

# EDGAR BOEHM AND THE JUBILEE COINAGE

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'THE greatest disappointment of the century' was Sir Charles Oman's verdict on the Jubilee coinage of 1887.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary reaction was if anything more hostile, with the prime target being the new effigy of Queen Victoria by Edgar Boehm<sup>2</sup> which showed the queen wearing a tiny crown in danger of slipping off the back of her head. How such an unsuitable portrait could ever have been approved remains a puzzle and, even though the queen's artistic judgment was admittedly a hit and miss affair, it still seems curious that neither she nor those most closely involved had any inkling of the likely public response. Indeed until the last minute the deputy master of the Royal Mint evidently entertained fond hopes that the Jubilee head would burst upon an 'enraptured public'.<sup>3</sup>

It was therefore particularly frustrating that the official mint records contained scarcely any documentation about the preparation of the Jubilee coinage and the accompanying Jubilee medal.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, however, about nine years ago some correspondence of the time was discovered in a locked box in a basement in the old Royal Mint at Tower Hill. The box contained semi-official letters to and, less frequently, from C.W. Fremantle, the deputy master of the mint, and among them were many letters about the Boehm effigy. Several are from Boehm himself, and some from Leonard Wyon, and although the papers are far from complete the chronology of events is now a good deal clearer. The long gestation period of the portrait is confirmed and there are intriguing glimpses of the trials and errors, both technical and personal, which bedevilled its preparation. What follows is very largely based on these recently discovered papers.<sup>5</sup>

The first mention of the new portrait comes in February 1879 when Sir Henry Ponsonby, the queen's private secretary, informed Fremantle that Boehm had been ordered to execute a new effigy of the queen to serve as the model for future dies. Although the letter gives no reason for the decision it is hardly surprising that there should be thoughts of a change. Most coins still bore versions of the 'Young Head' by William Wyon first used in 1838, and with the queen now in her sixtieth year Wyon's effigy bore little resemblance to the present reality. Nor was it surprising that Boehm, with his considerable reputation as sculptor to the royal family, should be chosen to undertake the work. The son of Josef Daniel Böhm, who had been director of the Imperial Mint in Vienna and one of the foremost European medallists of his day, Boehm had originally trained as a medallist and, more recently, had made commemorative portraits of such diverse figures as Schubert, Carlyle and the prince of Wales. His Austro-Hungarian background seemed no

<sup>1</sup> Sir Charles Oman, *The Coinage of England* (Oxford, 1931), p. 378.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Edgar Boehm was born in Vienna in 1834 and settled in England in 1862. He was created a baronet in 1889 and died the following year. Useful summaries of his career may be found in U. Thieme and F. Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler* 1910, IV, 194-95 and *Dictionary of National Biography* 1909, XXII, 229-30. For Boehm's medal designs see Mark Stocker 'Edgar Boehm and the Jubilee Medals of 1887', *The Medal* (September 1984), 25-29 and 'Edgar Boehm's Medal Commemorating Sir Francis Drake', *The Medal* (September 1984), 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> PRO. Mint 23/26: C.W. Fremantle to Sir Frederic Leighton, 1 March 1887.

<sup>4</sup> The previous poverty of the official mint records is made clear by J.L. Lant, 'The Jubilee Coinage of 1887', *BNJ* 53 (1973), 132-41. Mr Lant understandably concentrated on the unfavourable reception of the new coins.

<sup>5</sup> The papers have now been transferred to the Public Record Office as Class 23 of the Royal Mint records. The correspondence relating to the Jubilee coinage has been collected in Mint 23/9 and to the Jubilee medal in Mint 23/26. All subsequent notes unless indicated to the contrary refer to Mint 23/9, which lacks pagination.

disadvantage; on the contrary, the queen appeared to have a positive predilection for foreign artists.

From the beginning progress on the effigy was slow. Boehm's approach to all his work was painstaking, and the absence of a specific deadline for the portrait encouraged him to give priority to more immediate sculptural commissions. It was June 1879 before the queen recorded in her journal that she 'sat to Böhm for a Bas Relief',<sup>6</sup> but on 5 August Ponsonby was able to write to Fremantle to tell him that Boehm had finished the head. From this point Fremantle became fully involved in the preparation of the effigy, and the emphasis shifted from its use for new medals, which seemed to be uppermost in Ponsonby's mind, to the coinage. Despite Ponsonby's encouraging news in August, November found Boehm apologising for his lack of progress. It was not until 1 January 1880 that he had better news for Fremantle, having finished several models 'on a smaller scale' and apparently showing a 'little crown'.<sup>7</sup> About the correct shape of this crown Boehm was uncertain and he sought advice from Fremantle. For his part, Fremantle seems to have doubted the wisdom of including a tiny crown in the style of the Kaisar-i-Hind medal, and he caused enquiry to be made of C.F. Keary at the British Museum to discover if there were any numismatic precedent for it. Keary replied that he knew of no such coins, pointing out tartly that 'in the case of Greek coins I need not add the crowns are put on as if meant to be worn and not to tumble off at the slightest movement'.<sup>8</sup> These misgivings were conveyed to Boehm and there was evidently some discussion about the possible substitution of a large crown or a diadem. Further delays were caused by Boehm's anxiety over his eyesight and by his refusal to work by gaslight during the London fog.

By the end of January the work had been seen by the queen's daughter, Princess Louise, and on 20 February the queen herself called on Boehm and saw the new models for the coinage.<sup>9</sup> She approved the large crown suggested by Princess Louise but required a slight change to be made to the chin, for which Boehm was to be guided by a miniature by Sir Charles Ross. Fremantle visited the studio on 23 February and it is clear from the inquiries which he immediately put in hand at the College of Arms and the Tower of London that there continued to be uneasiness about the shape of the crown. A few days later, on the afternoon of 28 February, Boehm received a sitting from the queen. This enabled him, he told Fremantle, 'to complete a new and I hope terminating model from life – *which is much better* . . . The Queen was pleased with the wax model after I had made a few alteration [*sic*] from nature'. For the crown, he wrote, the queen chose from the drawings the one most like Pugin's.<sup>10</sup> There is about the letter the air of a job completed, and Boehm in fact now confidently suggested that the head could be turned over to Leonard Wyon who, as the mint's modeller and engraver, had the task of translating the model into a steel die.

