THE BRITISH MUSEUM AND THE BLITZ: 
THE DEPARTMENT OF COINS AND MEDALS IN WARTIME
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Introduction

On the night of 10 May 1941 the Luftwaffe launched its last major bombing campaign of the Blitz on London. Described by The Times as ‘another large-scale attempt at terrorization of the familiar Nazi pattern’, the raid saw more than five hundred bombers fly over London, releasing seven hundred tons of high explosives. The damage was immense, and the loss of life significant. By the morning of 11 May, 1,400 people were dead and many public and civilian structures had been damaged or destroyed, including the chamber of the House of Commons, Westminster Abbey and Westminster Hall.

The British Museum was also a casualty of the raid as a result of several hits by incendiary bombs just before midnight. Although the London Fire Brigade were called, their operations were hampered by a lack of sufficient water and, subsequently, the fires caused by the incendiaries burned out of control until 6.30am. The Department of Coins and Medals, Room of Greek and Roman Life, Bronze Room, Fourth Greek Vase Room, Romano-British Room, Central Saloon and the Prehistoric Room, were all devastated by fire and water from the firemen’s hoses. The South-West Quadrant of the British Library, then based within the British Museum, was also destroyed. The fires had burned most fiercely in the Department of Coins and Medals where the incendiary charges had penetrated the thin copper roof and lodged in a hollow space in the rafters to which there was no access. Eventually the broad iron girders that held up the roof buckled under the heat and crashed to the floor in a ‘mass of flame and twisted metal’ (Fig. 1).

Two months later the Trustees of the Museum convened to hear the report about the damage from John Allan, Keeper of Coins and Medals. This relatively brief report begins by mentioning the ‘complete destruction of the Medal Room by fire during the air raid,’ but it goes on to state that ‘[n]o coins or medals belonging to the Museum were lost or damaged and a large part of the departmental library had been removed.’ As Allan’s report implies, the losses were minimised because the Department’s objects were evacuated at the start of the war. This exodus was one component of a plan to move all of the British Museum collections out of Bloomsbury and was, because of their size and complexity, unparalleled in the scale and scope of its ambition.

The evacuation of objects from the British Museum during the Second World War is well documented; however, no narrative has specifically focused upon the numismatic collections and the activities of Coins and Medals during this period. The aims of this paper are, there-

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3 Caygill 1990, 38.
4 BMA, Box 3: ‘Fire Damage Night 10/11 May 1941’.
5 British Museum 1967, 16.
6 BMOP: Trustees of the British Museum, Standing Committee Report, 12 July 1941.
7 Anon. Special Correspondent 1945; Forsdyke 1952, 8.
8 BMOP: Trustees of the British Museum, Standing Committee Report, 12 July 1941. Five hundred pounds was later allocated for the replacement of the books lost from the library.
9 Caygill 1989, 17.
10 See, for example, Wilson 2002, 249–251 with references. See also Saunders 1992, 102–5 for a comparative discussion about the evacuation of the National Gallery in World War One and its subsequent preparations leading up to the Second World War.
fore, twofold. Firstly, by using the available archive evidence, it will provide a more detailed narrative of the wartime activities of the Department of Coins and Medals and, by doing so, attempt to evaluate the success of the Department in protecting its objects leading up to the bombing and in the immediately following years. Secondly, by revisiting the source material, including recent work to reassess the available physical evidence, this paper highlights some omissions from Allan’s aforementioned report.

Evacuating the Department of Coins and Medals

The First World War proved to be pivotal for arguments concerning the necessity or, indeed, possibility, of evacuating objects from the British Museum, and it also laid the groundwork for the future movement of the Department of Coins and Medals. The developments in long-range aerial bombardment had made the collections held by the National Museums more vulnerable to damage if they remained in proximity to areas with dense populations or identifiable military targets. As the war entered its latter stages in 1917, as a result of an increase in German raids on London, the Department of Coins and Medals moved its collections (but not the library) to storage in the disused Holborn Post Office tunnel.\(^\text{11}\) Although the British Museum escaped damage, the relocation of objects, albeit partial, required collections staff to consider the conditions in which the collections should be kept and worked upon. To realise this, the Museum established its Research Laboratory in 1920.\(^\text{12}\) The 1914–18 conflict had

