THE DIE FOR STEPHEN’S COINAGE IN THE GUILD-HALL MUSEUM, AND SECONDARY EVIDENCE THERE OF AN UNPUBLISHED PENNY OF HENRY I

By W. J. ANDREW, F.S.A.

In the City of London’s Museum at the Guildhall is an original die for Stephen’s first coinage and, as such, I believe it to be the earliest English die that has survived to us. If I am right in so styling it, the fact that I can find no reference to, nor paper upon it in any numismatic or archaeological publication, is remarkable, the more so because for nearly thirty years it has been illustrated in the Museum Catalogue for all to see. The catalogue, too, is one of the most widely read by students of English antiquities, because it describes many thousands of relics found in the city, and illustrates more than one thousand of them.

I have heard the die conversationally referred to as probably that of a contemporary forger, but, as we shall presently see, this is not so, and the mistake has possibly arisen from its illustration in the catalogue, where, to show the face, the die is so foreshortened that the spike is hidden from view. This gives it the appearance of the upper, or trussel, die, whereas it has the full spike, and is of course the standard. Had it been a trussel die, the fact that it displays the obverse type, which is of course that found on the standard, would lay it open to grave suspicion.

Its description in the catalogue is as follows:

"Die, steel, for striking the obverse of a penny of Stephen, bust to right, bearing sceptre, inscribed STIEFN—R(E)X;" [but see correction of this latter] "3½ in." [see correction later] "l., 1½ in. diam. Pl. XCIX, 1." [found in] "Little Bell Alley".

By the courtesy of Mr. J. L. Douthwaite, the Curator and Librarian to the City of London, I have been allowed to take a drawing of the die and I have also made an enlarged drawing from an impression struck from it to show the details of the inscription and type. (Plate.)

1 1908 Cat., p. 291, No. 76.
From these it will be seen that the correct and complete legend is *STIEFNE, that the letter N has its central line sloped upwards instead of downwards, that the last six letters are rather crowded together in front of the face and, finally, that the usual inner circle is entirely absent. The general type is, of course, that of Stephen's first coinage which I believe was issued from about Easter 1136 to Easter 1142—a rather long issue of one type for that period. But in various papers in this journal I have ventured to subdivide the type into three consecutive classes, which are easily distinguished by their shortening legends. The first, in mixed English and Latin and bad English spelling, gives us *STIFNE REX in full and has the inner circle. The second, still in mixed languages, but better English, reads *STIEFNE R, or rarely RE, and retains the inner circle. The third discards the Latin title altogether in reading merely *STIEFNE, and at first has the inner circle, then traces of it, and finally none at all, as in the case of the die under discussion.

It was not unusual, or significant, to drop the regal title at this period. Henry I, for instance, had done so on several of his coinages after he had been twenty years on the throne, and Stephen continued the omission, as also that of the inner circle, on most of the coins of his later types. That this is the latest form of Stephen's first coinage is definitely proved by the fact that it is found “muled” with his second issue, the obverse die in this case bearing this inscription and no trace of any inner circle.

So the die under review is of the very latest variety of Stephen's first coinage, and as such must have been made in 1141, or before Easter 1142. During part of this period, namely 2 February—1 November 1141, Stephen was interned as a captive, after his defeat by Matilda's party at the Battle of Lincoln, but the fact that the royal title is omitted is probably a coincidence as it appears to have been dropped before that event.

The form of N with the central line sloped upwards (N) was a very natural error for a die-sinker to make when punching the retrograde inscription into the die, and the form was very common in the Middle Ages, occurring on carved furniture, &c., even as late as the reign of Queen Anne. It is in evidence on London coins of Henry I, and in Stephen's reign we find it occasionally on Matilda's coinage, on the Scottish
coinage, and on several types of the irregular English issues, but, with one exception, it never appears on any of Stephen's official money.

The die before us was found in Little Bell Alley which, Mr. Douthwaite informs me, is now part of Copthall Avenue, Moorgate, following the course of the covered-in Walbrook in the City of London. We may therefore assume that it was a London moneyer's die. It is an interesting coincidence that the only coin extant of Stephen's official coinage that bears this irregular H should also be a London penny of Stephen's first general coinage. It reads +STIFINE REX, reverse +ADELARD: ON: LVN, and is therefore of my first subdivision of the general type, and is consequently from a die made five years earlier than this one. Yet the H is used in the King's name, as here, and not in that of the mint.

In numismatics we have only to describe a coin as unique for another to be promptly produced; in the Montagu Catalogue, to take an extreme example, one lot is described as unique, and the following lot as similar to the last, so it may be that a silver penny from the die before us does exist, and has escaped the thousands of Stephen's coins that I have noted from my youth up. But as the proportion of money of the twelfth century that we now have is as nothing to that originally issued, I did not expect to be able to identify a coin from this die.

