

Bermuda's currency

Any study of Bermuda's Currency must go back almost 400 years to the year 1616 (only seven years after the landings at Plymouth Rock) to find the early colonists on Bermuda having their own coins minted in England for use on the island. There were four different coins, known today to collectors as "hog coins", because of the hog depicted on the obverse. They were made of brass and today are extremely valuable.

The next coin to be specially minted for Bermuda was called the "ship's penny" (this one had a ship on the obverse) and the date on it is 1793. These are also collectors items, especially the proofs and the silver proofs which are very rare indeed.

For the next 121 years Bermudians, who traveled greatly throughout the Caribbean and the eastern seaboard of the U.S. and Canada generally used the Spanish dollar, and various other silver and gold coins from other nations (in addition to barter) to deal with their commercial needs.

However, following the growth in commerce after the American Civil war, the need for paper currency grew. Indeed in 1881 there was a plan to "overprint" a Canadian \$5 note in the amount of 21 shillings (a guinea) by the Merchants Bank of Halifax: this bank had a branch in Bermuda (which went on to become the Bank of Bermuda) as there was a considerable need for "local" currency. However, these plans did not come to fruition and the records do not give the reason.

The first true local currency arrived in Bermuda in 1914, at the opening of the World War, with the arrival of a "one pound" note for Bermuda printed by the American Bank Note Company (ironically located in Ottawa, Canada). They were a black/deep purple color and are extremely rare. Be prepared to pay up to \$20,000 for an "extremely fine" one. The first note was followed by a 5 shilling and a 10 shilling and then a second one pound note in 1927.

George VI (1936-52) notes saw the introduction of an additional note to the series of 5 shillings, 10 shillings and one pound, with the introduction of a five pound note in 1941 (the first signs of inflation?). The first of this new series was brown in color and immediately caused concern in shops because it closely resembled the 5 shilling (which was worth one-twentieth the value) and the brown ones were recalled and a yellow (the canary) was substituted. The "brown five pound" is, as a consequence of its brief life, a very rare note indeed: one in uncirculated condition (unc) is going to cost you \$10,000.

Elizabeth II's reign saw the transition from sterling notes (1952-1969) to the decimal notes of 1970-2000. The most remarkable event saw the introduction of a ten pound (sterling) note in 1966, and despite the fact that they were in circulation of five years, they are still highly prized by collectors today.

The decimal notes can be found from \$1 to \$100 (the \$1 note was substituted with a coin in 1988 and a \$2 note introduced). The decimal notes are most interesting for the various signatures that appear on them, and for the fact that the "replacement" notes (where any note is damaged in the printing process (Bermuda's notes are printed by De La Rue of London) a special note is introduced in the "packet/brick" of notes sent to Bermuda: these notes are called "x" notes, because the serial number begins with a Z). These replacement notes are, surprisingly, not that uncommon, but they are much sought after by collectors.

Like most things “Bermudian” the currency notes of the island are much admired by collectors, and it is a rare collector that has a complete set of the Island’s notes, especially in “fine”- to- better condition. However, they do come up at Auction quite often and an alert hunter can have a great deal of fun seeking them out.

They are a sound investment as they are unlikely to devalue in price.