\(^{11}\) Caygill 1992, 32.

lasted longer than anticipated and provision had to be made for offsite storage that was suitable for protracted periods. Policies established by the Laboratory proved to be the key to ensuring the safety of the collections, especially those which featured organic matter. This was less of a consideration for the Department of Coins and Medals, whose objects could be considered to be generally more robust, easy to move, and less affected by variation in temperature and humidity than those held by other departments.\(^{13}\)

Until the mid 1930s the movement of objects was not a foregone conclusion. A meeting of national museum directors was called by the Minister (then First Commissioner) of Works in 1933 and proved to be crucial for deciding upon the most viable policies. Initial comments were fatalistic, suggesting that the evacuation of collections was now pointless and that, given the speed with which aerial attack could be mobilised, there would be no time to consider moving museum collections. The Museum duly rejected this notion and so the Minister of Works put forward the alternative that Hampton Court Palace should become a repository for every national collection.\(^{14}\) Arguing that this was also a large and therefore viable target for aerial bombardment, the British Museum vetoed the idea.\(^{15}\) Finally it was agreed that the owners of large country houses in locales regarded as ‘safe areas’ should be approached with a view to lending space for the storage of collections.\(^{16}\) This culminated in the designation of Boughton House in Northamptonshire, the seat of the Duke of Buccleuch, as the proposed repository for the entire collection of Coins and Medals.\(^{17}\)

Sir John Forsdyke’s appointment as Director of the Museum in 1936 coincided with the beginnings of political disintegration in Europe. With ‘painstaking brilliance’, according to Caygill, he began to plan the evacuation in detail. This included the procurement of 3,300 folding packing cases which could be stored in very little space. The Museum also found a source of ordinary millboard cases, of which six hundred would be required for the removal of the coin cabinets.\(^{18}\) An internal report dated 1938 states that, ‘since there was no intention of taking the objects out of the boxes in the repositories...[Coins and Medals cabinets] were sealed with steel bands.’\(^{19}\) It is unclear whether these bands remained intact throughout the war.

Historically, the Department of Coins and Medals stored its objects in wooden trays in mahogany cabinets and, collectively, their gross weight was estimated at twelve and a half tons by the Museum Object Handlers.\(^{20}\) Unlike those departments that had a diverse collection of objects, the regularity of the dimensions of the coin cabinets meant that the plans for evacuation were comparatively straightforward. The Coins and Medals annual report for 1939 states that the internal packing of coins in cabinets was completed in advance so that they merely had to be placed in their millboard boxes for transport.\(^{21}\) On the evening of Wednesday 23 August 1939 the Home Office contacted Sir John Forsdyke to warn him that war was imminent: a cascade system of communication filtered this information down to Allan who was to ensure that employees of Coins and Medals were prepared to begin removing the collections by 7am on Thursday 24 August. Coins and Medals was one of the first departments to evacuate the Museum and, by noon on Saturday 26 August, according to Allan’s report, all of its objects had been sealed in crates and transported by rail to Boughton House.\(^{22}\)

The Department of Coins and Medals did not just move its objects: those members of staff not immediately called up for war duty vacated Bloomsbury and decamped to Boughton to oversee the collection and continue their research. The Deputy Keeper of Coins and Medals,\(^{23}\)

\(^{13}\) Digby 1979, 26. The Montague Guest collection, which included ivory tickets and passes, was housed in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at this point. See British Museum 1930, with Preface.


\(^{15}\) Caygill 1992, 34, states that there would have been a ‘spectacular bonfire if it was attacked.’

\(^{16}\) Forsdyke 1952, 1.

\(^{17}\) Caygill 1992, 36.

\(^{18}\) Forsdyke 1952, 1.


\(^{20}\) Anon. Special Correspondent 1959; BMOP: Trustees of the British Museum, Report of the Standing Committee, 14 October 1939. At this point the Object Handlers were known as the Masons.

