

## HOWARD LINECAR LECTURE 2013

### ECONOMICAL REFORM AND THE MINT, 1780–1816

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REFORMING major well-established governmental institutions is rarely easy. By definition, their importance involves them in complex networks of interests whose natural instinct is to view prospective changes with suspicion. Moreover, changing one part threatens to unsettle the whole, while changing the whole is bound to be complicated, lengthy, and costly. Further hurdles to change are set by the frequent need for such institutions to continue doing vital work as they are being reformed. Reform, in short, is invariably difficult and divisive. Indeed, in analysing the causes of the French Revolution of 1789, de Tocqueville stressed how much damage had been done not by inaction at Versailles, but by its controversial efforts at reform.<sup>1</sup> Especially where governments depend upon a high degree of consensus, major reform can be very dangerous.

From the late eighteenth century there were sustained and wide-ranging efforts at political reform in Britain, most famously leading to parliamentary reform in 1832. Although these efforts were often aimed as much at preservation as innovation, they were invariably fraught and fractious, feeding into and upon moments of real revolutionary potential. Yet the storm was weathered and the Hanoverian order left behind. A good specific case of this was the reform of the Mint and this paper explores the political means by which that happened. In doing so, light is also shed on the character of British political economy in practice at a time of extraordinary turmoil associated with the American, French, and industrial revolutions.

As is well known, the Mint was established in the Tower of London by 1279. It remained there for over five hundred years, evolving organically and with little external oversight. But in the late eighteenth century that changed when it came under intense scrutiny, initially under a wider umbrella of opposition efforts to reform key central government institutions, but then by the upper echelons of executive government itself. These efforts spread well beyond the initial hope of reducing a few costs there and increasing a bit of accountability there. The very purpose of the Mint came to be debated, with the value of coins and how and where they should be produced. Moreover, efforts at reform involved leading businessmen, engineers and scientists as well as, of course, politicians of the first rank. In these efforts, new wealth clashed with old, invention with tradition, custom with reason, profit with pride, and the capital with its provinces, all at a time when enormous challenges confronted the nation and its monetary order. Such battles may mainly have taken place beyond the glare of publicity and at a politically rarefied level, but they were real, substantial, and meaningful. Vast amounts of higher quality coins were produced, the Mint was moved to Tower Hill, new technology was embraced, and bimetalism formally abandoned in favour of the gold standard. The Mint in 1816 was a very different place to what it had been in 1780.

I am certainly not the first historian to explore either economical reform or the development of the Mint, but hitherto these two approaches have been kept somewhat apart.<sup>2</sup> I will bring them together, paying particular attention to the underestimated and closely linked

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<sup>1</sup> Tocqueville 2004; Pincus 2007; Hoppit 2012.

<sup>2</sup> On economical reform: Reitan 1985; Breihan 1977; Harling 1996. In these accounts the Mint warrants at most only a passing reference. For reform of the Mint and the coinage: Craig 1953, 237–76; Dyer and Gaspar 1992; Dykes 2011, chapters 1–3.

efforts of three key figures: Birmingham businessman Samuel Garbett, the politician Charles Jenkinson (Baron Hawkesbury from 1786 and the Earl of Liverpool from 1796), and finally Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society from 1778 to 1820.<sup>3</sup> Between them, they developed much of the new thinking about coinage and the Mint, so that exploring how they interacted one with another and with the Mint opens up a fresh perspective on a major transitional moment in the monetary history of Britain.

My paper is in five parts. In the first I briefly set out what was meant by economical reform, whose precise definition was critical in the Mint's case. The next three parts set out the contributions of my three central figures. Finally I will consider some of the broader implications for how we might think about the evolution of the Mint under the misnamed 'unreformed constitution'.

'Economical reform' was a term coined by Edmund Burke in 1780. If because of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) Burke is now often remembered as the 'father of modern conservatism', in his day he was one of the most intelligent and persistent critics of the misuse of British political power, at home and abroad. As the term suggests, one of his targets was the reduction of wasteful expenditure by central government, not least because Britain had been at war for five years in what would prove to be a vain attempt to prevent American independence. The nation was becoming increasingly loaded with taxes and debt, the latter to an extraordinary degree. But Burke's sights were mainly set on righting a wrong that he and many others believed had developed in the balance of Britain's constitution. He sought to rein in the growing 'influence of the crown', especially the executive's increasing buying of support to influence parliamentary elections.<sup>4</sup> In Burke's analysis, the state had evolved in ways that compromised its very principles. Its corruptions required amputation.

