THE XVd DURHAM PENNIES OF EDWARD III

By P. FRANK PURVEY

In the 1913 volume of this Journal appeared the last part of the Fox brothers' great work on the pennies of Edward I, II, and III, and it may then have seemed that their attribution to Bishop Richard de Bury of the coins classified by them as type XVd and having a crown in the centre of the reverse would never be questioned. They say, 'Richard de Bury, son of Sir Richard Aungervill, took his name from his birthplace. Bury St. Edmunds. What could be more natural than that, when seeking a personal mark to distinguish the coins issued by him as Bishop of Durham, he should take it from the arms of the famous abbey which had been so intimately associated with his earlier life? Those arms were, azure, three crowns or.'

However, despite the Foxes' reasons for placing these coins to de Bury, Brooke in his English Coins says regarding the attribution, 'We know that an order was given for penny dies to be sent to the Bishop of Durham in 1336, and that a new die was granted to the abbot of St. Edmund in 1340, but it is hardly possible that they can have coined pennies while small coins of 10 oz. silver were being issued. It is therefore probable that the Durham penny with a crown in the centre of the reverse, which has been assigned to Bishop de Bury, was struck before 1333 by Bishop Beaumont.'

This element of doubt in Brooke's mind regarding the Fox attribution of these coins to de Bury has recently caused me to re-examine the available evidence.

First of all, and assuming that logic enters into the question, it would be difficult to imagine why, after apparently deciding on, and using, a lion rampant and lis on the obverse of his coins, Bishop Beaumont should suddenly change to a crown in the centre of the reverse. One assumes that the choosing of a personal mark, especially for such a purpose as this, is not arrived at lightly, and, having decided on such a mark (as opposed to a general ecclesiastical mark), one would not change it without a fairly good reason.

Before looking at the coins themselves it might perhaps be appropriate to quote a few passages from Mark Noble's Two Dissertations upon the Mint and Coins of the Episcopal Palatines of Durham published in 1780.

It appears that great honour was done to de Bury at his consecration inasmuch as the king, the queen, the queen mother, the king of the Scots, 'and a great number of dignified clergy, nobility, and gentry' were present. Also an 'infinite concourse of the common people, all of whom he sumptuously entertained'. The consecration itself was performed by the archbishop of Canterbury.

It is recorded also that before Edward III was crowned de Bury had lent him money when in Gascony, and on this being discovered he had to flee to Paris apparently at the peril of his life.

Richard de Bury's career was a distinguished one, beginning as cofferer, then treasurer of the wardrobe, then Clerk to the Privy Seal (during which
time he was twice sent as ambassador to Pope John). In the year of his consecration he was made treasurer, and later became Chancellor of England. If indeed the evidence of Noble is correct, de Bury must have wielded very great power; a brilliant scholar (he was the king's tutor) he was after his consecration twice used as ambassador by the king. ‘His charity and munificence were unbounded’ and it is said that before his consecration he ‘held preferences to the annual value of five thousand marks’.

These extracts show something of the man himself and do, I think, indicate that had de Bury wished to strike coins from newly delivered dies (albeit unrecorded in the Rolls) he could easily have authorized the striking of a considerable issue for his own pleasure and suffered any loss involved without counting the cost.

This, however, would have been unnecessary as de Bury was consecrated on 19 December 1333, and the order for small coins of 10 oz. silver did not come into force until some time in 1335. There is therefore a period of a full year and perhaps a few odd months during which, even appreciating the general shortage of silver, de Bury could have struck quite a considerable quantity of coins. It may well be that Brooke overlooked or forgot this important fact, and that this prompted his doubts on the de Bury attribution by the Foxes.

To turn now to the evidence of the coins themselves. The Foxes’ (B.N.J. 1913, p. 107) say, ‘A rare variety of the penny of Bishop Beaumont, though having the Roman form of “N”, and therefore classed under XVc (Plate XII, fig. 16), shows on the obverse small oval stops, which connect it with the first penny of Bishop Richard de Bury, and was doubtless issued between 1327 and Beaumont’s death in 1333 (Pl. XXVII, a). The Sede Vacante coin which follows (Plate XII, fig. 17) is struck from a die made with the same irons (Pl. XXVII, b). Then, still from the same irons, except for the letter N, come the coins of XVd (Plate XII, fig. 18).’ (Pl. XXVII, c.)

On the face of it, this evidence is surely enough to uphold the Foxes’ attribution, but should further evidence be necessary to show that coins were struck at Durham after the Sede Vacante period and therefore attributable to Bishop de Bury, I think that a coin in the collection of Mr. F. Elmore Jones (and reproduced here with his kind permission) should provide conclusive evidence.

To go back first to the XVc pennies. These read on the reverse ClVI/TAS/D VN/ELM, and the rare coin of the Foxes’ Pl. xii, 16 shows on the obverse the oval stops referred to above and has the lion rampant i.m. of Bishop Beaumont. The next coin is in all respects similar except that the stops on the obverse are omitted and the i.m. is a cross pattée. Certainly it appears as if the same irons were used for both coins, and I think that there is no reason to doubt that this latter is a true Sede Vacante coin struck between 26 September and 7 December 1333, or perhaps a little later, until the dies for de Bury were delivered.

