

# The famous Heaton Mint

## COIN TALES

BY GEORGE MANZ

The story of the Heaton Mint begins in 1850, when Ralph Heaton II purchased Matthew Boulton's Soho Mint equipment.

Boulton was a industrialist who set up the Soho Manufactory in Birmingham, England, later teaming up with James Watt to produce the most advanced version of the steam engine, one that would literally herald the advent of the industrial revolution.

The Soho Mint, which was established around 1788, had recently gone out of business. So when an ad appeared in the *Birmingham Gazette* on April 1, 1850, it created "great excitement at the Heaton firm," writes James O. Sweeny in his book *A Numismatic History of the Birmingham Mint*.

By the end of April 1850, Heaton had purchased the four Soho Mint steam-powered screw presses that were auctioned off by Fuller and Horsey Auctioneers. "Though they were made in the period 1790-1810," Sweeny writes, "they were still reasonably modern in 1850; similar machines were the mainstay of the Royal Mint until 1880."

Sweeny notes the Heaton Mint also acquired six "cutting-out presses" for producing planchets, as well as other machinery.

Now all that remained were orders for coins and tokens so the new Mint could begin production. The company didn't have to wait very long.

That's because "The British Empire was in an expansionistic mode," Sweeny writes, "and the need for minor coins was great, both at home and in the colonies."

Because the Royal Mint and the various mints in Latin America were unable to keep up to the increasing worldwide demand for copper coinage, Ralph Heaton AND Sons, with

its equipment and skills, was at the right place and time to satisfy the quest for inexpensive base-metal coins and tokens.

Sweeny writes that the first order probably came from Australia, to produce "trade tokens for the mercantile establishment of Messrs Annand Smith." Orders from other countries soon began to flood into the Heaton Mint. They came from many parts of the globe. In 1851, Chile requested centavos and medio centavos. The Chilean centavo of 1851 is recognized as the first coin to display the now-famous "H" mark from the Heaton Mint.

The Royal Mint followed suit, contracting Heaton to supply copper blanks so the Royal Mint could mint copper coinage for England.

Other countries began to order coins as well, including the Province of Canada. (For a more complete review of the coins and tokens the Heaton Mint produced for the Bank of Upper Canada and the Bank of Quebec, as well as New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and the Dominion of Canada, see the next installment of this series).

By 1852, the Royal Mint had so much work manufacturing gold and silver coins that it could not possibly handle the minting of copper coins. So the Royal Mint advertised for bids to produce the needed coinage.

According to Graham P. Dyer, the Curator of the Royal Mint, Ralph Heaton and Sons and the Royal Mint signed a contract in 1853 to produce "a total of nearly 500 tons of these denominations (pence, half-pence, farthings, half-farthings and quarter-farthings)... but this time for coins, not blanks."

Dyer goes on to say that the vast majority of the English copper coins produced from 1853 to 1856 were produced by



Ralph Heaton and Sons. But because the English copper coins produced during those years carry no "H" mint mark, Sweeny writes they are "generally and mistakenly attributed to the Royal Mint."

Over the years, the company grew, adding additional equipment, until it finally outgrew its facilities on Bath Street in Birmingham. Construction began on a three-storey brick building on Icknield Street. By 1862, when the new building was completed, the Heaton Mint was the largest private mint in the world.

In 1862, the *Illustrated Times* of Birmingham noted the many accomplishments of the Heaton Mint:

"They were first employed in 1851 by the English Government and subsequently by Foreign Powers, and during the last 10 years have executed for different States, no fewer than 1,050 millions of coins, weighing upwards of 5,260 tons, and which, if placed side by side, would extend over 14,800 miles."

During the 1860s, the firm of Ralph Heaton and Sons oversaw the minting of coins in several major world-class mints, including the mint in Marseilles, France as well as the mint in Milan, Italy.

After Ralph Heaton II died in 1862, Ralph Heaton III took the reigns of power in the family-run enterprise. Even though he was only 35 years of

age, he had been working for the company for 22 years. When Ralph III assumed control, Sweeny writes that he "had been thoroughly trained in all phases of coinage manufacture, having personally managed the Marseilles operation for nearly three years. He had cut his eyeteeth on the old screw presses that were the mainstay of the company, but also had extensive experience with the European types of lever presses that had been adopted by the Paris Mint in about 1848. Indeed, he and his brother George had patented improvements to the lever press, and his plan for modernizing the Mint involved a gradual transition to that type of equipment."

Ralph III's brand new facility on Icknield Street began operating with one lever press and 11 screw presses. By 1866, the company had purchased an additional 11 lever presses, but retained the aging screw presses for some time.

Sweeny notes that gradually "the screw presses were retired from use, the last one (and one of the original Boulton presses) continued in service until 1882. The lever presses were made in Heaton's shops, and the experience gave rise to a new business opportunity - that of the manufacture of coining presses and other equipment."

By 1864, the government of Burma placed an order with the Heaton Mint to not only

supply the equipment and start-up supervision, but also the buildings for their mint in Mandalay.

For the next few decades, more orders for coins rolled in from around the globe - from Hong Kong, Brunei, and Guernsey, to Sarawak and Zanzibar.

By the late 1880s, things were going well for the company, which had just completed an order from the Chinese government to provide a complete mint (with 90 presses) in Canton.

By the time Ralph Heaton III was ready to retire, Sweeny notes he "decided to convert the family business into a publicly held limited liability corporation." So in 1889 the new company became known as The Mint, Birmingham, Limited.

The terms included continued employment for his three sons: Ralph IV as General Manager, Gerald as Works Manager, and Walter as Secretary.

George Manz is the owner of George Manz Coins. The firm specializes in Canadian, Newfoundland and world coins, as well as medals, tokens, numismatic books, and odd and curious money. Free lists (please specify which lists you want) are available from PO Box 3626, Regina, SK S4P 3L7. Phone: (306) 352-2337, e-mail: g.manz@sk.sympatico.ca: www.georgemanzcoins.com.□