

THE ENIGMATIC PROOF AND SPECIMEN STRIKES OF



THE 1934-35 CENTENARY FLORIN

THE IMPORTANCE OF NIPPLES, SURFACES AND RIMS

by T. Vincent Verheyen

THE Centenary florin shares the common fate of all four of Australia's commemorative florins in being worth less (McDonald 2006) in choice uncirculated grade than their plain counterparts – that's the price of popularity!. This enigmatic coin is far rarer worn to Fine than it is in uncirculated condition, an observation due in no small part to its:

- local issue at a 50% premium to face value
- strikingly unusual and attractive design
- rarity

The coin's background, its design and historical context has been discussed at length in several articles (Shaw, McDonald, Crellin) whilst the intricacies of its various strikes have received scant attention in the literature.

I have a fondness for George Kruger Gray's art deco reverse design of a naked (except for a wreath of laurel used as a crown) male riding bare back, astride his prancing horse holding a flaming torch up high (Figure 1). A very uncomfortable pose for any man and it was obviously controversial. The simple obverse legend incorporated by Percy Metcalf around his bust of King George V (destined for use in the British Colonies) is also a complete contrast to the typical profusion of Latin derived lettering inscribed on our predecimal coinage.

The Centenary florin is the only predecimal coin catalogued by Greg McDonald in regular (business), specimen and proof strikes. Dion Skinner's early catalogues quoted the coin in proof yet the market is confused on how to distinguish between them and there are many dealers who discount the co-existence of both specimen and proof versions – it's generally one or the other. The rarity of these special florins has led to a lack of any generally available information about:

- *What defines a proof and specimen strike? –*
- *Where different dies used?*
- *What to look out for in the Centenary and how to distinguish between worn dies and weak strikes –*

The acquirer of a Centenary florin described as a business, specimen or proof strike needs confidence that the coin is first of all actually the correct strike type, and secondly that the price asked is commensurate with its quality- e.g. how close is the coin to its original "as struck" or "typical" condition!

The aim of this series of articles is to provide, from a detailed study of the particular coins, a numismatic guide to Australia's commercially available predecimal proof coinage in digestible self contained sections. This article will study the various strikes microscopically, and use information obtained from the internet and by personally examining dealers stock and the Centenary florins in the Melbourne Mint and Museum

reference coin collections (housed at Museum Victoria) to shed a perhaps controversial new light on these fascinating coins.

Definitions

The accepted definition for a proof strike is that a specially manufactured die, with different surface treatments from regular dies, is used producing either matte, mirror or cameo finishes. Additional production differences such as double striking the blank and using specially prepared blank planchets can also be employed; all combining to create a miniature piece of industrial art.

The standard definition for a specimen strike is that they are the initial strikes from a "working" die i.e. no special die treatment but special care in the striking, so it looks like an exceptionally good business strike. The key difference being that the die was brand new so the strike is razor sharp, and the fields are uniformly smooth. Specimen coins are also generally hand struck or do not pass through the mint's complete handling system – they were made for verification and presentation purposes, even if only to the mint master! One would not reasonably expect the mint to discard a die used for specimen production, given the effort and cost associated with die manufacture and installation. One could expect such a die would in most circumstances continue to be used for regular coin production.

A business strike is applied to coin for the sole purpose of creating money at the lowest possible cost to the mint. Naturally the quality of coin struck this way can vary considerably despite having never seen public circulation. These coins pass through the mint's entire system ending up in bags or rolls at the bank. In contrast to our other predecimal coins, uncirculated versions of the Centenary florin were not widely available (unsurprising given the 1/-premium) but had to be acquired from the Centenary Committee, the State Bank of Victoria (McDonald) or Foy and Gibson (Crellin).

