OBITUARIES

GORDON VINCENT DOUBLEDAY (1914–1993)

GORDON Doubleday passed away on 16 July 1993 at the age of 78 years. He was elected a member of the Society in February 1946 and as early as February 1947 exhibited 11 nobles and a half-noble from the Bredgar hoard, found in 1940 near his old home in Kent. He was soon active in the affairs of the Society and was elected to Council for 1948. He became Secretary, 1951–1954, Director, 1955–1956, a Vice-President, 1957–1990, and in 1991 was made an Honorary Member, of which he was very proud.

He soon became a personal friend of Albert Baldwin. My first recollection of him was in 1950 when, as an office boy, I joined Albert and a few friends on a private visit to the Royal Mint, courtesy of Mr Stride. Gordon was in the party, as was another fruit farmer, Col. Gordon Stevens, whose grandson, Paul Stevens, is a member of the Society today. Again in 1950, I was most impressed by his purchase of Dr L.A. Lawrence's collection of gold coins of Edward III – 245 specimens for 1,800 guineas, paid for with a cheque from his father, Sir Leslie. He was a meticulous researcher and record keeper and had a keen eye for detail, so much so he added a further 90 pieces to the gold collection and amassed nearly 1,100 silver coins of the reign, through the saleroom and by private treaty, in particular from Edgar Winstanley and W.J.W. Potter, this latter acquisition by trading most of his Lincoln pennies with Henry Mossop. In the post-war years he was able to acquire Anglo-Saxon and Norman coins from the many major collections that came on the market. His auction catalogues tell the tale. With his coins were offered his tickets, immediately recognisable in his so neat italic hand, but from his day book it is clear that this style of writing was started on 12 May 1953: hitherto it had been an illegible cursive script!

He ceased being very active in numismatics after 1960, 33 years ago now, which is why most members will know him only by name. He sold his English gold coins, including 13 of Edward III, in 1961, occasioned by the need of funds for school fees combined with poor apple crops, and his unrivalled collection of Edward III in 1972. As cataloguer, I always regret not having had special type made for the various stops, abbreviations, etc., in the legends. And in 1987-1988, he sold his comprehensive series of Anglo-Saxon and Norman coins, the last general collection of the series in private hands, certainly in this country, the collections of his friends and contemporaries having long since been dispersed. One thinks of Elmore Jones, John Youde, Dick Mack and Dimi Mangakis, to name but a few.

I had always understood that Gordon's health had suffered in the war. What I did not know is that at Charterhouse School he was a promising athlete and cricketer, but ill health caused him to leave school before fulfilling early promise. In fact, he underwent a series of painful operations, perhaps caused through boxing, which he bore with courage, so much so that in 1932 he was awarded the Cornwall Badge of the Boy Scouts Association, of which he was a King's Scout. He went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, to study medicine, but gave up to farm in Essex. As a member of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, he was commissioned in the Royal Navy in 1939 and served with small vessels, minesweepers and LSTs (Landing Ships, Tanks). He was involved in virtually every
evacuation and opposed landing in the European theatre, was captured in Norway and escaped. Just after D-Day, landing troops at Le Havre, his ship was mined and totally wrecked, the result of which it is believed that Gordon was unconscious for 24 hours. He was mentioned in despatches for his war service.

He did not publish anything in the Journal, but was always willing to show his coins to visitors. On one visit to Great Totham he told me that soon after leaving Charterhouse he was one of a small group who were given the task of finding a suitable retirement present for a long serving headmaster, Sir Frank Fletcher. Gordon hit upon the idea of a bust of the headmaster, and so got the job of commissioning an artist to undertake the work. Upon unveiling, the bust was by no means to everybody’s taste, but as Gordon wistfully put it ‘at nine guineas, it must be good value for an Epstein’. Art may be in the family genes, for Gordon’s younger son is the sculptor, John Doubleday.

PETER MITCHELL
WILFRID SLAYTER (1914–1993)

Wilfrid Slayter, Honorary Secretary of the Society from 1962–1990, died suddenly on 5 January 1993 at 63 West Way, Edgware, Middlesex, his home for many years and the best-known private address in British numismatics.

Wilfrid was by nature a reticent man, and rarely mentioned personal matters or even his day-to-day professional work. His friends knew little of his life outside the Society and the details mentioned here have been kindly provided by his brother and only sibling, Mr Eric Slayter. Wilfrid Slayter (he had no other names) was born at Highgate in north London in 1914. The oral tradition that he shared the Kaiser’s birthday, with its amusing antithesis of character, proves to have been unreliable; Wilfrid was in fact born on the following day, 28 January. The family soon moved to nearby Hornsey where the sons were educated at Hornsey County School. Wilfrid’s brother, his elder by about four years, recounts their shared school-boy delight in collecting, beginning with stamps but soon encompassing ‘anything and everything as long as it was old’. This interest was fostered, not to say indulged, by their school-teacher parents who made over to the boys a special room in their house equipped with some display cases in which to create their own museum. They accumulated all manner of ancient artifacts, weapons, pictures, pieces of pottery – even a few coins, although these were not specially favoured at the time. Old books had a particular attraction and Wilfrid’s most prized possession was an annotated prayer book which had belonged to a soldier in Cromwell’s army, discovered on one of their numerous forays into Charing Cross Road.