By 10 March Wyon, who had long been aware of what was intended, had seen Boehm's model and was writing to Fremantle to ask him to do nothing with it until they had spoken. Whatever the cause of Wyon's concern, there is evidence that by July the first of a long series of pattern coins had been produced. There was talk, however, of alterations, and in particular of reducing the length of the queen's neck, but unfortunately there is now a break of more than twelve months in the correspondence. The surviving patterns of this

<sup>6</sup> Royal Archives, Queen Victoria's Journal, 30 June 1879. Quoted by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen.

<sup>7</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 1 January 1880.

<sup>8</sup> Keary to W.C. Roberts (later Roberts-Austen), 10 January 1880.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 21 February 1880, p. 9. The Court Circular for the previous day records that 'the Queen and Princess Beatrice, attended by the Hon. Horatia Stopford, drove out

this morning, and honoured Mr J.E. Boehm with a visit at his studio, where Her Majesty saw and much admired the monument of the Prince Imperial'.

<sup>10</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 28 February 1880. 'Pugin' is here being used as an inaccurate synonym for 'Gothic' since the designer in question was not Pugin but William Dyce. See Marcia Pointon, *William Dyce 1806–1864, A Critical Biography* (1979), pp. 97–98.

period show the queen with a large, sensible crown (Plate 1, No. 1), and in 1881 a similar portrait was adopted for the medal awarded for the campaign in Afghanistan. The decision to use Boehm's effigy on this medal had been taken by the late autumn of 1880, Fremantle informing the India Office in November 1880 that it would bear the effigy recently approved by the queen and for which a die had already been engraved.<sup>11</sup> Delays were caused by the reverse design, which Boehm wisely declined to undertake because of his other commitments, and it was not until June 1881 that a sample medal was submitted to the queen. This proved to be not entirely to her liking and she complained that the nose was too long and pointed and the lower part of the chin indented. These features were corrected by Wyon and a revised sample was approved in July (Plate 1, No. 7).

The main correspondence reopens in September 1881 with Fremantle encouraging Wyon to prepare reduced copies of the Afghanistan medal head which Fremantle said he admired very much and hoped to see in far wider use before long. Further pattern sovereigns, presumably dated 1881, were accordingly struck (Plate 1, No. 5) and towards the end of November Wyon for the first time referred to a die for the half-sovereign. This die must have been used for patterns dated 1880 (Plate 1, No. 4) since not only are no pattern half-sovereigns dated 1881 recorded but no ordinary half-sovereigns of 1881 were struck by the Royal Mint either. A letter Wyon wrote to Fremantle in November indicates that he was still not satisfied, complaining that the queen's neck was too long. Originally it may have been even longer, for Wyon had felt it necessary to reduce the length of the bust to avoid a disproportionately large, empty space in the field on either side of the head.

In May 1882 a letter from Boehm, the first on file from him for more than two years, suggested that before further steps were taken Fremantle should see a new bust which he had just modelled of the queen. A recent opportunity to study the queen's features had convinced him that the proposed coinage effigy left much to be desired, and he seems also to have become dissatisfied with Wyon, for the following month saw him at the mint working directly on the steel himself. It was a task which he approached with some diffidence, writing slightly facetiously to Fremantle: 'you have not far to send me to the Tower if I commit a "Majestäts Verbrechen [felony] 2<sup>o</sup> Classe". I shall try my best, but fear my old eyes & hands will not be as pliable as I should wish them to be – So I plead beforehand for your kind indulgence & if it is a failure pray let it be strictly "sub Rosa".'<sup>12</sup> Boehm's fears were confirmed and he had to refer the matter back to Wyon, who, while confessing to some surprise at the turn of events and expressing anxiety to see the fresh treatment of the Queen's head that Boehm had suggested, was prepared to be helpful. He regretted the loss of time but, never having been entirely happy with the original effigy, was not without hope of a better result. By July he was again actively engaged in the preparation of the new coinage.

Further pattern sovereigns had been struck by the autumn of 1882 and Fremantle, perhaps seeking reassurance that this time the work was progressing on the right lines, apparently consulted Sir Frederic Leighton, president of the Royal Academy. Leighton supported the idea of portraying the queen 'in point of years',<sup>13</sup> but went on:

I know also Her Majesty's feeling in regard to the Boehm medallion. Taken on its merits, however, as a work of art, and with a sincere admiration for Boehm's gifts, I am disappointed; – in a coin the first thing you look to is the shape & mass of the effigy – this mass seems to me to be of an unfortunate shape – meagre without elegance – it is also not clear and explicit; the long mass behind the head is barely distinguishable from hair – without close examination. – the whole effigy seems to topple forward – the line of the shoulder and the cutting off of the effigy are not I think happily managed – Again the head seems small & the nose very large & and [sic] disagreeably sharp at the point; – for so very flat a relief the division between the two chins seems

<sup>11</sup> PRO, Mint 16/74.

<sup>12</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 8 June 1882.

<sup>13</sup> Undated letter from Leighton to Fremantle, placed to

the autumn of 1882 from its position in the bundle of letters when removed from the box.

unnecessarily deep. . . . In sum the whole thing seems to me to want dignity – & I question whether Boehm is at heart satisfied with the work.