Centenary Florin Peculiarities

The wreath

In the case of uncirculated Centenary florins, the age or more precisely the number of coins struck by its dies is the most important factor in determining quality. This is due to the rider's head not being naked but adorned with a laurel wreath (Figure 1). Judging by the number of uncirculated Centenary florins seen with poor wreaths the tiny incuse die feature responsible for forming the wreath proved not suited to repetitive coining. Plausible theories are either that it rapidly became filled with surface debris or it was easily damaged resulting in the loss of resolution in the individual central leaves (Figure 2). As the die filled or the fine die features broke away the loss of resolution progressively



BUSINESS



SPECIMEN



PROOF-TYPE I



*The Florin's 3 strike types,
- regular or business, specimen and proof. - illustrating the contrasting surfaces and rims achieved by the mint.*

Figure 1 The 1934/5 Centenary Florin – Its Three Types

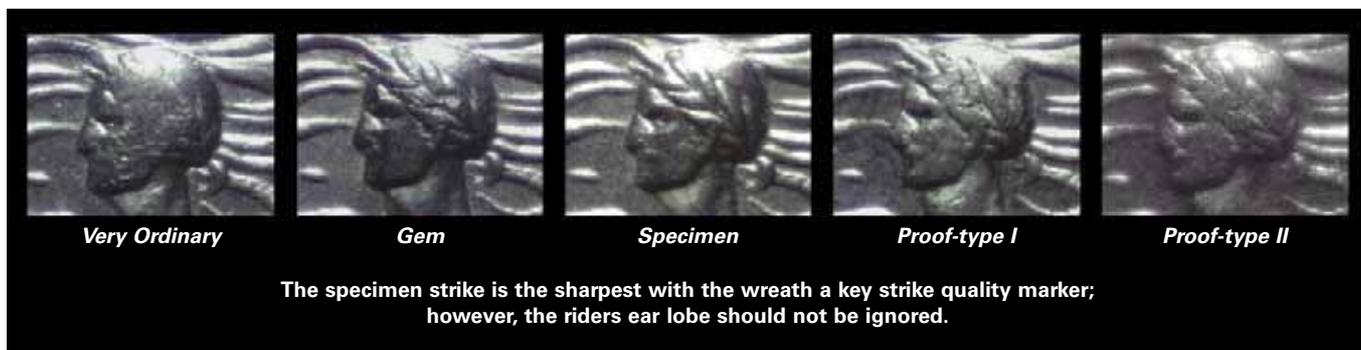


Figure 2 Variation in resolution for the rider's head with strike type

moved outwards along the wreath eventually turning it into blobs on the rider's head. Centenary florins with well struck wreaths are highly sought after by collectors and therefore command a significant price premium.

The nipple

Strangely, the most elusive feature in George Kruger-Gray's reverse design is not the presence of a full wreath but the rider's left nipple! (Figure 3). Even coins conservatively graded gem showing signs of only the most minor handling have not been observed with a nipple. The rider does not have an inverted nipple (it sticks out) and its location on the breast is fixed. Despite the small size of the rider and the anatomical correctness of the design, the nipple can just be seen with the keen naked eye. Florins with a prominent nipple also distinguish themselves by the sharp 3-dimensional striking of the rider's wreath. This wreath is of greater detail (Figure 2) than those seen on proof and early regular strikes (K Ford). The nipple, unlike the leaves in the wreath, is a feature that is either there or it is not. The study of many Centenary florins indicates that this feature is not present in varying degrees of prominence or resolution. This observation implies the lack of a nipple is not due to this feature on the die being worn or "filled in". The lack of a nipple on regular or business strikes has led to speculation that a special die was used for the specimen florins.

A plausible explanation offered by K Ford for the lack of a

prominent nipple on all but the specimen Centenary florins is that they were not accepted by the committee/mint master as the final design. The controversy regarding the nude figure at that time, with moral standards being vastly different from what they are today, may have led to the removal of a prominent nipple on the proof strikes despite the extra care in their die preparation and striking. The deliberate removal of the nipple theory, if correct, implies that the specimen strikes are also technically patterns!

