tims sitting in the Reducing Room at Tower Hill. He is surrounded by a number of lathes, known as reducing machines which, like a pantograph, copied large-scale metal versions of coin designs and, at the same time, cut the designs into small metal tools of coinage size. Everything about the room is orderly and as it should be. Mr Tims is wearing a clean white shirt, a tie and waistcoat. His hair is neatly combed. The floor is swept and the benches tidy. The room is well lit from the sky-light windows, and he sits comfortably on his stool, as we imagine he must have done a thousand times during his long career, concentrating on the work in hand. One senses that he would answer any question in relation to his world with knowledge and authority. As we survey the setting, we see that he has decorated the room with the work of his daily life in the form of the metal electrotypes used on the reducing machines. They form their own record of the time, including coinage and medal work from all over the world that the Mint undertook during the 1920s and 1930s, such as coins for Egypt and the Irish Free State, official Seals and wonderful portraits. The photograph conveys at a single moment a setting of calm precision amidst the noise and heat of other parts of the factory.

But it was not just the factory that was photographed. The Museum itself has a minor presence in the early twentieth-century visual archive. A large room, with a floor area of more than 1,300 square feet, was identified and no fewer than 25 show cases were installed to present the recently classified collection. The exhibition opened to the public in October 1904 and displayed more than 5,000 items ranging across Ancient British, Anglo-Gallic, Scottish, Irish and colonial coins, as well as a selection of medals and tradesman's tokens. It was a gathering together of rare and beautiful items in bewildering profusion. The image of the Museum from 1904 is well known from sets of Royal Mint postcards but this version is taken directly from a glass negative in the collection and reveals the Museum's public display in a remarkable level of clarity (Photograph 16).

The photographic record continues to be maintained and a powerfully emotive instance has been generated in the last year. Covid-19 has impacted upon all our lives, personal and professional, and the Mint is no exception. Part of the production capacity was given over to supplying over one million visors to the NHS but more regular production of coins and medals has required every part of the factory to adapt. The Museum wanted to make sure the changes were documented for future reference

and so commissioned the Mint's own photographer to walk the whole site to capture images of how the pandemic has altered the daily working routines. Even the coin-covered Gromit in the Royal Mint Experience has had to adapt (Photograph 17).

Many of the photographs mentioned in this article are to be found on the Museum's website royalmint-museum.org.uk alongside a selection of archive films, the earliest of which dates back to 1910. Taken together, they represent a wonderful record of life and work at the Royal Mint over the last 150 years.

All photographs: © Royal Mint Museum

Author's profile

Kevin Clancy is the Director of the Royal Mint Museum. He has published and lectured on the history of the British coinage and the Royal Mint for thirty years. In 2021 he edited a book on the history of the design of the British decimal coinage. He has served as Secretary to the Royal Mint Advisory Committee on the Design of Coins, Medals, Seals and decorations since 2003.

Contact

Kevin Clancy: Royal Mint Museum
kevin.clancy@royalmintmuseum.org.uk
royalmintmuseum.org.uk