PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 1995

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In the first part of my Presidential Address I shall review the activities of the Society during the year, and on the whole the very satisfactory year, that ends tonight.

Our Treasurer has just reported a small surplus for the year ending 31 October 1994 and his expectation of a slightly larger surplus in the year ending this October. It was with this knowledge that Council felt able to recommend that the annual subscription should remain unchanged and I am sure I speak for the new Council whom you elected a few minutes ago when I express the hope that I may stand before you next November and use these same words. It is reassuring, undeniably so, that the Society is passing through a period of financial calm and it was perhaps with relief as well as gratitude that in June, on the tenth anniversary of his appointment as Treasurer, Council minuted its appreciation of Tim Webb Ware for his prudent supervision of our finances.

During the year we have elected thirty-two new members, of whom three are juniors, and allowing for deaths, resignations and the nine members who have been amoved tonight, our numbers stand at 447 individual members and 122 institutional members. This represents a continuing movement in the right direction and may help to explain what I perceive to be an increase in attendance at our regular meetings. Whether it is actually true that more members are coming to the Warburg I do not know but I allow myself to be heartened by that perception, which I am aware is shared by others. At all events I may surely claim that the gradual expansion in our numbers speaks for the good health of the Society.

Last year I made particular mention of two of our most distinguished members, Stewart Lyon and Christopher Challis, and both again deserve our attention tonight. Taking Stewart Lyon first, it is exactly fifty years ago, at the Anniversary Meeting of 1945, that he was elected to membership. You have already shown, by your gift of Honorary Membership, how much his services to the Society have been valued during this long period; and tonight he has generously provided champagne so that you may drink his health and restore your flagging spirits after the Presidential Address. In the case of Christopher Challis, the debt that I referred to last year was acknowledged in April by his promotion to Vice-President, an honour happily confirmed by the ballot tonight. He therefore completes our complement of six Vice-Presidents and, I may add, active Vice-Presidents, always readily available to offer wise and constructive guidance to your President and Council.

Sadly, death, as ever, has come amongst us. Only days after the last Anniversary Meeting we learned of the loss of A.J. Arnot, a member of seventeen years’ standing and an enthusiastic collector of Anglo-Saxon coins, whom I mention first because he had been a frequent attender at our meetings. This August saw the death, in cruelly tragic circumstances at the age of only thirty-four, of our American member Michael Druck, who will have been known to some of you as an employee of the New York firm of Stack’s and whom I myself had the pleasure of meeting on a visit to the United States. Earlier in the summer came the death at a venerable age of Ken Jacob, no longer a member of our Society at the time of his death, but a member for so long, from 1946 until 1993, that it would be wrong not to mention him tonight. Advancing years had persuaded him to resign and I treasure his last letter to the Society, sending his best wishes for the future and his gratitude for the knowledge he had gained over so many years from our Journal.

Turning to happier matters, I thank our Director, Thomas Curtis, for putting together a splendidly varied programme which introduced us to several new speakers and which has, I
hope, catered for the interests of all our members. It was a programme that began well with Willis Johnson, a young speaker unknown to most of us, who in his account of medieval currency crimes made impressive use of unexpected documentary sources. He was followed in February by Mark Jones, who spared time from his onerous duties as Director of the National Museums of Scotland to talk to us about nineteenth-century temperance medals, and we stayed in the nineteenth century for a paper in March by Norman Biggs on sovereigns and standards. In April Philip de Jersey, in discussing Armorican Celtic coinage, demonstrated the benefits to be gained from a rigorous insistence on fact rather than opinion; in May Virginia Hewitt spoke about banknotes, a subject which had special appeal for me this year for reasons that will become apparent shortly; and in June we were entertained, as we knew we would be, by Michael Sharp’s Jacobite jottings.

Marion Archibald, in September, produced yet another hoard, this one spanning the years of the Norman Conquest and perhaps more important for its historical context than its numismatic rarities. You were warm in your applause, as you had been in May when, on behalf of Council, I had the happy task of presenting to her a specially inscribed membership medal in silver to acknowledge her assistance, year after year, in helping to organise the Council Sherry Party.

Our October meeting was the occasion for the fourth Linecar Lecture, and I think ‘occasion’ is indeed the word to use. With a charm and an authority that were a delight to witness Sir Conrad Swan, lately Garter Principal King of Arms, guided us through the origins and rules of heraldry and their application – successfully and unsuccessfully, accurately and inaccurately – to coins, medals and seals. It was a lecture that exemplified the purpose of those of us who, ten years ago, were involved in establishing the Linecar Lecture, not just by providing a speaker who would not normally address one of our regular meetings but also in setting numismatics in a wider context. The result was an evening which did honour to the memory of our benefactor Howard Linecar, a man to whom as a young numismatist I so often turned for advice and, it will not surprise you, never in vain.

