



## Britannia

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This note gives some background to press reports to the effect that none of the new coins in a newly redesigned set of coins will show Britannia on the reverse side.

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## A. History: nation and goddess

The Wikipedia entry for Britannia highlights its long, and sometimes contested, association with the state and its organs:

The Britannias was the original Latin name the Roman Empire gave to the British Isles, consisting of Albion, Hibernia and many smaller islands, originating from a reference from Pytheas of Massilia (Marseilles) in around 300 BC to the Pretanic (or Britannic) Islands. Deriving from *Pretannia*, Diodorus's Greek rendering of the indigenous name *pretani*, **Britannia** became the preferred Roman term for the island of Great Britain, and in particular the Roman province of Britain which extended north as far as Hadrian's Wall. *Britannia* was personified as a Goddess by the Romans, and more recently, has become a figure of national personification of the UK.

The Romans originally described the group of islands off north-west Europe as the *Britanniae*, consisting of *Albion* (Britain), *Hibernia* (Ireland) and many smaller islands. Over time, Albion came to be known as *Britannia*, and the name for the group was subsequently dropped.

[...]

There was a celtic goddess called Brigid who is one of the many sources of the personification of Britain. The Emperor Claudius paid a visit while Britain was being conquered and was honoured with the agnomen *Britannicus* as if he were the conqueror, but Britannia remained a place, not a female personification of the land, until she appeared on coins issued under Hadrian, which introduced a female figure labelled BRITANNIA.

Britannia was soon personified as a goddess. Early portraits of the goddess depict Britannia as a beautiful young woman, wearing the helmet of a Centurion, and wrapped in a white garment with her right breast exposed. She is usually shown seated on a rock, holding a spear, and with a spiked shield propped beside her. Sometimes she holds a standard and leans on the shield.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, variations on the term appear in the titles of the 9th century historia Britonum and the 12th century Historia Regum Britanniae which became tremendously popular during the Middle Ages.

It gained new symbolic meaning with the rise of British influence, and later the British Empire, which at its height ruled a quarter of the world's population and landmass. With the death of Queen Elizabeth 1 came the succession of her Scottish cousin, James VI of Scotland to the English throne. He became James I of England, and so brought under his personal rule the Kingdoms of England (and the dominion of Wales), Ireland and Scotland. On 20 October 1604 King James proclaimed himself as "King of Great Brittain, France and Ireland", a title that continued to be used by many of his successors. With the constitutional unification of England and Scotland in 1707 and then with Ireland in 1800 Britannia became an increasingly important symbol and a strong rallying point among Britons.

British power, which depended on a liberal political system and the supremacy of the navy, lent these attributes to the image of Britannia. By the time of Queen Victoria, Britannia had been renewed. Still depicted as a young woman with brown or golden hair, she kept her Corinthian helmet and her white robes, but now she held Poseidon's three-pronged trident and often stood in the ocean, representing British naval power. She also usually held or stood beside a Greek hoplite shield, which

sported the British Union flag: also at her feet was often the British Lion, the national animal of England which also appears on the Arms of Scotland—and a representative of God. Another change was that she was no longer bare breasted, due to the modesty of Victorian society.<sup>1</sup>

## **B. Britannia & the coinage**

Considerable detail about the tradition of Britannia appearing on British coins is published by a coin and Bullion company called Chard.<sup>2</sup> They note that the Roman emperor Claudius was given the name Britannicus following the successful invasion of Britain in 43AD. This name was inscribed on triumphal architecture in Rome on his return and this was reproduced on several coins of the time. These were Roman coins, although some have been found in Britain, indicating their usage even in the furthest outposts of the then Empire.

Britannia first appeared on a truly British coin when she (Britannia had occasionally been male in Roman times but was now modelled on the Duchess of Richmond – a society beauty and attachment to the court of Charles II) appeared on the reverse side of the farthing in 1672, followed by the halfpenny later the same year. According to the Royal Mint the familiar seated figure was “Used as a political symbol of the war with the Dutch, her olive branch represented a desire for peace above conflict”.<sup>3</sup> She then appeared on the penny coin between 1797 and 1970 and on the 50 pence coin since 1969.

## **C. Find the Lady**

Current interest in Britannia’s status has been aroused by newspaper articles such as this one from the Daily Mail which provided the following:

EVER since she appeared on a farthing in the reign of Charles II more than 300 years ago, the image of Britannia sitting on her rock wearing her Greek helmet and flowing classical robes, holding her trident with a lion at her feet has made a continuous appearance on British coins. But now the Royal Mint has confirmed that, before he left the Treasury for Number 10, Gordon Brown personally approved a new set of coins from which she has been entirely removed.

How profoundly depressing. No other name is more redolent of our country. No symbol, other than the Union Flag, better sums up these islands.

Yet we are told that under the most significant overhaul of coinage since decimalisation, she is to be replaced with a representation of modern Britain, whatever that may be.

[...]

