

Mark Blackburn, LittD, FSA
1953–2011

This obituary has been prepared for the British Numismatic Journal vol. 81 (2011). The British Numismatic Society has decided to make it available in advance of publication, via its website, for those interested in Dr Blackburn's contribution to the field.

MARK BLACKBURN died peacefully on 1 September 2011 at the age of 58, surrounded by members of his family. His long battle with cancer began in the 1980s, when he was successfully treated, but the illness recurred in 2004 and again in 2010. However, a combination of superb medical care and his own great strength and determination sustained him for over a year after his terminal diagnosis. He will be remembered as a towering presence – physically and figuratively – in numismatics: as a true leader of the field worldwide, an undisputed master of his discipline and the congenial face of the Department of Coins and Medals at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Mark was born on 5 January 1953 at his family home in Camberley, Surrey, third son of Neil Blackburn and Joan Wallace Blackburn (née Marshall), who had met at the accounting firm Dixon Wilson in 1936. When Mark was 13 the family moved to Tunbridge Wells, where he attended the Skinners' School, of which he later (in 2007) became a Foundation Governor. His time there established a long and happy association with the Worshipful Company of Skinners, which saw him elected a Freeman in 1981 and a Liveryman in 2008. After leaving school Mark read chemistry and later law at St Edmund Hall in the University of Oxford. He graduated in 1975, and entered pupillage at Middle Temple, where he subsequently practised as a barrister. In 1978 Mark left the law, taking up a position in the corporate finance department of the merchant banking firm Kleinwort Benson.

It was after four years with Kleinwort Benson, in 1982, that Mark made a life-changing decision to relocate to Cambridge and work as a Research Associate with Professor Philip Grierson. This move was not undertaken lightly, for it came with no permanent prospects and was a considerable departure from Mark's promising earlier career in corporate finance. But after a great deal of deliberation, Mark chose to accept the position, and never looked back.

The immediate result of Philip and Mark's collaboration over the next four years was the first volume of *Medieval European Coinage*: a study of coinage in western Europe from the fall of the western Roman empire to the tenth century, containing a catalogue of the collections of Professor Grierson and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. It remains the premier study of the subject, and served to cement Mark's already well-established position within the British numismatic fraternity. His interest in the subject dated back to childhood, and became serious when, in 1971, he joined the British Numismatic Society and read of a 'shortage of research workers in the British series' in Stewart Lyon's 1970 presidential address to the Society. In response, Mark wrote a letter to Stewart humbly offering his services on any projects which might need attention, and Stewart referred him to Michael Dolley, doyen of the Anglo-Saxon series. Under the tutelage of Dolley and Lyon, and also Michael Metcalf at Oxford, Mark quickly acquired an intimate familiarity with Anglo-Saxon coinage and related issues from Ireland, Scandinavia and continental Europe. He soon became a close friend and colleague of these major scholars, and also of Christopher Blunt.

In 1991, after nine years as a Research Associate of the Faculty of History, Mark was appointed Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals in the Fitzwilliam Museum – a post he was to hold for twenty years. In this time, he built on the solid foundations laid by his predecessor, Professor Ted Buttrey, to make his department a genuine world leader, above all in the study of medieval coinages. Mark was a gifted manager and a warm and encouraging leader. His time as a lawyer and in the City left him with a great talent for organisation and a strong sense of efficiency, as well as a respect for attention to detail, all of which ideally suited him for the tasks associated with numismatic research. The rabbit warren of rooms making up the department became a welcoming hub for the numismatic community. Under Mark's guidance the collection's holdings, as well as its prestige, grew considerably through a number of major bequests and acquisitions, for which Mark often deftly negotiated the complex process of obtaining funds. The enviable position in which he has left the department is in itself a major testament to his energy, devotion and ability.

