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# THE 1880 MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION FOUNDATION STONE MEDAL

Les Carlisle, when publishing what was known of the medal believed to have been struck to commemorate the laying of the foundation stone for the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition, gave the following information (Car.1880/12):

Size: 22 mm Metal: Gold  
Mintage: n/k Mint: Stokes & Martin  
Edge: Plain with ring and ribbon attachment.

He also offered a copy of a letter which is believed to have accompanied the issue of the medal (though the content of the letter seems to infer a late date). Since his publication in 1983, further information has come to light, and the full story of the medal can now be told.



The medal probably deserves to be in the record books for the time which elapsed between its inception and its delivery. At a meeting of the Executive Commissioners of the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition on the afternoon of 13 Feb. 1879, the suggestion was put forward that a gold medal should be struck for Commissioners. It was proposed that each of the Commissioners would receive one in time to wear it at the button hole on the day of the laying of the foundation stone of the Exhibition Buildings. The other details were left to Mr. Were, one of the Commissioners. The Governor of the Colony was due to lay the stone on the 19th., this gave Were five clear days to have the medals ready.

Were, either realising that five days was not very long for the task, or wishing to hand the job to someone as soon as he could, went straight to the Melbourne Mint at the close of the meeting. Unfortunately the Deputy Master, V. Delves Broughton, was not there. Were therefore left him a note outlining the proposal and asking to see him in the morning. The note included an idea for the design:

“The device might be a view of the intended building and the reverse the name of the Commissioner with the date, say 1880, and a wreath or other ornament or design if you will kindly think it over and suggest”.

After the meeting on the 14th. he left a further note confirming the order and added “could you manage to have the Southern Cross shown over the building or on the reverse”.

Now, with four days to go, and a rough idea of what was wanted, the Mint went into action. The fact that they had no die engraver only added spice to the challenge. The size of the medal was to be between that of a sixpence and a shilling which lent itself perfectly to the shortcut of making it the size of a sovereign. This was a shortcut because a pair of old sovereign dies could be re-worked thus minimising the work of shaping the dies for the press. A pair of dies was selected and softened and the design removed.

At this point an engraver was needed to cut the design directly into the die. Mr. Ernst Altmann was chosen and told what was wanted. Broughton then wrote to Were telling him of the steps that had been taken and suggested that the issue would cost about £70 depending on the thickness of gold needed to take the design.

On the 17th., with two days left, Altmann wrote to the mint to suggest that the design was not well balanced. "There will be too much bright space underneath the engraving of the building which would make it look bad. I would therefore suggest, (and I am confident that it would meet Mr. Were's approval) that you have the words "FOUNDATION STONE" engraved directly under the 1880, and "COMMEMORATION MEDAL" around the edge". Altmann had been working on the dies for the previous three days and nights (including, he specifies, Sunday) but was confident that they would be ready the next morning.

The Deputy Master approved the alteration to the inscription, but it is not known who actually made the additions to the die. In any case, Altmann was told to have the dies at the mint by 9.00 a.m. on the 18th. He was to wait while they were hardened, about an hour, and then take them back to his workshop, polish them and return them to the mint by noon. Altmann was also to arrange for the loops to be ready, these he was buying from his brother. The style of loop chosen was an oval made from thin gold wire. Altmann would attach these to the medals and sew the ribbon to them as well as inscribe the names of the Commissioners on the reverse of the medal by the next day.

A total of seventy gold medals was struck during the afternoon. Altmann presumably watched the striking of the first few as he sent an assistant to the mint later to pick up the rest of the issue, he had taken the first seven himself. In addition to the gold medals there was also a need for six silver pieces for use in the actual stone laying ceremony. These were not ready when the last of the gold striking was sent to Altmann but presumably were struck off before the dies were removed from the press. At the time, two further silver pieces and one in copper were struck for the Mint Museum (these are now part of the Victorian State Collection). The gold pieces were struck in standard gold, the silver at .980 fine and the copper was pure copper.

At the foot of the account sent to the Commissioners, the following note was appended: "The obverse die is now so much cracked as to be utterly useless. If any more medals wanted a new die must be cut".

The Commissioners must have been delighted to receive their medals, as they overlooked this note. On June 25, 1879 they ordered an additional 36 gold medals and had to be told again that the die was broken. Undeterred, they approached Ernst Altmann and arranged for him to cut a second obverse die. This new die was delivered to the mint on July 2 and the 36 medals were struck and delivered with the note: "Owing to the inferior quality of the metal from which the die was made, the impression on these medals is not perfectly brought out. Cracks appeared in the base of the die after the first blow of the press which rendered it unsafe afterwards to give the heavy impact necessary to produce a good medal".

A year later the Exhibition Commissioners put in an order for a further fifty medals for newly appointed Commissioners. This batch was probably the one with which the letter published by Carlisle was issued. It should be remembered that the words "Foundation Stone Commemoration Medal" were not requested by the Commissioners who saw the medal as having a more general function as implied in that letter, and for whom the Foundation Stone ceremony was a suitable occasion only for first having them available to wear.

On this occasion the mint struck 53 medals, the order had apparently been increased. But this issue can be identified very easily as steel rings were used with it instead of the fine gold wire of the first two issues. The last of the medals was issued to Altmann on July 22, 1880 along with the dies. Altmann had entered these dies in the Exhibition competition.

The last chapter of the story is a short one. The Commissioners wished to have further medals struck in August 1881 and

contacted the mint to find out where the dies were. The mint replied that they had been given to Altmann but were at that time cracked and quite unfit for further use. The Commissioners then decided not to pursue the matter.

The entry in Carlisle's second edition should therefore read:

Size: 22 mm. Metal: Gold, Silver, Copper.  
Mintage: 159.8.1  
Mint: Melbourne Branch of Royal Mint.  
Edge: Plain with gold or steel ring and ribbon for suspension.

John Sharples  
**Curator of Numismatics**  
Museum of Victoria.

Reference: Carlisle, L. J. *Australian Commemorative Medals and Medalets from 1788*, Sydney 1983.  
Melbourne Mint Records (Series 643 Unit 175 Division A of Victorian Public Records office).