Burke's was a potent voice, but not a lone one. Indeed, in part he was inspired by the efforts of the Reverend Christopher Wyvill and the Yorkshire Association.<sup>5</sup> Many in Britain were unhappy with the war with America, both on principle and because of its costs. To them it showed up widespread flaws in Britain's political processes that needed correcting. This was the beginning of the 'age of reform' and although the Mint was never a major target for the reformers, it was fair game to them because as an office of the crown it was subject more to prerogative than parliament.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in 1780 Burke was explicit that it was beset with problems. As he put it, it was

a great expence to the nation, chiefly for the sake of members of parliament. It has its officers of parade and dignity ... and formerly was a body of great importance ... as the bank [of England] is at this day. It was the great centre of money transactions and remittances ... until king Charles the first, among other arbitrary projects ... made him withhold the money that lay there for remittance. [From] that blow ... the mint never recovered. Now it is no bank; no remittance-shop. The mint, Sir, is a *manufacture*, and it is nothing else; and it ought to be undertaken upon the principles of a manufacture; that is, for the best and cheapest execution, by a contract, upon proper securities, and under proper regulations.<sup>7</sup>

This was a subtle attack, criticizing the misuse of prerogative power over a hundred years before and stressing how limited the role of the Mint now was and how its work should be undertaken on purely commercial terms. By emphasizing the need for such a contract Burke was indirectly saying that there was no room for tradition, patronage, or sinecures. In the bill that he developed on economic reform, he proposed abolishing the Mint altogether and handing control over the issuing of coinage contracts to the Bank of England.

It is not surprising that this call, and most others that Burke made for economical reform in 1780, was rejected. After all, Britain, trying desperately to defeat America and its powerful allies, had much more important and pressing priorities. Yet defeat at Yorktown in October

<sup>3</sup> The very good accounts of Mint reform by Craig and by Dyer and Gaspar (see n.2) rest heavily on Mint and Treasury papers. By contrast, I depend heavily on the extensive but scattered papers of the key individuals. For sake of simplicity, I refer to Jenkinson only by his birth name throughout.

<sup>4</sup> Christie 1956. An excellent summary of the nature of 'oligarchical politics' is in Brewer 1976, chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> Black 1963, chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> A good introduction to the literature on and scope of the 'age of reform' is Burns and Innes 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Burke 1996, 516–17.

1781, by making plain that the war would be lost, opened the door for renewed efforts at reform. Early in 1782 the Treasury began to collect information about how much coinage had been issued over the past half century and, importantly, at what cost. The House of Commons too began to investigate matters, leading to the appointment of select committees in February and April 1782, with the costs of coinage being criticized. In the following month there was a precipitous move to suppress two major offices at the Mint.<sup>8</sup> Those last efforts failed, but their seeming author, the Earl of Shelburne (Fig. 1), an ally of Burke, was soon given another chance to act when in July 1782 he became Prime Minister.



Fig. 1. William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne, 1st Marques of Lansdowne (1737–1805) by Jean Laurent Mosnier, 1791. (© Sotheby's.)

Shelburne was one of the most extraordinary politicians of his time, less because of his enormous Anglo-Irish wealth or modest political accomplishments than because he assiduously sought out the company of those he judged to be at society's cutting edge. For example, around the time he succeeded his father in 1761 he travelled from Edinburgh to London in the company of Adam Smith, which proved to be a sort of road to Damascus for him.<sup>9</sup> He imbibed and supported the liberal ideas of the time and gathered around him or corresponded with many key thinkers in Britain and France. He plainly had a sense that the times were changing, not just through enlightened ideas and the American Revolution, but also because of the early

<sup>8</sup> TNA: PRO, MINT 1/13, ff. 74, 75, 77–8, 98, 102; *Journals of the House of Commons*, 38 (1780–2), 662, 672, 943, 956, 1,141. Charles Stanhope, Lord Mahon, who had strong reforming credentials, was a key figure in the Commons' investigations.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart 1980, 347; Rae 1895, 153–4.

stirrings of the first industrial revolution in Britain. He thought that all these changes required the nation's political and administrative institutions to be reformed.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of the history of the Mint, a journey Shelburne made to Birmingham in 1766 was critical. The town was then in a major phase of expansion as the pre-eminent centre of hardware production in Britain and was beginning to express itself politically.<sup>11</sup> There Shelburne saw 'so much enterprise and sharpness' and met with its leading businessmen, Matthew Boulton and Samuel Garbett (Fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> Both were at different times to have important roles to play with the Mint, but it was Garbett who in 1782 led the way and with whom Shelburne remained in frequent contact until Garbett died in 1803.



Fig. 2. Samuel Garbett (1717–1803), halfpenny token (D&H Warwickshire 127). (© Royal Mint.)

A month after becoming Prime Minister, Shelburne asked Garbett and his son, Francis, to investigate the Mint and to report on how it might be reformed. This was an intriguing choice, for Garbett père was a complete outsider with no known prior interest in the Mint. If this was likely to ensure that he viewed the Mint with fresh eyes, they were the eyes of a highly experienced businessman, who in his sixty-five years had run a hardware business in his home town of Birmingham and in Scotland a highly innovative sulphuric acid works and a major iron-works.<sup>13</sup> In Scotland he made a great impression, being described as 'of singular worth and very uncommon ability' and 'of great acuteness of genius and extent of understanding'.<sup>14</sup> But those merits could not save him from difficulties, which became acute when a financial crisis hit Scotland in 1772. Garbett's complex and capital intensive business arrangements resulted in his affairs being, as he put it, 'in a very unpleasant Train', including not only heavy debts, but legal battles with his son-in-law. The perplexity proved impossible to unravel quickly and fully.<sup>15</sup>