If Leighton's undated criticism belongs to the autumn of 1882, it is not altogether clear which of the pattern pieces was shown to him since neither pattern sovereigns nor half-sovereigns are known dated 1882. Possibly Wyon was still using existing 1880 and 1881 dies to save time or it may be that the pattern sovereign of 1883 (Plate 2, No. 10) is the coin in question. This, however, shows a bust with tiara and veil which is so different from that on the earlier pieces that it looks to owe more to Wyon than Boehm, but it certainly merits Leighton's strictures, as well as answering elements of his description. An associated punch in the mint collection (Plate 2, No. 11) is numbered 10, and since a letter from Fremantle to Wyon in November identifies 'the last pattern sovereign of the first series'<sup>14</sup> as No. 7 it seems possible that the 1883 pattern belongs to a continuing sequence and is not a private initiative on Wyon's part.

During the final months of 1882 Wyon continued to work on a sovereign die in consultation with Boehm. By November Boehm seemed satisfied that the latest pattern sovereign was 'very good now',<sup>15</sup> though he added ominously that there were a few little changes still to be done. Shortly before Christmas Fremantle reported progress to the chancellor of the exchequer, Hugh Childers, and showed him the latest coin. Childers, however, was far from impressed and told Fremantle that he would be very unwilling to submit the effigy for the queen's approval. What was required was a fresh start, but with the task still left to Boehm, in whose hands the matter had been placed by the queen's wish. The news left Boehm surprisingly unruffled. His reaction may be partly explained by the fact that his priority at the time was not the coinage but monumental sculpture. A note in the *Magazine of Art*<sup>16</sup> reported him at work on statues of Lord Beaconsfield, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe and Dean Stanley for Westminster Abbey and another of the duchess of Westminster for Eaton Hall. 1882 saw the erection of his statues of Carlyle on Chelsea Embankment and Lord Lawrence in Waterloo Place; in March he gave two lectures at the Royal Academy on 'Portraiture in Sculpture', while in April he began work on a statue of Sir Francis Drake for Tavistock. Even allowing for studio assistance, this formidable body of work explains why Boehm wrote 'I work like an engine'.<sup>17</sup> The effigy for the coinage was not as lucrative a commission as a statue and, in the absence of a deadline, mint pressure was nothing like as great as that of a memorial committee.

Nevertheless a suspicion remains that the chancellor's brusque response was expected, even desired, by Boehm and Fremantle. Significantly, it was accompanied by a clear statement that the Government would not interfere in the arrangements which Boehm thought necessary for reproducing his work for the coinage. Wyon, with whom Boehm had not been impressed, could now be happily discarded, and through Boehm's Viennese connections an attempt was immediately made to find a superior and more congenial engraver. For this purpose Boehm consulted his old master, Carl Radnitzky, one of the most prominent Austrian medallists of the century. Radnitzky recommended a pupil of his, unnamed by Boehm but described by Radnitzky enthusiastically as 'the only "Medailleur" who in all Europe works on the real good principles of this almost lost art'.<sup>18</sup> The arrival two days later of some 'beautiful medals' convinced a relieved Boehm that the pupil was a 'first rate artist'<sup>19</sup>, and he duly despatched his new model to Vienna in January 1883. In June a 'very hopeful'<sup>20</sup> plaster cast from an unfinished die, probably of halfcrown size, arrived from Vienna and in December Boehm received an 'excellent'<sup>21</sup> cast from a

<sup>14</sup> Fremantle to Wyon, 4 November 1882.

<sup>15</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 13 November 1882.

<sup>16</sup> *Magazine of Art*, 1882, p. xx.

<sup>17</sup> University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Autog B.9; Boehm to 'Miss Edwards', n.d.

<sup>18</sup> Boehm to Radnitzky, 7 January 1883.

<sup>19</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 9 January 1883.

<sup>20</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 12 June 1883.

<sup>21</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 29 December 1883.

completed die. January 1884 saw the arrival of a cast from a corrected die which Boehm again found 'excellent',<sup>22</sup> though Fremantle decided to enlarge the letters. A first die was subsequently received and half-crowns were struck. But several alterations were required and June found Boehm urging Fremantle not to strike further pieces until 'the proper punch & matrice'<sup>23</sup> arrived from Radnitzky. A cast from a die for a smaller coin, probably the half-sovereign, was received in July, followed by a punch for the half-crown. Modifications were suggested to the former, but the punch was described by Boehm as 'admirable'<sup>24</sup> and Fremantle undertook to strike a coin in silver.

This was presumably the piece which Fremantle in August 1884 submitted to the chancellor of the exchequer and which Childers in turn submitted to the queen. She thought the likeness was 'pretty good'<sup>25</sup> but criticised the frill of the veil and said bluntly that she much preferred the existing coinage. Judging by the 1884 pattern half-sovereign or sixpence (Plate 1, No. 9), which bears a crowned bust similar to that on the earlier patterns of 1880 and 1881, some of the changes and corrections carried out in Austria had been of a modest character. But the pattern half-crown of 1884 (Plate 2, No. 12) bears a markedly different bust, closer to that on a pattern sovereign of 1885 and on an undated but related half-sovereign (Plate 2, Nos. 13 and 15). On these patterns there is a stiff frill and the tiny crown, abandoned in 1880, made its unfortunate re-appearance. It had been used on all the more recent authorised effigies of the queen, reflecting the fact that the queen preferred to wear the small crown because of its lightness. A strong realism, not to say literalism, deeply pervaded contemporary art, and Boehm's portraiture not least.