The year was remarkable also for the Society’s one-day meeting on new developments in Anglo-Saxon numismatics which Mark Blackburn and our Director organised on Saturday 8 July at Gonville & Caius College. A fully-booked conference, a strong programme, a wonderfully sunny day, a famous Cambridge college: how could it fail to be a success, if I may use the words with which Lord Stewartby captured the general mood at the end of the afternoon. Thomas Curtis, I know, would be the first to acknowledge the crucial contribution of Mark Blackburn, and our thanks are also due to the Master and Fellows of the College, and to the Senior Bursar, our member Robin Porteous, for adding to the enjoyment of a good lunch by providing wine and an elegant and spontaneous speech. Papers during the day by Mark Blackburn, Derek Chick, Hugh Pagan and Bill Lean, and a summary of the proceedings by Lord Stewartby, dispelled any notion that the huge advances in the study of Anglo-Saxon coins may have run their course. On the contrary, what struck me was the intellectual vigour of the continuing debate, while in the contribution of Simon Keynes we saw evidence of the interaction of historian and numismatist which can be such a helpful feature of these one-day meetings.

In speaking of Cambridge with undisguised enthusiasm I make no apology. Long ago, when I was Director, it was my wish that the Society should occasionally meet outside London and with the support of others of a like mind the principle has become firmly established. We are after all a national and an international society, drawing our British members and indeed our officers from distant parts of the United Kingdom as well as from London, and I have always believed that one of the ways in which we reflect our national status is by visiting provincial centres. You will therefore understand my pleasure that, in the programme which the Director will announce later this evening, we shall again be on our travels next summer.
This should not be taken to mean that London’s numismatic attraction has in any sense diminished. Rather the reverse has happened, in fact, with the very welcome announcement during the year that funding has been secured for a coin gallery at the British Museum. This is excellent news, guaranteed to promote interest not just in the national collection but in numismatics generally, and I congratulate the Keeper on the successful culmination of his efforts. From what I hear a broad-based display is intended, tracing the history of money from earliest times, and, having myself been involved this year in the completion of a numismatic gallery, I have a good idea of the task that now confronts the Keeper and his colleagues to ensure that the display will be ready by the target date of January 1997. They may be sure, however, of our interest, our goodwill and our support.

Of my own activities I may report that in April I attended the very successful BANS Congress in Caerleon, organised by the South Wales and Monmouthshire Numismatic Society, while in September I went to Hertford College, Oxford, for the annual BANS Lecture Course. For me, as a student of the milled coinage, a particularly satisfactory feature of the Caerleon Congress was the re-emergence of Dr David Dykes, a near neighbour of mine in South Wales, who is working his way towards a much fuller and much needed understanding of the token coinage of the late eighteenth century and its leading personalities, as you will discover when he speaks to the Society next year. At the equally successful Lecture Course it was gratifying to see the Society so much in evidence. All the speakers except the special Royal Mint Lecturer were members of the Society, two of them Vice-Presidents indeed, while the weekend as a whole was organised with efficiency and good humour by Joe Bispham, until recently a member of Council.

In March I lectured to the Sheffield Society for the Encouragement of Art and at the end of June I was in Edinburgh, where the opening of a small exhibition of medals by students of the Royal College of Art gave me the opportunity to meet some of our members who live in that delightful city. In September I visited Norfolk, where the Norwich Coin & Medal Society, though they could not find it in their hearts to welcome me as a man of Suffolk, cheerfully accepted me as a fellow East Anglian. I have had the pleasure, at the Royal Mint, of acting as host to the Worthing & District Numismatic Society and the Lancashire & Cheshire Numismatic Society, while the St Albans & Hertfordshire Numismatic Society very kindly elected me to Honorary Membership.

The year has, however, relieved me of one of my responsibilities. In company with Christopher Challis I have been acting as a supervisor of Christopher Eimer’s M Phil thesis on the Pinos, that prolific but neglected family of eighteenth-century medallists. Mr Eimer has, I am happy to say, survived our supervision and has managed without difficulty to satisfy the internal and external examiners appointed by the University of Leeds. I gladly take this opportunity publicly to salute him on a well-earned success and to express the hope that more numismatists may profit from his example by undertaking part-time degree courses.

Finally, I have saved till last my acknowledgement as President of the assistance and support that I have received during the year from Council and, in particular, from the Officers: our Treasurer and our Director, of whom I have already spoken; our Secretary, who without complaint makes the long journey from Glasgow to attend every meeting; our Librarian, who with the welcome assistance of Peter Bagwell Purefoy has caught up with the accessioning of items received for the Library; and our Editors, who are keeping the Journal on schedule and who are confident that Volume 64 will appear as planned before the end of the year. To them all I offer not just my own thanks but the warm gratitude of the whole Society.

(The President then delivered a paper entitled ‘Gold and the Goschen Pound Note’, the text of which is published at pages 185–93, above.)