REVIEWS


MOST of the twenty-one contributions in this volume originated in the 1988 London Symposium on Techniques of Coin Production. Now, as then, the chronological range is wide, from classical times to the present day, and there is a pleasing variety of approach.

Of particular value to members of this Society who are interested in the early mechanisation of the Royal Mint will be ‘Early Austrian and German machine mining’ by David Sellwood, ‘Rotary Coining in Britain’ by Edward Bestly, and ‘Mechanisation at the 17th Century London Mint: the testimony of tokens’ by Robert Thompson because each in its own excellent way helps to clarify how the processes worked and the extent to which they were used. In ‘Coining and die-making techniques in the 17th Century’ Peter Gaspar makes an important observation concerning the use as a matrix of the counterpunch, a tool long known to us from literary evidence but hitherto undetected amongst surviving collections; and in ‘Punches and dies in the 18th Century’ Graham Dyer explains with convincing plausibility how the development of the fully lettered punch brought more rather than fewer working tools, the point being that in order to reduce the strain on the fully made-up punch, another, without lettering, was used to begin preliminary forming of the die.

Two other contributions which stand out are ‘The Coining Press after 1817’ and ‘The future of coinage’. In the first Denis Cooper emphasises the importance of Uplorn who invented the toggle-action press which until today remains the essential mechanism for coining, while in the second Peter Hatherley discusses how the Age of Copper in which Llantrisant was coinng, while in the second Peter Hatherley discusses the story of coinage as a whole should be read with attention by us all.

C.E. CHALLIS


ALTHOUGH this substantial volume was published as long ago as 1991, knowledge of its existence does not seem to have spread widely among numismatists, in part no doubt because its title does not indicate that it has numismatic content. The reality is that it contains two contributions of particular numismatic interest, the first an essay by Peter Stott on ‘Saxon and Norman coins from London’ (pp. 279-325), which concludes with a catalogue of finds of Anglo-Saxon and Norman coins made in the City of London and in Westminster up to early 1987, the second a discussion by Marion Archibald of ‘Anglo-Saxon and Norman lead objects with official coin types’ (pp. 326-346). Stott’s is the first full-length discussion of coins and coin finds in the context of current archaeological work on Anglo-Saxon and Norman London, and his catalogue of the material puts on record a number of previously unpublished coins, a good proportion of which derive or probably derive from the productive Billingsgate site excavated from the early 1980s onwards. Here and there he suffers from an apparent time lag between the completion of his manuscript and its publication, for he has been able to take account of discoveries or of changes of opinion among scholars that have taken place since 1987, and he is also too respectful of opinions expressed in the 1960s or 1970s which no longer seem valid today; but these are minor blemishes, and one must set against them his rather unnerving but largely justified contention that the late Michael Dolley’s reconstructions of the ‘St. Martin’s le Grand’, ‘Gracechurch Street’ and ‘Walbrook’ hoards of late Anglo-Saxon pence are all more or less faulty. It may be noted in this context that Edward Bestly has drawn the present reviewer’s attention to new evidence for finds of coins of Edward the Confessor in the City of London provided by the surviving manuscript catalogue of the collection of the City of London-based businessman Thomas Bliss.

Marion Archibald’s contribution utilises a flood of new material, chiefly from Billingsgate but also from sites in Essex, and even from Richmond in Yorkshire, to offer a new and challenging interpretation of the lead objects carrying impressions from coin dies that have long perplexed numismatists. The theory that they are ‘trial pieces’, recording dies for archival purposes, seems now to be incorrect, while only three of the objects are of suitable physical character to be officially stamped coin weights. Her own view is that the remaining objects are connected with the collection of customs dues, coin-shaped pieces being receipts for payments (for which she cites possible French parallels) and longer strips being tags for marking imported goods. It is not easy to prove or disprove such suggestions, but her arguments against these objects being ‘trial pieces’ are certainly very persuasive, and her remarks as a whole should be read with attention by us all.

HUGH PAGAN

The publication of this book marks a turning point in the study of British coin-weights. It may rightly be regarded as the culmination of twentieth-century research. Furthermore it will surely be the cornerstone for future work in its field, and a very useful reference for work in associated areas.

The study of coin-weights is an interesting and, in some ways, a difficult subject. It is interesting for several reasons. The use of coin-weights spans almost the entire period during which gold coinage was widely used, in particular the European experience from the introduction of the florin in the thirteenth century to the Great War. The story of coin-weights mirrors the ebb and flow of trade, national and international upheavals, and the perennial problem of maintaining a 'sound' currency. The study of coin-weights is difficult for just the same reasons. Neither a purely coin-based approach nor a purely historical one can begin to illuminate the true picture. In addition, there are the usual difficulties of method and interpretation associated with any form of metrological enquiry.

