TWO NEGLECTED NORTHUMBRIAN HOARDS OF LATE 14TH-CENTURY GOLD COINS

By R. H. M. DOLLEY

The purpose of this note is to draw attention to one notable omission from the recent Inventory, the 1834 hoard from Brinkburn Priory, and also to suggest that in some future edition that work's account of another Northumbrian find, the 1775 hoard from Fenwick, should be amended in more than one particular. Brinkburn and Fenwick are only a very few miles apart, and re-examination of the evidence suggests that there is a distinct possibility that the two hoards might have been concealed on the same occasion. To take first the earlier discovery from Fenwick (Inventory 159), the writer is indebted to his friend and former colleague Mrs. J. S. Martin for a reference to pp. 349 and 350 of Vol. XII of the magisterial fifteen-volume History of Northumberland which a succession of local historians and antiquaries saw through the press between 1893 and 1940. From the account there given the following additional facts emerge:—

(a) The discovery was made on or about 10th June, 1775.

(b) The precise find-spot was beneath the flagged floor of an upper room at Fenwick Tower.

(c) The total number of coins recovered was not 224 but 226.

(d) The coins, all of them nobles, lay in rouleaux packed around with sand.

(e) The coins, though predominantly of Edward III, also included some of Richard II and at least one of David II.

(f) Certain pieces passed to the Hunterian Museum.

The importance of this supplementary information can scarcely be exaggerated. For the first time the numismatist is given confirmation of a hoard-provenance and find-spot for the extremely rare noble of David II—and the writer’s opinion is that one day the same provenance will be shown to attach to the British Museum specimen—while the date of deposit suggested in the Inventory, and only slightly modified in a recent paper in this Journal, must be adjusted by as much as forty if not fifty years. It is suggested, then, that the revised Inventory summary of the find might run somewhat as follows:—

159. FENWICK TOWER, Northumberland, 10 (?) June, 1775.
226 (+ ?) AV English and Scottish. Deposit: c. 1385 ± 5.

ENGLAND — Edward III: nobles, classes not specified, bulk of hoard. Richard II: nobles, classes and number not specified. SCOTLAND — David II: noble, Burns Fig. 285, 1 (+ ?).


Disposition: 119 coins originally in possession of Sir Walter Blackett of Wallington; a number, including David II noble, passed to Hunter. There was no container, and there is a possibility that other coins(?) several hundreds) were abstracted by William Cook’s workmates.

It should be stressed, though, that even this modified account has no pretensions to finality, and the present writer is convinced that much remains to be extracted from the above-cited authorities by a specialist in the series who finds an opportunity to visit Glasgow and Newcastle as well as the British Museum, and who has the patience to work through the whole of the documentary material and to collate it with the unprovenanced coins in the Hunter and British Museum trays.

Almost sixty years after the discovery at Fenwick Tower, a hoard of the same date came to light at Brinkburn Priory. Again the writer is indebted to Mrs. Martin for some early references to the discovery. In Mr. Matthew Young's grangerized copy of Snelling's works, one of the treasures of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, there occurs the following note:—

'Nov. 15 1834

Mr. Stewart brought 5 Richard II Nobles and one of Edward III said to have been found at Brentbourne [sic] Priory Northumberland where several others both halves and quarters it is said were found at the same time.'

A more substantial account of the discovery, and one less coloured by a London dealer's very natural pre-occupation with rarity, appears on p. 636b of the December number of the Gentleman's Magazine for 1834. It runs as follows:—

'Some workmen, forming a new road near Brinkburn Priory, near Newcastle, lately discovered a small brass pot, containing several gold coins, rose nobles [sic] of the first and second [sic] coinage of Edward III, and some half and quarter nobles of the same reign, all in perfect state of preservation. The pot and coins are now in the possession of Major Hodgson Cadogan, of Brinkburn.'

For the fullest printed account of the hoard, however, we must turn once more to the fifteen-volume History of Northumberland to which allusion has already been made. On pp. 458 and 459 of Vol VII there will be found the following passage which draws on family traditions as well as the 1834 Gentleman's Magazine and a brief reference in Vol. XII of the History of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club:—

'On July 25th, 1834, in removing the debris of a burned wooden building which stood near the offices of the house [i.e. Brinkburn Priory] and a little to the north-west of the church, there was a very important find of gold coins. The hearthstone had been removed, and the man who was throwing up the earth into a cart said to the man on the cart, 'That's the heaviest spadeful I ever threw up', and the man on the cart, looking down, saw a pot of brass or bell metal. There were between three and four hundred coins, comprising rose nobles [sic] of the first and second [sic] coinage of Edward III, half and quarter nobles of the same reign, and nobles of Richard II. The pot and some of the coins are still at Brinkburn, in the possession of Mrs. Hugh Fenwick. The Medal Room at the British Museum was enriched, by the gift of Major Cadogan, with specimens of the coins not before then in the collection; others were given away and some disposed of.'