The next coin, type XVd, is similar to the Sede Vacante coin except that the letter ‘N’ on the obverse is Lombardic instead of Roman and the reverse reads ClVI/TAS/DVNE/LMl with a crown in the centre. There is no contraction mark over the last ‘M’.

The small oval stops are again apparent both in the Fox coin (Pl. XXVII, c)
and on a coin formerly in the Carlyon-Britton collection (Pl. XXVII, d). The ‘M’ takes up more space on these XVd coins and is doubtless a new iron, but the other letters are very similar and could well be from identical irons as Fox, plate xii, 16 and 17 (Pl. XXVII, a and b).

Not so, however, in the case of Pl. XXVII, e (Mr. F. Elmore Jones’s coin). The stops here are perfectly round pellets and few of the letters, if any, appear to be from irons used for the previous four coins. This, I think, is the last in the chain of XVd coins of Durham and could be dated immediately prior to the introduction of small coins of 10 oz. silver, when the manufacture of pennies would most certainly have been carried on at a loss.

The fact that the four specimens of type XVd that I have examined (and more probably exist) have all been struck from different pairs of dies seems to indicate that the issue was more considerable than the few surviving specimens might indicate. As mentioned above, de Bury had a year and perhaps a few odd months at his disposal and, considering the acute shortage of silver, it is perhaps remarkable that any coins at all of this period have survived. It is not unreasonable to think that de Bury’s own wealth may account for the existence of these coins in the first place, for it is certain that London and Canterbury had ceased work long before 1333, and it is more than likely that nothing was coined at York after this date.

If it is now accepted that the coins of Bishop Beaumont and Bishop de Bury may be separated by dividing those coins with the lion rampant and lis i.m. from those coins with a crown in the centre of the reverse, it raises the question whether the Foxes’ were correct in placing, however tentatively, the ‘florin’ penny of Durham reading EDWARDVS REX AIN as the last coin of de Bury before his death on 14 April 1345. This coin does not have a crown in the centre of the reverse but has one of the limbs of the long cross turned to form a crozier.

If I am correct in my surmise that personal marks were carefully chosen, one would certainly not expect a change of mark at this time if the coin was in fact struck by de Bury, and it does, I think, indicate that the EDWARDVS REX AIN coin is wrongly placed as the first of the ‘florin’ coins of Durham. A much more reasonable place has now been found for this coin which seems to preclude any possibility of it being other than a penny of Bishop Hatfield. (See the paper by Mr. F. Elmore Jones, p. 326.)


As well as publishing the incomplete mandate dated 27 November 1336 which was later listed by the Fox brothers in the appendix of their work on the coins of Edward I, II, and III, Montagu also publishes a second mandate and a letter which I think are extremely relevant to my article above.

The mandate of 1336, according to Montagu, was probably never acted upon as no mention was made of the number of dies to be delivered. The second mandate is dated ‘Westminster 16 October’ but the year is not given. Montagu, however, says ‘. . . apparently granted in 1344’. The third item is
a letter, also unfortunately undated, which was written by de Bury to a friend in London, asking him, with other friends, to enquire secretly the reason for the detention of his dies by the Mint Officers, which had been sent there ‘... to be corrected according to the usual custom’.

Montagu’s theories in the light of this letter and of the mandate which he thought was granted in 1344 are briefly as follows:

(a) The dies which de Bury refers to are either Bishop Beaumont’s old ones or else they are dies made for de Bury (according to a mandate which was not entered in the Rolls) which, for some reason, contained an irregularity and had to be returned to London. Whichever is the case, the dies were detained for a considerable period in London.

(b) The letter which de Bury wrote to his friend in London was acted upon and the mandate which Montagu believed was written in 1344, and which granted him tres cuneos was the result.

(c) That de Bury was at all times anxious to strike coins but the circumstances given above prevented his doing so until the last few months of his incumbency at Durham, which explains the rarity of his coins.

Although the main purpose of my article has been to show that I think the coins with a crown in the centre of the reverse were struck by Bishop de Bury, and not to place too fine a point on when he might have struck them, in the light of Montagu’s paper I feel that I should like to make a final observation.

With regard to the letter, it is a great pity that it is not dated, as otherwise it might have proved my surmise that de Bury could have struck coins at any time if he had so wished, irrespective of the cost. It must of course be remembered that at the time Montagu was writing no coins were known which could be attributed to de Bury, nor was the existence of the order for small coins of 10 oz. silver then known, although I stand to be corrected on this latter point. If he had known these two things, he may well have looked at the evidence in a different light.

I still think that the close affinity in lettering and stops between my first two illustrations of XVd coins (Pl. XXVII, c and d) with those of XVe (Pl. XXVII, a and b) points to their being struck fairly early in the incumbency of de Bury. The obvious differences seen in Mr. F. Elmore Jones’s coin of XVd (Pl. XXVII, e) could indicate that it was struck at a later date.

The explanation may lie in the fact that a complete mandate giving de Bury a certain number of dies was in fact acted upon shortly after his translation but did not find its way into the Rolls. For some unknown reason perhaps the dies were returned to London after only a short while and were then detained, and that the coin of XVd with letters from new punches and showing round instead of oval stops (Pl. XXVII, e) is the sole survivor of de Bury’s dies when they had eventually been returned to him after ‘correction’.