On leaving school, Wilfrid worked for several local dispensing chemists before joining Warman Freed in Golders Green, also in north London, where he was employed for many years until his retirement in the early 1980s. The formal date is blurred, even in family recollection because, for some time afterwards, he used to return on a part-time basis to stand in for absent colleagues. Wilfred never married but shared with his parents the house at Edgware which they had purchased in 1936. After his mother’s death, Wilfrid lived on there with his father whom he looked after with great devotion, and latterly alone. His only recorded pet was a tortoise named John Henry who lived to a great age. Wilfrid’s sole interest apart from the Society was his work on behalf of the League of Friends of Edgware General Hospital.

In adult life, Wilfrid’s collecting focused on coins (although what determined this choice is not clear) and especially on the British milled series. His early bibliophile interests and his fascination with the personalities of history both remained with him, and he formed an extensive collection of books, letters and other items which had belonged to famous numismatists of the past. In his will he bequeathed his copy of Brooke’s *Norman Kings* from the author’s personal library to the British Museum, and many of his other books to the Society. Wilfrid was responsible for the revision of the volume on ‘Numismatics’ in the *Teach Yourself* series, and wrote a number of reviews and the occasional obituary for the Society’s *Journal*. Otherwise he published little, for he was not a scholar, but made a unique contribution to furthering the cause of coinage studies through his long service to the British Numismatic Society.

Wilfrid joined the Society in 1946. He was a loyal supporter of its meetings, and was elected to the Council in 1951 and again in 1960, but he was known to comparatively few until he became the secretary two years later. In Wilfrid, the Society had a most dedicated, hard-working and efficient officer. Membership totals rose steadily from 341 when he took over to 555 when he retired. Keeping track of this increasing and world-wide clientele was for
him a most enjoyable part of the job, but it was none-the-less a time-consuming, and
sometimes delicate, task. During his twenty-eight-year tenure, other aspects of the secretary’s
duties were also becoming more onerous and the Society itself had to surmount some serious
problems, all of which made heavy demands on the secretary. Wilfrid served with eight
Presidents and many other officers, all of whom have been united in their praise of his selfless
work and unwavering support.

For many of its members, especially those resident overseas who could not attend its
meetings, Wilfrid Slayter became the personification of the British Numismatic Society. He
must have signed innumerable nomination papers ‘from personal knowledge’ and if that was
only minimally true at the outset it soon became established fact for, despite a rather formal
manner in both personal and written communication, Wilfrid’s natural kindliness shone
through and he achieved an easy rapport with people of all ages and conditions. He was the
longest-serving officer in the Society’s history, and was still a Council member at the time of
his death. He claimed that in his membership of the Society extending over nearly forty-seven
years he had failed to attend only one meeting and that because of illness — another record
which will almost certainly remain unique to him.

The Society’s debt to Wilfrid was acknowledged in 1978 when it presented him with a
special variant of its 75th Anniversary Medal and, in 1983, when he was made an Honorary
Member. Although this relieved him of the obligation to pay the annual fee, such was his
devotion to the Society that he continued to made a donation of it every year until his death. A
more personal token of members’ appreciation and regard was the subscription raised for him
at the time of his retirement from the secretaryship in 1990. The same occasion was also
marked by the presentation to Wilfrid of the only silver cast of a portrait medal commissioned
by past and present officers of the Society who had served with him. Designed by Robert
Elderton and produced by the Royal Mint, the medal gave Wilfrid enormous pleasure and all
who knew him were delighted with its excellent and sympathetic likeness.

Loyalty was one of the keynotes of Wilfrid’s character; to the Society, to his friends, and to
the ideals and standards of the England in which he had grown up. It extended even to
material things like his faithful typewriter with its large, old-fashioned, letters and mis-aligned
keys on which he would compose his brief, almost staccato, notes to fellow officers and other
correspondence. Wilfrid’s outlook on life was generally serious, but when he could be
persuaded to reminisce about the personalities of the Society in the past he would suddenly
become animated, and his face would light up with a boyishly mischievous grin, as he related
tales of their doings and of their foibles. Wilfrid’s natural inclination was to take a generous
view of people and situations whenever possible, but he could be very forthright in expressing
his opinion of those whom he considered had overstepped the mark, or about proposals which
were not, as he saw them, in the best interests of his beloved Society.

There was hardly a numismatic gathering in London for nearly thirty years which Wilfrid
did not attend ex officio for, in his quiet way, he enjoyed parties and the warmth of his
reception. It was a measure of the respect and affection in which he was held that the
invitations continued to pour in after he had retired, and when organisers knew that advancing
years would not always permit him to attend. Wilfrid’s kindly presence will be sorely missed
by a wide circle of friends at these events, but most of all at the monthly meetings of the
British Numismatic Society which had been the very heart of his existence.

MARION ARCHIBALD