PRESENTATION OF THE SANFORD SALTUS MEDAL TO MR EDWARD BESLY, 27 MAY 2003

In making the presentation, the President said:

In the summer of 1986 the National Museum of Wales – as it was then known – established a new specialist post to curate its coin and medal collections. Over the previous few years the Keeper of the Department of Archaeology, George Boon, with the positive support of the museum authorities, had transformed what had been an unexceptional provincial numismatic collection – albeit one with a strong Roman presence – into one of national significance. Judicious purchase – underpinned by a healthy purchase grant – augmented by the addition of Treasure Trove material from finds like the remarkable Bryn Maelgwyn and Coed-y-Wenallt hoards resulted in a cabinet that, as Marion Archibald has put it, became ‘imperative for scholars to visit’. Official recognition of its importance came with the redesignation of the department to ‘Archaeology and Numismatics’ but, even more fundamental, with the creation of a dedicated post of ‘Numismatist’ to ensure the future care of the collections after Boon’s now imminent retirement, its scholarly interpretation, its popular exposition and, critically too, for a Treasure Trove institution in the new age of metal detectorism, the administration and study of Treasure finds in the Principality.

To find someone competent to meet these requirements over the broad spectrum of the collection – singlehanded after Boon’s retirement – seemed an onerous task. The new post, nevertheless, attracted a strong field, but there was one outstanding candidate who stood above the rest: a Somerset man with a degree in Chemistry from Oxford, forensic experience in the Home Office and a decade of service in the department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum. This was Edward Besly. He had made his mark with his joint publication with Roger Bland of the Cunetio Treasure (awarded the Royal Numismatic Society’s Gilljam Prize in 1986) and his seminal paper in our own Journal on the York mint of Charles I, and he was already working on his survey of Civil War hoards. And, in the seventeen years since his appointment to Cardiff, Edward Besly has made a profound contribution to numismatic science over a wide range of subjects including Roman coinage, the English medieval series and the mints of the Civil War – the last an area in which he is undoubtedly the country’s foremost authority. His papers in the Journal on the mints of Truro and Exeter and on the Tregwynt hoard bear witness to this. His contribution has, however, by no means been restricted to the academic monograph, for he has achieved much in making his chosen fields accessible to a wide public. On two occasions he has been awarded the Lhotka Memorial Prize of the Royal Numismatic Society: for his Coins and Medals of the English Civil War (1991) and his Loose Change (1997). One must not forget either his useful pamphlet on Roman coins relating to Britain; nor, despite his strictly professional duties, his readiness to lecture to numismatic and historical societies with a lightness of approach that yet never sacrificed an iota of scrupulous scholarship.

Edward Besly is, of course, well known to everyone here this evening. He had an editorial responsibility for nine volumes of the Journal and was a skilful Director of the Society, devising for us lecture programmes of variety and appeal. He has himself lectured to us on many occasions, most recently on his interpretation of the important third-century Rogenet hoard. (Moreover, as an added bonus, we have enjoyed his singing voice although not yet, I think, any performances on the bassoon.) Edward is now turning his attention to Cardiff’s collection of gallantry and campaign medals with the enthusiasm he has demonstrated over all his projects, and I am sure the results of his study, like so much he has achieved, will be original and authoritative.

Edward Besly has made an impressive contribution to numismatic scholarship and to the popular dissemination of its results. It gives me the greatest pleasure, therefore, to present to him, on behalf of the Society, the John Sanford Saltus Gold Medal for 2002.
In reply, Mr Besly said:

Mr President and fellow members, it came as a great and very pleasant surprise to see my name put forward last year, and I would like first to thank you all very much for voting me the Sanford Saltus Medal. To receive this in the Society's Centenary year is an added pleasure, for we are celebrating British numismatics on a broad front and my work takes me into many of the areas covered by the Society's remit.

My introduction to numismatics came through an interest in archaeology – fostered by my parents and by many vacations spent digging – in practice, therefore, the coins of the Romans. In 1974, chance led me to spend a few months as a temporary assistant in the Coins and Medals Department of the British Museum, which I loved. My qualifications, however, were scientific, and in 1975 I duly joined the Home Office Forensic Science Service, which I did not enjoy. Two years later, a vacancy arose at the British Museum, and an act of faith by Robert Carson and others saw me back in London, curating European coinages and helping to record some of the large, not to say massive, Roman hoards that kept coming to light. Chance it was, again, that led me to British numismatics when John Kent became Keeper; and as curator of post-medieval coinages I dealt with a string of significant Civil War hoards. Another act of faith, by George Boon and the then Director, led to my becoming the National Museum of Wales's first official 'Numismatist' in 1986, as you have just heard. From George I learned much, not least the usefulness of the Appendix in constructing a paper: the three of mine cited in connection with the medal ballot have seventeen between them! An interest in archaeology and a scientific background have both over time proved to be very useful.

I fear, however, that coins are also in the blood, though for the wrong reasons. I had known for many years that my great-great-grandfather, another Edward, owned a paper mill. Only recently did we make the connection that he was the same Edward Lloyd, the newspaper owner who in advertising his wares on the small change of the day caused a scandal that led to a new Coinage Act in 1853. I am unlikely to leave such a mark, but have always been interested in coins that are less than perfect, whether in their manufacture or through use and abuse: for instance, I've been amused recently to see coins once again being used for advertising, receiving in change a coin bearing a sticker promoting a Swansea cocktail bar.

As the sole numismatist at Cardiff, I am obliged to work – indeed, enjoy working – on a wide range of material, from the ancient world to the Euro, making me a bit of a jack-of-all-trades, numismatically speaking. I am therefore extremely grateful to very many of you, too numerous to name, who are so generous with specialised help and advice; and to successive Keepers of Archaeology & Numismatics in Cardiff for their support and encouragement. It has been and continues to be a pleasure and a privilege to work in two such institutions as the British Museum and National Museums & Galleries of Wales.