

Royal commemorative medals in Britain — souvenir and self-promotion

Frances Simmons

Royal events in the United Kingdom have been commemorated traditionally with medals for centuries, back to the Stuarts and before. There was no lack of commemoration for the recent coronation of King Charles III. But we've seen a change in the medal as a souvenir as people commemorate, if at all, in different ways from previous generations.

No official commemorative medal has been issued for a coronation or royal jubilee since that of George VI & Elizabeth in 1937, before World War II. For Charles III, there were hardly any mayoral medal gifts; it used to be customary to give cheap keepsakes to school children to keep and to wear at celebratory events. An example of this is the Edward VII & Alexandra *Coronation* 1902 medal for Kidderminster (fig. 1). Designed by George Frampton, the medal was manufactured by The Mint, Birmingham. The reverse shows the circular arms of the Worcestershire town of Kidderminster, with Peter Adam, Mayor, Coronation June 26th, 1902.¹ To personalise this medal, we find written in black ink in the lid 'From Grandpapa and Mama to Edna'. This makes a charming souvenir and is quite typical of the older generation buying for the youngest. In the trade, we see this type of personalisation quite often when the card case survives. Very rarely do we see the actual medals engraved on the edge or elsewhere – generally the box or case is personalised by gilt embossing, or exceptionally with a plaque affixed to the case.²

In 1937 the makers of Rowntree's Cocoa, Jellies and Gums commissioned from Vaughton a souvenir medal for

the coronation of Edward VIII.³ Edward abdicated so there was no coronation. Undeterred, the confectioners issued a medal for the coronation of George VI. It is very similar, made by the same manufacturer, same size (fig. 2). Why did the company strike royal commemorative medals? Rowntree is a Yorkshire firm with its origins in 18th century, founded as a company in early 19th century. In the 1930s it launched many of its most famous brands and boxes of chocolate: Black Magic, Dairy Box, Aero, Kit Kat, etc. Director George Harris had married into the Rowntree family and was responsible for their innovative branding and marketing. J. Walter Thompson was appointed their advertising agency. Making a medal would have been part of the old way of building staff loyalty and to show patriotism. In contrast, the firm made sweet tins as a retail souvenir and continued this practice up to and including the coronation of Elizabeth II.

In comparison to the relatively cheap gilt brass souvenir made by Rowntree, the Gordon Hotels Group coronation medal of 1937 was a classic premium gift (fig. 3). It was made by Turner & Simpson with the approved effigies of George VI and Elizabeth.⁴ Different reverses of the medal exist for group members, the Mayfair Hotel, and Hotel Victoria, both in London, and the Hotel Metropole Brighton. They became Grand Metropolitan Hotels, now owned by Diageo. The silk lining of the case is printed with the name of the hotel.

Using the same approved portrait design of George VI and Elizabeth, HMV, the record retailer produced a silvered bronze medal which was sort of personalized or could be



Fig 1. Coronation of King Edward VII & Queen Alexandra, 1902
In original card case, with personal inscription by George Frampton for the Mint, Birmingham Ltd.
Bronze, struck, 35 mm



Fig 2. Rowntree's Cocoa Jellyes & Gums, Yorkshire,
medal for the Coronation of George VI & Elizabeth, 1937
Vaughton Brothers
Gilt brass, struck, 32 mm

thought to be so: 'To commemorate YOUR association with "His Master's Voice" during coronation year 1937.' At 38 mm the size is standard for a crown or five shillings



Fig 3. Grosvenor Hotel London SW1 medal for
the Coronation of George VI & Elizabeth, 1937
Turner & Simpson
Bronze, struck, 44 mm

blurring the boundaries between a medal, coin or token (fig. 4).

Another example of a medal using the approved portrait for the coronation in 1937 is the City and Corporation of London's medal given to those attending a celebratory banquet at the Guildhall (fig. 5). It is unusual to have a portrait on these badges which were issued by the City of London for all the great receptions and banquets held in the Guildhall.⁵ More usual is the 1939 jewel which plainly states the occasion: Visit of the king & queen to Guildhall on their return from Canada and America. 23rd June 1939.⁶

After World War II the use of the medal changes slightly. There is no official commemorative medal. On the coronation of Elizabeth II, the City of London produced a base metal medal in a two-tone card case. It is very often found in junk boxes but not as common as the 1953 cupronickel crown in its black and clear plastic case which was bought by millions in multiples as a souvenir. Yet the appetite for souvenirs was still great. The old tradition of boroughs or counties producing a special commemorative medal persisted. John Pinches used an approved effigy with customised reverses to cash in on the event, such as with Lambeth Borough Council medal (fig. 6). Nine other reverses are known for this medal.⁷