When Garbett's report into the Mint was commissioned he had only just exited from (well-publicized) bankruptcy proceedings. Doubtless the Mint would have been nervous of the prying eyes of any outsider, but for those eyes to have belonged to a recent bankrupt can only have heightened their doubts. But Garbett lacked neither resolve nor confidence and, of course, had the Prime Minister's backing – the Mint was ordered by the Treasury to co-operate with the investigation.<sup>16</sup> In August and September 1782 he fired off requests for information, especially regarding costs and accounts, he visited the Mint on several occasions, encountering 'very anxious faces', and he poured over records at the Treasury. The small amount of resistance he encountered was soon quashed. As his investigation progressed he wrote to Shelburne on developments, submitting his final report in November. It was naturally carefully worded, but in a private letter to Shelburne he summarized his findings in blunt economical reform terms: 'That there appears considerable unnecessary perquisites and profits, & many offices which

<sup>10</sup> Norris 1963; Aston 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Hopkins 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Fitzmaurice 1912, I, 274–6. Shelburne had already been in correspondence with Garbett: BL, Bowood Papers, Add Mss, 88906/1/11, f. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Carlyle 1990, 382–3.

<sup>15</sup> BL, Bowood Papers, Add Mss, 88906/1/11, ff. 21, 23, 25. Garbett's bankruptcy involved proceedings in both England and Scotland and became common knowledge because lists of bankrupts were published in many papers: Norris 1958, 136–45.

<sup>16</sup> TNA: PRO, MINT 1/13, ff. 114–15.

have been made mere sinecures, and, that the checks anciently established to protect the standard of gold coin have not in former reigns been sufficient for that purpose.<sup>17</sup>

In Garbett's opinion, the main villain of the piece was the Master of the Mint, Lord Cadogan, who he calculated had received £70,000 since his appointment in 1769. Much of that was because of the opportunities for private profit afforded by the major gold recoinage of the previous decade, for which Garbett also concluded that the Bank of England had wrongly been paid £5,000, and the lack of purity of old gold coins had cost a further £17,000. Finally, he thought that if sinecures at the Mint were abolished then annual expenses there could be reduced by 40 per cent to £7,000 per annum.<sup>18</sup>

Garbett's report was well based, clearly argued, and to the point. But it had four main flaws. First, some of his criticisms related to past not current practice – albeit practice that was liable to recur. Second, the handful of sinecures he condemned cost less than £5,000 per annum, certainly not a trivial sum, but a drop in the ocean of public finances as a whole. Third, Garbett condemned only parts of the Mint – perhaps because he appreciated the considerable merits of some of its officers – but also tarred the Bank of England, thereby compromising Burke's chosen line of attack. Thus in 1805 the Master of the Mint even claimed that Garbett's report cast no aspersions on its 'admirable constitution'.<sup>19</sup> Finally, it was untimely. True, the king in his speech to parliament in December 1782 indirectly noted Garbett's efforts and implied that action was need.<sup>20</sup> True also that Shelburne did not ignore it – he sent it out for independent appraisal – but he was consumed with the gargantuan problem of making the peace to end the American war.<sup>21</sup> That was a difficult enough task for any Prime Minister, even more so for one who was widely disliked and distrusted. Enormous strains in his ministry soon surfaced, with it collapsing just nine months old in April 1783. Shelburne never held high office again, turning to a life of elegant, patronizing, retirement – not, as we will see, that Garbett allowed him to forget about the Mint.

With Shelburne gone, Garbett's report lacked a clear political owner willing to act on it. If in the following years the Mint was sometimes asked to justify its costs and improve its accounting practices, no concerted measure of reform was directed at it for sixteen years.<sup>22</sup> Yet neither Garbett nor his report simply faded into the background. Far from it. That this was so was partly due to Garbett's evolving and tireless interest in the Mint, but mainly for practical reasons. With the end of the American war in 1783 Britain's economy surged ahead, including rapid urbanization in the midlands and the north. This dramatically exposed the inadequacies of the nation's coinage, especially the lack of small copper coinage and the related explosion of counterfeiting and clipping. Loud calls began to be heard from across the nation for something to be done.

Pitt the Younger's ministry, in place from 1783, could not ignore those calls and, moving to my second main figure, it fell to Charles Jenkinson (Fig. 3) to respond. He quickly produced a report in 1784 in which a key concern was the export of coins by smugglers. He raised the prospect of reforming the office of Master of the Mint by expanding its remit to consider broader issue of money supply, bullion export, and exchanges.<sup>23</sup> This report appears to have fallen on deaf ears, but Jenkinson did not give up and became markedly more influential in Mint matters when appointed President of the newly reconstituted Board of Trade in 1786.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Shelburne Papers [hereafter Shelburne Papers], vol. 131, ff. 1–46. The quotes are at ff. 6r and 27r. Garbett's requests to the Mint for information are at TNA, PRO: MINT 1/13, ff. 113–14, 124–6, 131, 133.

<sup>18</sup> Shelburne Papers, vol. 131, f. 58.

<sup>19</sup> TNA, PRO: BT 6/119, Earl of Bathurst, Master of the Mint, to the Privy Council committee on coins.

