PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS, 1996

G.P. DYER

WE have just heard from the Treasurer a report of the very satisfactory state of the Society’s finances, a preliminary indication of which enabled your late Council to recommend no change in the annual subscription, that uncompromising barometer of the financial health of the Society. I admit having begun to harbour the welcome and comforting thought that I may be able to complete my Presidency without an increase in the subscription and for this, but much more for his efficient administration of our financial affairs, I express due gratitude to our Treasurer, Tim Webb Ware.

The underlying health of the Society is also evident in our numbers. During the year we have elected thirty-one new members, of whom one is a junior, and allowing for deaths, resignations and the twelve members who have been amoved tonight membership now stands at 463 individual members and 122 institutional members. Ten years ago, when Hugh Pagan delivered the third of his Presidential Addresses, the combined membership was almost exactly 500. The increase to the current figure of 585 is not perhaps spectacular but I do not doubt that there are many societies who would like to point to a growth of seventeen per cent over the last ten years.

I mentioned deaths a few moments ago and although only one has been reported this year it has been a grievous loss. By the death of Joan Murray on 4 September we have been deprived of one of the great names of Scottish numismatics, for with her late husband Jock Murray she did so much by her acute observation and her enviable familiarity with archival sources to broaden and deepen our knowledge of Scottish coins. It was at the recommendation of Lord Stewartby that she joined the Society in 1965 and the value of her subsequent contribution was recognised by Honorary Membership in 1983 and by the presentation in 1987 of our highest award, the Sanford Saltus Medal, largely for her study of the coins of James III and James IV. She last spoke to the Society in March 1994, delivering an important paper on the coinage of Robert II, but her increasing frailty was apparent and I think many of us feared, as sadly proved to be the case, that this would be the final occasion on which she would address the Society.

On a happier note I have during the year made two presentations on your behalf. In May I had the pleasure of handing to Jeffrey North the Sanford Saltus Medal which by your vote you had awarded him in the ballot last November. His gracious words of appreciation acknowledged the assistance that, from the first, he had always received from other numismatists and I hope that such cooperation may never cease to be a feature of British numismatics. The previous month, April, I presented the Council Prize for numismatic achievement among the younger generation of scholars to Martin Allen, whose work on short cross and on the Durham mint was recognised by Council not just because of its intrinsic merit but also because of the less than perfect circumstances in which he conducts his research. It seemed to me that the words that were spoken on these two happy occasions should become a matter of permanent record and I am glad that the Editors have agreed to find space for them in the Journal that will carry this Presidential Address.

Our monthly meetings here at the Warburg Institute produced as usual an admirably varied programme to cope with the broad chronological range of members’ interests. The ancient period was represented by Roger Bland’s paper on late Roman precious-metal coin hoards, the Saxons and Normans by David Symons’ study of the Worcester mint, and the later medieval period by our new member John Stafford-Langan, who spoke with confidence and clarity on
the Irish coinage of Edward IV, and by our Vice-President Peter Woodhead, whom we also congratulate on the publication of the first volume of the Schneider Syllote. David Dykes brought us into the late eighteenth century with his biographical sketch of Samuel Garbett, while the nineteenth century was served by Peter Gaspar, who did nothing to spare my blushes with his description of the Royal Mint's humiliation over the withdrawn sixpences of 1887. Our wider interests were reflected in Robert Lyall's survey of the cuts, plugs and countermarks of the Caribbean and in Luke Syson's beautifully illustrated paper on the eighteenth-century medals of the Dassiers.

The annual out-of-town meeting was held on 6 July in Birmingham, at Soho House, home of Matthew Boulton. Apart from the first paper, however, when Dick Doty provided a fascinating foretaste of what is likely to be the Society's second special publication, Matthew Boulton did not feature in the formal proceedings, which were planned as a general outline of minting and coin use in the West Midlands. This, like our regular monthly programme, produced a good balance, with Andrew Burnett on coins of the Iron Age, our Vice-President Stewart Lyon on the tenth century, Edward Besly on the Civil War period and Dick Doty, as I have said, on the Soho Mint. A broader perspective was provided by my namesake, Professor Christopher Dyer, whose paper on the use of money in the later Middle Ages so impressed us that he has been invited to deliver next year's Linecar Lecture, an invitation that I am glad to say he has cheerfully accepted. But perhaps the revelation of the day came from Stewart Lyon, who bravely confessed to a family connection with Sir Edward Thomason, the Birmingham medallist of the nineteenth century whose memoirs portray an importunate and self-seeking businessman of the worst kind.