In recent years, numismatic souvenirs have been more closely aligned to currency, e.g., £2, 50 pence, or bullion e.g. 1 oz or 1 kilo coins. The cost of making a metal medal impacts the buyer. Ironically, for such a patriotic favour the cheaper medals come not from Birmingham and the West Midlands as before but from China and Asia. This blurring of the name – medal/coin – is further exacerbated with the demise of cash for the payment of small amounts of goods and services. The nearest approximation we have for a Charles III official table type commemorative medal was issued by the Royal Mint



Fig 4. Coronation of George VI and Elizabeth, 1937
'His Masters Voice' now HMV records,
J Langford Jones for The Mint Birmingham
Base metal, struck, 38 mm



Fig 5. Coronation of George VI & Elizabeth, 1937
Medal for Reception at the Guildhall,
City of London, by G & S Co Ltd.
Gilt silver with suspension: crowned enamelled red and white
Corporation of London arms, 35 x 50 mm

(fig. 7). However, it is marketed as 1 oz Silver Proof Coin with £2 denomination. It is a non-circulating legal tender coin (NCLT). Confusingly, the design uses the imperial measure, and the coin denomination. Like the medals officially issued for George VI and previous monarchs, this commemorative is available in different metals, including prestigious gold and silver.

The use of the royal cipher and emblem instead of a portrait is far more common for the coronation of Charles III on commemoratives other than medals and coins. A logo or brand is important both for the maker and the promoter.



Fig 6. Coronation EIR, 1953 souvenir
Queen Elizabeth II crowned 2 June 1953
queen's head right by John Pinches for Lambeth Borough Council
Aluminium alloy gilt finish, 35 mm



We are accustomed to seeing it printed on medal boxes and packaging for over a century whether by the Royal Mint or private mints like Westminster, Fattorini, Pinches. These days, the emblem and the cipher (crowned C III R) are approved, very much controlled and used extensively for souvenirs including medals. The logo or emblem for the coronation was created by designer Sir Jony Ive KBE (Knight of the British Empire) and his creative collective, LoveFrom⁸. The emblem unites the flora of the four



Fig 7. The Royal Mint, 1oz Silver Proof £2 coin for the coronation of his Majesty King Charles III, 2023
Portrait effigy of the king by Martin Jennings
38.01 mm
Photo: The Royal Mint

nations of the United Kingdom; the rose of England, the thistle of Scotland, the daffodil of Wales and the shamrock of Northern Ireland, referencing the king's love of nature. Together, the flowers create the shape of St Edward's Crown, with which the king was crowned during the Coronation Service at Westminster Abbey on Saturday, 6th May 2023 (fig. 8).

An official military service medal for Charles III and Camilla exists, although it was not ready in time for the coronation itself. The reverse is very similar to his mother's souvenir medal. These award medals are made of nickel silver, unlike similar ones in silver issued to servicemen in 1953. The obverse features a crowned effigy of Charles and Camilla facing left. The reverse shows the monogram, the royal cypher C III R surmounted by the Tudor crown, a laurel wreath and the date of the coronation, 6th May 2023 (fig. 9). In theory about 400,000 medals could be made and distributed to members of the Armed Forces and uniformed Emergency Services with 5 years continuous service up to 5th May 2023. As the king is already in his



Fig 8. Approved emblem for Charles III, designed by Sit Jony IVE KBE and collective, LoveFrom, 2023
Photo: DCMS



Fig 9. Coronation of Charles III, official medal, 2023
Crowned effigy of the king and queen facing left
Nickel silver (copper nickel alloy)
Photo: Awardmedals.com

seventies, this service medal might therefore become the most common memento of the king's reign.

If you are not entitled to the official medal, you could buy Bigbury Mint's coronation medal designed by Matthew Holland. It is made of plated base metal with a yellow and purple ribbon. The reverse shows the Order of the Garter with the royal cypher. Bigbury Mint also made copies of the official medal under licence to the Ministry of Defence.⁹

Not all citizens and subjects of the United Kingdom are in favour of the monarchy. Around the time of the coronation, there were protests with placards proclaiming 'Not My King'. Darren Cullen, graffiti artist, satirist and activist, produced some crown coin sized medals or NCLTs with the king beheaded. On this medal of dishonour, blood appears to ooze from Charles' severed head. The inscription reads 'Charles III. Sic Semper Tyrannis. 2023'.¹⁰ Bad things come to tyrants eventually. On the reverse is a crowned skull with Gothic script 'God will not Save the King', referring to the first line of the UK national anthem (fig. 10).