In view of the queen's lack of enthusiasm, Fremantle and Boehm felt obliged to make further changes. At this point there is another break in the correspondence, which reopens in July 1885 with Boehm wishing to show Fremantle 'two plaster casts of the small coin' which he had received some time ago from Radnitzky and which 'could be made right with very little alteration'.<sup>26</sup> The following month three dies arrived, completing a series of three different sizes, but the casts and dies evidently failed to please. Despite all Boehm's earlier enthusiasm, Radnitzky's engraver (who may perhaps have been Radnitzky himself) was now abandoned and Wyon consulted once more. Boehm noted with relief that 'L. Wyon showed himself as docile as a lamb — an old lamb! — but I hope still that "revenons à notre mouton" will prove beneficial to the ultimate result'.<sup>27</sup> Altogether, Boehm's Austrian excursion had taken nearly three years and there was little to show for it. Fremantle, whatever his unease at such an unorthodox course, apparently remained on cordial terms with Boehm, giving him a 'lovely little Donatello' of which Boehm hoped 'to make some day a Relievo'.<sup>28</sup>

Wyon, to his credit, was soon at work. There is a sovereign punch in the mint collection marked N<sup>o</sup> 8 REVISED NOV: 1885 (Plate 3, No. 19) and it is evident that a new series of trial pieces was under way. A letter from Boehm in December 1885 refers to a coin as No. 8C and there is no doubt that further pattern sovereigns were struck in late 1885 and early 1886. Small changes were constantly being made; in November Boehm complained about the lines of the veil; in December he was bothered about the upper lip and the embroidery of the bodice. Nevertheless Fremantle felt confident enough by 15 January 1886 to tell the Treasury that changes to the coinage would shortly be effected and to seek authority to pay Boehm the 'very moderate sum' of 200 guineas for all his work up to 31 December 1885.<sup>29</sup> Boehm generously undertook to make no further claim on the mint, and in fact the real

<sup>22</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 28 January 1884.

<sup>23</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 21 June 1884.

<sup>24</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 15 July 1884.

<sup>25</sup> Sir Henry Ponsonby to Childers, 29 August 1884.

<sup>26</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 14 July 1885.

<sup>27</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 30 October 1885.

<sup>28</sup> PRO. Mint 1/48, pp. 709–710.



purpose of the approach to the treasury was to enable Boehm to pay Radnitzky, who was becoming importunate. Indeed there is reason to think that poor Boehm had to pass a very substantial portion of the 200 guineas to Radnitzky.

Any hope, however, that Fremantle entertained that the long labours might now reach a speedy conclusion was quickly disabused. By the end of January Boehm was again working direct on the steel to perfect the effigy and he wrote unhappily to Fremantle: 'I am in the midst of obtaining & spoiling alternately the dies & punches you sent me & like Sisyphus find a fatal impossibility in finishing — However you have had so much patience that I hope you will not loose it yet . . . I am *most* anxious to do something good, but I fear my eyes will give way'.<sup>29</sup> Despite the problem with his eyesight and his dislike of the 'tedious thankless work'<sup>30</sup> of engraving, Boehm continued to persevere. A matrix from the revised 8 punch exists marked J.E.B. 2.86. (Plate 3, No. 20), and there is further evidence of Boehm's involvement in the marks of the engraving tool which can be seen around the outline of the effigy. At the same time he was also working on one of Radnitzky's dies for the half-crown. In February he complained about the nostril on Radnitzky's die, and, worse still, he found on the sovereign that the ear was in the wrong place and the necklace 'looked like peas so I removed it . . . 8.C. & 8.D. I spoilt in practising!'.<sup>31</sup> He feared that Fremantle would be shocked at the alterations and would think vain his hopes of achieving a better portrait. A further pattern sovereign, No. 8E. was struck in June 1886, as Boehm continued to work direct on steel, and for the first time Fremantle mentioned the desirability of having dies ready in time for the Golden Jubilee in 1887.

The beginning of July 1886 found Boehm at Frogmore House, Windsor, where the queen gave him a sitting and, expressing herself very much pleased with a new model, said there was no need to show her the work again before completion. A brief report of the sitting in the Court Circular<sup>32</sup> prompted Wyon to write sadly to Fremantle, though in truth he had had several years to reconcile himself to the employment of Boehm. While not denying that the decision to use Boehm's effigy gave him pain, he assured Fremantle that he thought the course followed was right. Had the honour fallen to him, he would have 'shrunk very much'<sup>33</sup> from it as neither his health nor his eyesight was good. More constructively, he stood ready to offer advice if required. The offer was not ignored and Wyon was in fact subsequently called upon to prepare the new obverse dies from Boehm's finally approved models.

Progress, nevertheless, remained far from smooth and even Boehm referred to 'this tedious matter'.<sup>34</sup> At one stage he wanted a steel cast of the model to be made in Paris and had to be assured by Fremantle that the mint was capable of doing the work adequately. Next he found it necessary to prepare a new model in flatter relief and it was August before two plaster casts could be collected from Boehm's studio. In October a major modification was made to the shape of the arches of the crown, though not to the size of the crown, and in December came news of yet another model, 'infinitely better' than all the previous efforts: 'I have . . . for these last two days gone "con amore" over the plaster cast & remodelled the whole so that it is flat enough for any requirements of striking'.<sup>35</sup> Patterns were available by February 1887 and at long last, on 24 March, Fremantle was able to submit the effigy in its final form for the approval of the chancellor, now George Goschen, and the queen.<sup>36</sup> Boehm, clearly in touch with events, waited anxiously for news, asking

<sup>29</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 29 January 1886. The three mis-spellings perhaps speak for his anxiety.

<sup>30</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 9 June 1886.

<sup>31</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 8 February 1886.

<sup>32</sup> *The Times*, 3 July 1886, p. 9. the Court Circular for the previous day reports that 'Mr. J.E. Boehm, R.A., who is commissioned to prepare a new Royal portrait medallion for the Imperial coinage has had this morning, at Frogmore, a sitting from Her Majesty'.

<sup>33</sup> Wyon to Fremantle, 6 July 1886.

<sup>34</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 29 July 1886.