The complexity of the subject may explain why it was not until 1909, in the 6th volume of the British Numismatic Journal, that we find the first attempt to discuss English coin-weights. (Although several articles on coin-weights were published in France and Belgium in the second half of the nineteenth century, they did not discuss the English series.) The author of the 1909 article was L.A. Lawrence, a leading numismatist of the time. His paper was based on evidence culled from Ruding's Annals of the Coinage, and the study of a small accumulation of weights which he had put together in the course of his numismatic researches. These weights are now in the British Museum, where the collection has grown enormously since Lawrence's time.

While crediting Lawrence with the pioneering work in the subject, it is impossible to overlook the defects of his account. His artefactual evidence was curiously unrepresentative, and his reliance on Ruding for documentary evidence meant that he completely missed some important chapters in the story. For example, there are no official documents referring to the extensive circulation of Portuguese gold coins in England in the middle of the eighteenth century, because the authorities were embarrassed by it. As Snelling says, the gold coin of Portugal 'passes only by courtesy, and not by law'. However, what happened in Ireland was a different matter, and the authorities found it acceptable that foreign gold of any kind should circulate there. Indeed, several proclamations regulating the value of foreign gold in Ireland were issued. This led Lawrence to believe that coin-weights for Portuguese coins were all intended for use in Ireland. In fact, ample evidence that the weights were intended for use in England is provided by the makers' labels affixed to English coin scale-boxes of the time, and many other contemporary sources.

Despite its shortcomings, Lawrence's paper aroused some interest in the subject. When it was read to the BNS a few members of the Society exhibited coin-weights, and several others contributed to the discussion which followed. Further publications on the subject soon appeared. In 1916, Sir Hercules Read, vice-president of the Society of Antiquaries, wrote about a very ornate (and quite untypical) box of scales and weights, and around the same time M.S. Dudley Westropp read a paper on Irish coin-weights to the Royal Irish Academy.

The next steps were the result of the foresight and initiative of Thomas Sheppard of the Hull Museum, a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and a member of the BNS. He began to form at Hull a collection of coin scales and weights which soon became the finest in the land. He spoke about the subject at the British Association meeting in 1918, and in the years 1920–23 he published many details of the Hull collection in the columns of Spink's Numismatic Circular. These articles were collected in a book, which also contained an extensive listing of weights compiled by Sheppard's colleague, J.T. Musham. For the last seventy years this book has been the primary source of information for students of English coin-weights and scales. It was reprinted in 1976, and soon sold out, so that second-hand copies of the reprint are now much sought after.

There are at least two mysteries associated with Sheppard and Musham's book. The first is the question of the missing plates. The preface and the list of illustrations for the original edition indicate clearly that four plates of coin-weights were to be included. But the book has no plates. Presumably the expense of producing them in 1923 could not be justified, which is a great pity, because there are some items that we should dearly love to see. The pity is the greater because the collection at Hull was lost when a bomb scored a direct hit on the Museum in the war of 1939–45. But therein lies the second mystery: what really did happen to those coin-weights? It is possible that an intense fire could have destroyed them, quite literally, but there have been rumours that some or all of them may have survived. It has even been suggested that they were officially recovered and transferred to another museum, without any record being made in the excitement of the time. The only certain thing is that the rumours will persist.

Apart from the collection at Hull, several other collections of coin-weights were being formed in the 1920s and 1930s. The collection now in the Ashmolean Museum appears to be based mainly on two private collections formed around this time, one of them by F.P. Barnard, the author of the standard work on reckoning counters. Probably as a result of the nineteenth century work on the subject in France, the Bibliothèque Nationale already had a cosmopolitan collection of coin-weights, including a good selection of English ones. Unfortunately, when Dieudonné wrote up the collection in 1925 he classified the weights according to the coins which they were intended to check, a
The collection of W.V. Morten is mentioned several times in Sheppard and Musham’s list, but nothing more is known about Morten or the fate of his collection. A better-known collector was V.B. Crowther-Beynon, President of the BNS in the 1930s, who published two articles on the subject in the BNJ. In the second one (1931) he refers in flattering terms to one other private collection, and mentions three ‘considerable collections’ which he had recently acquired himself. After Crowther-Beynon’s death, his collection of weights passed to the British Museum, together with a number of scales and three manuscript note-books. These materials form the backbone of the current holdings at the British Museum.

Also in the 1930s, there was being formed the important collection of Richard Turner, sometime Mayor of Bedford. In 1936 he wrote an article on coin-weights, illustrated by two plates of photographs, for Eagle, the magazine of Bedford Modern School. Later in his long life (1881–1982) he contributed articles to Libra, the journal of the History Circle of the Weights and Measures Administration, and for many years he was regarded as the leading expert on the subject. After his death, his collection was dispersed, partly by private sale, but mainly through two auctions held by Boardman’s of Haverhill in 1986. The entire collection may have included as many as a thousand ‘loose’ weights, as well as numerous boxes of scales and weights. Although its dispersal was regrettable, the availability of a good number of highly desirable pieces helped to sustain the growing interest in the subject. This process had in fact begun in the 1970s, when Seaby’s listed a collection of coin-weights in their Bulletin on several occasions. There were also two substantial collections auctioned at Spink’s (1979, no. 7 and 1981, no. 18).

