

## OBITUARIES

### MICHAEL JOHN BONSER (1939–2013)

MIKE Bonser, the Huddersfield-born naturalist and numismatist, died at his home in Wimbish, Essex on 1 March 2013, after a courageous battle against a long illness.

When Mike was aged seven his family moved from Yorkshire to Hebburn on the south bank of the Tyne. Thus, many would have regarded this Yorkshireman as a Geordie. Like many innate collectors, Mike began exchanging and buying coins as a schoolboy. On leaving school, Mike's first, albeit brief, employment was in the Tyne shipyards. A combination of intellectual curiosity and physical practicality remained the hallmark of his character throughout his life.

Mike trained at Durham College, becoming a qualified plantsman, which led to a post at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Jesmond, Newcastle before joining the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at Stockbridge House, carrying out botanical research, despite some degree of colour blindness. In the early 1960s, Mike took an 'indoor job' with Boots the Chemist, who then had a farm and gardens department. He advised veterinarians and farmers, and was transferred from Newcastle to Saffron Walden in 1961. By this time, Mike had married Dorothy, whom he had known since schooldays and from attending the same chapel. Before too long, the urge to return to the outdoor life was too great and a customer recommended the Forestry Commission where, among many other practical skills, Mike learnt to wield a chain saw.

In the spring of 1973 Mike responded to an advertisement placed by Peter Aylett, the proprietor of Graces Fruit Farm, for a horticulturalist. After Mike had commuted for a year (on his much loved James motor-bike), he and Dorothy moved into Graces farmhouse, where a side-line in his cottage garden developed into a farm shop and he acquired new skills such as driving and welding. His children recall his wide-ranging interest in fossils, British flora and fauna, steam engines – he even built his own model engine and learnt to drive a steam train – and all such things that fascinate and educate in childhood and beyond. Between 1979 and 1984, Mike managed the orchard replanting programme of 25,000 trees and the installation of an irrigation system. Peter Aylett paid handsome tribute to Mike at the Service of Thanksgiving held at All Saints' Church, Wimbish, on 7 March 2013: 'He was a truly genuine right-hand man, valued colleague and perfectionist in everything he did.' Mike not only knew the names of all the plants on the farm, welcome or pernicious, but delighted in using the Latin name for each. Typically, he used his chain-saw induced hardness of hearing to 'turn a deaf'n' whenever it suited him.

It was in the early days of metal detecting that Mike developed his knowledge of the history of the farm and satisfied his insatiable curiosity by searching every square inch and researching the finds. By around 1980 it was clear that in the absence of an organized and accessible way of recording the burgeoning number of detector finds invaluable information would be lost. It was Mike who had the energy, enthusiasm and, above all, requisite personal skills to earn the trust of all sides in what threatened to be a fraught battle between unregulated detectorists and a potentially intransigent establishment. In autumn 1983, with the encouragement of Mark Blackburn, newly arrived at his research post at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Mike started publishing articles in the popular detecting magazines, *Treasure Hunting* and subsequently *The Searcher*, describing the significance of finds and seeking information and assistance. He travelled widely to visit detectorists, identify and record their finds and harness their talent. He earned their respect and confidence and, in turn, respected their confidentiality. Many, such as Tony Carter, became close friends. His down-to-earth, candid, practical and personable character, was instrumental in minimizing hostile attitudes on both sides. The resultant articles on 'Single Finds of Anglo-Saxon and Norman coins' appeared in the volumes of *BNJ* for 1984 (32 finds), 1985 (75 finds), and 1986 (139 finds). From 1987, the publication

of finds was formalized as the Coin Register, to which Mike himself contributed more than 2,000 find records.

Just as in his farm work, this new role that Mike had created for himself proved abundantly fruitful. In Michael Metcalf's words: 'in an excellent partnership with Mark Blackburn, he kept to it without deviation over the years. He found the right task for himself, to contribute objectively to scientific progress, and he worked steadily at it ... Mike Bonser was in the forefront of what has since become a major field of interest ... Rich sites promote secretiveness, alas, and without Mike's diplomacy, much that he rescued would have faded from memory.'<sup>1</sup> His bibliography (see below) clearly evinces his credentials as a numismatist. It was Mike's determination and diplomacy, in the face of some menacing characters, that led to the so-called 'Flixborough' productive site being identified in his article on 'Fifteen years of coin finds from productive sites' in 1997 as Sledmere.

As a result of his highly significant contribution to numismatics, Mike was among the winners of the inaugural Jeffrey North Medal in 2008. In his presentation of the award, Mark Blackburn acknowledged Mike's integrity and the enthusiasm which enabled him successfully to bridge the divide between detectorists and academics.<sup>2</sup> This helped ensure that finds from productive sites were disclosed and thus facilitated the establishment of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Mike was always keen to share his knowledge with others. He lectured for the Workers' Educational Association for more than twenty years and gave many talks to numismatic societies and detecting clubs.

At the well-attended Thanksgiving Service Mike's enthusiasm for nature, fossils, steam engines, chain saws and numismatics were recalled. He was a real gentleman, a man of the soil, with strong hands, a weather-beaten face and a boisterous laugh, who rarely spoke an angry word. It was evident to all on first meeting him that he was a warm hearted, open spirited, and clear sighted individual. It was a combination of no-nonsense, hands-on practicality and intellectual curiosity that enabled him to be a 'gatekeeper' between detectorists and academics, respected by all.

