

CRYSTAL BALLING ... The Future of Decimal Paper Banknote Collecting

LIKE many collecting endeavours, banknote collecting is constantly evolving and full of surprises. This helps to maintain our interest level, enjoyment, and to keep us “on our toes”.

The history of Decimal banknote collecting essentially began in February 1966, when the first \$1, \$2, \$10 and \$20 notes were introduced at the time of decimalisation. These notes were issued to replace their equivalent Pre-Decimal denominations of Ten Shillings, One Pound, Five Pounds and Ten Pounds. The \$5 note was later introduced in 1967, followed by the \$50 in 1973 and finally the \$100 in 1984. I contacted well-known banknote expert Mick Vort-Ronald for his recollections of the early days of Decimal notes.

“My early experiences with paper decimal were that no-one bothered to collect them when they first came out. Collectors assumed that because Coombs / Wilson had been around for so long there would be no hurry to do so. Then there was the Coombs / Randall followed quickly by Phillips / Randall and by then it was very hard to find Uncirculated Coombs / Randall notes, particularly the \$20. I swapped an ANSCo token (worth \$1,000s) for about 8-9 Coombs / Randall \$20s with a bank teller, which enabled me to make up spare sets, which I advertised to only swap for older notes I was missing...I was the first to attempt to assemble complete sets up to the Knight / Wheeler notes and accompany them with my (then) typed interleaves. A well-known millionaire note collector could not buy a set anywhere at that time and swapped me an oval specimen book of 10 notes for one of my spare decimal banknote collections, which should give you some idea of early decimal collecting.”

Wow! Haven't times changed!

Some of the notes which were put aside early on by collectors included examples of the first 1,000,000 notes printed for each denomination. These were the very First Prefixes, being AAA (\$1), FAA (\$2), NAA (\$5), SAA (\$10) and XAA (\$20). An example of a \$1 First Prefix AAA taken from circulation is shown in Fig. 1.

Decimal note collecting seemed to remain low key until at least the mid-1970s. In 1974, our banknotes had the legend at the top of the notes changed from “Commonwealth of Australia” to “Australia”. This was an obvious design change which received some publicity at the time. Collectors focused their attention on securing the notes with the previous “old” design. It soon became clear to collectors looking to assemble sets of “Commonwealth of Australia” notes that the Coombs / Randall notes (particularly the \$20) were indeed quite tough



Fig. 1, \$1 First Prefix AAA from circulation



Fig. 2, \$1 First Prefix AAA
Archival note, image courtesy of Mick Vort-Ronald

to find, especially in high grade. This explains the current high values of these notes.

Another boost in interest occurred during the 1980s with the demise of the \$1 and \$2 notes, which were replaced by coins in 1984 and 1988 respectively. Many collectors and non-collectors alike hoarded the \$1 and \$2 notes, believing that they “might be worth something one day”. This has made them relatively easy to come by today, often showing up in full bundles of 100 notes. At Shows and Fairs around Australia, dealers can always count on non-collectors presenting circulated \$1 and \$2 notes, and being asked to value these “rare” notes.

In 1991, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Decimal Currency, Note Printing Australia released an exclusive limited edition portfolio containing notes from their archives. This portfolio included examples of the last 1,000 printed Pre-Decimal notes (Last Prefixes) and the first 1,000 printed Decimal notes (First Prefixes). This innovative product probably brought First and Last Prefixes to the attention of many collectors for the first time! An example of a \$1 First Prefix AAA archive note is shown in Fig. 2.

During the period from 1992 to 1996, the remaining paper notes were phased out and replaced by polymer versions. The \$5 polymer was introduced in 1992, then the \$10 in 1993, the \$20 in 1994, the \$50 in 1995 and finally the \$100 in 1996. Once again, this change prompted collectors to put away some of the paper notes for the future, although nowhere near to the same extent as the earlier hoarding of the \$1 and \$2 notes.

By the 2000s, many collectors had succeeded in assembling complete sets of the Decimal paper notes. These sets consisted of an example of each signature and variety type for each denomination, a total of around 80 notes. As the supply of these notes began to outstrip demand, values stagnated. After more than 35 years of collecting the Decimal Paper notes, many collectors were looking for a new challenge.

