

Book Review

The Coinage of the Hon. East India Company: Part I – The Coins of the Bengal Presidency, by Dr Paul Stevens, London 2012, published by AH Baldwin & Sons Ltd; case-bound, 6½ x 9¾ ins. (140 x 250 mm), pp 564, illustrated throughout. ISBN 978-0-906919-25-5. Price: £50
A paperback edition has also been produced for the Indian market, distributed by FS Todywalla.

Readers of this Journal cannot fail to have noticed the various articles written by Paul Stevens over the past few years on the coinage of the East India Company, particularly with regards the Bengal Presidency. This has been the result of many hours spent poring over primary source documents in the British Library as well as input from numismatic colleagues. It all started over 12 years ago when the late Ken Wiggins enlisted the help of Paul and Bob Puddester to produce a listing of additional East India Company coin types that had been identified since the publication of Major Pridmore's catalogue of coins of the Indian Presidencies. Pridmore's work had appeared in 1975 and, together with the subsequent book on the Uniform Coinage, published in 1980, was the most comprehensive catalogue of British Indian coinage that had appeared.

Ken Wiggins' untimely death in 2000 and Bob Puddester's subsequent decision to leave the project because of other activities, left Paul with the task of carrying the work forward largely on his own, but with the encouragement and input from others who shared his interest in this area. Far from being limited to a simple listing of new coin types, the project developed into something much more comprehensive. Research in the British Library threw up all sorts of information about the Company coinages, mints, mintmasters etc that was not contained in Pridmore's work. Pridmore, for some reason, had omitted to include any references to primary sources that he had consulted, making it quite difficult for any subsequent researcher to check those sources and verify his information. That the information needed to be verified became clear to the author of the book under review when he found Company documents contradicting what Pridmore had written in certain areas or indicating that he had misinterpreted the data.

This new book, on the Bengal Presidency, is the first in what is now a planned series of three to cover all the presidencies. The bulk of the book comprises ten chapters:

1. Calcutta mint, early years, 1757-1760
2. Calcutta mint, 1761 to 1790
3. Pulta mint 1780-1786
4. Calcutta mint, 1790 to c1802
5. Other mints in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa
6. Calcutta mint, c1800-c1830
7. Benares mint 1775-1830
8. Mints in the Ceded & Conquered Provinces
9. Calcutta mint. Coinage with steam-driven machinery c1818 to 1835
10. Soho mint

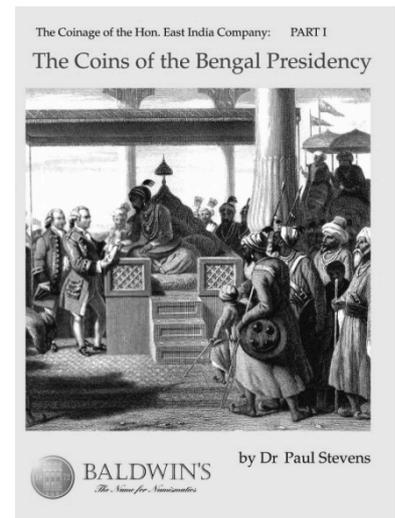
The other mints covered in chapter 5 include Murshidabad, Patna, Dacca, Monghyr and Cuttack, with mention also of Tripura and Garhwal, while the mints covered in chapter 8 include Ajmir, Agra, Allahabad, Bareilly, Dehli, Farrukhabad, Gwalior, Hathras, Najibabad, Saharanpur, Saugor and Sohagpur. Much of this was not covered at all by Pridmore.