Die wear, weak strikes and polishing

Early strikes have fine matte or even textured satin fields and a strong wreath and horse's eye; as the die wears the surface of the fields becomes uneven and the wreath and horse's eye lose resolution (Figure 4). Late die state coins have poor resolution of their high points and close examination of their coarse irregular field surfaces and rims for signs of circulation are needed to confirm the loss of detail is solely due to die wear.

Centenaries suffer from partial weak strikes - typically revealed by:

- on the obverse a lack of detail in the sideburns on the king's cheek.
- the reverse generally reveals a weak strike in the bottom left exergue area with the horse's hoof (above L in florin), the exergue and initial lettering in FLORin.

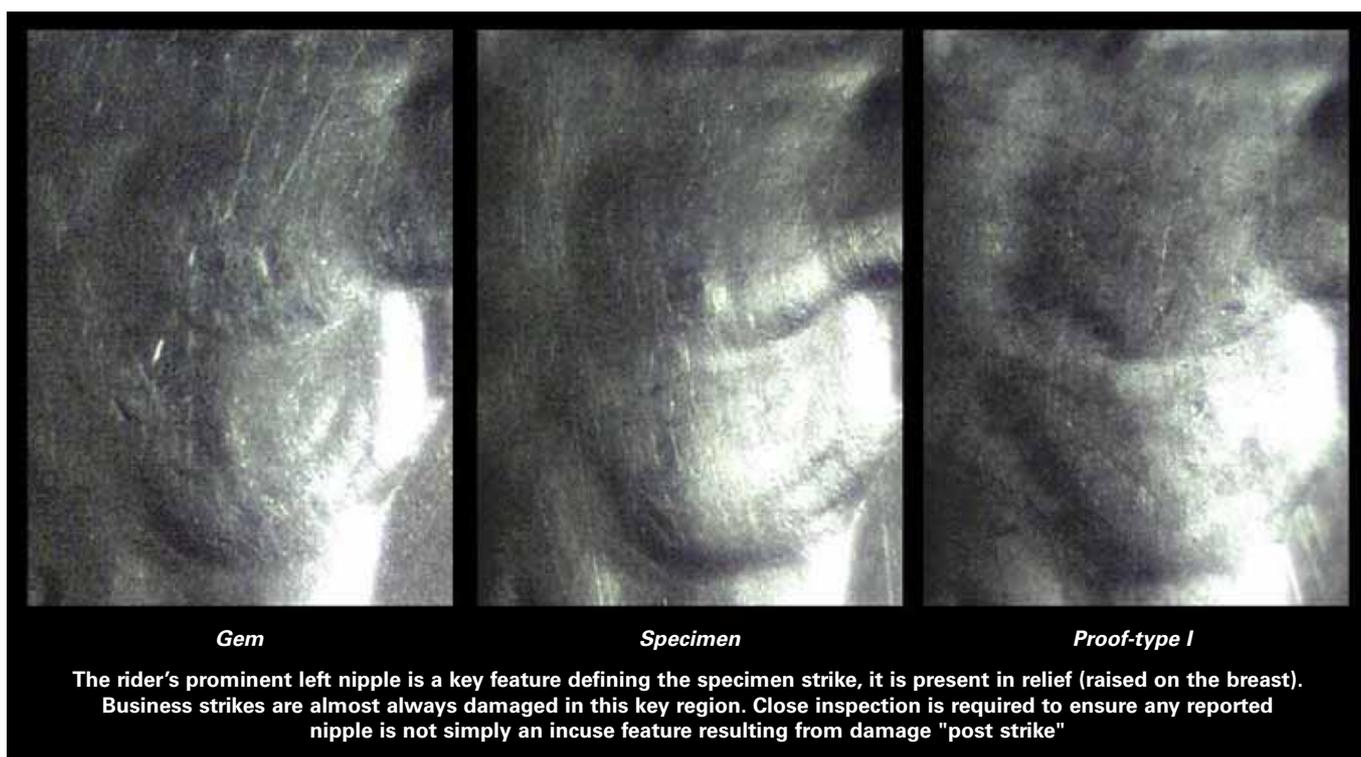


Figure 3 The Elusive Riders Nipple

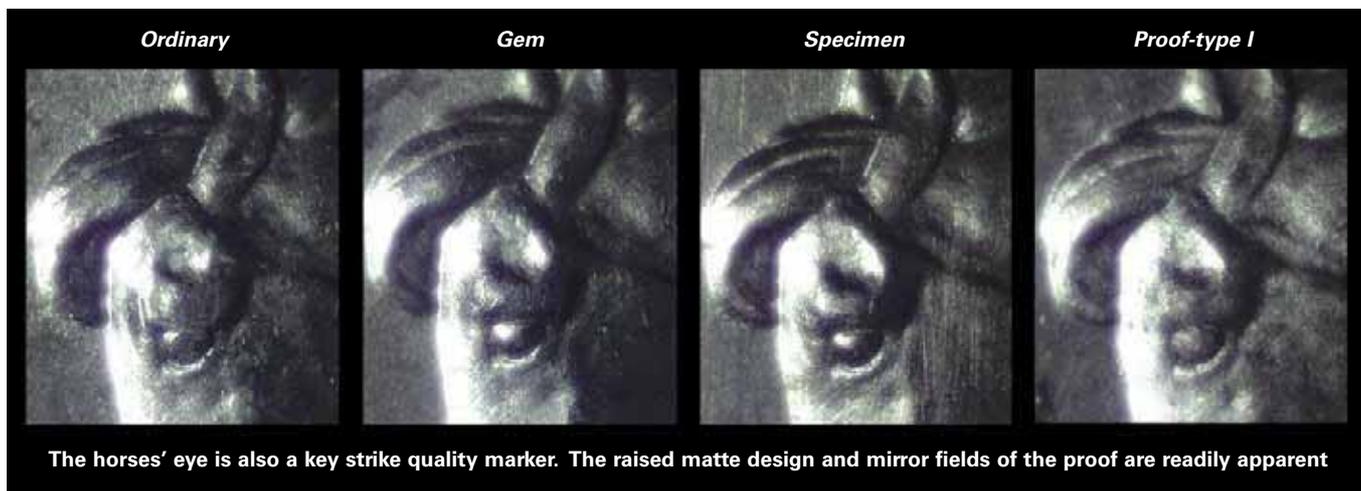


Figure 4 Variation in resolution for the horse's head with strike type

This author has seen several Centenaries which are weakly struck in these areas but still have nice wreaths.

The Centenary florin should have satin or fine matte fields; however, many previous owners have polished them. These can be easily spotted by looking (10X magnification) at the fields directly adjacent to the relief (lettering). These polished coins show a transition from satin to mirror finish here and will lose their broad milky cartwheeling lustre in accord with the degree of polish applied. If the coin has lightly mirrored fields with cartwheeling lustre look at the rims, if they are as described below, it most likely will have been struck from the proof dies.

The level of accurate anatomical detail on both the rider and horse are remarkable given the size of the Centenary florin and are a testament to the engraving skills of George Kruger-Gray. This Melbourne issue is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful coins in the world (ANDA). The specimen strike is a standout in terms of its 3-dimensional definition of bone, muscle and tendon.

An Overview on how to Identify the Various Strikes Proof

The proof version of the Centenary florin does exist and it is both rare and scarce in the market. This author's web-based research included the excellent website <http://www.noble.com.au> provided by Noble Numismatics auctions to study the frequency and number of "special" Centenaries coming onto the market. Nobles have handled eight special Centenary florins in the last 11 years i.e. Lot 1553 Sale 69, Mar. 2002, although

most were described as specimen strikes. Interestingly, only one of the probable proofs and just two other lot descriptions mention the rider as being "fully struck up"; with Lot 1553 Sale 50 Mar 1996 commenting on flatness on wreath and high points on the rider. The author is aware of another eight proof florins marketed through various dealers during this period making an estimated average of two proofs available per year. The research presented here on these "special" Centenaries reveals the proof strike is actually found in two die types, here labelled types I and II.