<sup>35</sup> Boehm to Fremantle, 12 December 1886.

<sup>36</sup> Fremantle's submission of 24 March 1887 to the chancellor indicated that obverse dies were not yet ready for all the gold and silver denominations. This may explain the presence in the mint collection of uniface pieces showing only the reverses of the new threepence, sixpence, shilling, double-florin, and crown.

Fremantle on 28 March 'have you heard yet how the coins please?'.<sup>37</sup>

The queen's approval was accompanied by a suggestion that the coins should include some word to indicate that they were struck in the Jubilee year. This was resisted by Fremantle, who understandably enough wished to avoid further delay, especially as the dies for the branch mints needed to be despatched by the next mail. Arguing that the inclusion of additional words was impossible without either 'rendering the coins unsightly or so abbreviating the necessary words as to make them unintelligible', he attempted to sweeten the pill by suggesting that since the new designs were being adopted in 1887 they would in any case always be 'associated with the idea of the Jubilee'.<sup>38</sup> The queen conceded the point so reluctantly that the chancellor asked Fremantle to reconsider, but the deputy master bravely stood his ground. Fearing that the introduction of any special letters or mintmark might prompt doubts about the genuineness of the coins, he thought it much safer 'to trust to the coins as they stand telling their own story'.<sup>39</sup>

As the Jubilee approached, Fremantle made confident statements, both public and private, about the anticipated success of the coinage. In an article in *Murray's Magazine*, he wrote: 'among the numerous memorials to which this happy event will give rise, none surely can be more fitting than a faithful portrait destined to hand down to posterity the likeness of a Sovereign beloved by her people, and with it the recollections of a glorious and happy reign'.<sup>40</sup> He could only have drawn encouragement from a leading article in the *Times* on 27 May 1887. This was still some four weeks before the issue of the coins, but the necessary proclamation describing the designs had been published in the *London Gazette* on 17 May, and on 27 May illustrations of some of the designs became available to the public with the release of Fremantle's Annual Report for 1886. In its leader, the *Times* described the new effigy as 'striking as a portrait and dignified in pose. Exception may perhaps be taken to the veil which depends from the back of the head and gives a somewhat less graceful line than the undraped neck of the former effigy, but the general merit of the new effigy as a work of numismatic art cannot be disputed'.<sup>41</sup> Before proceeding to draw heavily from Fremantle's as yet unpublished article in *Murray's Magazine*, it heaped praise on the mint and its deputy master: 'of the new coinage in general we can only say that, to judge from the reproductions given in the Report, they do great credit to the mechanical resources of the Mint, and still more to the fine taste and numismatic knowledge of the accomplished Deputy Master, MR. C.W. FREMANTLE'. Well might a gratified deputy master refer to a 'magnificent article'<sup>42</sup> and be reinforced in his belief that all seemed set for the coinage to be acclaimed by the public (Plate 3, No. 26).

When the storm of condemnation erupted, Fremantle seemed genuinely taken aback at 'the sad turn affairs have taken, most unexpected to me. . .'.<sup>43</sup> It was some storm: questions in parliament,<sup>44</sup> outspoken criticism from all sections of the press, derisive cartoons and doggerel in *Fun* and *Punch*,<sup>45</sup> and even unfriendly comment from John Evans in his presidential address to the Numismatic Society.<sup>46</sup> The coinage was seen as the worst of all worlds; poorly executed, undignified on the obverse, and inefficient in not specifying values on the reverse. Goschen's unconvincing defence referred to 'a conflict of authority' between numismatists, who favoured beauty of design, and 'the more practical persons who passed the coins from hand to hand'.<sup>47</sup> Beauty, he implied, had won over utility, but

<sup>37</sup> PRO. Mint 23/26: Boehm to Fremantle, 28 March 1887.

<sup>38</sup> Memorandum from Fremantle to chancellor of the exchequer, 4 April 1887.

<sup>39</sup> Fremantle to Goschen, 18 April 1887.

<sup>40</sup> C.W. Fremantle, 'Our New Coins and their Pedigree', *Murray's Magazine* (1887), p. 746.

<sup>41</sup> *The Times*, 27 May 1887, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Fremantle to Boehm, 24 June 1887.

<sup>43</sup> Fremantle to Boehm, 24 June 1887.

<sup>44</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, 316 (14 June - 6 July 1887): see 23 June 1887 (cols. 773-75) and 28 June 1887 (cols. 1150-51).

<sup>45</sup> *Fun*, 6 July 1887, pp. 5, 7, and 10; *Punch*, 9 July 1887, pp. 6, 7, and 9.

<sup>46</sup> NC, 3rd series, 7 (1887), 24-25. The presidential address was delivered on 16 June 1887.

<sup>47</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, 316 (14 June - 6 July 1887): 23 June 1887 (cols. 773-75).

the *Pall Mall Gazette* attacked this tenuous distinction: 'as if they could not be combined and as if there was anything artistic in specifically unfitting a thing for its use!'.<sup>48</sup> Confusion between the two, indeed, explains the failure of so much Victorian art.

