

Australian coins – a fascinating history

Pre 1770

The First Australians did not use money as we know it; they used a barter system, trading goods from one end of Australia to the other. Some popular trading items included special stones for making tools, coloured stones (ochres) used for painting, and precious pearl shells that came from the far north of Australia.

1788

The British sent the First Fleet to Australia to set up a penal colony. They didn't send much money with the First Fleet because the convicts were not paid anything and the soldiers were supplied with goods for free from the Government Store. Besides, there were no shops!

Most of the first coins used in Australia came from the pockets of the officers, sailors and convicts who settled in Australia. These coins included English sovereigns, shillings and pence; Spanish reales; Indian rupees and Dutch guilders. It wasn't long before there were coins in Australia from all over the world. Almost any coin (no matter which country it was from or what it was made out of) ended up being used as money in Australia.



1800

As the Australian population grew, a proper money system was needed. There needed to be enough money to go around, and people had to know exactly what each coin was worth.

Governor King tried to solve the problem by making a proclamation, fixing the value of all of the different coins in the colony. These became known as the 'Proclamation Coins'.

However, there were still problems. There simply weren't enough coins, and many trading ships took precious coins out of the colony as payment for cargo.

1813

The British Government decided to send 40,000 Spanish dollars to the colony. Governor Macquarie asked a convict named William Henshall (who had been convicted of forgery) to punch a round piece out of each of the Spanish dollars.

This almost doubled the number of coins – producing 39,910 doughnut shaped pieces (known as 'holey dollars') and the same number of solid pieces from the centre (these were called 'dumps'). All the coins were stamped with the words 'New South Wales', and holey dollars and dumps were used in NSW until 1829 and in Tasmania until 1849.



There are only around 300 holey dollars and around 1000 dumps still in existence. Can you imagine how valuable one of these coins would be today?

Investigating Australian Coins

1825

The English Parliament passed the 'Sterling Silver Money Act' which officially made British coins the only recognised form of currency in Australia. The Spanish dollar soon fell into disuse because it was no longer worth anything. Silver coins were shipped to Australia after being made at the British Royal Mint.

1849

The first gold discovery in Australia was in Victoria in January 1849, and by 1851 the life of the colony had been disrupted because of the gold rush. Within a few years there was pressure to convert this gold into something that could be easily spent.



Early gold sovereign

1852

While Australia was waiting for a mint, people were making up their own rules about how to turn their gold into money. The Adelaide Assay office made strips of stamped gold which came to be known as the 'Adelaide ingots'. Each of these ingots was unique and individually stamped to indicate its weight and how pure its gold content was.

1855

A branch of the British Royal Mint was opened in Sydney. A Melbourne branch followed in 1872 and a Perth branch opened in 1899.

1910

In 1909, eight years after Federation, the Federal Parliament passed a bill allowing Australia to have its own coins. In 1910 the first distinctive Commonwealth coins were issued. The coins were based on the British sterling system of pounds, shillings and pence.



Penny

Half penny

Shilling

1963

The government announced it was planning to convert to a decimal currency system in the coming years. Six leading artists were commissioned to submit designs for the new coins. The rules included that the design must be an Australian theme. Stuart Devlin was the artist selected and he was given six months to complete his work.



Coin design

Investigating Australian Coins

1965

The Royal Australian Mint opened in Canberra. Australia now had its own Mint which began producing decimal coins.

1966

On 14 February, decimal currency was introduced in Australia, with 1c, 2c, 5c, 10c, 20c and 50c coins which were all round in shape. These decimal coins replaced the half penny, penny, threepence, sixpence, shilling and florin.



1969

The circular 50c coin was replaced by a 12-sided 50c coin which we still use today.

1984

A \$1 coin was introduced to replace the \$1 note (which was made out of paper). Why? The \$1 notes kept wearing out too quickly from being touched and passed around.

1988

A \$2 coin was introduced to replace the \$2 note.



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1992

Australia's 1c and 2c coins were taken out of circulation because their worth had dropped, and they were becoming too expensive to make.



2012

Australia's first coloured circulating coin was produced. It was a \$2 coin and commemorated Remembrance Day with an image of a red poppy on the reverse side. Only half a million of these were produced so they are quite rare.



2013

The Mint produced two ground-breaking coin designs.

The first was a dome-shaped \$5 coin depicting the night sky. Called 'The Southern Cross – Crux' this coin was not a circulating coin, but a collectors' item.

The second was a triangular, silver \$5 coin. This was to mark the 25th anniversary of the Australian Parliament House. This coin was also a collectors' item.



2016

It has been 50 years since decimal currency was introduced on 14 February 1966.