Armed with information contained in Mick Vort-Ronald's book *Australian Decimal Banknotes Paper Issues (Second Edition)*, published in 2000, a few collectors began to collect the First and Last Prefixes of each signature and variety type. To complete this set, the number of notes to obtain nearly doubled to more than 150. As most of these First and Last Signature Prefixes were not put aside at the time of their issue, and with some signatures having hundreds of different Prefixes printed, this proved a challenging task. Some of these Prefixes began to show up on eBay in the mid-2000s, and it was clear that there was strong interest from collectors. In December of 2007, Greg McDonald's *Pocket Guide to Australian Coins and Banknotes, (15th Edition)*, listed

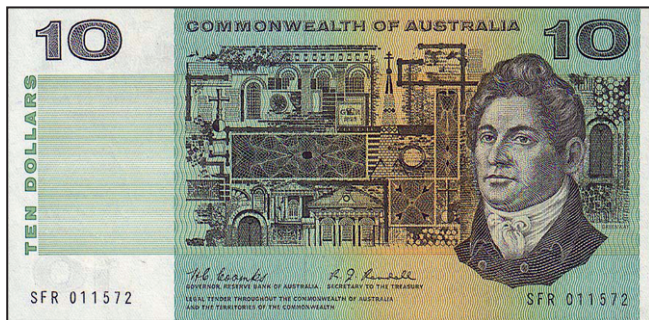


Fig. 3, Lot 2883 - \$10 Coombs/Randall Last Prefix SFR note, image courtesy of Downies

these First and Last Signature Prefixes for the first time, and a new collecting theme was born!

In July of 2008, Downies held an auction which included a section specifically devoted to these Decimal Paper First and Last Signature Prefixes. The section was headed with the following introduction:

"With the recent publishing of verified first and last paper note signature prefixes in numismatic literature, a whole new collecting theme has been released into the public domain...As this more detailed information is now not restricted to a privileged few collectors, there is expected to be a significant variation to published 'guesstimates' of the value of such notes...This high grade selection should provide a very good indication of the true worth of such notes in the future."

In total, 57 notes were offered for sale in this section, and included 55 different Prefixes. I viewed these notes prior to the auction and most of them were in About Uncirculated (aUnc) or better grade, certainly an impressive collection! Highlights included a \$10 Coombs/Randall Last Prefix SFR described as Virtually Uncirculated (my inspection revealed a teller flick), which sold for \$1,013 including Buyer's Premium of 19.25%. An image of this note is shown in Fig. 3.

Another highlight was a \$50 Johnston/Fraser OCR-B First Prefix YXH described as Uncirculated (my inspection revealed a corner fold), which sold for \$1,073 including Buyer's Premium. This note is shown in Fig. 4.

Most of the unsold notes were again offered in Downies' October 2008 auction and many of these sold for higher prices than the prices at which they were passed-in at the July auction! In this October 2008 auction, more than 90 notes were offered. The promising results of the 2008 Downies auctions certainly increased the profile of this segment. Due to this, along with the Prefixes being listed in the McDonald and Renniks Guides, collectors were encouraged to search through their Decimal notes to try and find some of these elusive First and Last Signature Prefixes.

This searching proved fruitful, as more than 700 notes were offered for public sale (major auction houses and ebay) in 2009 and 2010. This contrasts with more recent times, where



Fig. 4, Lot 2908 - \$50 Johnston/Fraser OCR-B First Prefix YXH, image courtesy of Downies

fewer than 100 notes per year have been seen over each of the last 4 years. Most Downies auctions now include fewer than 10 of these notes.

My research of the total quantities and denominations of Decimal Paper First and Last Signature Prefix notes offered reveals the following:

Total quantities of publicly offered notes:

2008 to 2012
approximately 1,100 (average of 220 per year)

2013 to 2017
approximately 350 (average of 70 per year)

Breakdown of total notes offered by denomination:

\$1.....	9%
\$2.....	9%
\$5.....	18%
\$10.....	16%
\$20.....	25%
\$50.....	18%
\$100.....	4%

As can be seen by these results, Decimal Paper First and Last Signature Prefix notes are starting to "dry-up", with the \$1 and \$2 notes proving the most difficult to obtain. The increase in popularity and awareness of this area has seen values steadily increase.

I am always buying and on the lookout for these notes, so if you have any, please let me know!

Email: collectablebanknotesaustralia@gmail.com

References

Australian Decimal Banknotes Paper Issues (Second Edition) by Mick Vort-Ronald, 2000

Downies (Australian Coin Auctions) auction catalogue 299A, July 2008

Renniks Australian Coin & Banknote Values (27th Edition) edited by Michael Pitt, 2016

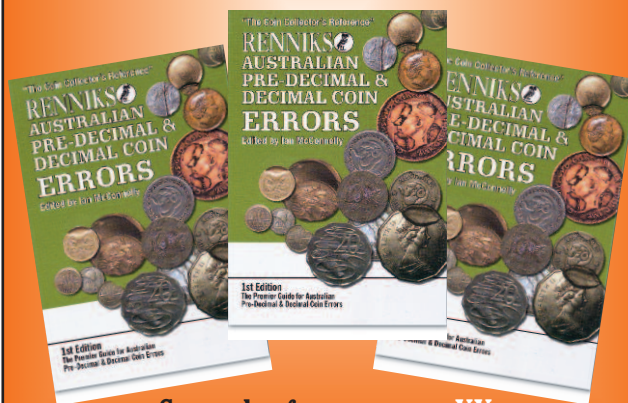
Sales results from www.ebay.com.au, 2007-2017

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Marcus Condello

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