At first Fremantle appeared to hope that the portrait would escape the worst of the criticism, for in a letter of commiseration to Boehm, he commented that 'at any rate nobody has ventured to say the Effigy is not a good likeness, except a ribald scribe in the *Pall Mall* tonight'.<sup>49</sup> But he spoke too soon, and it was nevertheless Boehm's effigy that suffered most. The *Pall Mall*'s 'ribald scribe' was far from being alone in drawing attention to the absurdly small crown perched on the queen's head, worthy of a fairground giantess.<sup>50</sup> True, it was the crown she liked to wear and Goschen was able to tell the house of commons that 'the head-dress and the crown, and the mode of wearing it, adopted on the new coins will, I am informed, be found on all the more recent authorized effigies of Her Majesty, and not on the new coins alone'.<sup>51</sup> The public, however, preferred on their coinage a more dignified image of their queen. Boehm's realistic style might take a delightful form when he portrayed, for example, Thackeray wearing spectacles in a statuette, but according to the *Art Journal*: 'for such "realism" as his there is no place in numismatic art'.<sup>52</sup> Some of the attacks on Boehm reflected the chauvinism of the time, and at least one critic complained that 'the favoured artist bears not even an English name'.<sup>53</sup>

Criticism of a more perceptive kind came in a letter to the *Times*<sup>54</sup> by the painter, Edward Poynter, soon to be a coin designer himself. Poynter began by condemning the coins as 'the feeblest and most ill-executed specimens of coinage ever sent out from a national mint . . . it is not without reason that there is a general outcry against them'. The authorities must be praised, however, for retaining Pistrucci's *St George* on several of the reverses. 'Nor can they be otherwise than praised for having gone for the portrait of the Queen on the obverse to a sculptor so *facile princeps* in portraiture as Mr. Boehm, though in the production of his relief he was somewhat hampered by having to introduce material more suitable for a bust or for a large medallion than for so limited a field as a coin presents'. Against the press cutting on the file, a mint hand (almost certainly that of W.C. Roberts-Austen, who had acted throughout as Fremantle's confidant) has commented: 'the conditions which hampered Mr Boehm seriously increased the difficulties of coining also; and there were elements in the design which threw much high relief towards the circumference of the coin'.

Poynter was on less sure ground when he continued: 'the authorities at the Mint provided themselves with a good portrait of unexceptionable technique, which had only to be faithfully copied to have saved us from the most discouraging part of the business — the really shocking workmanship of the coins themselves'. Roberts-Austen, if he it was, disagreed. It was not sufficient to copy faithfully if the artist had failed to adapt to the constraints of coin design: 'a coin must be struck at a single blow, & Boehm's design, in plaster, was too high for this to be possible'.<sup>55</sup> Roberts-Austen also questioned Poynter's scathing opinions of the planes which express the modelling, but he ruefully wrote 'partly true' when Poynter complained that 'parts which should be kept subordinate are wrought up in excess; thus, the nose, which should be on the lowest plane, and in delicate relief

<sup>48</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 June 1887, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Fremantle to Boehm, 24 June 1887.

<sup>50</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 June 1887, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, 316 (14 June–6th July 1887): 28 June 1887 (cols. 1150–51).

<sup>52</sup> *Art Journal*, 1887, p. 287.

<sup>53</sup> Lewis F. Day, 'New Coins for Old', *Magazine of Art*, (1887), p. 419.

<sup>54</sup> *The Times*, 25 July 1887, pp. 3–4.

<sup>55</sup> Roberts-Austen was well qualified to judge. Apart

from his long experience in the mint, he had been actively involved in the preparation of copies in electro-deposited iron of Boehm's model for use on the reducing machine. See *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Deputy Master of the Mint*, 1886 (London, 1887), pp. 49–50 and Professor W. Chandler Roberts-Austen, F.R.S., 'The Electro-Deposition of Iron', *Journal of the Iron and Steel Institute*, 1 (1887), 71–77. The latter paper was delivered by Roberts-Austen on 26 May 1887.



from the ground, presents a twisted and swollen appearance from the exaggerated projection which has been given to it'. But according to Roberts-Austen this was again Boehm's fault rather than the mint's, since the relief of the nose was the same on the coinage as on the model. Finally, Poynter suggested that the whole issue should be recoined and given a more simply-treated portrait, though he observed in passing that the crowned portraits on the coins of Elizabeth I were highly successful.

Poynter evidently returned to the attack two or three days later when opening an exhibition in South Kensington. On this occasion he hinted rather more strongly that Boehm had been obliged to include 'such structural absurdities as the toy crown and the straight veil' in deference to the wishes of the queen.<sup>56</sup> It was a point picked up a couple of years later in Boehm's obituary in the *Times* which, while conceding that the effigy had not been a success, suggested that Boehm had been greatly hampered by his instructions.<sup>57</sup>

The mint did not publish a reply to Poynter. Silence was seen by Fremantle to be the most prudent reaction, and this was the course which he had already urged on Boehm: 'with regard to the coins themselves I would suggest that the less their details are discussed the better, as I am not at all without hope that the present tide of their unpopularity will turn, & that they will ultimately be viewed with favor'.<sup>58</sup> He wondered if perhaps they ought to have foreseen the effect on the public of 'that little crown'<sup>59</sup> and stopped it, but at heart he was unrepentant and he reminded Boehm that the coinage of 1817, 'now universally admired & accepted as models of workmanship'<sup>60</sup> had been badly handled at the time of its introduction. In a letter to Robert Hunt, his counterpart at the Sydney mint, Fremantle recognised that 'without a great & skilled Engraver we shall never have a really fine head on our coinage – but when a new Effigy has been selected in the highest quarters, the only thing to do is to get the best reproduction of it possible by mechanical means and take the consequences'. Prompted perhaps by Poynter's criticism, he also defended the small crown by comparing it with that on portraits of Elizabeth I, the latter 'looking much more as if it would fall off the head than our new crown does'.<sup>61</sup> To Ponsonby, Fremantle expressed the hope that the coins would be but a nine days' wonder: 'at any rate they are better than the old ones'.<sup>62</sup>

Wyon, who had had to suffer the mortification of preparing the master tools for the new effigy, was less kind. He told Fremantle that Boehm's design might look good in bold relief but in a coin it inevitably had a mean appearance. The face had to be the principal feature, and Wyon therefore hoped that both crown and bust would be abandoned in favour of a simple head. Of Wyon's part in the engraving of the new reverses, essentially revivals of designs of 1816/17 and even further back, there is no mention either now or earlier in the correspondence.<sup>63</sup>

The surviving papers also reveal little of Boehm's reaction, beyond his disappointment at the way the bust had been reproduced and his wish that the relief could have been higher. It is difficult to underestimate the effect that xenophobic ridicule must have had on this most gentlemanly of artists, whose career had hitherto enjoyed unbroken success. According to Marion Spielmann, an eminent critic of sculpture who knew Boehm well, hostility to the effigy proved fatal:

<sup>56</sup> J.L. Lant, 'The Jubilee coinage of 1887', *BNJ* 53 (1973), 132–41 (p.138).