Mark brought these same qualities to all of the projects and societies in which he was involved. His abilities were soon spotted by senior figures in the field. From 1977 he was attending committee meetings of the Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles, and in 1980 was formally appointed as an editor. Initially he shared this role with Christopher Blunt and Michael Dolley, but from 1987 until 2010 he fulfilled the roles of general editor and secretary alone, and oversaw the publication of thirty-six Sylloge volumes, with several more volumes in progress as of 2011. From 1998 Mark also served as general editor of the project which initially brought him to Cambridge, Medieval European Coinage. This series has advanced slowly but steadily, with a second volume published in 1998 and two others very close to completion at the time of his death. From 1990 Mark also served on the Council of the Royal Numismatic Society, and as an editor of the *Numismatic Chronicle* from 1992 until 1998.

Mark's involvement with the British Numismatic Society began in 1971 with his election as a junior member, and over the years the Society has benefited hugely from his contribution in various capacities. He was first appointed to Council in 1975, and served as an editor of the *British Numismatic Journal* in 1983–7. Later the Society enjoyed his vigorous leadership as President from 2004 until 2008. In this time a recruitment drive brought the total membership to over 650 for the first time in the Society's history. The Society's range of awards and prizes was restructured and extended, and the processes of election and nomination to Council were made more transparent. Mark's formidable academic achievement in British numismatics was recognised in 2008 at the very end of his presidency when he was – much to his embarrassment – awarded the Society's Sanford Saltus medal. Mark's many other awards and distinctions include the Society's Council Prize (now the Blunt Prize) in 1987 (of which he was the inaugural recipient); the Jeton de Vermeil of the Société française de Numismatique in 1991; the Royal Numismatic Society medal in 2008; and, in 2011, the Prize Medal of the Gunnar Holst Stiftelse (Sweden) and the British Academy's Derek Allen prize. Also in 2011, the University of Cambridge recognised Mark's research with the award of a Doctorate of Letters – a higher degree reflecting his exceptional level of academic attainment.

Mark's influence in Cambridge extended well beyond the coin room. He took great pride and pleasure in his association with Gonville and Caius College, of which he was elected a Fellow in 2005, after a long affiliation going back to 1982. Mark enjoyed contributing to the life of the college in his role as Registrary between 2007 and 2010, and was always a regular visitor to college meetings, meals and concerts. Within the university Mark's duties included the teaching of undergraduate and graduate students. He derived great enjoyment and satisfaction from teaching, and

appreciated the impact that seeing – and, better yet, handling – coins could have on students, and so made every effort to conduct his classes within the coin room itself whenever possible. Successive cohorts from the Faculty of History and the Departments of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (of which he was an Honorary Research Associate from 2001, and Reader in Numismatics and Monetary History from 2004) and Archaeology (of which he was an affiliated lecturer from 2004) benefited from his encyclopaedic knowledge and his enthusiasm in passing it on. Mark's graduate students will remember him both for his incisive yet constructive criticism and for his kind encouragement and support.

Beneath all of Mark's honours and awards lay a bedrock of very deep numismatic knowledge. The specific area which Mark made his own was the coinage of early medieval England and its neighbours between the fifth and twelfth centuries. This period was marked by tectonic shifts in politics, society and economy as the later Roman empire metamorphosed slowly and often painfully into medieval Europe. The key players in this process, from the British perspective, were the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. Written and archaeological sources for them are often few and problematic, and so their coins play an especially important role. Mark excelled in the delicate techniques needed to extract coherent conclusions from them, and contributed more than 200 publications to the field. These began with a brief note on a coin of Henry I in the *British Numismatic Journal* of 1973, followed in the next year's volume by a substantial and important article on the late Anglo-Saxon and Norman mint of Watchet in Somerset. After this Mark went from strength to strength. A full list of his publications is included in one of the last of them to appear: volume 7 in the Society's series of Special Publications, *Viking Coinage and Currency in the British Isles*. This brings together fifteen of his papers on a theme which was of abiding interest to Mark – the development of currency under the influence of Viking raids and settlements in the ninth- and tenth-century British Isles. It was to this topic that he devoted his five presidential addresses in 2004–8, which form the core of the book. His interest in the Vikings also led him back to their homeland in Scandinavia. In the 1970s and 1980s he examined the patterns of export of Anglo-Saxon and German coins in collaboration with Kenneth Jonsson and Michael Metcalf. Later he returned to Scandinavian finds to consider the earlier (ninth-century) phase of coin circulation in Norway, when the currency consisted largely of silver dirhams brought from the Muslim world and a smaller element of western coins. Mark was invited to participate in an interdisciplinary project reassessing finds from the Viking trading settlement of Kaupang in modern Norway, which included large numbers of coins, coin-fragments, weights and other objects, and another project on the exceptional Hoen hoard of gold coins and jewellery. He subjected all of this material to close analysis, producing an important framework for the circulation of gold and silver in Scandinavia more widely.