Surface Contrast

The proof strike from the type I die combination has a cameo appearance, with the raised design in frosted or matte relief contrasted by heavily polished mirror fields (Figure 1). A guide to the expected appearance of this proof is given by the regular proof silver designs struck by the mint for 1934. These 1934 proof silver coins are renowned for their mirror finish fields providing a contrast to their lightly frosted or matte raised design (Hutchinson 1993). This deliberate surface treatment of the proof dies to highlight the design would be expected to follow through to the 34-5 Centenary given its dies would have been prepared at around the same time.

Coin struck from the type II dies are much more uniform in overall surface finish than those from type I. The type II proof coin have an even semi-mirror appearance with little difference in surface texture between the lightly polished fields

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and raised design. The cartwheeling lustre seen on both proof types when angled under halogen light is much sharper than the pooling lustre of satin finished specimen and business strikes in accord with the proof's mirror fields.

Strike Quality The proofs of this period were not all necessarily fully struck up and difficult features on regular designs such as the vertical pearls on the monarch's crown (obverse) and the top small inner shield (reverse) are occasionally seen with less than perfect detail. The proofs have only a very weak nipple "at best" (not visible to the naked eye) in accord with this feature not being completely obliterated from the die. The wreath on a proof, though better struck than on business versions; is also not as well defined when compared with the specimen. However, the denticles and lettering cannot be improved on and are strong and sharp as expected for a proof. The type II proof coin at first appear not quite as well struck as the type I but close inspection reveals them to be equivalent. The perceived difference is due to the variation in the surface texture of their raised designs.

Rims The proof coin's rims are the same for both types I & II. They are not uniform and their obverse rim is in contrast (to all other strikes), thin and narrow with a bevelled edge. Their reverse rims are both characterised by broad flat sections with a partial wire (fine raised metal line near the sharp edge) and narrower bevelled sections in the 12 and 6 o'clock regions.

Both proof types have a slightly different die axis orientation to all the other Centenaries. Using the reverse exergue as a horizontal reference point (9-3 O'clock); the top of the crown on the obverse points to the 12 O'clock position i.e. perpendicular. For specimen and business strikes the obverse die is rotated 15° clockwise so that the top of the crown points near 12:30 - refer Figure 1.

When examined under high magnification the proof strikes reveal a number of minor planchet flaws seen as partial delamination cracks and small scalloped areas where metal has detached from the coin's surface. The proofs coming onto the market are commonly found in much less than pristine condition making them difficult to distinguish, this may be due to their popularity with the general public who did not have the means or foresight to look after them properly.

Specimen

The existence of a specimen strike of the Centenary florin is confirmed by this author's personal examination of the two coins - NU 33699 and NU 32470, labelled specimens in the Museum Victoria collection. Their provenance is from the Melbourne Museum and Mint; and they were identified as specimens by John Sharples. The specimen coin shown here (Figure 1) was confirmed as identical in its strike (from same dies) to the pair in the museum collection. John states in his notes for NU 32470 that 100 specimen pieces were prepared. Investigation of the Noble Numismatics auction records for the last 11 years uncovered possibly up to four coins equivalent in appearance to the Museum reference coins i.e. Lot 3134 Sale 58 Jul 1998. These initial observations suggest that the specimen Centenary florins are actually much rarer and scarcer in the market than the proofs.

Surface Contrast The specimen coin has a reverse cameo appearance with satin or fine matte fields on both sides (Figure 1). The raised design features are lightly polished to a semi mirror finish. This dies combination of frosted field with mirror highlights is the complete opposite surface treatment to that of the proof dies. This reversal of surface treatment between specimen and proof extends to the rims as detailed below.