Each chapter follows a similar format: after a short summary, there is a detailed review of background information including relevant quotations from the source documents. This is followed by a well-illustrated catalogue of the coins discussed, and then a full list of references. In the catalogue part of each chapter, the coins are illustrated greater than actual size so that they can be easily viewed. The Persian legends, nicely drawn by Dr Bhandare, are provided alongside each illustration, as is their transliteration and translations. Weights (both official and as actually measured), diameter and other relevant information is also provided in each case. A catalogue proper is provided for each coin issue in the form of a 7-column table detailing: Stevens catalogue number; Pridmore catalogue number (where appropriate); denomination, status (e.g. whether currency issue, proof etc); edge; comments; rarity estimate. It should be noted that there is no price catalogue in the book: the author has gone far more sensibly for an estimate of scarcity for each entry, ranging from C for common to Unique where only one example is known. In those cases where it was not possible to determine the scarcity, NR (not rated) is used. All this is well laid out with clear illustrations and with the end-user in mind.

In addition to the ten chapters, there is a short but useful introduction to the book, which sets the scene and provides some basic information for those readers not acquainted with the subject. While at the end of the book, there are some useful appendices: an AH/AD/R Y concordance; a glossary of Indian words and abbreviations found in the extracts from the records; a concordance of Pridmore numbers with the Stevens catalogue numbers; and the mint names and rulers' names as they actually appear on the coins. The book ends with a four-page general index.

I have already mentioned that this book covers in chapters 5 and 8 a range of mints not dealt with in Pridmore's work. There are various other important pieces of information which the new research has brought to light. It is worth mentioning a few of them here.

The "Murshidabad" rupees (and mohurs) became an important coinage type for the Company in Bengal. The original coins were issued by the Nawab of Bengal from his mint in Murshidabad. Pridmore thought that, though permission had been received from the Nawab to coin such rupees at the Company's Calcutta mint from 1761, from that year until 1777 the principal silver coinage struck at Calcutta was the Arkot rupee with Murshidabad rupees being struck in insignificant quantities possibly either for political or presentation purposes, this being based on "the few mint records traced" (Pr. p 200). So insignificant did he consider the quantities to be that he did not start his Murshidabad rupee listing until AH 1179 year 7 of Shah 'Alam II (Pr. p 237), thereby implying that rupees



with earlier dates of that ruler were not Company ones. Stevens, on the other hand has found ample source material which demonstrates that striking of the Murshidabad rupee at the Calcutta mint started already in 1761 at the end of the reign of 'Alamgir II and continued as a significant coinage there right from the start of Shah 'Alam's reign. The problem, however, was how to distinguish the Company's "Murshidabad" rupees from those of the Nawab in these early years. (St. pp 9-11).

Some years later production of machine-struck "Murshidabad" rupees was undertaken at four mints: Calcutta, Murshidabad, Patna and Dacca. These coins from different mints have small privy marks on them as a means of identification. Pridmore's attribution of these privy marks to the four mints has been generally accepted since his book was published, but Stevens argues convincingly that two of the attributions, those of Dacca and Patna, need to be reversed (St. pp 217-219).

The district of Banaras was ceded to the Company in 1775, together with its mint. For the next 30 years the mint was run by local native officials without direct management from Calcutta. During this period, gold, silver and copper coins were struck. Pridmore lists only two dates for the gold mohurs, AH 1209/37 and AH 1213/41, saying that "earlier and later hijri and julus years should occur" (Pr. p 248). Stevens, however, has found a table from a contemporary source detailing the gold coinage at the Banaras mint from 1775 onwards, apart from a few years for which records were incomplete or missing. The mintages varied considerably: almost 20,000 in 1784/85 (AH 1198/99 year 26), 27,000 in 1795 (AH 1210/11 years 38/39) to as low as 5 solitary mohurs in 1801 (AH 1216/17 years 44/45) (St. pp 306-7).

Many other fascinating pieces of information could also be mentioned but they are all in the book and that is where they should be sought. Production values are excellent. The book has been well edited and laid out, on good quality paper with strong binding. The author is to be congratulated on the results of all his research and Baldwins, the publishers, are also to be congratulated on the quality of the finished product.

All in all, this book is a mine of information and an essential reference work for anyone interested in this period of Indian history, British colonial history and East India Company coinage. It will surely be the standard work for many years to come. We look forward to the next instalment of this three-part series.

SLG