\(^{21}\) BMOP: J. Allan, Department of Coins and Medals Annual Report for 1939, 18 January 1940.

\(^{22}\) BMOP: Allan, report to the Trustees, 14 October 1939.
E.S.G. Robinson, was placed in charge of the Museum’s entire operation at Boughton House during this period. Digby suggests that he was chosen for logistical reasons, because Coins and Medals was the easiest of any collection to manage, giving Robinson time to supervise the entire operation: ‘the coins were all beautifully stored in cabinets, which were very quickly packed and the evacuation of that department [from Boughton] would be completed long before any others.’ The first half of 1940 appears to have been relatively stable and productive for the purposes of research. It was at Boughton, for example, that Harold Mattingly completed the fourth volume of his *Catalogue of Roman Coins*, an achievement for which, in 1941, he was awarded medals of the American Numismatic Society and the Royal Numismatic Society.

By 1941 the productive academic environment appears to have become more constrained, partly owing to the fact that key members of staff including John Walker, the Assistant Keeper, were called up for service. Remarkably he managed to complete his *Catalogue of Muhammadan Coins in the British Museum* whilst on commission as a Pilot Officer in the Royal Air Force Intelligence Service. Far greater disruption was caused when, despite the protestations of the Trustees, a military airfield was built near Boughton House at Grafton Underwood. Deeming the safety of the collections to be in jeopardy, the Trustees decided to move the collections of the Department of Coins and Medals, along with the other objects being held at Boughton, to a purpose-built climate-controlled room in Westwood Quarry, Wiltshire. This quarry was to be shared with the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum and took about six months to prepare since it required drying out, floors levelling, and appropriate ventilation, at a cost of £20,000. Allan was sent to oversee its adaptation and was put up at a hotel in nearby Bradford-on-Avon for the duration of its completion. By December 1941 the quarry was ready to receive objects, but the decision was taken to delay the move until March 1942 when the convoy could depart using police escort and arrive in daylight, thus giving it greater protection from night bombing raids.

In the interim, the Department of Coins and Medals accepted additional storage at Drayton House in Northamptonshire and Compton Wynyates in Warwickshire and, by October 1941, the collection was divided equally between the three houses. This separation appears to have made the objects more difficult to locate and, for example, in March 1942 Robinson wrote to a colleague at Drayton because he believed that one of the coin cabinets had gone missing.

On another occasion coins were erroneously added to a batch of objects intended to be shipped from Drayton to Compton Wynyates. The ease with which cabinets of valuable coins could go astray might, in part, explain why Forsdyke suggested to Allan that, once the work was complete, he should prioritise the movement of the collections of the Department of Coins and Medals to Westwood. This finally took place in March and April 1942 and there the collection remained until December 1946, under armed guard and the full-time supervision of members of Museum staff on rotating shifts.

