

Three Indian Peace Medallions – 1919 by Simon Wilson

Sometimes, what seems like a simple search for information turns up nothing. Other times, you get a surprise. In this case it was a bit of both. It all started as a search for information about a medallion I bought as part of a mixed lot many years ago and ended up as a small collection and an interesting story.



It's a plain medallion (*above*), the size and shape of an old penny, 32mm in diameter and struck in bronze. The obverse features the conjoined busts of King George V and Queen Mary, facing right. The legend around the outside of the medallion says GEORGE V * MARY. The mark between the names is more like a flower than an asterisk, but keyboard options are limited.

The reverse design features a tree on the right, with laurel leaves arching over the words PEACE/CELEBRATION and a plaque which contains the date 1919. The exergue contains the words CALCUTTA/SCHOOLS.

I bought a small bag of them with a mixture of coins, medallions and military badges, none of which gave me a clue about the context of the medallions. Years passed, I collected British Peace medallions for 1919, but tried to stay away from overseas ones as it's hard enough forming a decent collection of British ones, without branching out into imperial issues.

I will cover the Calcutta medallion, then mention two others of a similar type which are known to exist. Information on these medallions is limited. They were clearly given to Calcutta school pupils to celebrate peace, but apart from that (which can be guessed by reading the medallion) there is no other information. At the point I bought them I didn't even know where they had been made, as large numbers of peace medallions were struck in Birmingham and they may never even have been to India.

Fortunately, when I did start digging, there was some information available. The Coin and Medallion website *Numista*, was my first stop, followed by chasing down a copy of Robert Puddester's book *Medals of British India*. It's a hard book to find, as most of the advertisers don't seem to have them in stock and when I did find one the cost was around £100 to import one from the USA. At that point I began to appreciate the old saying that ignorance is bliss. I certainly feel a lot better about being ignorant when it saves me that sort of money.

Finally I consulted Noonan's catalogue - Lot 1661 (Indian Medals from the Puddester Collection) sold on 8.10.02. Lists three - Calcutta Schools, Allahabad Schools and Surat Schools. There is no picture of the lot but *Numista* has photographs of the Calcutta and Allahabad medallions (*below*).



The designer is F K Wezel, who was responsible for many Indian coin designs and was Chief Artist/Engraver at the Calcutta Mint from 1893 until his retirement in 1922.



The Peace Celebrations in London (*left*), took place in July 1919, at which point the ink was barely dry on the Treaty of Versailles, but the Indian contingent of 1,800 men were delayed after flu broke out on their ship. As a result, they camped in the park at Hampton Court Palace, as the coronation contingents had done in 1901 and 1910. They eventually had their own

parade in August as the band of the Brigade of Guards played at the head of the parade, and the crowd threw flowers. It ended with an inspection by the King, a garden party at Buckingham Palace and the award of the VC to Karanbahadur Rana of the 3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles.

In India, the Peace was celebrated in a "small scale" way in July, if you can call giving small cash gifts to 10,000 poor people, as happened in Calcutta, small scale. But the main celebrations were planned for December and the coming of the cold weather.

In Calcutta during the main celebrations, there were grand dinners and receptions for the Viceroy and the upper classes. There were also events for the "feeding of the poor" (split into Hindu and Moslem events for dietary reasons) and school children were "entertained" on both Saturday and Sunday. Details are frustratingly brief. Several venues are named, including the Zoo, and there were outdoor games as well as "entertainments" and the children were also allowed to visit the city cinemas in organised groups. Three schools are named, two founded by the Catholic Church and one by a French soldier. They all survive to this day as what appear to be private schools, and it occurs to me that the

“schoolchildren” of Calcutta were quite a select group, with a clear distinction between the “poor” who were fed and the “school children” who seem to have been entertained, and were possibly the only group given medallions.

It is only possible to name one of the likely participants in this peace celebration – Estelle Merle O'Brien Thompson. Born in 1911, her father was a British engineer and her mother was of mixed race. After her father died of pneumonia on the Western Front in 1916 the family fell on hard times and she ended up as a charity pupil at the La Martinière School in Calcutta where “she was constantly teased by the majority European students for her mixed ethnicity”. She later became well known as Merle Oberon, and achieved fame in Hollywood.

Although she concealed her ethnicity during her career, her 1936 Oscar nomination for *The Dark Angel* is now regarded as the first nomination for an Asian actor.

There are several mentions of the Allahabad Peace Celebrations, but only in general terms. Fireworks on Government buildings at Government expense and local “feeding the poor, school sports and garden parties” in the newspapers of 1919, stating that if any local groups wanted to help with the costs as an expression of thankfulness for Peace, donations would be welcomed.

Two ratepayers of Allahabad, a week before the Peace Celebrations (13 – 16 December 1919) applied to take out an injunction against the Municipal Board of Allahabad, on the grounds that such a contribution was illegal. There was also an attempt to oppose official Peace Celebrations in the city at a council meeting the week before the event, but his was defeated.



Calcutta is now known as Kolkata. Medallions from Calcutta are fairly common on eBay, with two available at the time of writing. Allahabad (now known as Prayagraj) medallions crop up very rarely and Surat (*above*), still known as Surat, medallions are even rarer – only seen two mentioned and only one of them had photographs. They are all major cities and it is surprising that so few medallions to the latter two cities have been seen. It is possible that local politics had a part to play, or that the numbers were very small, or that very few were issued, but this is all speculation as there is no firm evidence either way. British rule in India was in its final few decades, the Amritsar Massacre in April had done irreparable damage to the British relationship with Indians and the people known as

“extremists” in the Press were reported as working hard to undermine British efforts, including the Peace Celebrations, an example of this being the actions in Allahabad.