<sup>57</sup> *The Times*, 13 December 1890, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Fremantle to Boehm, 27 June 1887.

<sup>59</sup> Fremantle to Boehm, 24 June 1887.

<sup>60</sup> Fremantle to Boehm, 27 June 1887.

<sup>61</sup> PRO. Mint 17/25, pp. 232–35; Fremantle to Hunt, 25 August 1887. He had written something similar to Hunt a few years earlier: 'I am sorry to say there is, in my opinion, no really good English Engraver now living. Our Mint "Modeller & Engraver," Mr. Leonard C. Wyon, for whom I

have the greatest regard, & who is a man of taste and cultivation, is certainly the best'. (PRO. Mint 17/49; Fremantle to Hunt, 16 January 1880).

<sup>62</sup> Fremantle to Ponsonby, 20 June 1887.

<sup>63</sup> A letter from Boehm to Roberts (later Roberts-Austen), 4 March 1880, suggests that the former's views may have been sought on the question of reverses: 'as far as I am concerned I would do my best but that not being much — we can at least borrow Pestrucchi's [sic] tasty shield as the Master of the Mint so judiciously did the St. George'. This suggestion was in fact adopted for the Jubilee coinage.

'his gentle spirit bowed in silence beneath the torrent of scornful condemnation with which his work was received, his tongue tied with official red tape and with Treasury sealing-wax upon his lips. He aged, unquestionably, under the trial, and there is little doubt that it had as serious a result upon his health, and perhaps, indeed, upon his life, just as the Wellington Monument had upon Alfred Stevens, as the national Gallery upon Wilkins, or as the Royal Courts of Justice upon Street'.<sup>64</sup>

As soon as expediency permitted, the coinage was changed. A note from the queen of September 1889 tells all: 'the Queen dislikes the new coinage very much, and wishes the old one could still be used and the new one gradually disused, and then a new one struck'.<sup>65</sup>

## APPENDIX

A tentative attempt has been made to list the patterns and dies which have survived from the long preliminary work on the Boehm effigy. Undoubtedly far more were prepared than now survive, and the list that follows is not only an incomplete record but is also difficult to relate to the descriptions in Mint 23/9. The sequence here is therefore largely based on the style of the portrait. This has given a result that is not altogether satisfactory, suggesting that Boehm's approach may have been rather less than orderly, with features (such as the double-arched crown) being discarded and then readopted in a somewhat haphazard fashion. All the illustrations have been enlarged with the exception of No. 25 on Plate 3, which has had to be reduced while the illustrations of matrices and dies have been reversed to facilitate comparison. Nos. 17 and 18 on Plate 2 are reproduced by permission of the trustees of the British Museum.

**SERIES A** Portrait with large crown, veil and Garter Star. Inscription VICTORIA D:G: BRITT: REG: F:D: unless otherwise stated.

- |       |  |  |
|-------|--|--|
| (i)   | Sovereign<br>Double-arched crown. Border to edge of veil.<br>Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1579)  | Obverse punch<br><br>Plate 1, No. 1                    |
| (ii)  | Sovereign, 1880<br><i>Obv.</i> Similar to (i) but with necklace and pendant.<br><i>Rev.</i> St George and Dragon, with date below.<br>Nobleman (1922, lot 272): ex J.G. Murdoch (1904, III, lot 543) and L.C. Wyon (1901, lot 6) | Silver, plain edge                                     |
| (iii) | Sovereign<br>Crown with single arch, but veil runs into beading as in (i) and (ii). Jewels in circlet of crown outlined with pearls. With necklace and pendant.<br>Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1576)                                | Obverse matrix<br><br>Plate 1, No. 2.                  |
| (iv)  | Sovereign<br>Similar to (iii) but veil does not reach beading. Cross of necklace outlined with pearls.<br>Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1577)   | Obverse matrix<br><br>Plate 1, No. 3.                  |
| (v)   | Half-sovereign, 1880<br><i>Obv.</i> Similar to (iv) but without pearls outlining jewels in crown and cross of necklace.<br><i>Rev.</i> St George and Dragon, with date below.<br>Royal Mint (Hocking, I, 2202)                   | Gold, plain edge<br><br>Plate 1, No. 4 (obverse only). |
| (vi)  | Half-sovereign, 1880<br>Apparently similar to (v) but struck in silver<br>Nobleman (1922, lot 272): ex J.G. Murdoch (1904, III, lot 543) and L.C. Wyon (1901, lot 6)   | Silver, plain edge                                     |
| (vii) | Sovereign, 1881<br><i>Obv.</i> Similar to (iv) but veil has fewer folds. Cross of necklace plain.<br><i>Rev.</i> St George and Dragon, with date below.<br>Royal Mint (Hocking, I, 2197)   | Gold, plain edge<br><br>Plate 1, No. 5 (obverse only). |

<sup>64</sup> M.H.S. (Marion H. Spielmann), 'The Artistic Aspect of the New Coinage', *Westminster Gazette*, 31 January 1893, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, edited by G.E. Buckle, 3rd series, (1886-90), I, 530.