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23 BMOP: E.S.G. Robinson, letter to the Trustees, 11 October 1939.
24 Digby 1979, 25. See below for the later movement of coin cabinets from Boughton House.
25 Mattingly 1940; BMOP: Trustees of the British Museum, Standing Committee Report, 12 July 1941; BMOP: Robinson, letter to Sir John Forsdyke, 8 January 1940.
26 Walker 1941; CMA: Department of Coins and Medals, Minutes of the Sub-Committee on Antiquities, etc., 12 July 1941; BMOP: Allan, Report to the Trustees, 8 May 1941.
28 Forsdyke 1952, 5; Wilson 2002, 251.
29 BMA, Box 2: R. Bedford, letter to Allan, 24 March 1942. Bedford was employed by the Victoria and Albert Museum to oversee the evacuation of their objects to Westwood.
30 Caygill 1990, 37.
32 BMA, Box 1: Robinson, letter to Gadd, 26 March 1942; BMA, Box 1: Robinson, postcard to Gadd, 31 March 1942. The missing cabinet is listed as ‘C&M.586’ and Robinson eventually found it at Compton Wynyates but ‘packed in a wooden box & not in the cardboard container [he] was looking for.’
33 BMA, Box 1: Basil Gray, letter to Allan, April 21 (no year given). Gray called it ‘[t]hat box of Coins, C&M R11’.
34 BMA, Box 2: Forsdyke, letter to Allan, 25 October 1941; BMA, Box 2: Forsdyke, letter to Allan, 20 March 1942.
35 Allan, Mattingly and possibly also Robinson were all posted there for duty. See BMA, Box 2: Forsdyke, letter to Mattingly, 13 March 1943; BMA, Box 2: Forsdyke, letter to Allan, 12 November 1942; Forsdyke 1952, 6.
Back in London, the Museum initially closed in anticipation of the predicted waves of bombers, but these failed to materialise. Forsdyke later reflected that this period had made it seem that ‘the clearance of all the galleries had been unnecessary’.\textsuperscript{36} In January 1940 it was decided that selected galleries should reopen with a display of replicas and photographs, but ‘containing no irreplaceable treasures’ and, later that year, the Department of Coins and Medals mounted its first wartime display consisting of electrotype copies of its objects.\textsuperscript{37} An internal memorandum, circulated in June 1940, and which predates the bombing, contains a list of the collections material which remained in the British Museum.\textsuperscript{38} This document essentially acted as a guideline for salvage should the Museum receive a direct hit during an air raid. Many of the large stone objects were still in situ, having been deemed too cumbersome to remove, and the British Library had completed only a partial evacuation of its collections. Allan’s contribution, reporting the status of Coins and Medals, stated that ‘[n]othing is left but the Departmental Library from which the most important books have been removed.’\textsuperscript{39}

**Bomb-damaged coins**

In 2010, an archive box containing unsorted numismatic material was removed from one of the Museum basements set aside for Coins and Medals. Some of the material consisted of modern European coins which, since they were minted after the war had ended, must have been added to the box in the decades that followed.\textsuperscript{40} However, the box also contained hundreds of misshapen lumps of metal which are made from coins fused together, bearing the signs of significant damage by fire, including melting and oxidisation. It is inconceivable, given the heat to which they were evidently subjected, that they were situated anywhere but the Museum and, most likely, within the Department of Coins and Medals when the building was bombed. The fragments were probably salvaged from the destroyed Department in the days or weeks that followed the bombing and afterwards placed in storage. Two of the largest of these molten fragments were subsequently selected to be registered as objects for the collection (Fig. 2 and Fig. 4).\textsuperscript{41}

One of the two masses is relatively compact, and appears to consist of medieval hammered pennies (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{42} These have melted to such an extent that parts of this lump are now little more than silver ingots showing faint outlines of coins: all except one are illegible. The legible coin resembles an Edward I or II type 10 penny (c. 1305–1310) and has an obverse inscription that begins EDWAR (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{43} Arguably these coins were once part of a hoard of pennies and, because type 10 pennies comprised between forty and fifty per cent of hoards buried after about 1320, its deposition probably dates from the early to mid-fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{44} The total weight of the lump is 390.54 g and, since an unclipped penny issued during this period might weigh between about 1.3 g and 1.4 g, one might surmise that the mass contains the fused remnants of about 275–300 coins.

There is no gap in the British Museum series of medieval hammered pennies and there is no hoard recorded to have been acquired and which has subsequently gone missing from the collection. This suggests that it is previously unrecorded and, moreover, that it was brought to the

