PRESENTATION OF THE SANFORD SALTUS MEDAL TO MR ROBERT HUGH THOMPSON, 23 MAY 2000

In making the presentation, the President said:

It is my privilege this evening to present, on the Society’s behalf, its highest award, the Sanford Saltus Medal, to Mr Robert Hugh Thompson. Since its foundation in 1910, the Medal has been the medium through which the Society’s membership as a whole can recognize the numismatic distinction of a fellow member as expressed through his or her writings. Past recipients have included many who have made signal contributions to the development of British numismatics and tonight Robert Thompson’s name is added to that select band of honorands.

Mr Thompson was elected to membership of our Society in March 1964. This was as a junior member but already, as a schoolboy four years earlier, he had entered the lists as a numismatic author. And since 1966 not a single year has passed without at least one numismatic paper flowing from his active and versatile pen. Primarily, but by no means exclusively, these have been in the field of British trade tokens, or, as befits a scholar who is by profession a librarian, as meticulous bibliographic studies. In our own Journal, which, under the terms of the Sanford Saltus Medal Fund, is a main focus for the award, have appeared a number of pivotal articles that have made manifest not only Robert Thompson’s exacting attention to numismatic detail but also his intellectual acumen and his sensitivity to historical nuance.

Much of his work has related to the seventeenth century and – although one must pay particular tribute to his fundamental survey of the dies of Thomas Spence – I imagine that it is in this century and with its trade tokens that his numismatic heart really lies. It is peculiarly apposite that among a number of biographies that Mr Thompson has been invited to undertake for the New Dictionary of National Biography is one of Thomas Snelling, who first began the scholarly study and documentation of seventeenth-century tokens. For, in this respect, Robert Thompson is the Snelling of our own age. And our Journal bears witness to this not least with his notable resolution of the vexed question of central or local token production and his critique of the town pieces of Gloucester.

Of course, in considering the award members may now take into account work outside the Society’s own publications. In 1975 Mr Thompson’s increasingly encyclopaedic knowledge of seventeenth-century tokens led to an invitation to him to publish the remarkable Norweb collection of this series in the Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles. This monumental task, shared since 1988 with Mr Michael Dickinson, is now, after the labours of a quarter of a century, nearing its close and this month sees the publication of the sixth in its sequence of fascicules. They comprise an oeuvre de première qualité that must be mentioned tonight because it is a catalogue raisonné of exceptional value to both the seventeenth-century numismatist and historian and an enduring testimony to Robert Thompson’s analytical skills and scrupulous scholarship. Underlying all I have said must be the consideration that Robert Thompson’s impressive contribution to numismatic science has been made as an adjunct to a busy professional career, and I am delighted now to be able, on behalf of the Society, to present to him the Sanford Saltus Gold Medal for 1999.

In reply, Mr. Thompson said:

Mr President, I am very grateful to members for the award of this medal. I particularly appreciate a gold medal in the light of the comment on one of the programmes I arranged as Director, that it had been full of copper, brass, and lead!

I see from the list of previous recipients that I am the first to have published primarily on tokens. Your vote therefore leaves no doubt that such non-regal and post-medieval artefacts are worthy of serious study; but of course that was established long since by J.G. Milne and by George Boon.

As a native of Cardiff I remember George Boon arriving at the National Museum of Wales. This must have been a great relief to the Keeper of Archaeology, for Dr Savory was little interested in coins, and did not relish being badgered on the subject by schoolboys such as myself. Boon,
however, soon set up the South Wales & Monmouthshire Numismatic Society. Another founder member and a member of this Society, John Roberts-Lewis, was generous to me with his duplicates.

After moving to London in 1962 I joined the Hayes Coin Club, where a visit by our late Secretary, Wilfrid Slayter, brought me into this Society; but it was a talk at Hayes by George Berry, in (I think) June 1966, that made me see seventeenth-century tokens as the series on which I wished to concentrate. Their attraction has been the opportunity to combine documentary research into issuers with technical study of dies etc.

An adverse consequence of their unofficial character is that they lack a central archival source, at least since the 1851 nationalization of the Corporation of Moneyers. I am glad, though, to have persuaded people that the tokens were made by the moneyers, thus overthrowing a myth which had lasted more than two centuries.

From my papers drawn to members’ attention for the ballot, I conclude that if one is careful to give one’s reasons for a statement, one may be permitted to revise one’s conclusions. In 1975 I understood the ‘300 pounds’ received in Bristol farthings as £300-worth; in 1988, thanks to the advice of John Brand, I changed this to 300-lb weight in each of two barrels; and in 1994 I amended this to three barrels of 300-lbs each.

A number of my shorter notes have been connected with publication of the Norweb collection, for which I now have Michael Dickinson as a willing and able coadjutor. Part VI has been published this month, and intentionally it is numbered 49 in the Sylloge series, though always due after Volume 50.

For such a work one has a duty to attempt an explanation of what one publishes, even when the evidence is incomplete. I have in mind not so much my suggestion that a poulterer’s token from INFEILD and St Ives refers firstly to Enfield in Middlesex, which in my view is a reasonable, indeed it remains the only attribution. I think rather of some armorial tokens attributed to the island of Sark, which has followed a logical argument to a somewhat extreme conclusion. I shall continue to worry about this until proof is forthcoming.

The Norwebs have kindly dedicated this latest volume to the memory of my mother, who cut out and mounted photographs while caring for my father when housebound. He died in January, and I will finish with a thought from his fellow-townsman, Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury. Though not about tokens, it might be so construed. ‘Words’, Hobbes wrote, ‘are wise men’s counters, they do but reckon by them: but they are the money of fools ... ’. Thank you.