Other private mints have taken advantage of a commercial opportunity. One such example is the Westminster Coronation Collection Long to Reign over us: a set of three silver medals with the reverse on each *Magnae Britanniae* ('of Great Britain') (fig. 11). Other products are all coin like, 50 pence coins in shape.¹¹ The decline of



Fig 10. Charles III medal God will not save the king, 2023
Darren Cullen
Plated metal, 40 mm



Fig 11. Long to Reign over us, 2023
Commemorative medals for the coronation of Charles III,
The Westminster Collection
Silver, struck, 38 mm
Photo: The Westminster Mint



Fig 12. 50th anniversary of the British Numismatic Trade Association, 2023,
two dollars NCLT
Issued by Niue, designed by Jody Clark, Commonwealth Mint
2oz .999 silver, struck, 38.6 mm
Photo: BNTA

cash appears to have altered public perception so that now a coin is viewed more like a medal was in the past.

This confusion regarding what is a medal and what is a coin is everywhere, even among numismatists. The year 2023 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the British Numismatic Trade Association (BNTA) and a commemorative coin has been issued. But if it is not legal tender except in

a tiny island in the Pacific, is it truly a coin? In spirit it is a medal. Made by the private Commonwealth Mint using the portrait of Charles by Jody Clark it has a value of two dollars from the tiny Pacific Island state of Niue. The reverse uses iconic images from British coins: Una and the Lion in the centre, Gothic crown Victoria, Britannia and the three Graces, with the BNTA logo at the base (fig. 12). The BNTA also produced a chocolate medal using the reverse design. It is a medal as stated on the reverse label until you open the gold foil and find a chocolate 10p or 5p coin. Reader, albeit confused, I still ate the tasty chocolate.

In conclusion, I present a couple of rather lovely traditional portraits of the new king and queen by Ian Rank-Broadley. These large bronze plaques were commissioned by the king and feature Charles and Camilla in their robes of the Order of the Garter (fig. 13). The medallions are installed in Queen Mother Square, Poundbury, Dorchester on Duchy of Cornwall land. The plaques were unveiled by Charles and Camilla on 27th June 2023. This town is Charles' pet architectural project but is now the responsibility of Prince William as the new Duke of Cornwall. I have discussed medals as adverts, as premiums, and the lack of a commemorative medal. Despite having no legend, these large plaques are the epitome of the royal commemorative genre and the traditional form of branding 'the Firm', royalty by royalty.



Fig 13. Charles III and Camilla in robes of the Garter, 2023
Ian Rank-Broadley
Bronze, cast, 400 mm
Photo: © the artist

NOTES

1. This is the original date of the coronation of Edward VII and Alexandra. It was postponed to August 1902 because of the king's illness. See Brown, L.: *A Catalogue of British Historical Medals*, volume III, London, 1995, 3768.
2. For example: an official George V silver jubilee medal in its original case but with a silver engraved plaque affixed: 'John Michael Fellowes Prynne from his Godfather Sherard J H Prynne In commemoration of his Baptism on Thursday April 18 1935 being the year of the Silver Jubilee of Their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary'.
3. Whittlestone, A. and Ewing, M.: *Royal Commemorative Medals 1837–1977*, vol. 7, Llanfyllin, 2009, 7370F.
4. Whittlestone and Ewing, 2009, 7342D.
5. Hinde, K. and Attwood, P.: *Badges and Medals of The Corporation of London and Guilds outside London, Trade Tokens and Other Medals in the Collections of the Worshipful Company of Cutlers of London*, Sandy, 2014, p. 99.
6. Hinde and Attwood, 2014, p. 108.
7. Whittlestone, A. and Ewing, M.: *Royal Commemorative Medals 1837–1977*, vol. 8, Llanfyllin, 2012, 8056 reverse E, Lamb and Flag, emblem of Lambeth Borough Council, London.
8. Ive was chief design officer of Apple Inc. from 1997 until 2019.
9. <https://bigburymint.com/product/king-charles-coronation-medal-commemorative-full-size/> [accessed 28-11-2023]. *Charles III coronation* medal, 2023, designed by Matthew Holland, The Bigbury Mint, plated metal, 32 mm. A miniature version of the Charles III medal is also available.
10. *Sic semper tyrannis* ('thus always to tyrants'), sometimes thought to be uttered by Brutus when assassinating Julius Caesar in 44 BC. However, it was uttered by John Wilkes Booth when he assassinated Abraham Lincoln.
11. <https://www.westminsterinternationalshop.com/products/the-king-charles-iii-coronation-crest-medal> [accessed 28-11-2023]. Base metal and colours, 28.5 mm, NCLT although in the shape of a fifty pence coins.