It was an excellent day that proved to be a sell-out and, as we always wish on these occasions, produced faces that are not regularly seen at the Warburg. We are grateful to David Symons and to his colleague Rita McLean, who generously looked after the Birmingham end of the arrangements, but inevitably the heaviest burden fell on our Director, Thomas Curtis. With five speakers to commission, plus all the associated correspondence with members wishing to attend, an out-of-town meeting makes a considerable demand on his time. I know, from my own experience as your Director, that it is not easy to find speakers for the regular monthly programme, let alone a one-day meeting out of town. A vivid recollection is with me still of a conversation in 1980 with John Brand, when he asked me if I would consider nomination as Director: papers, he said, would be offered to me and all I would have to do was the relatively simple task of taking these offers and blending them into a balanced programme. Now I do not want to suggest that John was untruthful but the reality bore no resemblance to the promise. In eight years I doubt if I received more than three or four offers of papers, and with this experience in mind I want particularly to acknowledge how much we owe Thomas Curtis for the burden that he shoulders with such calm authority.

Besides going to Birmingham for the special meeting, my travels have taken me to Chester for the Annual Congress of the British Association of Numismatic Societies and to Manchester for the BANS Lecture Course. Both were well organised and friendly occasions at which members of our Society were prominent, but I am bound to say that the modest attendance at the Lecture Course was disappointing, the more so as those who stayed away missed an informative and candid account by the Deputy Master of the Royal Mint on the preparations that are being made for the single European coinage. The prospect of such a fundamental change to our currency gave particular relevance and topicality to this year's celebrations of the twenty-fifth anniversary of decimalisation. Indeed, for me one of the events of the year was the truly memorable speech by Lord Callaghan at the opening of the special anniversary exhibition at the Bank of England in February, when he revealed the almost casual way in which the decision to decimalise was taken in 1966.

During the year I have spoken to the British Art Medal Society and to the St Albans & Hertfordshire Numismatic Society and, for once, my regular visits to London coincided with
the Annual General Meeting of the London Numismatic Club. I was also in London early in February for the special meeting on the cleaning and storage of coins that accompanied the London Coin Fair and with which the name of the Society had been associated. The two speakers from the Conservation Department of the British Museum had a packed house, and the only sadness was to witness the speed with which the room emptied before the open meeting of the Coordinating Committee for Numismatics in Britain which followed the lectures. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the CCNB Newsletter is establishing an increasingly useful role for itself and I hope that domestic members of the Society appreciate receiving it as one of the benefits of their membership.

Before concluding this part of my Address I extend my thanks to Council for its support during the past year, for the largely unseen role its members so willingly play in ensuring the smooth functioning of the Society, and, in particular this year, for its help in shaping the Society’s constructive response to aspects of the Treasure Bill and the Government’s discussion paper on portable antiquities. Of the officers, I have already spoken of our debt to the Director, Thomas Curtis, and to the Treasurer, Tim Webb Ware. To the Secretary, Donal Bateson, who continues to defy the problems of distance, and to the Librarian, Tony Holmes, who is quietly and effectively getting to grips with the Library I also express the Society’s gratitude. As for the Editors, Edward Besly and Nick Holmes, this year they deserve our sympathy as well as our gratitude, for after having prepared a bumper Journal it is no fault of theirs that delays at the printers will probably prevent its appearance until next February. We are truly fortunate in our officers and I hope we will always keep in our minds the fact that they are volunteers who give up time from their busy professional lives to serve the Society.

My last word, however, is addressed to you all, to thank you, the membership as a whole, for your loyalty and support. But before you can be allowed to toast the health of the Society and indulge in friendly conversation over a drink or two, I fear that you must endure the second part of the Presidential Address.

(The President then delivered a paper entitled ‘Thomas Graham’s Copper Survey of 1857’, the text of which is published at pages 60–66, above.)