<sup>20</sup> Cobbett and Wright 1806–20, XXXIII, col. 209. Two years later Garbett wrote to Shelburne that he often referred to this speech '& with exultation consider it your Lordship[']s creed.' BL, Bowood papers, Add Mss 88906/1/11, f. 121r.

<sup>21</sup> Shelburne Papers, vol. 131, ff. 59–63 are reflections, some positive, some not, on Garbett's report by William Chamberlayne, Solicitor to the Treasury but formerly Solicitor to the Mint, dated 7 January 1783. Presumably Shelburne asked for this report. Later Shelburne commended the Garbetts' proposed 'capital reform': Fitzmaurice 1912, I, 228.

<sup>22</sup> In 1785 the Public Accounts Commissioners queried some of the Mint's expenditure; in 1788 they disallowed a customary charge; and the Mint's accounts for 1791 were returned as 'imperfect'. TNA, PRO: MINT 1/13, f. 224; MINT 1/14, ff. 42, 220.

<sup>23</sup> TNA, PRO: MINT 2/13.

<sup>24</sup> Ironically, Burke had managed to suppress the old Board of Trade in 1782. Klinge 1979.



Fig. 3. Charles Jenkinson, 1st Earl of Liverpool (1729–1808) by George Romney, 1786–8. (© National Portrait Gallery.)

Throughout, he saw the problem not simply as one of ensuring the provision of more high quality coins, but also of reforming the Mint.

Jenkinson hailed from the Oxfordshire gentry rather than peerage, and cut his political teeth on foreign affairs before gaining experience in the Treasury and War Office. Unlike Shelburne, he willingly toiled on tiresome administration and the accumulation of information and, critically, remained firmly close to and supportive of George III, even as the king was criticized for behaving unconstitutionally.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, a key plank of the economical reform movement, reducing the influence of the crown, was no part of Jenkinson's ambition. Yet he was a reformer of sorts, seeing it as necessary to the preservation of what was best in the political order as well as to encourage national prosperity. He was then comfortable with the appointment of Pitt the Younger in 1783 and was now close to the heart of government.

It was about then that Jenkinson began to be deeply interested in coinage and the Mint, an interest which he pursued actively and positively to near the end of his life. In the main, that effort was conducted out of the public gaze and mainly through correspondence, small meetings, and the Privy Council. His one main public pronouncement on the matter was to publish in old age what he called a letter to the king.<sup>26</sup> But this was a personal if public epistle to a monarch nearing his final and lengthy mental incapacity. As Jenkinson put it, 'I wish to leave

<sup>25</sup> Cannon 2013. *Jenkinson 1784* is a three-volume edition of international treaties, nicely suggesting something of the man: his historical awareness, powers of application, and commitment to the authority of solid information.

<sup>26</sup> Jenkinson 1805.

something behind me which should show my attachment to my royal master in the last moments of my life.<sup>27</sup>

Jenkinson's approach to the Mint was, then, very different to Garbett's. Critically he was a political insider, not an outsider, with a much surer grasp of what was achievable. He was calmer and more contemplative. Consequently, where Garbett, initially at least, instinctively sought simplicities, Jenkinson instinctively sought complexities. To Jenkinson the topic of the Mint and coinage was so delicate, complicated, and abstruse that no one, including himself, fully understood it.<sup>28</sup> But he made more effort than anyone else at the time to improve that understanding. There were five major elements to this.<sup>29</sup>

First, Jenkinson placed the Mint in an historical context. Around a hundred pages of his extensive papers relating to coinage concerned the Mint's affairs before 1782. This included, for example, a copy of a report from 1777 into the mints of Paris, Rouen, Lille and Brussels undertaken by Stanesby Alchorne, Assay Master at the Mint.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, therefore, Jenkinson sought to evaluate the Mint in comparative perspective, which alerted him to the significance of seigniorage and the internationally unusual method of paying for the Mint. Third, he sought to assess the performance of the Mint not only in terms of its productivity and wastefulness, but also by the basic standard of whether it was providing the nation with sufficient good coins at a reasonable cost. Hence he became very worried about the provision of copper coins. This made him appreciate, fourthly, the importance of Burke's assertion that the Mint was now a manufacture, no more, no less. If that meant, finally, that the manufacture should be done as well as possible, it also led inexorably to questions of the virtues of the gold standard against bimetallism, including thereby international comparisons of the value of gold and silver and the economic incentives to export coin. To Jenkinson, changing the Mint was about much more than just profits and sinecures, it was also about machinery, exchange rates, public order, and economic growth.

In developing this complex vision, Jenkinson did a good deal of work himself, reading through statutes, proclamations, rolls of parliament, and much else.<sup>31</sup> But he also actively sought help from three main sources: Samuel Garbett, Matthew Boulton, and Sir Joseph Banks. Boulton's role here was almost exclusively as a manufacturer who believed he had the expertise and technology to produce higher quality coins more quickly and cheaply than the Mint. This is a fascinating story which others have told very vividly before, so I will largely leave it to one side.<sup>32</sup> I do, though, want to consider the roles of Garbett and Banks in efforts to reform the Mint.

