

# Coins of the Irish Troubles

The writer has in his collection a small group of coins of the Irish Republic that were counter-marked during the Troubles in the 1970's. To understand these coins better, it is necessary to take a brief look at the history of Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century...



## Imitating & Defacing the coinage

Would-be conquerors, usurpers and those seeking to influence against a government have often used the issue of coinage as a means of legitimising the status of their cause. Some have resorted to issuing satirical tokens while other, like German Operation Bernhard in World War II, have sought to cause economic distress to their opponents.

Despite the threat of (often severe) punishment, coins have been defaced for political reasons almost as long as they have been minted. Examples from Roma times onwards show monarch's titles and images defaced with a variety of marks seeking to cast doubt on the legitimacy or effectiveness of their rule.

## The Struggle for Irish Independence & a New Coinage

After a series of campaigns over nearly three centuries, Ireland gained its independence from the United Kingdom on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1922 became a self-governing British Dominion: the Irish Free State.

Six counties in the north wished to remain part of the United Kingdom and this right was exercised two days later when counties Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone rejoined the UK.

British coinage continued to be valid in the Free State and, when the Dublin government sanctioned its own coinage in 1926, this adopted the same currency units (half crown, florin, shilling &c) as that circulating in the UK upon its first issue in 1928, albeit with emblems held to represent the fledgling state. Politically, this was an important step for the de Valera government as no identifiable Irish coinage had been minted since the last Hibernia coppers of George IV in 1823.

## The Troubles

The Republic of Ireland was economically stable with income per head around 60% of that in the UK mainland throughout the 1950's and 1960's, but a different picture was emerging in the north where there was a significant (and widening) economic gap between the protestant and catholic communities with many companies refusing to hire staff across the sectarian divide. Various pressure groups were formed on both sides, seeking and responding to a desire for greater civil rights and increasing tensions led to the outbreak of armed conflict in the summer of 1969.

## The Road to Defacement

Throughout the period since 1928, the Irish punt was linked to the British pound at 1:1 so coins from the Irish Republic and the UK held equal tender status throughout Ireland and had generally been accepted, despite the efforts of some protestants for them to be rejected as alien money.



During the early 1970's, however, coins began to appear in loose change that had been defaced with often crude and overtly political slogans. The large majority still extant show the coinage of the Irish Republic defaced with crude punched messages supporting the protestant military groups that emerged from the mid 1960's onwards although others have the British Queen's head overstruck with the letters IRA.

### The Messages

Most of the Irish coins defaced by or on behalf of the protestant paramilitary groups simply added the group's name letters, usually over the word Eire or across the Irish harp as a means of showing the perpetrator's rejection of Irish claims to sovereignty over Northern Ireland. Known groupings, on whose behalf coins were defaced include:

- IRA Irish Republican Army
- VAN Vanguard – briefly popular protestant political party
- UDA Ulster Defence Association
- UFF Ulster Freedom Fighters
- UVF Ulster Volunteer Force



A second group of countermarks sought to inflame inter-community relations further by making reference to key dates in the Irish conflicts of the past, most notably the accession of King William III in 1688 and defeat of James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

The final group includes messages of hatred aimed at the catholic community and one, particularly crude, group includes the counter-marked initials F.T.P. which the eminent Irish numismatist Michael Dolley described as 'the notorious graffito FTP with its rude exhortation to the reader to inflict on His Holiness an activity that could be thought particularly inappropriate for a professed celibate'. Other 'messages' include:

- KAI Kill All Irish
- KAT Kill all Taigs (a derogatory term for Irish persons)



### Workmanship & Origins

Overall, the quality of workmanship is poor and execution is not to normal mint standards, but it didn't need to be for the message to be sent.

The consensus is that they were struck by hand in engineering workshops across Belfast, including those associated with ship-building (very much a protestant trade in the 1960's and 1970's).

The florin or 10p coin is most regularly seen and this is thought to reflect the ease with which the larger flan coins can be punched at reduced risk to the hands of the 'craftsman' compared to the smaller and thinner lower value coins. Once struck, coins could also be passed anonymously back into circulation via telephone boxes without pecuniary loss to the organisation

### Legacy

Thankfully, Northern Ireland has been at peace for nearly two decades and the different currencies now in use either side of the border have reduced the impetus for this form of political statement. The coins leave a vivid reminder of the strength of sentiment that remains below the surface and serve as a reminder to politicians of the price of failure to meet social and economic aspirations across the community divide.