Mike was a member of the Cambridgeshire and Yorkshire Numismatic Societies and of the British Numismatic Society for thirty years, including three years on Council (1988–90). His death is a great loss to his family, friends, numismatic colleagues and numismatics in general. He leaves Dorothy, his wife of fifty-two years, his children Paul, Richard and Judith and six grandchildren.

TONY ABRAMSON

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<sup>1</sup> *Pers. comm.*, 1 April 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *BNJ* 79 (2009), 308.

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## RICHARD GEORGE (DICK) DOTY (1942–2013)

Dick Doty passed away on 2 June 2013, after a long illness. Cindi Roden, Dick's fourth wife and his soul mate, called him her 'Silly old Bear'. It is a good name. A very complex man, he showed infinite patience in doing research that he shared with others in the form of talks, books, and historically backed numismatic displays. He was the author of nine numismatic books, a teacher, a lecturer and just a plain good friend, and the world has lost a truly amazing man.

Dick was born in Portland, Oregon, on 11 January 1942. His family was poor but proud. Dick worked in a textile mill with his father in the evenings when he was in high school, and thus some school grades were a struggle. He was aided by a mentor, a teacher, O.P. Marsubian, who became a second father and a lifelong friend. Marsubian pulled a few strings and got Dick a small grant to go to Portland State University where he completed his B.A. degree. From there, Dick went to the University of Southern California, and graduated with a doctorate in Latin American Studies in 1968.

Beginning his professional career as a teacher, there were stops at Central College, Pella, Iowa; York College, City University of New York in 1970–71, and the University of Guam, 1971–73. At each place he served as an Assistant Professor, teaching mostly Latin American, United States and World history. His duties filled his days with lecturing and writing, which served him in good stead later in life.

When Dick was eight he was given his first world coins, which left an impression that lasted until his death. Given the opportunity to use his numismatic expertise, he joined the American Numismatic Society staff in New York, where he served as curator of modern coinage from 1974 to 1986, when he left to join the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC. At the time of his passing, he was the senior curator of the National Money Collection at the Smithsonian. Dick decided that he did not wish for higher positions at the Smithsonian: he was certain he would not be happy with an office, meetings, and a coffee cup. I believe he made the right decision. His work made him happy.

Dick received many awards in his lifetime, including a Fulbright Fellowship to the University of Madrid, Spain, a Mexican Government Fellowship for study in Mexico City, the Del Amo Fellowship for research in Spain, the Millennial Award Medal of the Royal Numismatic Society, a lifetime achievement award from the American Numismatic Association, and (the most recent) the Huntington Award from the American Numismatic Society.

He was the founding President of the International Committee for Money and Banking Museums (ICOMON), and served as the first President of the Conder Token Collector's Club, International. Important indeed as these achievements were, there was much more to honour in the man.

Dick was essentially a man without ego. He never used his education or his position as a benchmark of who he was. Titles, be they his own or someone else's, meant little to him in terms of the measure of a person. A person's education or job was not at all important to him, everyone was seen as his equal. He was a man who had so many friends that one could not

count them, and no enemies at all. He was a very loyal friend as well. Once he accepted someone as a friend, he would never desert them.

Dick fully believed that human relationships could be found in the items he studied and organized as a curator, and he shunned the usual (or traditional, if you will) history that was told in rather dry language by many of his predecessors, and by many museum curators today as well. At his core, he was a story teller. The history came first, followed by the coin or token.

Dick became enchanted by British eighteenth-century Provincial tokens in a roundabout way. Here are his own words, written as part of an introduction for the sale of his collection of those tokens in 2006:<sup>1</sup>

I finally became a serious token collector because of two factors. One was being Welsh. And the other was running into Matthew Boulton.

Bloodwise, I am a mongrel – French, Sephardic, Danish, Dutch, Swedish, Scottish, Irish, possibly Italian and definitely English – and Welsh. I tend to favor the Welsh portion of my inheritance, in part because we're so obscure as a people that no one has managed to create meaningful prejudice against us. When I discovered that Wales (which, until the coming of the Royal Mint some three decades ago, I would have categorized as one of the most numismatically inert spots on earth) had actually struck and circulated its own money in the 1780s and 1790s, had actually shown the way to the rest of the British Isles, I thought it might be worth a closer look.

It was.

Then Matthew Boulton came into the mix. I've always been interested in machinery, coining technology, and the like. When I ran across a British Midlander who'd had the vision to marry a steam engine to a coining press, and who'd performed the rite two hundred years ago – I thought he might be worth a closer look too.

He was.

I found that many of the features he and his Soho Mint would someday introduce on coins had already made their debut – on his tokens. The tokens got me more deeply into the life and work of Matthew Boulton. And Matthew Boulton returned the favor, leading me deeper and deeper into Conder tokens in general, and those of Soho and the other Birmingham coiners in particular. I lived in Brum, off and on, for about a year. And I finally turned what I'd found there into a book.

Dick's award-winning and wonderfully readable book, *The Soho Mint and the Industrialization of Money* (London, 1998), a very important study presented by the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution and the British Numismatic Society (in association with Spink), explained to the world the origin of modern minting and gave credence to tokens as a form of money. Many consider this to be his most important work. Truly, Dick was one of a small and very select band of American numismatists, in company with the likes of Marvin Lessen, Harrington Manville, and Peter Gaspar who have expanded our knowledge of British coinage.

Richard Doty is survived by his wife, Cindi Roden. We are all left with fond memories of a one-of-a-kind numismatist, and a one-of-a-kind friend. He will be greatly missed.

BILL MCKIVOR

<sup>1</sup> The Copper Corner FPL 45, July 2006, 2.