HENRY SYMONDS, FSA: 30 JANUARY 1859–11 FEBRUARY 1933

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The son of Henry Symonds of Broadwinsor in Dorset and Mary Leekey of Milverton in Somerset, Symonds was educated at Rugby School, admitted to Lincoln’s Inn in 1885 and called to the Bar in 1886 (Pl. 3c). At the time of his election to the Numismatic Society of London, 1885, he was resident in Leamington, Warwickshire, and, indeed, the find there on 21 May 1885 of c.200 Roman coins, all base denarii, became the occasion of his first numismatic publication. From Leamington he subsequently moved to Edgbaston and then, in 1897, to South Kensington, London. In 1900 he resigned from the Society but in 1909 was re-elected, to what by then through incorporation had become the Royal Numismatic Society, at which time he gave as his address the Union Club in Trafalgar Square.

During this latter period of association, which was to continue until his death, Symonds’s standing—then at its height—was recognised not only by his election, first to Council (1911, and on subsequent occasions) and, second, to a vice-presidency (1913), but also by the award to him of the Society’s medal (1924). Contemporaneously, he was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London (1911), and on 8 November 1915 he became Honorary Deputy Assistant-Keeper in the Department of Coins and Medals in the British Museum. The Great War had left the Keeper, George Hill, alone, ‘all my younger colleagues having gone to the front or to Whitehall’, and C.F. Keary, his helper, had had to step aside on medical grounds. Symonds, ‘a recognised expert in certain branches of English numismatics’, volunteered to fill the gap and his services were duly valued. But his stay was brief. On 12 February 1916 he betook himself, first, to Bridport in Dorset and then to Staplegrove near Taunton (1919) and, finally, to Weston-super-Mare (1925) in Somerset. Symonds had come back to his parental roots. His genealogical interests bore fruit in the Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club, of which between 1913 and 1916 he was editor. He also embraced the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, serving on its council and acting as its Honorary Secretary from 1920 to 1925.

After his initial contribution to the Numismatic Chronicle Symonds published there between 1887 and 1926 a further twenty-one pieces. The mention of just two of these in the history of the

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Royal Numismatic Society is odd and certainly does not do justice to Symonds’s achievement. Chronologically, they ranged widely, from Roman times to the reign of James II; and they varied greatly in length, a note on an unpublished Canterbury penny of Henry VIII contrasting sharply with a long and detailed analysis of Elizabeth I’s coinages for Ireland. Some of this work focussed entirely on the coins themselves, but by far the greater part introduced its readers to and analysed the documentary evidence for the actual production of coins.

Now Symonds, of course, was not the first to point up the significance of documentation: one need look no further than the pages of Ruding’s *Annals* to be certain of that. In what was once dubbed, rightly, the numismatic equivalent of a traditional county history – in which generalities by subject area are succeeded by chronological detail – Ruding laid out in magisterial fashion what he perceived to be the bones of his country’s numismatic story. When did mints begin, where were they and what was their product; who ran them, for whom, and at what profit; what were their rhythms and when did these cease? In addressing these questions, Ruding searched far and wide; indeed, he turned every stone known to him. He had to. Then, there was no Public Record Office; no seemingly endless shelves of printed catalogues and calendars of official documents; and none of the technological devices and modern means of communication which under-gird our researches today. (It is salutary to remind ourselves that when Ruding began his sally into numismatics and the history of coinage not even the Penny Post had been introduced.) He relied upon his friends, his acquaintances, government officers, keepers and owners of coin and archival collections, antiquaries, and so on; not a few of whom, like he himself, were ministers of the Cloth. Between them they afforded him access to what he wanted to see, drew to his attention matter which they knew to be of importance, volunteered advice, offered him transcripts and lent him books and tracts. The superb survey which emerged lay rooted, wherever possible and above all else, in a mosaic of documentary evidence.