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\textsuperscript{36} Forsdyke 1952, 3.
\textsuperscript{37} BMOP: Anon. 1940a; Allan, Report to the Trustees, 4 September 1940.
\textsuperscript{38} BMOP: ‘Salvage Lists and Instructions’, June 1940.
\textsuperscript{39} BMOP: Allan, reporting in ‘Salvage Lists and Instructions,’ June 1940.
\textsuperscript{40} These may have been objects donated for potential acquisition but which were not required for the collection.
\textsuperscript{41} BM registered object numbers E.5226 and E.5227. These were exhibited in 2011 in the BM Money Gallery, for which see Hockenhull 2011, 47. The fragments were displayed alongside an incendiary shell casing that was salvaged from the roof of the Parthenon Gallery after 10 May 1941. The casing was designed to open at altitude, scattering the charges over London, but its mechanism was probably faulty and released them too late, causing them all to land on the British Museum. See Forsdyke 1952, 8.
\textsuperscript{42} BM object number E.5227.
\textsuperscript{43} Image photographed using Reflective Transformative Imaging (RTI) by Craig Williams, Department of Prehistory and Europe, British Museum, June 2012. Although its features are worn, the crown and spreading hair featured on the bust are reminiscent of type 10cf2 series.
\textsuperscript{44} Stewartby 2009, 131.
Fig. 2. Object no. E.5227. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 3. Detail from object no. E.5227, Edward I/II Type 10 Penny. © Trustees of the British Museum.
Museum to be catalogued as Treasure Trove. The finder was perhaps unable to return to collect it or was informed that the hoard had been destroyed in the bombing, but no documentary evidence survives to support this suggestion.

The second block of melted coins that was accessioned in 2011 is approximately 390 mm long, 270 mm wide at its broadest point, and 105 mm deep (Fig. 4). It is not only larger but, at 8.5 kg, much heavier than the first block. The object has brittle edges and it is possible that some of the other fragments found in storage were once attached to it but have now broken off. Subjected to radiographic testing in February 2012, the mass was found to contain several hundred copper coins which had been fused together by lead.

Most of the coins that are fused within the mass are damaged to the point of being illegible. Those that were identified were predominantly issued in India and the earliest identifiable coin is of Wima Kadphises, the third Kushan king, from between about AD 113 and 127. Other identifiable coins include those of the Yaudheya Republic and Kanishka II. From their diameter, thickness, and from the details remaining on the inscriptions, it is possible further to surmise that most of the remaining coins in the mass are medieval Indian, but they do not

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45 BMOP: Allan, Department of Coins and Medals Annual Report for 1941, 14 February 1942, lists the Treasure Trove dealt with by the Department in 1940 and 1941. No hoard matches this description which implies that it had only recently entered the museum and that it had not yet been processed or catalogued.

46 BM object number E.5226.

47 Testing conducted by J. Ambers, Department of Conservation and Scientific Research, British Museum, February 2012. Since lead melts at 327.5°C and copper at 1083°C respectively, the mass was subjected to heat somewhere between these ranges. The copper shows signs of melting in several places, suggesting that temperatures reached the upper end of this range.

48 Many of the coins are worn and were probably in a poor condition prior to the bombing. Given the large number and varied numismatic nature of the objects found, not to mention their poor condition, it would require a project more focused in scope than the present paper fully to catalogue the legible coins within this conglomerate.
appear to have been properly sorted. One unregistered lump, for example, has the remains of a Victorian halfpenny token from Nova Scotia half wedged between layers of Indian coins.

The lead within the mass is most likely to have come from electrotypes which were, presumably, stored nearby and melted in the fire to fuse the copper coins together. Large numbers of electrotypes coins, which also exhibit signs of fire damage, were found in the archive box when it was examined. Their lead cores are gone leaving a thin layer of plating. The Museum was known to be producing electrotypes in the 1930s and, indeed, they constituted the wartime sacrificial display mounted by Coins and Medals.49

It remains open to question whether any of the damaged coins were registered: given the damage to these objects, their corresponding paper tickets (the card discs upon which the coins sat in their trays, providing information about their provenance and type) would have almost certainly perished in the flames. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether these objects were ever accessioned from the original registers. This is because the collection was built over two centuries and because collecting policies were, until long after the war, fluid and flexible.50 Objects which were already represented in the collections of Coins and Medals were sometimes exchanged for objects from other collections which would fill gaps within series.51 The Coins and Medals registers should have been amended to reflect the fact that the object was no longer with the Museum but this system varied from series to series and according to the practices of individual curators. In some instances the exchange of these so-called duplicates remains unrecorded.52 The Oriental registers, which were removed from the Department of Coins and Medals before it was destroyed, provide an illustrative example of the development of the collection, and the attendant pitfalls that derive from trying to identify missing coins. It is not, therefore, possible to state definitively whether the coins in the larger lump were registered objects, potential acquisitions left for staff to choose from, objects loaned by another institution for study or a combination of the above suppositions.