Unfortunately it was not until 1838 that the British Museum began its systematic registration of its acquisitions, and the writer has failed in his attempt to identify particular coins as the gift of Major Cadogan. It is notable, however, that a number of pieces of the period would seem to have been acquired in the 1830's, and one wonders whether in some cases the ultimate provenance of certain purchases made may not also have been the Brinkburn find. A complicating factor, however, is the circumstance that at Glasgow Cathedral in 1837 there was discovered a major hoard of roughly the same period (Inventory 172 but the date 'c 1380' there suggested must be too early as the hoard contained lions ('St. Andrews') of Robert III.
(1390-1406)), though in the case of Brinkburn a check on old tickets and on coins actually in the National Collection would suggest that no attempt was made to impose on Major Cadogan's generosity by the Museum seeking to acquire die-varieties. Indeed, it is unlikely that the selection went even as far as the acquisition of coins to represent the main classes later distinguished by Lawrence.

By a fortunate chance, however, the writer is able to illustrate a parcel of coins from the hoard, and also the container. In 1961 Dr. Peter Fenwick left with him at the British Museum for the purposes of study a total of nine pieces to which there attaches the Brinkburn provenance. They are all illustrated on Pl. II. The Lawrence classes can be gathered from the summary listing that concludes this note, but at this point we may record the weights. The four London nobles [Pl. II, 1-4] weigh 118-2, 119-4, 118-2 and 119-2 grains respectively, and the Calais noble [Pl. II, 5] 117-7 grains. No less consistent are the weights of the London half-nobles [Pl. II, 7-9] which tip the scale at 58-2, 58-5 and 57-7 grains respectively, while the quarter-noble from the same mint [Pl. II, 6] weighs 29-1 grains. The brass pot which Dr. Fenwick borrowed from a relative is of a form which cannot be exactly paralleled on the plates appended to the Inventory, and for the carefully drawn section which is appended (Fig. 1) the writer is indebted to his former colleague Dr. J. P. C. Kent.

![Fig. 1](image)

It stands exactly six inches high, and in its lines and execution alike it does every credit to some anonymous late fourteenth-century craftsman.
OF LATE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY GOLD COINS

It is clear from all this that the bulk of the 1834 hoard from Brinkburn Priory consisted of coins of Edward III. Thanks to Young, however, we can be quite certain that there were also present nobles of Richard II, and so the date of the hoard’s concealment should fall somewhere in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. Obviously Dr. Fenwick’s parcel is not representative of the whole find, and it was perhaps inevitable that the family’s dwindling selection should have been culled for rarities by discriminating and importunate visitors down the years, but the fact that seven of the nine survivors should belong to Edward’s sixth or penultimate coinage would seem to indicate that from the first ‘Treaty’ coins were in the majority. On this evidence, though, it is unusually difficult to indicate a probable occasion for the hoard’s deposit, but the parallel with the hoard from Fenwick Tower which contained the David II noble but not the Robert III lion might suggest a date before rather than after 1390, though the argument could be thought weakened by the circumstance that there the hoarder seems to have eschewed all denominations other than the noble. All in all, a provisional dating c. 1385 ± 5 may be thought reasonable, and the writer is satisfied that it is not likely to err by more than a very few years.

For the purposes of the second edition of the Inventory, then, the Brinkburn Priory find can be summarized somewhat as follows:

BRINKBURN PRIORY, Northumberland, 25 July 1834.


Disposition: 9 of the coins and the brass pot in which they were found now in separate private ownership. Others of the coins are believed to have been presented to the British Museum, but cannot now be distinguished.

It only remains for the writer to express once more his obligations to those who have made possible the writing of this note, and to urge upon those specializing in the later mediaeval coinages of England the desirability of an early re-appraisal of the hoard-evidence. Twelve years in the Coin Room at the British Museum have satisfied him of the latent significance of what at first sight may seem hopelessly fragmentary evidence preserved in the trays and registers, and it is his opinion that the outstanding problems presented by the coinages of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries will never be solved solely on the basis of such minutiae as letter-forms. A broader view has become necessary, and, in the absence of new hoards, it is more than ever essential that due weight should now be given to the testimony of finds now dispersed but for which there exists some partial record, unpromising and untractable though this material may seem in comparison with the detailed listings of new finds that have become a feature of the British Numismatic Journal—at least where mediaeval series are concerned.