Strike Quality The specimen coin are exceptional in their detail and resolution with a prominent nipple and superb wreath in accord with their definition as being the first coin struck

from the new and hence ultra-sharp die.

Rims The rims on the specimen are distinctly different to the proof with the obverse rim generally broad and flat with partial wire particularly in the 3 and 9 O'clock regions. The reverse rim is uniform, thin and has a bevelled edge around the whole coin – a strong contrast to the proof strike whose reverse rim has broad flat sections.

Business

The comments and descriptions outlined above for the specimen coin apply to the business strikes excepting the reduction in detail and absence of a nipple along with the appearance of surface marks on these coin due to the mint's normal handling practices (Figure 1).

Despite the very low mintage of this coin at least two dies were used to produce the business strikes. These two are described in Figures 6 & 7 and further research may possibly turn up more. The specimen die, after modification to remove the nipple, was brought back into service (as Die A) to strike the bulk of the business coin examined by this author. Additional surface treatments (cleaning with a fine wire brush) during the dies life can be seen in a progression of fine raised lines or striations in the fields around the horse and on the obverse near the monarch's head. A die crack developed on the obverse near the 6 O'clock position on the star "medallion" at the base of the monarch's outer cloak (Figure 5). This crack produced an irregular curved raised line which progresses counter clockwise through the ribbons and further into the design following the rim.

Specific Die Markers for the Centenary Florin

The previous section can be summarised in revealing that flat reverse rim sections and mirror fields are good indicators for a proof strike whilst the presence of a prominent nipple on a blemish free coin defines a specimen strike. However, to be absolutely sure whether a Centenary is a proof strike – using Figures 6 and 7 as a guide, closely examine the coins under both brilliant and fluorescent light using at least a 10X magnifier.

In-depth search for die markers In contrast to the characteristic markers which distinguish the two proof types from business strikes, the very rare specimen coins have the same die markers as the bulk of the regular strikes examined. There are other common die markers on the Centenary florin, naturally these are from the master dies for the year and one on the reverse is included here in Figure 5. The master die markers are by their nature, found on all coins for the year.

The small irregular raised region between the horse's backside and tail is suspicious but is too small to be considered anything but a fault in the master die. This feature is seen on the trial strike (Museum Victoria NU 33698) from the London mint confirming its classification as a master die marker.



Figure 5 Master die marker and working die cracks

Conclusion

Given the Centenary florin's restricted mintage, the numismatic complexity seen in its numerous dies and their varying finishes proved a far greater challenge than initially expected. The lack of any proof strikes in Museum Victoria's collection and general scarcity of proof and specimen coin has hampered research into their die variation, however, enough evidence has been found to confirm both types exist. In depth research into the surfaces of these coins suggests

their minting was closely monitored by the Melbourne mint with hand finishing and "improvements" witnessed in the variable rims, raised lines and degree of surface polish.

The master dies were made at the Royal Mint London and the proof dies were probably made in Melbourne, perhaps as a special project. The effort put in by the Melbourne mint is rather intriguing especially given the very small 75,000 mintage. One speculation is that this commemorative coin, by its very design, is uniquely Melbourne and the mint felt

