ROYAL MINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE DESIGN OF COINS, MEDALS, SEALS AND DECORATIONS

His Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, retired as President of the Royal Mint Advisory Committee at the end of 1999, thereby bringing to an end a remarkable period of service to the Committee extending over no less than forty-seven years.

He attended his first meeting on 21 March 1952 and was at once fully involved in the important task of selecting coins for the new reign. Thereafter he attended meetings of the Committee with punctilious regularity, dealing with new circulating coins and official medals, commemorative coins and government seals. But probably the greatest demands were placed upon him at the time of decimalisation, when he skilfully guided the Committee towards the adoption of the series of reverse designs still in use today.

The work of the Committee in examining and selecting designs for the coinage will undoubtedly be a source of study for future generations of numismatists. It may therefore be of interest to reproduce below the text of the speech delivered by John Porteous, OBE, a member of this Society, to the Committee and distinguished guests at the lunch held in honour of His Royal Highness at St James's Palace on 24 November 1999. It was an unenviable task, which fell to Mr Porteous as the longest serving current member of the Committee but which he accomplished with characteristic style and wit.

SPEECH BY JOHN PORTEOUS AT THE FAREWELL LUNCH FOR HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS, THE PRINCE PHILIP, DUKE OF EDINBURGH AT ST JAMES’S PALACE, 24 NOVEMBER 1999

Your Royal Highness

This is a very festive lunch but it’s a sad occasion for us at the Royal Mint Advisory Committee, since it brings to an end your forty-seven years as our President. During that time, Sir, you have been the captain and not the figurehead of our vessel. It says on our cards that you have missed four meetings. How, Sir, you can reconcile that with your conscience I don’t know, but if it’s any comfort to you I can plead in mitigation that you have attended every single one of them where the substantive coinage of the realm was under consideration. Moreover, you have brought to the Committee an expertise of your own; because you are the only single one of us who has ever had the least idea about what servicemen would like to see on their campaign medals. So for nearly fifty years you have been the Royal element in the Royal Mint.

You have brought to us, to our Committee, an extraordinary range of remarkable members and the first that I should mention perhaps is Kenneth Clark. Not Kenneth Clarke, you understand, who was Master of the Mint about three years ago. Ex-Masters of the Mint, in fact, are today two a penny with us. (I use that term, two a penny, in the old-fashioned archaic sense in which it was used by minting and coin people to mean of very great value and price!). No, I mean of course Kenneth Clark, the art historian and connoisseur who, once he had pronounced a design good or bad, none of the rest of us, except perhaps yourself, Sir, ever dared to gainsay. And then there was John Betjeman, who in a single, drawling, apparently off-hand phrase, could turn the whole Committee in an instant from one opinion to another. There was Peter Scott, who, Sir, could vie with you in delineating the curve of a roan antelope’s horn or the cut of a kittiwake’s wing, and Anthony Wagner, the most learned of heralds, who you used to tease, Sir, for the fierceness with which he used to impose the disciplines of his calling. We had Elisabeth Frink, a woman of as strong and fine a character as her sculpture. We had Marina Warner, who stirred us all up, and we had Shirley Anglesey, who calmed us down again and talked more sense than almost any of us. And I must mention with some sadness today two other members of our Committee, John Hale and Hugh Casson, whose characters and minds enormously brightened our deliberations over many years.

But it has been you, Sir, with your experience of negotiating in the highest levels of the State who has enabled us to make our proposals as a Committee stick. Because we are only an Advisory Committee and yet we deal in the emblems and symbols of high politics. I could give you an example of this. For some three hundred years our coinage was imbued with the symbols of Union, but in recent years we have begun and our Committee has been forward in handling the symbols of devolution with the £1 pieces, one for each of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, where, under your careful guidance, we have worked to provide designs which were correct without being pedantic, historically charged without being aggressive, and which have avoided, as far as we could, what I think of as the sentimental Braveheart school of ignorant nationalism. With you we have also examined the delicate problem of a design for Northern Ireland, where the symbol, as so often, has been part of the problem rather than part of the solution; and we eventually lighted, very
happily, on the solution of the flax flower or linen flower, which, since we adopted it for coinage, has now, I understand, been adopted as the emblem of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

But of course above all it's in the field of the effigies of Her Majesty the Queen that your influence has been most pervasive and where you have reconciled with great skill, if you will allow me to say so, the conflicting roles of Consort and Chairman of a dispassionate and independent Committee. Her Majesty has been graciously pleased to allow four effigies. The first Queen Elizabeth only had one because her advisors never dared present her with another one after the accession portrait. And I believe that the four have in their different ways satisfied and in some instances delighted public opinion and that our coinage, thanks to Your Royal Highness's interest and care, now stands worthily in our historic tradition and will not disgrace us when, two or three millennia hence, it is virtually all of us that remains.

I began by saying, Sir, that you were the captain of this ship and not its figurehead and I don't believe that anyone in this room would believe me if I declared that we had never heard the bark from your quarterdeck. We Committee members have, for our part, been pretty adept at massing on the fo'c'sle, or whatever it is that mariners are said to do on these occasions, bravely forming up, as often as not, behind one of our female colleagues. Palaces have ante-rooms and committees sometimes wait in them and I once heard one member say to another, 'Say what you think, he cannot have your head cut off'. Well, in fact, I must say that when I first joined the Committee and we used to meet in the rather grand Tapestry Room through there – I think the Tapestry Room but anyway it had the air of a sixteenth-century Privy Council chamber – I sometimes wondered whether perhaps you could and that perhaps the arras might part and a pair of Yeomen of the Guard come to haul one of us off to the Tower.

In fact, you did produce a coup de théâtre on one occasion but it was of a very different order. We were considering, Sir, you may remember, the coinage of the Seychelles and we were looking at some drawings, rather dull drawings it has to be said, of the proposals – the usual thing of palm trees, some birds and fish, a coco-de-mer. 'Wait!', said Your Royal Highness, 'I don't believe that a single one of you has ever seen a coco-de-mer'. And from a briefcase, a bulky briefcase under the table, you produced the most exotic, erotic, innocent and suggestive object in all nature. It was a princely specimen of this object and it was calculated to reduce every one of us to the state of mind of a tittering eight-year-old. You made us pass it round the table and it was in that state of mind, as we all handled it, that we went on to consider the coinage of the Seychelles. I think this episode tells me that you have brought to our Committee zest and humour as well as dignity and authority, and I would also say that I have enormously admired the way in which you have encouraged us to respond to imaginative ideas and to innovation, and especially technical innovation, while keeping at bay some of the forces of commercialism and sentimentality and other things that pervade our world today.

Sir, for many years we have sat round a table discussing banners and dragons and emblems of that kind and I suppose now feel a little like Sir Bedivere reminiscing by the lakeside. I have, alas, no Excalibur, but before your barge comes, Sir, I have this present to make to you, which has been confided to me by the Royal Mint. It is so jewel-like and sparkling that it almost looks as if it ought to have Excalibur embedded in it, but it is actually a sculpture by Mr Robert Evans. It has your portrait in the middle, Sir, and around this magic vortex are, as I believe, the elements of modern coinage, its raw materials, floating as it were in the waves of thought. Round about the edge are the finest productions of the Royal Mint during your time. May it please Your Royal Highness to accept it as a mark of the gratitude and the respect, and may I say, the affection, in which you have been held by the members and the officers, past and present, of the Royal Mint Advisory Committee.