The extant correspondence between Forsdyke, Allan, and Robinson during 1939 and 1941 gives a clear indication that, whilst most of the Department decamped to Boughton House, Allan, at least, remained at the Museum. Heating was required in the Medal Room, which further suggests that, since the Coins and Medals library was closed to students, he was working there after the outbreak of war, and possibly up until the bombing in May 1941.53 Dr David MacDowall, who joined the Department of Coins and Medals in 1956, states that ‘when the rest of the cabinets had been removed to safety . . . the Keeper John Allen [sic] had retained in the BM some of the Indian cabinets on which he was working.’54 To a certain extent this is supported by the evidence of stained coin tickets; indeed, a great swathe of tickets belonging to ninth and tenth-century Shahi series coins show evidence of staining (see, for example, Fig. 5).55 This occurred at some point between 1933 (the latest acquisition year to be found on a stained ticket) and 1956 or 1957, when it was noticed by MacDowall. MacDowall recalls a conversation with John Walker, who suggested that ‘they must have suffered from the fire bombs that had set fire to the BM in the war.’56

49 BMA, Box 3: ‘War Exhibition List and Notebook, 1940’; BMOP: Allan, Report to the Trustees, 4 September 1940.
50 Williams 2011, 37.
51 See Wilson 2002, 159–60 for an example of objects being bartered for other objects held with institutions in the United Kingdom and abroad. The practice of exchanging duplicates between collections was widespread until the mid-twentieth century.
52 See, for example, CMA: Oriental Series Register, Whitehead 1922, 1525–4149, Volume 9, object nos. 1922.0424.377, 1921,1118.54 for standard documentation procedure for object exchange. This required the gluing of tickets from exchanged coins directly into the registers. The same volume has entries where the traces of glue are apparent but the ticket has gone astray.
53 BMOP: Allan, letter to the Directorate, 28 September 1939.
54 D. MacDowall, pers. comm., 15 March 2012. by email.
55 India Office Collection, acquired 1892. See Walker 1953, 78. See also tickets belonging to objects with the following BM object numbers: 1933,0802.12; IOC.804; IOC.811; 1904,0206.3; 1894,0507.1017; 1853,0301.50. Tickets with more extensive damage may have been replaced since the bombing. Under ordinary circumstances tickets would not have been separated from the objects and would, therefore, have accompanied the coins in their cabinets to Boughton House.
56 D. MacDowall, pers. comm., 15 March 2012, by email.
The stained tickets were subjected to X-ray fluorescence and Raman spectroscopy (XRF) testing in June 2012 which found no difference in the elemental composition between the dark areas and the unaffected areas of paper. Since XRF testing should detect higher traces of carbon associated with charring, this rules out the possibility that the tickets were damaged by fire. It is still possible, however, that the staining was caused by the firemen’s hoses, the water from which had done as much to damage the books in the South-West Quadrant as the fire itself.

The initial report about the bombing, states that ‘[t]he only serious losses were the section of the Library dealing with Indian and Oriental Coins and the manuscript and casts made for Mr Allan’s Catalogue of Coins of Medieval India’, and the Trustees express their sympathy with Allan for the ‘total destruction of the Medal Room and in his personal losses.’ Since no one was hurt in the bombing of the Medal Room, one assumes that these ‘personal losses’ refer to the aforementioned manuscript although, since it was not published, very little information survives concerning its content. Unfortunately Allan’s work is not mentioned in reports to the Trustees except in retrospect (after it was destroyed). Allan’s reasons for not reporting the destruction of coins to the Trustees are elusive, but mitigated by the fact that the damaged objects were not thrown away, as might easily have occurred when the building was cleared of debris. This indicates that he did not go to any great lengths to hide their destruction: he simply omitted the fact from his report, and it seems unlikely that he would have faced serious repercussions if he had reported their destruction, especially if they were unregistered. Indeed, the readiness with which the Trustees accepted the possibility that registered objects could be destroyed is demonstrated by a British Museum wartime display, advertised in a contemporary press report as a ‘possible sacrifice to the aerial perils of war.’ This so-called ‘suicide display’ lived up to its name and was destroyed during the bombing of the Museum on 10 May 1941.