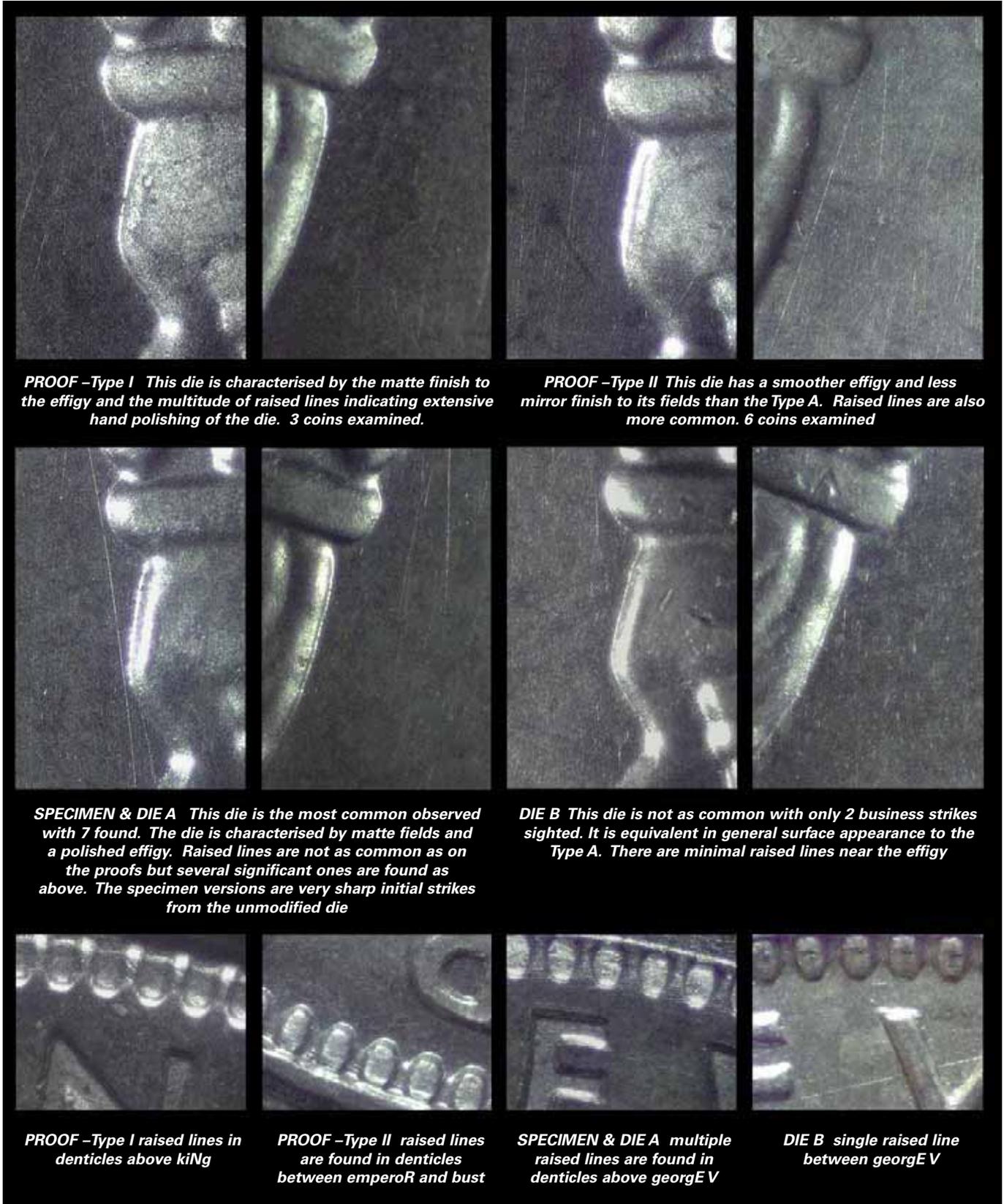


Figure 6 Obverse Die Markers for the Centenary Florin

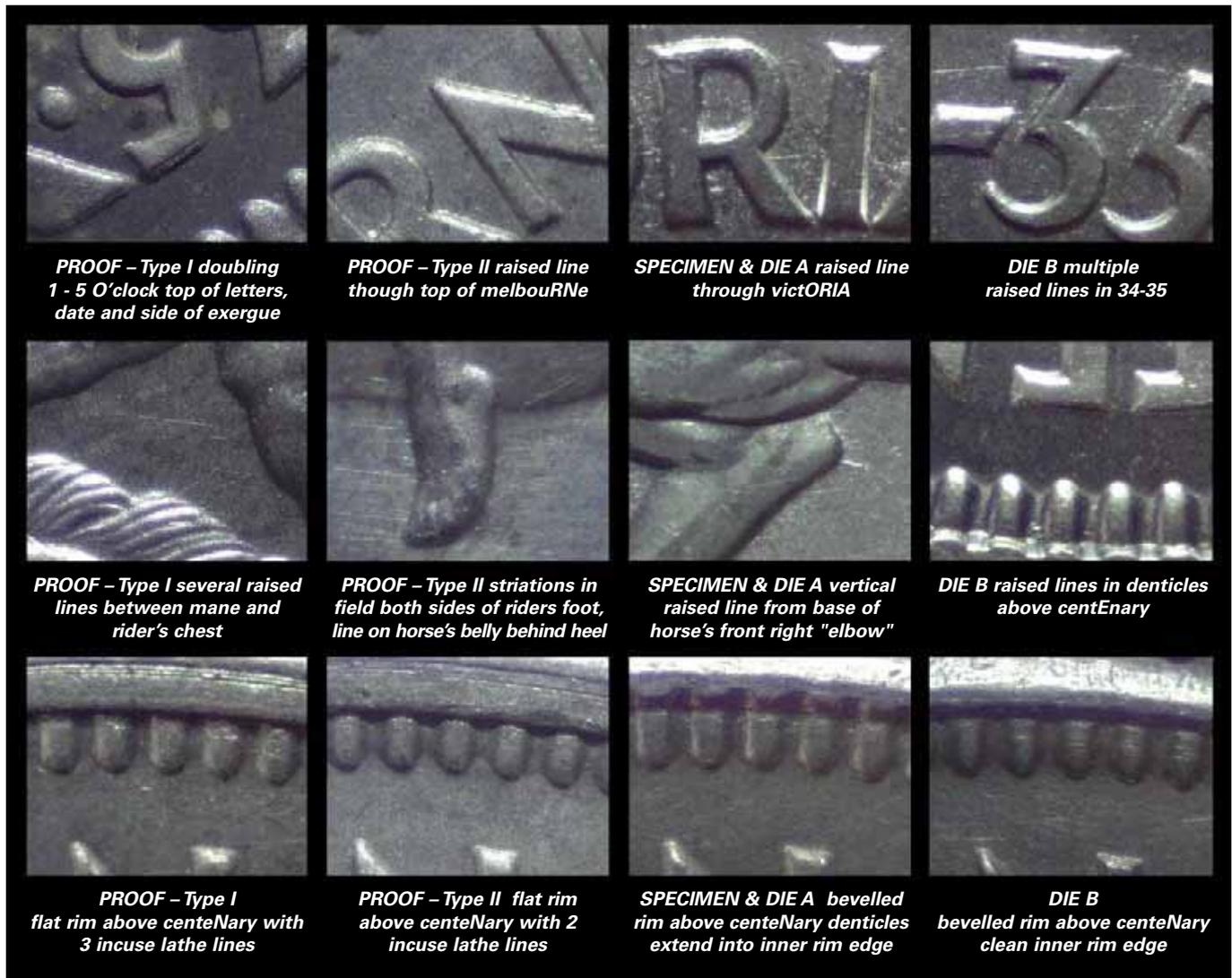


Figure 7 Reverse Die markers for the Centenary Florin

a duty to produce something special. The theory that the prominent nipple on the specimen strike led to the die being modified; to ensure its removal before it was approved for general production, offers the simplest explanation for its absence from all other strikes.

More research is needed into the relevant Melbourne mint records (if they can be found) to better understand the number of dies prepared, any modifications made and the quantity of proof and specimen coin produced and sold. The Victorian and Melbourne Centenary florin stands out as a prime example of the fascinating and intriguing heritage Australia has in its predecimal coinage.

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