ENGLISH PIEDFORTS AND THEIR PURPOSES.

BY L. A. LAWRENCE, F.S.A.

It is possible that the above title may be unintelligible to some readers, so that something of a definition may be advisable to make the subject clear. The poverty of our numismatic language has rendered necessary the use of this French word. The present meaning is “heavy measure,” and it was applied by the French to certain coin-like pieces which were larger and heavier than coins intended for currency. We use the word in a slightly different sense, to imply only a difference in weight.

An English piedfort is, therefore, a piece struck from coin dies, but of much greater weight, though the diameter remains the same as the coin. It consequently follows that the thickness must be considerably increased. Very little is known about these pieces or their uses, and so I have thought it might prove useful to make a list of them in the hope that by so doing some interest in them may be created and that study of them may result in making their uses better understood.

All the English piedforts that I know of date from between 1280 and, let us say, 1500. They are as follows:—

1. Edward I Lincoln penny, class IIIc; weight, 64 grains; very fine. L. A. L.
2. London halfpenny, class VII; 27.5 grains. L. A. L.
4. London halfpenny, class X; weight, 26.7 grains; fine. B. M.
5. London halfpenny, class X; reading ANGLI; weight, 31.2 grains; worn. B. M.
6. London halfpenny, class doubtful; weight, 31 grains; Montagu and Murdoch collections.
7. Edward I London farthing, class X; weight, 24.1 grains; very fine, B. M.
8. Edward II Canterbury penny, class XI; weight, 66 grains; worn. B. M.
9. Edward II Canterbury penny, class XI or later; weight, 81 grains; very worn. L. A. L.
10. Edward II Canterbury penny, class doubtful; weight, 86 grains; very worn. L. A. L.
11. Edward III London half-groat, Roman M.; weight, 320.5 grains. L. A. L. This piedfort has a long pedigree.
12. Henry V London groat, mullet on shoulder type; weight, 308.8 grains; worn. B. M.
13. Henry V London penny, mullet and broken annulet at sides of crown; weight, 56.8 grains; worn. B. M.
14. Henry VI Calais groat, trefoil coinage; weight, 169.7 grains; somewhat worn. B. M.
15. Henry VI Calais half-groat, annulet coinage; weight, 185 grains; somewhat worn. B. M.
16. Henry VI Calais penny, pinecone and mascle coinage; weight, 58.6 grains; holed and somewhat worn. B. M.
16A. Henry VI Calais penny, pinecone and mascle coinage; weight, 55.1 grains; worn. B. M.
17. Henry VI York penny, cross and pellet coinage; weight, 60 grains; worn. L. A. L.
18. Edward IV York penny, of Archbishop Booth; weight, 76.1 grains; fine. B. M.

All these pieces are of good silver, and these twenty specimens here described are all that I know of. Except for the thickness, they are exactly like the coins they represent. Perhaps they are more truly circular than coins, but this can be explained by the
fact that there was no necessity to adjust the weights of them after they were struck. It will be noticed, first, that there is no relation between the weight of the piedfort and that of the coin it represented, and where there are two piedforts of the same denomination of about the same period, there is considerable difference between the weights of the piedforts themselves; thus piedforts of the Canterbury pennies vary from 86 to 66 grains, though the 66-grain coin is in better condition than the worn 81 and 86-grain pieces. In the same way the Calais half-groat weighs 185 grains, against the groat of 169.7 grains.

Special attention is called to these weights in order to show that these English piedforts could never have been intended for currency. If not for currency, for what purpose were they struck? This is perhaps a difficult question to answer. They have been called patterns and proofs. If they are to be regarded as such, then we must consider these patterns and proofs as something quite different from the meaning nowadays of the terms. Patterns now suggest to us something different in design from the current coin. The piedforts are as much like the current coin as are two coins; indeed, as far as the half-groat of Edward III goes, I have been able to find the reverse from the same die on a half-groat in the National Collection, and in Mr. R. Carlyon-Britton’s collection recently dispersed was the obverse of the piedfort. So that patterns, as we now know them, they are not. Proofs of a die in the same way as an early impression from a print plate, they may be, but they are not specially prepared articles for the public.

If they were die proofs, just to see what the work looked like when struck from the die, why the extraordinary thickness and the use of relatively such an amount of valuable metal when a thin piece would probably have shown the impress better? The suggestion that I put forward is that these English piedforts were made—firstly, to satisfy the engraver of the dies that his work was what he intended it to be; and secondly, for the use of workers of dies in the mint workshops, to show them what the chief engraver intended them to copy. It is a significant fact that nearly all the later pieces
and many of the earlier ones bear names other than that of London. To some of these places we know that irons were sent, not dies. Irons could not have been of much use for striking a uniform coinage throughout the country if the workers had not a pattern to work to. For this purpose a thin proof would have been of less use, and it might at any time have been mistaken for an ordinary coin. The thickness, however, of the piedfort would have been something of a safeguard.

Therefore if these thick pieces had been made for this purpose, we might have expected that they would have been the last word in accuracy. So they are, with one exception, namely, the trefoil groat of Calais. On this piece the \( \text{O} \) of \( \text{DIVTORS} \) is omitted. At first sight this looks like a serious objection to use as a working pattern, but it may not be as serious as it looks. No doubt the prominent mint authorities knew quite well the spelling of each word of the legend—it had been the same on the coins for a century—but there is another explanation. The absence of the letter may have been the privy mark for the pyx trial. I am a great believer in the accuracy of the manufacture of our English coins, and when I see an apparent blunder repeated on a number of different dies it suggests to me not carelessness of work but intent. If mint masters had to find a method of secret marking, different every three months, they must sometimes have found it difficult, while keeping the coinage uniform, to invent a fresh system of secret marks.

How else can we explain \( \text{EDW} \) and \( \text{EDV} \) on many different dies of Edward III? when even the annulet stops were so carefully placed between the words that sometimes a difficulty is found in differentiating two dies. These piedforts have also been described as the standards which were ordered to be delivered to the various mints for assay purposes. The standards, however, must have been for different purposes, as the weights of them were ordered. For London the value was 40 shillings and for the provincial mints 10 shillings. These standards must, therefore, have been much heavier than any piedforts. Some later standards are preserved in the mint, and those I have seen are large
sheets of gold with a small impress of a coin in one corner and little pieces have been cut out from time to time for assay purposes when the coins were made. Looking to what I have been able to ascertain, I think the working pattern idea a reasonable one, but I am quite open to any suggestion which will better explain these curious heavy pieces. I should be grateful for a suggestion of a good English word which could be used in place of the French "piedfort," and I should further welcome any description of similar pieces in the ownership of our members or others.

POSTSCRIPT.—If my views as to the uses of these strange pieces are correct, a possible reason for the great rarity of them may be that when the coinage of which they were the patterns was finished, those, with the dies and the irons, were returned and scrapped. The few that remain to us now may have been appropriated or have been lost. It is difficult otherwise to account for their presence with us now.

Since going to press I have found one more piedfort:—

20. Henry VIII Durham penny, ασ at sides of shield, mint-mark star; weight, 44·7 grains; fine. B. M.