The lack of evidence about the destruction of numismatic material might, in part, be explained by the limitations of the archive documents relating to the period 1939–45, which are woefully brief. Minute taking was limited by staff shortages, and this is particularly evident with regard to the original papers for 1941–51, which are condensed into a single volume, when previously a single year (1938 for example) might have filled a large bound tome in the archives. Considering the scale of the damage to the Museum on 10 May 1941, it is extraordinary that the report about the degree of the damage barely covers one page of the Trustees’
report. It took until 1952 for an official treatment to emerge, written by Forsdyke two years after his retirement as Director.

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that the British Museum attempted to understate the scale of the destruction. The final written report from the Trustees is defiant in its tone and, whilst it acknowledges the ‘complete destruction of the Quadrant and of the roofs of the main staircase and the Galleries mentioned’, it further states that ‘all these roofs and floors and the whole structure of the Quadrant were condemned as unsafe before the last year, and would have been reconstructed long ago if money had been available.’ Reflecting upon the scale of the damage to the rest of the building and the destruction of 250,000 books from the British Museum Library, this places a more measured perspective upon the losses from Coins and Medals.

After the war: conclusion

The preceding narrative highlights the difficulties faced by the Department of Coins and Medals over a period lasting twenty years. The mystery surrounding the bomb-damaged coins also demonstrates the extent to which important information can be lost within a relatively short period of time. Fortunately, the surviving evidence suggests that, on the whole, the Department successfully executed a remarkable evacuation of its valuable collection, which bears testament to the dedication and diligence of its staff in the face of challenging conditions.

The tasks of rebuilding and re-housing Coins and Medals were both arduous and disruptive to the Department’s activities and, according to Wilson, ‘an austere greyness settled on the institution.’ Having previously managed to maintain the disparate links between a geographically and logistically fragmented collection, members of museum staff returning from war service were now hampered by post-war austerity measures. The Ministry of Works had made its priorities clear, explaining that ‘little or no labour would be available for Museums until demands for housing had been met, and Museums must therefore be prepared to confine their activities to parts of their premises which would need no serious reconditioning.’ The slow progress of the rebuild frustrated the new Director and successor to Sir John Forsdyke, Sir Thomas Kendrick, who referred to this period as the ‘lean years’. The Department of Coins and Medals moved back to Bloomsbury in late 1946 to temporary accommodation in the Museum’s No. 3 East Residence, where working conditions were far from convenient.

Space was limited, many of the objects remained inaccessible, and provision for students was minimal. During this time, the burned out Department remained little more than a roofless shell, leading Kendrick to remark that he ‘dreaded every shower of rain.’ Finally, after a thirteen-year rebuild, the Department of Coins and Medals reopened to staff and students in November 1959.

REFERENCES

- CMA: The British Museum Department of Coins and Medals Archive.

64 BMOP: Trustees of the British Museum, Standing Committee Report, 12 July 1941.
65 Forsdyke 1952, 7–8. His report, however, still lacks detail and only briefly refers to the episode of the bombing.
66 BMOP: Trustees of the British Museum, Standing Committee Report, 12 July 1941.
68 Wilson 2002, 252. Some staff members from the Department of Coins and Medals, for example, the Assistant Keeper, Derek Allen, stayed on in the civil service and did not return to the Museum after the war.
69 Anon. Special Correspondent 1959a. Kendrick was announcing his resignation as Director. Allan had retired as Keeper of Coins and Medals in 1952 and died three years later, in 1955. See Walker 1956, 351–2.
70 Anon. Special Correspondent 1959b; Walker 1953, 80; Burnett 2011, 6.
71 Anon. Special Correspondent 1959a.
72 Anon. Special Correspondent 1959b. The article proudly announced that the rebuilt Department ‘has its own entrance hall and waiting room, and is air conditioned.’
Allan, J., 1940. ‘Indian Coins’, The British Museum Quarterly 14, no. 4, 98.
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