The continuity of scholarship provided by Turner led others to take an interest in the subject, many of them from outside the mainstream of numismatics, and several from outside the UK. Thus, in the 1960s and 1970s, there were useful publications written by a number of people. Among them were, in no particular order: Ronald Stocks, Graham Dyer, George Mallis, Gerard Houben, Michael Crawforth, and Francis Lavagne. But at the time when the author of this review became interested in the subject (around 1982), the book of Sheppard and Musham was still the most comprehensive account available.

In an attempt to establish an historical and economic context for the entire sequence of English coin-weights, the reviewer wrote a series of nine articles for Equilibrium, the journal of the International Society of Antique Scale Collectors. This journal had been founded by Michael Crawforth and had already carried a number of articles on coin-weights, coin-scales and associated matters. The nine articles were published in the years 1986–88. As one critic was not slow to remark, these articles are ‘diffuse and incomplete’. The intention was to lay the foundations for a more extensive study, and indeed the first part of that project was carried through, with the publication of a detailed study of the medieval period in the 1990 volume of the BNJ. Further work was held over when it became known that Paul and Bente Withers had undertaken the mammoth task of photographing and cataloguing all the British coin-weights which were accessible to them. Clearly, any future work on the subject would have to use their tome as its primary source of artefactual material.

The publication of the book is thus a very welcome event. Indeed, it is everything that one could expect. Substantial (360 large pages), comprehensive (over 2,500 weights are included), well-illustrated (there is a high-quality photograph of almost every weight), and informative (documentary evidence and illustrations of coin-scales are liberally scattered among the descriptions of the weights themselves). The book covers all weights made in the British Isles and intended to be used for weighing coins that were in circulation in the British Isles, but not weights made abroad and intended for weighing British coins. This is the most rational way of defining what is meant by a British coin-weight. It works well in practice, with only a few doubtful cases, such as the weights made by John Kirk primarily for use in the colonies which may also have been used here. More significantly, it enables ‘sets’ of weights made here, and intended for weighing British and foreign coins which circulated together here, to be considered in their rightful context. The period covered is, roughly speaking, 1200–1900.

Although the primary aim of the book is to provide a comprehensive record of the weights, rather than a detailed analysis of their historical and economic context, there are several important areas where the authors have extended our knowledge of the background. For example, they have carried out a detailed study of the punches and dies used to produce the weights for guineas and pistles used in the period around 1700. This indicates that the weights were probably made by not more than three manufacturers, even though there are many different varieties and the names of at least nine members of the Founders Company appear on them. Indeed, throughout the book there are many cross-references to the use of common punches for weights which, at first sight, appear to be unrelated. Another detailed study covers the various countermarks which are found on weights. This should provide the basis for more accurate dating of certain series, such as the late medieval crown-and-ais weights, and the eighteenth-century guinea weights stamped with the crown of the Official Stamper of Money Weights.

However, the reputation of the book will be built, not on such useful minor contributions to knowledge, but rather on the fact that it is, as its subtitle rightly proclaims, a Corpus of British Coin-Weights. Although some individual weights that are ‘not in Withers’ will certainly turn up, it is unlikely that there will be many new discoveries which change the overall picture. So the book is a sound foundation for future work. In his 1909 paper, Lawrence had somewhat rashly said that ‘we have before us the weights themselves’. His inability, by his own admission, to draw any useful conclusions was mainly due to the inaccuracy of the claim at that time. Now, nearly a century later, we really do have the weights before us.
Historical Bibliography on British Coin-Weights

The items are listed in date order. The author will be delighted to learn of any items which have been overlooked, but please note that articles which are entirely concerned with coin-scales, rather than coin-weights, are omitted on purpose.

L.A. Lawrence, 'Coin-Weights', *BNJ* 6 (1909) 287-303. See also the report of the meeting on pages 381-383 and 394.


V.B. Crowther-Beynon, 'Notes on a collection of money-scales and other coin-weighing appliances', *BNJ* (1925-6), 183-192.

V.B. Crowther-Beynon, 'Notes on some unusual money weights', *BNJ* 21 (1931-33), 93-102. See also report of meeting, pp. 227-228.


D.F. Allen, 'A fourteenth-century coin-weight', *BNJ* (1934-37), 189-190. [The object described is not confirmed to be a British coin-weight.]


A.G. Mallis, 'Coin Weights for Foreign Coins that were Current in Ireland', *The Numismatist* 91 (1978), 7-16.


NORMAN BIGGS