As to the hypothetical suggestion that this might possibly have been the die of a contemporary forger, there is ample evidence to the contrary. We have seen that it is a standard die and true to type, and that the unusual H does occur, on the obverse also, on a London penny of the same general coinage. The crowding of the letters to the right of the design is present on examples of both the London and Winchester mints of this variety. The diameter of the outer circle, and therefore of the coin to be struck, is exactly three-quarters of an inch which is correct for this late issue of the type, and, finally, a point which I think is conclusive, microscopic examination proves that the die was punched with official irons. Apart from this, no forger of that time would trouble to make a standard die to be set in a big block of wood for all who wished to see, nor would he temper it to steel, for he could hardly expect to produce a large quantity of coins without the risk of detection, with its drastic punishment.
Further, no forger could or would have cut the numerous tiny punches necessary to make this die. The cuneator’s art was then a hereditary trade-secret, and necessitated the cutting and tempering of many minute punches which would be far beyond a forger’s skill, and unnecessary when castings from a genuine coin would be sufficient for his fraud, and this die is punched, not cut, or cast.

As I believe it to be our earliest English money-die it deserves some general consideration. In the Catalogue it is described as only 3½ inches long, but this was measured without the spike which is 2½ inches long, making the total length 5½ inches. It is octagonal throughout, which is unusual, and the whole, except the face, is corroded. The face would be tempered to steel by the old blacksmith’s method of heating to red-heat, and then plunging in cold water, and this has protected its polished surface. The face itself is also octagonal, perfectly smooth and flat; and varying from 1½ to 1¾ inches in diameter according to whether measured across the sides or corners. As the design upon it is only three-quarters of an inch across there is therefore a perfectly flat margin of about a quarter of an inch around it. I stress this because we know that coins had long been struck within a circular metal collar upon the standard die, to prevent the metal of the coin from spreading beyond the design. Until Henry I’s time this collar had been close-fitting, leaving the coin round and neat, but it seems to have been gradually expanded until under Stephen’s troubles the impress of the collar upon the edges of his coins shows that it then only fitted where the metal spread to touch it. Probably a loose collar expedited production. We should therefore have expected to see a groove in the margin, or the edge of the die circular and rabbeted, to hold the collar. A standard die for the seal of Southampton in my possession is only a few years later, and is carefully rabbeted all round for its collar. But evidently this method was not yet in force, and the collar used with this die must have rested quite loosely upon it, and have been adjusted to the design as each coin was struck.

The standard die, as we have seen, bore the obverse design and was set in a block of wood, probably waist-high, by its spike; but the trussel die was held in the hand by a twisted willow thong to ease the vibration during the striking. It
received the full shock of the hammering, and so wore out much sooner than the standard; in fact, statistics and records suggest that one standard lasted as long as two trussels. This, I have always contended, explains our “muled” coins. In the stress of a new general recoinage it would be impossible for the cuneator to supply all the dies to the many mints at once, and if the trussel which bore the name of the moneyer and his mint, was delivered to him first it was evidence that he had paid his fees for the new coinage (which was the whole purport of the change). There could be no fiscal objection, therefore, to his using it with his old standard die until his pair was completed. Hence we find occasional “mules” of most mints, and this is why the reverse design is always, or practically always, of the later coinage, for it is from the trussel die.

Although Mr. Douthwaite has most kindly searched the Museum records for me, he can find no further information of the die than that given in the Catalogue. All we know, therefore, is that it was found in Little Bell Alley, and we may safely assume that it was dug up there. That it should have been thus separated from its mint and buried, hidden, or lost invites our speculation. It would have been in use in 1141 and in April or May of that year, Stephen being then in captivity, his rival the Empress Matilda entered London in state to await her coronation, which was intended to take place at Westminster on 24 June. No doubt at this time loyal moneyers of London removed, and probably hid their dies from the mint, for we may hazard the guess that all Stephen’s dies would have been promptly destroyed, and those of the Empress and her party substituted. If this were the case it would account for the burial of this die in Little Bell Alley, where perhaps the moneyer lived.

SECONDARY EVIDENCE OF A COIN OF ONE OF HENRY I’S RAREST TYPES

There are other exhibits of numismatic interest in the Guildhall Museum, including three dies for the shillings of James I, but there is one little relic that appeals especially to numismatists. It is described in the Catalogue as

“Brooch, brass, repousse, representing the reverse of a penny of Henry II” [see later] “bearing the moneyer’s

1 1908 edition, p. 126, No. 9.
The Die for Stephen’s Coinage in the Guildhall Museum

mark GOTPINE ON GLOPCI; ⅜ in. diam.” [found in] “London”.

The attribution to Henry II, although wrong, is interesting because it suggests that the brooch was found very long ago, when the coins of Henry I and Henry II were confused and wrongly assigned. The object is of latten, impressed with the reverse of Henry I’s very rare type (Hawkins, 266, Brooke’s Type 6 in the Museum Catalogue, and Type 8 in my Numismatic History of the Reign of Henry I), namely, a cross pattee upon a saltire terminating in tiny quatrefoils. Of this type I have been able to record only ten examples, and this adds another mint to the series. Its date would be between 1115 and 1120.

It is an exceptionally fine and clear impression, and the actual punching of the die by official irons is quite distinct. It was found in London, and the hereditary cuneator who made the dies was then Otto the Goldsmith of London; I am therefore inclined to think that it was a trial piece struck in latten from the original die, and then mounted as a brooch, perhaps for Otto’s wife. It reads #GOTPINE: ON: GLOPCI: for Godwine of Gloucester. The spelling Gotwine, for Godwine, was not unusual at that period, and occurs, for instance, on the same type at Winchester.
COINS OF THE STAMFORD MINT
ÆTHELSTAN, EADGAR, EADWEARD THE MARTYR

Plate 1