So, Symonds’s documentary approach was not novel; and nor was he alone in his own generation in using it. His contribution was to supply a whole new dynamic, focussing sharply on the Tudor and, to a lesser extent, the Stuart coinages; not simply in the pages of the *Numismatic Chronicle* but also in those of the *British Numismatic Journal*. He joined the British Numismatic Society in 1909 and was to remain a member for a decade, his name appearing for the last time in the list of members ‘revised up to January 31st 1920’. During this period he exhibited coins, gave books to the library, served on Council and was twice elected a vice-president. In all he contributed seven papers to the *Journal*. Interwoven as they should be with his other work, already mentioned, they reveal a remarkable picture, made possible by his enviable rate of work. Between 1910 and 1917 he published in his succinct and incisive way eleven substantial articles extending to over 300 pages. In four of these, starting in the reign of Queen Mary and then pushing backwards and forwards, he covered the English coinages of the whole Tudor period. In two more he dealt with the Irish coinages from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I, and in a further three he looked separately at the Durham House mint, the Bristol mint and Tudor mint engravers. Taken together they constituted a wide-ranging discussion of the Tudor coinage as a whole, in which new evidence was used to expand the range and depth of knowledge, to question existing interpretations and to examine what all this meant for the classification of the coins themselves. One illustration
should make this point exactly: it concerns the mint at Durham House (where now the Adelphi stands) to which Ruding had allotted only a brief footnote reference and whose very existence was in Symonds’s day still in some doubt. The Exchequer records, which Symonds did so much to explore through Accounts Various (E101), contained no indenture for such a mint, but Symonds discovered on the Patent Rolls a commission which set out clearly who was to run the mint, which coins were to be made, and what the administrative arrangements were to be. In theory, then, Durham House had existed; but had it ever actually operated? Notwithstanding his ‘exhaustive’ searches, Symonds could not find any production figures (and, indeed, nor has anyone else, for now we know that no official accounts were ever made), but he clearly demonstrated from an account of Sir Edmund Pekham, high treasurer of the mints, and the State Papers that Durham House did make both profits and payments. It had existed and it had worked. Having established on grounds of weight which was the silver shilling stipulated in the Durham House commission (the ‘pretty little shilling’ which the former Bishop Hugh Latimer had found in his purse), and satisfied himself on the relationship between John Bowes, under-treasurer of Durham House, and Sir Martin Bowes, under-treasurer of Tower I (that is to say, there was none), Symonds addressed the question of the mint marks to be attributed to Durham House. Here he came down on the side of ‘the bow and the grappling iron’. The first attribution, though not entirely original to him (and he was always generous in expressing his indebtedness to others), was sound and has stood the test of time; the second was misplaced. In his elucidation of the administrative reorganisation which accompanied the great debasement of Henry VIII, Symonds proposed that three mints operated in the Tower; whereas in reality there only ever were two. The second was headed in succession by Thomas Knight, Stephen Vaughan and Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, and it is to Vaughan that it is now generally agreed, thanks to the late Herbert Schneider, that mint-mark grappling should be assigned. This quite uncharacteristic misinterpretation by Symonds may seem to detract from his overall achievement; but, if it does, it is only by a little. It was he who put Durham House firmly on the numismatic map, and today that place remains quite unchallenged.

Of course, no one should ever imagine that this and Symonds’s other articles on the Tudors came simply as a preamble to what he had to say on the Stuarts; on the contrary, he seems to have conceived a simultaneous assault on each front. The difference between the two being that whereas, as has already been intimated, in the end his work on the Tudors added up to a sweeping survey of a dynastic coinage as a whole, that on the Stuarts did not. True, what he had to say on Stuart engravers continued, and indeed was published at the same time as, his work on Tudor engravers but for the rest he concentrated on only one aspect of the Stuart mint and coinage, the trials of the Pyx. These he pursued from James I to James II in the clear belief that the official record of the sequence of mint marks should be published. Of course, he was right. After the trials of the Pyx, Symonds deserted the Stuarts for the reign of Edward IV, examining, first, his Irish coinages and then his mint accounts.

Despite the emphasis which Symonds placed on documentary evidence, in reality he never strayed far from the coins themselves. Over and besides those he examined in cabinets both inside and outside the British Museum, Symonds had a collection of his own, which he appears to have assembled onwards from the late 1880s. Long, long, after his death this collection was dispersed at auction. In the first sale, 26 September 1973, there were 125 lots of English, Scottish and Irish coins, many of which were said to be rare and in good condition. Particularly noteworthy were

13 Annals, I, 314 n. 5.
17 Coins of Durham House are still scarce and little work has been done on them. See, however, the contribution by Mr Bispham, who suggested that the engraver of Durham House dies, who Symonds rather tentatively surmised to be Henry Basse or Robert Pitt, was, by virtue of his markedly different style, Anthony Levens, a Frenchman, also working in the Tower. J. Bispham, ‘The base silver shillings of Edward VI’, BNJ 55 (1985), 138–40.
lots 1–44 – ‘the Anglo-Saxon and Norman pennies of Dorset, Somerset and Gloucester’. Given Symonds’s provincial connections this emphasis on the South-West seems perfectly natural. On the other hand, why was it that the coins of the Tudor and Stuart periods, on which he had thought and worked so hard, should only roughly equal in number those of the South-West; and, moreover, that the whole of this sale of British material should only slightly outnumber in lots the two later ones which were entirely devoted to coins of the classical world? Exactly what guided Symonds’s eye may never be known but one thing is certain: coins to him, like documents, were evidence and, if by metallurgical analysis, they could help solve some knotty problem then coins should be subjected to assay and, therefore, to destruction. This he did when studying the mint-marks of James I and, more particularly, the Irish series of Henry VIII and Edward VI.

Henry Symonds was a scholar: enthusiastic, energetic, perceptive and productive. His judgments were good, his transcriptions sure. It is fitting that he, thought in his day to be ‘a pleasant and frequent attendant’ at numismatic meetings, should be remembered in this volume to commemorate the Society to which he belonged and in whose journal he published some of the very best work that has ever been done on the Tudor period.19