

# The Royal Mint and the First World War

'Money, medals and munitions'

The First World War changed life in Britain forever.

## The COINAGE

The coins in circulation at the time war broke out were:

- BRONZE** Farthing, halfpenny, penny
- SILVER** Threepence, sixpence, shilling, florin, half-crown
- GOLD** Half-sovereign, sovereign



## WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL THE GOLD?



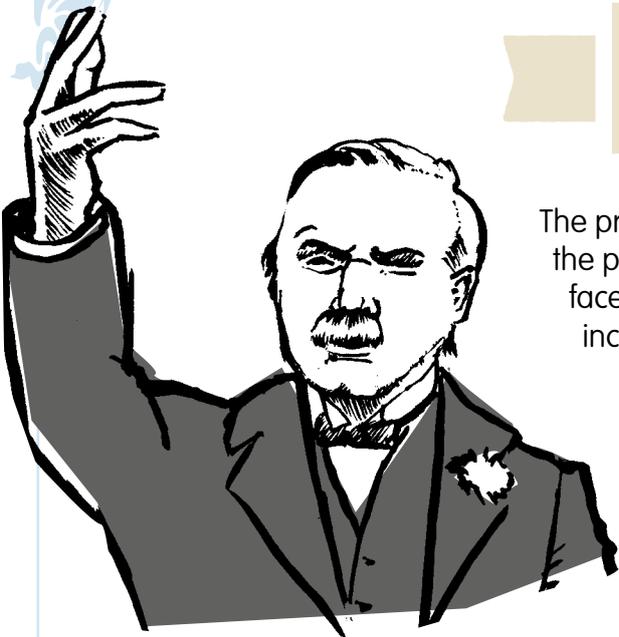
In 1914 it at once became clear that the gold would be needed to pay for the war effort. Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George firmly believed that having gold coins was a luxury that the country could not afford, and that by keeping them British people were as good as helping the enemy. Within days Treasury notes of £1 and 10 shillings were being issued and gold coins disappeared rapidly from circulation. It was the last time gold coins were to be seen in everyday use and the coinage was changed forever.

## SILVER and BRONZE

The demand for silver and bronze coins increased significantly during the war. Not only was silver being used in place of gold, but also because large scale industrial activity created a greater demand. More women were working than ever before and wages had to be paid. The Mint had to work at full capacity to meet demand, and after the war had temporarily to sub-contract the production of bronze coins to mints in Birmingham. These coins can be easily spotted as they have an 'H' or 'KN' stamped by the date.



## A Lasting IMPACT



The price of silver rose during and after the war. By 1920 it had reached the point where silver coins were worth more melted down than their face value. An urgent change was needed. A cabinet committee including Lloyd George, now Prime Minister, and Austen Chamberlain Chancellor of the Exchequer, took the difficult decision to reduce the fineness of the silver coinage from 925 parts silver (in use since Anglo-Saxon times) to the lower standard of 500. This new silver alloy remained in use until the end of the Second World War.

### PEOPLE

Mint staff fought in the war, and several unfortunately did not return. On 13 June 1917 the Mint itself was hit by a bomb from an enemy aircraft, four members of staff were killed and a number injured. Sir John Cawston, Deputy Master of the Mint, was there that day and his daughter described 'the ghastly day the Mint was struck and so many men killed'. The impact on Cawston was so great that 'after doing all he could to help – he was violently sick...'

After the war the Mint actively employed ex-servicemen. One of these was Charles Coombes, a sculptor of war memorials, who went on to design the figure of Britannia adopted for the bronze penny in 1937.



### MEDALS



As well as gallantry medals and 1914 and 1914-15 Stars, there was a need for eight million British War Medals and five million Victory Medals. To cope with this enormous quantity, the Mint required the assistance of a temporary medal factory in Woolwich Arsenal.

### MUNITIONS



The Mint also made a direct contribution to the war with its work on munitions. Specialist war work included:

- Adapting the automatic coin balances to weigh cartridges and to discard those that were too light or too heavy
- Making body gauging machines that would verify the body gauges of small arms cartridges
- Making cartridge positioning machines to fill machine gun cartridge belts.
- Manufacturing a wide variety of gauges to a high degree of accuracy, repairing or converting them to fit other devices, and manufacturing artillery dial sights.

The range of work reflected the specialist engineering skills available at the Mint.