At first glance, Garbett's continuing, indeed growing, interest in the Mint after he had produced his report was surprising given his lack of interest before 1782, the fact that his report fell on stony ground, and his very active role as the head of the Birmingham business community at a time full of challenges – of revising trade regulations with America, France, and Ireland, and maintaining civil order in the revolutionary fervour of the 1790s.<sup>33</sup> Yet through the rest of the 1780s and the 1790s, well into his eighties, he continued to ponder the Mint and the nation's coinage. Especially important was that in 1786–7 he met and corresponded with both Jenkinson and Pitt, though all the time writing to the retired Shelburne to keep him abreast of developments and passing pithy judgements on one and all. There were other flurries of activity, though hardly a year went by without him writing to Jenkinson on the Mint. At this stage he judged Jenkinson to be 'an excellent instrument', if not 'masterly', but Pitt's undoubted cleverness struck him as too lawyerly, making him bereft of 'extensive ideas' and

<sup>27</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,424, f. 288v.

<sup>28</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,424, f. 287v.

<sup>29</sup> This is based upon a synthesis of his papers on coinage in BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,421–4, but also scattered correspondence by Jenkinson to Sir Joseph Banks in the Sutro Library, San Francisco, Banks Collection [hereafter Banks Collection], CO1-6.

<sup>30</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,421, ff. 73–104.

<sup>31</sup> Banks Collection, CO5:56.

<sup>32</sup> Selgin 2008; Doty 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Norris 1958; Money 1977.

‘system’.<sup>34</sup> If Garbett could tiresomely repeat to them old laments about sinecures and private profit taking at the Mint, he also considered new factors, especially regarding the explosion of counterfeiting at Birmingham, issues surrounding bimetallism, developments in metalware manufacturing, and the benefits of the French method of paying for new coinage.<sup>35</sup> He read around the topic too, including Locke and Smith from this side of the Channel and Montesquieu, Necker, and Calonne from the other side.<sup>36</sup>

Garbett and Jenkinson exchanged ideas and information in developing their understanding of coinage and the Mint.<sup>37</sup> Each could bring something different to this relationship, which was necessarily asymmetrical. Garbett was a provincial figure, clear in what was happening in one of the nation’s mushroom towns, both in terms of the problems caused by the inadequacies of the current coinage and the potential offered by new technology. As a businessman, he also had ideas about how a new copper coinage could be produced, not least so that it would not hinder reform of the Mint, briefly harbouring the hope that he would be awarded the contract.<sup>38</sup> But Jenkinson could elicit information from a wider range of sources – as for example sending out a circular letter in 1787 to sixteen towns and cities across England about the state of the copper coinage.<sup>39</sup> In the end, of course, Jenkinson had political power and heavily influenced decisions that were made.

If Garbett helped Jenkinson to develop his thinking about the Mint, his status as an outsider was confirmed by the fact that he was not appointed to the committee of the Privy Council to consider the coinage, formed in 1787 and re-established in 1798. While he had contacts with Jenkinson and Pitt, it appears that he spent more time and effort in expounding both old and new views to the now completely politically inactive Shelburne. And if Garbett certainly helped Jenkinson develop his thinking about monetary matters it is telling that by one anonymous account in Jenkinson’s papers, Garbett was a ‘doating old man’ who ‘writes very long & tiresome letters’; Jenkinson told the king that Garbett was honest, ingenious, energetic, and punctilious, but ‘apt to be troublesome’.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, he had little sense of the enormous pressures under which Jenkinson and Pitt worked, at times threatening to bury them with his views. And the fact was that by 1787 the pressing problem was judged to be the lack of sufficient copper coinage, not the constitution of the Mint. Pretty quickly it was Matthew Boulton who was now the Birmingham businessman who mattered most in Whitehall, as Garbett rather painfully recognized.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps it was to be expected, then, that a year before Garbett died he complained bitterly to Shelburne that Jenkinson, whose investigation of Mint he now judged a ‘frivolous parade’, had used him shabbily.<sup>42</sup>

The committee of the Privy Council established in 1787 put a good deal of effort into how to improve the nation’s coinage, but progress was halting. In part that was because it wanted to embrace new technology to produce silver and copper coins and had to assess tenders to do so from Boulton and the Mint, as well as criticisms of the rivals against one another. (The tenders were set out very differently, making comparisons tricky.) However, in 1789 the Council had embraced Burke’s fundamental point that the Mint was to be judged mainly as a manufacturer. As Jenkinson wrote to Boulton then, ‘I am as sensible as you can be that it is highly important to proceed in the Reformation of the coin of this realm’.<sup>43</sup> But progress was slowed by the magnitude of other problems confronting Pitt’s ministry, including the enormous impact of the

<sup>34</sup> BL, Bowood Papers, Add Mss, 88,906/1/11, ff. 219–20.

<sup>35</sup> BL, Bowood Papers, Add Mss, 88,906/1/12, ff. 54–6; 88,906/1/14, ff. 7–8, 14–15.

<sup>36</sup> BL, Bowood Papers, Add Mss, 88,906/1/14, ff. 139–40.

<sup>37</sup> In 1790, for example, Garbett sent Liverpool notes on works by Calonne and Locke regarding coinage. BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,422, f. 83.

<sup>38</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,421, ff. 127, 131.

<sup>39</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,421, ff. 146–52. A number of the replies thought that a new copper coinage would be a ‘reform’.

<sup>40</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,422, f. 317r; Selgin 2008, 111.

<sup>41</sup> BL, Bowood Papers, Add Mss 88,906/1/12, ff. 130–1. Garbett harboured doubts about Boulton’s plans. BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss 38,422, ff. 116, 118–19; BL, Bowood Papers, Add Mss 88,906/1/12, f. 89; 88,906/1/14, ff. 176–7. When Garbett died, Boulton heaped praise on him, not least his ‘just, honourable and liberal’ principles: Campbell 1962, 20.

<sup>42</sup> BL, Bowood Papers, 88,906, f. 217v.

<sup>43</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss 38,422, f. 15.

French Revolution of 1789, the outbreak of war against France in 1793, and the disastrous harvest of 1795. Bound up with these were two financial crises. The first in 1793 led to runs on many country banks, a serious lack of liquidity, and a surge in bankruptcies. But the second early in 1797 threatened worse and could only be contained by the Privy Council suspending the cash payments of the Bank of England, effectively establishing its notes as currency.<sup>44</sup> This was a pivotal moment, allowing new possibilities now to be seized. Boulton's Soho Mint in Birmingham was awarded the first of its contracts. This was, by Burke's definition, a triumph of economical reform, undertaken by a ministry that was, paradoxically, increasingly being viewed as reactionary and repressive.

Though there were good historical precedents for contracting out the production of copper coins, the Mint understandably felt threatened by Boulton's rising star.<sup>45</sup> Sir George Yonge, Master of the Mint from 1794 to 1799, a Privy Counsellor since 1782, and a Fellow of the Royal Society, chided the failure to consult him and bemoaned developments, writing in one letter that 'I don't [sic] agree with the Privy Council at all, in the business of copper coin – and for all you think you are following Sir Isaac Newton, you will soon find yourselves, as well as the Treasury, in a scrape, several ways, for want of proper precautions.'<sup>46</sup> The reference here to the great scientist Newton, Master of the Mint from 1700 to 1727 and President of the Royal Society for nearly as long, was very pointed, for Yonge was writing to Sir Joseph Banks (Fig. 4), who had been President of the Royal Society since 1778 and had just been made a Privy Counsellor. Banks, Yonge was saying, was no Newton. Of course that was true, but with Jenkinson now feeling his age, Banks was becoming a key figure in the next stage of the reform of the Mint, whether Yonge liked it or not.

Sir Joseph Banks hailed from a substantial landowning family whose main estate was in Lincolnshire. His achievements are well known, especially as a botanist on Cook's first great voyage of exploration into the Pacific. He was only twenty-three when he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, becoming its President twelve years later, a position he held until his death in 1820. Like Jenkinson, he admired the king, helping him in his agricultural pursuits, but he was also committed to improving central government's decision-making in many fields, from weights and measures to the tea trade.<sup>47</sup> His interest in the nation's coinage was a part of this, but had two other roots. The first was his sister Sarah Sophia's justly celebrated numismatic endeavours – she (and her collections) lived with Joseph and his wife. The second was that as a major Lincolnshire landowner he had first-hand experience of the growing monetary problems besetting the economy, playing a pivotal role in supporting country banks there in the financial crises of 1793 and 1797.<sup>48</sup>

In 1797 Banks wrote to Jenkinson about issuing new silver coins, noting that 'I agree fully with your lordship in thinking that it cannot be undertaken till the Mint is reformed & this I fear will be a difficult [sic] & a tedious task.'<sup>49</sup> As this suggests, in many respects the scientist and the politician had similar approaches. Jenkinson was clearly determined to bring Banks quickly up to speed on the Mint, sending him various papers, including some of those produced by Garbett.<sup>50</sup> But Banks' seemingly inexhaustible mental energy and scientific sensibility required him to go into some matters more fully. He put even greater store than Jenkinson had on understanding the evolving practice of the Mint since the early seventeenth century, especially in the great recoinage of 1696. He also cast his net more widely amongst recent and

<sup>44</sup> Hoppit 1986; Shin 2009.

<sup>45</sup> In 1789 the Mint could not provide figures of copper coins produced before 1729 because of contracting out. BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss 38,422, f. 29. Whether copper coins were legal tender was also an issue: see Craig 1953, 250.

<sup>46</sup> Banks Collection, CO 2:39. Yonge went to see Boulton's Mint in October 1797, writing to Banks that 'The apparatus is enormous, not ingenious – and the goodness and dispatch of the work much inferior to the Mint.' 'The pence and two pence will be of little use, and are already complained, as I foretold'. 'Boulton, however, has made a good job of it, for he has got the copper at about half the price he charged government for it, tho' certainly he charged at the market price, at the time': Banks Collection, CO 6:56.

<sup>47</sup> Carter 1988; Gascoigne 1994, chapter 5; Gascoigne 1998, 121–3 concern Banks' involvement with coinage policy.

<sup>48</sup> Banks Collection, CO 2:47–51; CO 4:16–19.

<sup>49</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss 38,423, f. 20v.

<sup>50</sup> I have found no evidence that Banks and Garbett corresponded directly with one another, or met.



Fig. 4. Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) by Thomas Phillips, 1810. (© National Portrait Gallery.)

contemporary literature, both within and without the Mint. Thus, for example, he knew of a telling critical analysis of the constitution of the Mint written half a century earlier by Joseph Harris, the king's Assay Master.<sup>51</sup> Banks, however, could also bring quite other skills and connections to rethinking the Mint, most notably through his involvement with the developing field of engineering.<sup>52</sup> Longstanding efforts to drain the Lincolnshire fens meant that Banks had had some awareness of this profession for years, and in 1793 he had been made an Honorary Member of the Society of Civil Engineers, of which Boulton was also a member. Through these links the great engineer John Rennie, who had worked for Boulton and Watt, was brought in to report on the Mint in 1798 and subsequently.<sup>53</sup>

With the very aged Garbett now marginalized and Jenkinson in serious ill health, Banks was by 1798 the most dynamic figure taking forward reform of the Mint. One aspect of this involved marginalizing Yonge. In 1787 the Master of the Mint had been a member of the committee of the Privy Council on coinage; but when it was re-established in 1798 he pointedly was not, despite Yonge being a Privy Counsellor.<sup>54</sup> Tellingly, the committee moved quickly to rein in the Master's remuneration, an act of 1799 limiting it to a salary alone.<sup>55</sup> Yonge's term as Master ended and his successor was Jenkinson's son and heir, Robert, the future Prime

<sup>51</sup> Banks Collection, CO 6:2. I found no copy of this in Jenkinson's papers.

<sup>52</sup> It was possibly also through Banks that Jenkinson asked the Oxford mathematician Professor Abraham Robertson (FRS, 1795) to check calculations made by Garbett – they were found to be somewhat inaccurate. BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss, 38,424, ff. 123–4, 136–7; Banks Collection, CO 4:69.

<sup>53</sup> Craig 1953, 128; Chrimes 2013; Goucher 1963, 128.

<sup>54</sup> TNA, PRO: BT 6/126, 2 November 1787; BT 6/127, 10 February 1798.

<sup>55</sup> 39 George III, c. 94. A draft of the report which led to this, as well as the commitment for the Mint to use new machinery is at BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss 38,423, ff. 240–83.

Minister from 1812 to 1827. Already weakened by Boulton's copper coin contract, the Master of the Mint was further undermined by statute on the one hand and by nepotism on the other.

By subjecting the Mint to the gaze of a great scientist the overt politics of Mint reform, which in any case had been compromised by Jenkinson's cast of mind, were put aside and attention focussed on technical and practical considerations. Professional judgement was difficult for the Mint to gainsay and its utilization of the latest machinery became essential if it was to avoid losing everything to external contractors. This in turn threw up the simple but devastating conclusion that the Mint physically could not accommodate the new machinery in the Tower: for the Mint to move with the times, it would have to move premises. This was easier said than done given the huge costs of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars that raged with little respite from 1793 to 1815. But in 1804 Pitt, after a five minute meeting with Rennie and others, decided on moving the Mint to Tower Hill. This was a relief to Pitt – 'he had been freed from a weight' – and to Boulton, who 'thought the Tower but a gloomy place, which repressed genius, and retarded practice'.<sup>56</sup>

The new Mint was a major break with the past. Whereas in the Tower it had been strung out inside the walls, it was now much more logically ordered, with spaces better tailored to a major manufacturer's needs, and fitted out with machines encompassing 'all the modern improvements'.<sup>57</sup> It is interesting that instead of abolishing the Mint, as Burke had proposed, the solution had been to invest in it and strengthen it, at least in terms of its physical capacity. At this stage there was no further great effort put into reforming the Mint's constitution. Indeed, in 1805 the Master of the Mint vigorously defended its constitution and in the following year officers at the Mint felt confident enough to complain that inflation and taxes were seriously eroding their livelihoods. Perhaps this was evidence that there was still scope for reform. Banks certainly seemed to think so.<sup>58</sup>



Fig. 5. The Mint, by Thomas Rowlandson and A.C. Pugin, 1810. (© Royal Mint.)

<sup>56</sup> BL, Liverpool Papers, Add Mss 38,424, ff. 242–3.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, BT 6/128A, f. 323.

<sup>58</sup> TNA, BT 6/119, 24 and 26 October 1806.

By 1810 the profits of the highest office at the Mint had been removed, new technology had been introduced, and the Mint had nearly completed its move to its new premises (Fig. 5). In this way, much of the agenda of economical reform had been completed. Consequently, when calls for economical reform were revived from 1806, these were not directed at the Mint.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, in monetary matters, the reformers' sights were now set not on the Mint, but on the Bank of England, on the grounds that following the suspension of cash payments in 1797 it had over-issued notes, generating intense inflationary pressures, especially for gold. This reached a head when in 1810 Francis Horner, MP, an enthusiast for the ideas of Adam Smith, managed to establish a House of Commons select committee to investigate the high price of bullion.<sup>60</sup> This was part of a wider intense debate – the 'bullion controversy' – about the relationship between paper money and gold, in which the role of the Mint was largely irrelevant.<sup>61</sup> That said, it is telling that after a lengthy debate of the bullion committee's report the first resolution agreed by the Commons was to confirm 'That the right of establishing and regulating the legal money of this kingdom hath at all times been a royal prerogative, vested in the sovereigns thereof.'<sup>62</sup> Politically, this was entirely consistent with how Mint reform had been handled over the previous thirty years.

Wartime exigencies and domestic political dispositions meant that Horner and his allies – including Huskisson and Ricardo – failed to get their way in 1811. Reform pressures had been contained and brought firmly within the scope of executive government. Not that reform of the Mint was at an end then. But additional substantive change only came when William Wellesley Pole was made Master of the Mint in 1814, the same year his brother became the duke of Wellington, taking forward reforms during nine years in office, including a proposal to abolish the office of Warden.<sup>63</sup> To Banks, usually sparing with praise, Wellesley Pole was 'the most efficient Master I have ever heard or read of' – that is, superior even to Newton.<sup>64</sup> With the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, there was a palpable sense that the Mint and the nation's coinage were entering a new age, including the formal establishment of the gold standard.<sup>65</sup>

Reform of the Mint did not end in 1815. But Garbett and Jenkinson were now dead and Banks was withdrawing from public life and died in 1820. Critically, however, the process I have uncovered, of significant evolutionary change, had become embedded, even somewhat embedded within the Mint's own new walls. Aspects of the old order remained, notably of the role of the Moniers, but major changes had been achieved since Burke had launched his attack in 1780. His fundamental charge that the Mint was to be judged as a manufacturer alone had been answered. This left the Mint much better able to react to the developing challenges of providing the coins for the first industrial nation, but it also suggests to us something more broadly of the political regime of the times. It is with a few reflections on that score that I will close.

The movement for economical reform began in the shires and in the House of Commons. But Mint reform was very largely undertaken out of their gaze within the highest levels of executive government. Jenkinson's deference to George III and his prerogative powers, including those over coinage, was crucial to this. But Jenkinson was no dyed in the wool conservative, sure that things had once been so much better and could only get worse. He knew both that reform was necessary and that it had to be taken forward by thinking and researching around the subject widely, critically, and imaginatively. His willingness to consult frequently with Garbett was a crucial part of this. Their relationship, which has previously been under appreciated, was tremendously productive, helping Jenkinson to grasp fully the importance to

<sup>59</sup> On the revival see Harling 1996, chapter 4.

<sup>60</sup> For a summary of the committee's proceedings and the resolutions which followed see Feavearyear 1931, 182–7.

<sup>61</sup> For a summary of the stages of the controversy see Fetter 1965, 26–7; Hollander 1911. A useful non-technical summary of the controversy is Dick 2013, chapter 2.

<sup>62</sup> Hansard 1811, col. 69.

<sup>63</sup> TNA, PRO: BT 6/128A, ff. 262, 278.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Gascoigne 1998, 123.

<sup>65</sup> TNA, PRO: BT 6/128A, ff. 320, 323.

the Mint of new technology, foreign exchanges, and seigniorage. In this they invested heavily in comparative perspectives, of both practice and ideas. Theirs was decidedly neither a little England view nor an untheoretical one; indeed in a few respects their analysis prefigured fundamental principles of political economy at issue in the bullion controversy. Banks too had expansive views and a determination to research deeply and systematize. He had literally seen the world and his scientific contacts ranged far and wide, allowing him to build upon what Jenkinson and Garbett had developed, notably by bringing in professionals and scientific standards. In doing so, like Jenkinson he took fractious politics out of deliberations of the Mint. Together, they helped reform the Mint, but they also preserved it.

Reform of the Mint speaks more generally to the nature of political change in Britain in the era of the American and French revolutions. In this case, there may have been delays, but there was no shirking and major changes were undertaken. Certainly this was done to improve the standing of the crown and his ministers without surrendering power to parliament or popular pressure – the Mint was reformed, but the crown's prerogative power over the nation's money supply was confirmed. But it was also done because from Pitt down, all appreciated the fundamental importance of coins to society, for exchange in a burgeoning economy beset by inflation, but also as tokens that physically linked society, from great to small and from near to far. What else did government do at the time which everyone could feel and use? Coins were unquestionably one of the major manifestations of the government at the time, and of the quality of that government. By that measure, government made significant strides in the generation after 1780.

The attack on the Mint began with Burke at one stage of his political thinking. But this paper can end by noting that reform of the Mint conformed to one of his precepts uttered in reaction to the French Revolution: 'A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation'.<sup>66</sup> In the case of the Mint, what Burke aimed at was only partially achieved. As a manufacturer it was dramatically improved and the scope for private profit was significantly curtailed. Yet there was no surrendering of the power of the crown. Parliament's efforts to encroach upon that power, both with respect to the Mint and to the advent of paper money, were seen off. Efficiency and transparency had been increased, without altering the balance of the constitution. This was achieved through hard work, careful research, vigorous thinking, and firm practicality. In this, the willingness of Shelburne and Jenkinson to consult with outside expertise was crucial. Plainly this was no *ancien régime*, but a form of cautious and conservative reform that skilfully avoided generating the contradictions and conflicts that de Tocqueville identified as major causes of the French Revolution.

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<sup>66</sup> Burke 1989, 72.

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