- (viii) Sovereign Unfinished obverse matrix or die  
 Similar to (vii). The tool is still soft.  
 Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1578) Plate 1, No. 6.
- (ix) Sovereign Obverse punch  
 Without inscription, and details apparently incomplete. Somewhat similar to portrait on Afghanistan medal (Plate 1, No. 7), especially in folds of veil.  
 Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1575) Plate 1, No. 8.
- (x) Half-sovereign, 1884 Gold, milled edge  
*Obv.* VICTORIA DEI GRA: 1884. Similar to (ix) but higher arch to crown. Rounder outline to base of bust.  
*Rev.* BRITT: REGINA FIDEI DEFENSOR Four crowned shields separated by sceptres and with Garter Star in centre.  
 K.J. Douglas-Morris (1974, lot 194): ex W. Saward (1919, lot 95) and V.M. Brand.
- (xi) Half-sovereign or sixpence, 1884 Silver, milled edge  
*Obv.* Similar to (x)  
*Rev.* BRITT: REGINA FIDEI DEFENSOR Four crowned shields separated by floral emblems and with Garter Star in centre.  
 Norweb (forthcoming sale): ex W. Saward (1919, lot 120) and V.M. Brand  
 Plate 1, No. 9 (obverse only).

*SERIES B* Portrait with veil and tiara. Inscription VICTORIA D:G: BRITANNIAR: REG: F:D:

- (i) Sovereign, 1883 Gold, plain edge  
*Obv.* Truncated head without robes. Necklace without pendant brooch.  
*Rev.* St George and Dragon, with date below.  
 Royal Mint (Hocking, I, 2198) Plate 2, No. 10 (obverse only).
- (ii) Sovereign Obverse punch  
 As (i). Punch marked 10.  
 Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1580) Plate 2, No. 11.

*SERIES C* Portrait with veil and small crown. Inscription VICTORIA D:G: BRITT: REG: F:D: unless otherwise stated.

- (i) Half-crown, 1884 Silver, milled edge  
*Obv.* VICTORIA DEI GRATIA Crown with single arch, somewhat pointed. Veil plain except for frill at top. With necklace, ear-rings, Garter Star, and Badge of the Order of India.  
*Rev.* BRITANNIARUM REGINA FID: DEF: Shield within collar and Garter, date below.  
 Norweb (1985, lot 622): ex W. Saward (1919, lot 118) and V.M. Brand Plate 2, No. 12 (obverse only).
- (ii) Sovereign, 1885 Gold, milled edge  
*Obv.* Bust similar to (i) but more rounded at base.  
*Rev.* St George and Dragon, with date below.  
 Royal Mint (Hocking, I, 2199) Plate 2, No. 13 (obverse only).
- (iii) Sovereign Obverse die  
 Exactly as (ii) for which it is the die. Marked N° 1. 1885  
 Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1587) Plate 2, No. 14.
- (iv) Half-sovereign, undated Gold, milled edge  
*Obv.* VICTORIA DEI GRATIA Similar to (ii) but slight differences in crown.  
*Rev.* BRITANNIARUM REGINA FID: DEF: Crowned and garnished shield as current issue.  
 Royal Mint (Hocking, I, 2203) Plate 2, No. 15 (obverse only).
- (v) Sovereign Obverse punch  
 Head larger than in (i) ~ (iv). No cushion below crown. Brooch on bodice and Garter Star, but without Badge.  
 Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1586) Plate 2, No. 16.

- (vi) Sovereign Obverse impression  
Similar to (v) but bust runs into beading. Crown on slight cushion. Veil embroidered and more elaborate frill. With Star, brooch and two Badges.  
Lead impression from obverse matrix or unfinished die.  
British Museum. Presented by W. West, 20 November 1923, and said to have been 'obtained from the wife of one of the engravers'. Plate 2, No. 17.
- (vii) Sovereign Obverse impression  
Apparently as (vi) but with wider edge  
Lead impression from obverse matrix or unfinished die.  
British Museum. Presented by L.A. Lawrence, December 1925. Plate 2, No. 18.
- (viii) Sovereign Obverse punch  
Similar to (vi) and (vii). Without ear-rings, necklace, brooch, or Badges. Marked N° 8 REVISED NOV: 1885 and shows evidence of hand-work around the effigy.  
Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1585) Plate 3, No. 19.
- (ix) Sovereign Obverse matrix  
Similar to (viii)  
Marked FROM N° 8 REVISED 11.85. and J.E.B. 2.86. Shows evidence of hand-work around the effigy and is still soft.  
Royal Mint (Hocking, II, 1584) Plate 3, No. 20.
- (x) Sovereign Obverse die  
Base of bust smaller than in (v) – (ix). With Badge and necklace with pendant, but without Star. More embroidery on veil.  
Royal Mint (but not listed by Hocking) Plate 3, No. 21.
- (xi) Sovereign Obverse punch  
No inscription. Similar to (x) but crown removed.  
Heavily worked field, but hardened for use.  
Royal Mint (but not listed by Hocking) Plate 3, No. 22.
- (xii) Half-crown Obverse punch  
No inscription. Similar to (x) but bust is narrower. Double-arched crown. No embroidery on veil.  
The table has been heavily worked, and the tool is still soft.  
Royal Mint (but not listed by Hocking) Plate 3, No. 23.
- (xiii) Sovereign Unfinished obverse matrix or die  
No inscription. Similar to (xii) and also soft.  
Royal Mint (but not listed by Hocking) Plate 3, No. 24.
- (xiv) Copper electrotype Obverse  
No inscription. Crown with single arch and resting on pronounced cushion. With Badge and Star.  
Close to approved effigy (Pl. 3, No. 26) and signed J.E.B.  
Approximately 4.75 inches in diameter and presumed from its relatively shallow relief to relate to the coinage.  
Royal Mint (but not listed by Hocking) Plate 3, No. 25.

## PLATE 1



1



3



2



4



6



5



7



9



8



PLATE 2



10



11



12



13



14



15



16



17



18

## PLATE 3



19



20



21



22



23



24



25



26