She has been a small but charming and even romantic part of our way of life for so long that the banishment of her graceful female form seems to be a pointless and

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<sup>1</sup> Britannia, Wikipedia, ret'd 28 February 2008,

<sup>2</sup> [Chard \(1964\) Limited](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Royal Mint press release](#); 5 March 2008

expensive act of vandalism, another small aspect of the brutalisation of today's Britain.

It seems not to matter that, through centuries of British coinage, she has been unfailingly adaptable for her various masters -- she turned to face right instead of left for George IV's currency and even stood up for the florin coin of Edward VII. Even though we have six denominations of coins, from the one penny to the 50 pence piece, it seems not one of them has a place for her in Gordon Brown's Britain.

While the Prime Minister wraps himself in the Union Flag, with proclamations of his love of country, he quietly ditches the very symbol that has represented Britain's past and present glory for longer than any other.

Because, although Britannia has been continuously on our coins since that first Britannia farthing was minted in 1672, she has personified the proud history of these islands since long before the invention of the Union Flag with which her shield is emblazoned.

[...]

Britannia reminds us of the best of Britain: she is gentle, generous, yet also strong. Foreigners have nothing to fear from Britannia, or the lion at her feet, if they do not rouse her. Custom, habit, tradition, the past, pride and, if necessary, military strength: Britannia stands for much in our world that should be as important today as they were in Stuart times.

Gordon Brown was shortsighted as well as unchivalrous to consign Britannia to the Royal Mint smelting plants. Let's hope one day that she -- and the values for which she stands -- will return.<sup>4</sup>

The Royal Mint, responsible for the production, design and issuance of all coinage in this country, published a note explaining the process by which the new designs on the coins were chosen.

The definitive reverse designs of the coins currently in circulation, with the exception of the 20p, the £1 coin and the £2 coin (which were introduced in 1982, 1983 and 1988 respectively) were created by Christopher Ironside in preparation for decimalisation in 1971. The first of the new decimal coins, the 5p and 10p, were introduced in April 1968 and corresponded exactly in size and value to the shillings and florins.

It has, therefore, been almost 40 years since the current reverse designs were first introduced. This is an unusually long period and it would be necessary to go back as far as 1887 to find a series of reverses which has lasted as long.

A public competition to obtain new designs was announced in August 2005 with the specific intention of generating public interest. The competition was open to members of the public who competed alongside specially invited artists and the Royal Mint engraving department.

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<sup>4</sup> Daily Mail, 29 January 2008

The design brief gave would-be designers a 'free hand'. However, as heraldry has been an important element in the design of British coins for centuries, entrants were encouraged to look at interpreting heraldry in an 'imaginative and creative way'. The brief also suggested that they might like to consider themes to represent Britain, such as flora or fauna, geographic features, social, political or cultural achievements or British institutions.

Over 4000 designs were received, the highest response to any public competition to redesign the United Kingdom coinage, including that organised at the time of decimalisation. To ensure impartiality it was requested that no initials or identifying marks were included on the drawings. All designs were considered at length by the Royal Mint Advisory Committee on the Design of Coins, Medals, Seals and Decorations before making a recommendation. The Committee was established in 1922 with the purpose of raising the standard of numismatic art in the United Kingdom. The Committee meets under the chairmanship of Professor Sir Christopher Frayling.

The £1 coin and £2 coin were initially not included in the brief as these are relatively new additions to the UK's coinage. However, the £1 was later added to complete the winning set of designs that were submitted.

The winning designs for the reverse side of seven of the United Kingdom's circulating coins - from the 1p to the £1 coin - will be announced in early Spring. The designs take a traditional theme that reflects the nation's rich heritage, including our historic national and heraldic emblems, and treats it in an innovative and contemporary way.

There are no plans to remove the existing Britannia design 50p coins from circulation - of which there are an estimated 806 million pieces.<sup>5</sup>

It should be pointed out that since 1992 Britannia ceased to be a constant on all 50 pence pieces due to the use of the reverse of the 50p coin for various commemorative designs. These have included, UK Presidencies of the Council of Ministers and the EU; D-Day Anniversary; Scout Association Centenary; National Libraries Act; the NHS; the four minute mile; the suffragette movement; Samuel Johnson's Dictionary and the Victoria Cross.

## **D. The new designs**

The new designs were officially revealed on 2 April 2008. Collectively they form the Royal Coat of Arms, separate coins utilising a portion of the whole. Announcing the coins the Royal Mint stated that:

The Shield of the Royal Arms has been given a contemporary treatment and its whole has been cleverly split among all six denominations from the 1p to the 50p, with the £1 coin displaying the heraldic element in its entirety. This is the first time that a single design has been used across a range of United Kingdom coins.

The new designs will enter circulation gradually throughout the year. It is normal practice for banks to order coins from the Royal Mint to satisfy public demand, which fluctuates over the course of the year. The current coin designs will remain in circulation and as legal tender for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>5</sup> Royal Mint Briefing Note 11 March 2008

The diagram below illustrates this:

