



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

If, as the saying goes, money does make the world go round, we all have a rather special place in the South Wales valleys to thank for it, says Jules

The Welsh Valleys are famous for many things: coal, choirs and more than one celebrity pop star. But imagine my surprise when I found myself driving into an industrial estate on the edge of Llantrisant when filming for *Escape...* What on earth could a location like this have to do with country life?

In truth my destination underpins the lives of us all, and this was a rare opportunity to get up close and personal with an extraordinary place. As I parked up and met my crew, we gathered our gear and marched towards the entrance flanked by multiple layers of razor wire covered in security cameras. Thankfully, we were greeted warmly with the following words: "Hi Jules, welcome to the Royal Mint."

We often talk about making money, but since it was established that is literally what the Royal Mint does. Since it moved from London in 1967, the Mint has become a business in its own right, making coins not just for the UK but for a staggering 60 countries worldwide. Chances are, if you're on holiday in Thailand, Egypt or Poland, the shrapnel in your pocket was made in Wales.

Since the Iron Age, coins have been traded in Britain for all manner of things, but it was the arrival of the Romans which established the tradition of a cash economy without which it's impossible to imagine life today. The Mint's own museum collection numbers some 80,000 examples of coins from all over the world, from early Greek to the present day. In the past, of course, coins were made from gold and silver, their value in weight equivalent to the value of the coin, but over the last century or so the materials that our coins are made of has changed dramatically. How would you feel if the pound in your pocket was made from recycled copper, tin, brass and steel? Well, you'd better get used to the idea because that's exactly what goes into them. It's not so much money for old rope, more money for old wire and ingots of nickel. The Mint has its own smelters which transform simple ingredients into the economic bearings that make the world go round. I watched as, emerging from a handful of furnaces, great coils of metal were formed ready to be turned into some of the four billion coins The Mint makes annually.

Over the years, thousands of different designs have been produced. Early coins were crude affairs struck by local blacksmiths at the behest of chieftains and nobles. Today the process is much more sophisticated, reflecting greater demand and a need to thwart the counterfeiters. But, reassuringly the imagery itself is still hand-engraved by master craftspeople. The only key difference is that once the design is finalised and the die cast, the machines take over.

My slightly cheeky request to look at the vault was wryly refused, but I was welcomed into perhaps the busiest end of the operation. The Coin Pressing Room is where the analogy between Willy Wonker's Chocolate Factory and The Royal Mint comes to life. In a modern factory building the size of a football pitch, I watched as a press thumped out pennies; a forklift hoisted a bin of simple copper plated steel discs into a huge hopper above it; and thousands of blanks poured into the hopper and began streaming down to the jaws of the press itself, which struck them at an astonishing rate of 750 a minute. In the blink of an eye, a worthless metal disc was given an indelible value. The press spat the finished pennies into a great bin with no more ceremony than if it were making sweets. In a few minutes, it was filled to the brim with around a quarter of a million penny pieces – £25,000 in the time it takes to boil a kettle!

There's a palpable sense of pride amongst the team at the Royal Mint, and rightly so. Plenty of businesses and individuals make money in this country but the men and women of The Mint do so in a manner all their own. Our house hunters picked the South Wales valleys hoping to find value for money, but I wonder how many of us know just how much value is really there? Next time you put your hand in your pocket you will, I hope, have plenty to remind you...

• *Black Sheep is away*

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archaeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

You can follow Jules on Twitter @thejuleshudson, or visit his website at www.juleshudson.com