The background to Mark's success with these Scandinavian finds lay in his research into coin-finds within England. Mark was a pioneer of the analysis of single-finds of medieval coins as they proliferated from around 1980, and was one of the first scholars to take advantage of this development by collecting information on new finds from metal-detectorists. Articles with Mike Bonser in the early 1980s laid the foundations for the Coin Register, and in 1997 Mark established a digital resource at the Fitzwilliam Museum for storing and analysing single-find material: the Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds (EMC). It remains a benchmark for websites of its kind, and continues to be updated with hundreds of new finds every year. Recording finds was, of course, only a prelude to the important task of analysing what they indicated about the nature of the monetary economy in the early Middle Ages. Mark became established as one of the foremost interpreters of new finds, and, along with other

scholars engaged in similar work (most notably Michael Metcalf), he was able to use them to construct an alternative view of the scale of coin-use in the early Middle Ages; one which was not dependent on the chance discoveries of hoards. This revealed a very clear and widespread peak of coin-loss in the late seventh and early eighth centuries – the period of the *sceattas* – which would not be matched in England again until the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Other areas to which Mark devoted particular attention at various times are the coinage of Alfred the Great, Norman issues of the first half of the twelfth century, the coinage of Viking-Age Dublin, the use and circulation of gold after the seventh century and the chronology of the *sceattas*. His work also extended to the coinages of India, Vietnam and Japan, where he was able to apply successfully the techniques he had honed on the medieval coinages of Europe. He was meticulous and patient in his analysis but never lost sight of the broader context and implications of his work. A sign of the esteem in which his research is held is that Mark's name is well known to archaeologists, historians and other scholars in disciplines far beyond the immediate numismatic community. As a gifted exponent of the virtues of numismatic evidence, Mark contributed important chapters on coinage to major general publications such as the *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, the *Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* and the first two volumes of the *New Cambridge Medieval History*. He also served since 1991 as numismatics editor for the interdisciplinary journal *Anglo-Saxon England*.

This summary of the many contributions Mark made through his writing and research can only offer a partial view of the impact he made on the field. Much of any truly great scholar's contribution lies in the links between colleagues he facilitates and the personal friendships he generates, often spanning continents, disciplines and generations. This was undoubtedly true of Mark. From an early stage he harnessed a delight in travelling to numismatic ends, and over the years he gained many friends across the globe. Through travel and contacts with local scholars around the world, Mark established links of enduring value.

When a book-launch party was held for Mark's volume on *Viking Coinage and Currency in the British Isles* in September 2010 – by which point he knew that his time was running short – he spoke with characteristic modesty in response to the friends and colleagues who had gathered to pay him tribute. In his view, the secret to anything he had done, and also the greatest pleasure in anything he had done, was to listen to, nurture and encourage others. In this way he had approached the challenges in his life both with fortitude and with infinite kindness and sensitivity. A great delight for him was to play host, either at his department, college or at his home in Cambridge, which countless numismatists will remember fondly. Mark was also a warm and loving family man, who was devoted to his children – Molly, Hal and Will – and to his wife Fiona, in all of whose achievements he took his greatest pride.

Rory Naismith