

FLEMISH COINS IN MID- TO LATE FOURTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND AND WALES: DISTRIBUTION, CHRONOLOGY, AND USE

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STUDIES OF THE MONETARY RELATIONSHIPS between England and Flanders in the later middle ages have centred on two well-documented phases of currency interaction bracketed at either side of the fourteenth century: on the one end, the circulation of Low Countries sterlings imitating English pennies in late thirteenth and early fourteenth century England and Wales has been rigorously studied by Mayhew (1983), while at the other end the influx of Flemish imitations of English gold coins in early fifteenth century England and Wales has been the topic of considered discussions by Munro (1972) and Allen (2012, p. 364-366). In contrast to the lengthy paper trails that these twin flashpoints have left in the historical record, documentary evidence pertaining to the presence of non-imitative Flemish money on English and Welsh soil between these dates is markedly thin, and consequently the role played by Flemish coins, if any, in the currency of mid- and late fourteenth century England and Wales remains an opaque aspect of regional monetary history. Coin finds, however, provide a route out of this impasse, and this paper draws attention to a small but coherent corpus of single finds and hoarded coins issued in Flanders by Counts Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346) and Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384) and found in England and Wales since the early twentieth century. While individual examples of these coins have occasionally received passing mention in general discussions of the use of foreign coin in medieval England and Wales, there has hitherto been no attempt to systematically assemble the scattered body of archaeological, historical, and numismatic evidence relating to their chronology, distribution, and likely functions in an English and Welsh currency context; as such, this paper is intended as an initial statement of evidence based on published and previously unpublished historical documents, excavation coin lists, hoard reports, and metal-detector finds.

1. COMPOSITION

A total of 22 Flemish coins of Louis I and Louis II are known from England and Wales, all but one of which are single finds; the majority are recent discoveries uncovered by hobbyist metal-detector users, although specimens have also been recovered during scientific excavations. Though modest in absolute size, the finds corpus is not tremendously smaller than the equivalent data for some other classes of late medieval foreign coins whose roles in domestic currency are explicitly attested by historical documents; just 57 Scottish coins of the mid-fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries, for example, are known as single finds from England and Wales, despite being officially permitted to circulate there from the 1370s onwards (Kelleher 2012, p. 182). These numbers also compare favourably to other late medieval European series attested as English and Welsh coin finds; Kelleher (2012, p. 371), for example, records a total of 26 French coins, 15 Baltic coins, 15 Anglo-Gallic coins, and 11 Portuguese coins among single finds of the period 1351-1544. Figure 1 summarises the composition of finds by issuer and denomination. Gold coins are represented by a single franc and quarter écu, both struck for Louis II. Silver and billon coins, however, are more numerous, and are represented for both issuers. Eight silver gros are recorded, seven of which

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are specimens of the *gros compaignon* coinage struck in a progressively debased form under Louis II during the period 1346-1364; it is likely that the remaining gros also belongs to this issuer. Two examples of the silver quart de gros of Louis I are also present, but are considerably outnumbered among the coinage of Louis I by ten billion mites of the 1330s and 1340s.

Denomination	Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346)	Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384)	Louis I or Louis II (1322-1384)
Franc d'or	0	1	0
Quarter écu	0	1	0
Gros	0	7	1
Quart de gros	2	0	0
Mite	10	0	0
Total	12	9	1

Fig. 1 - Distribution of coin finds by issuer and denomination (n=22)

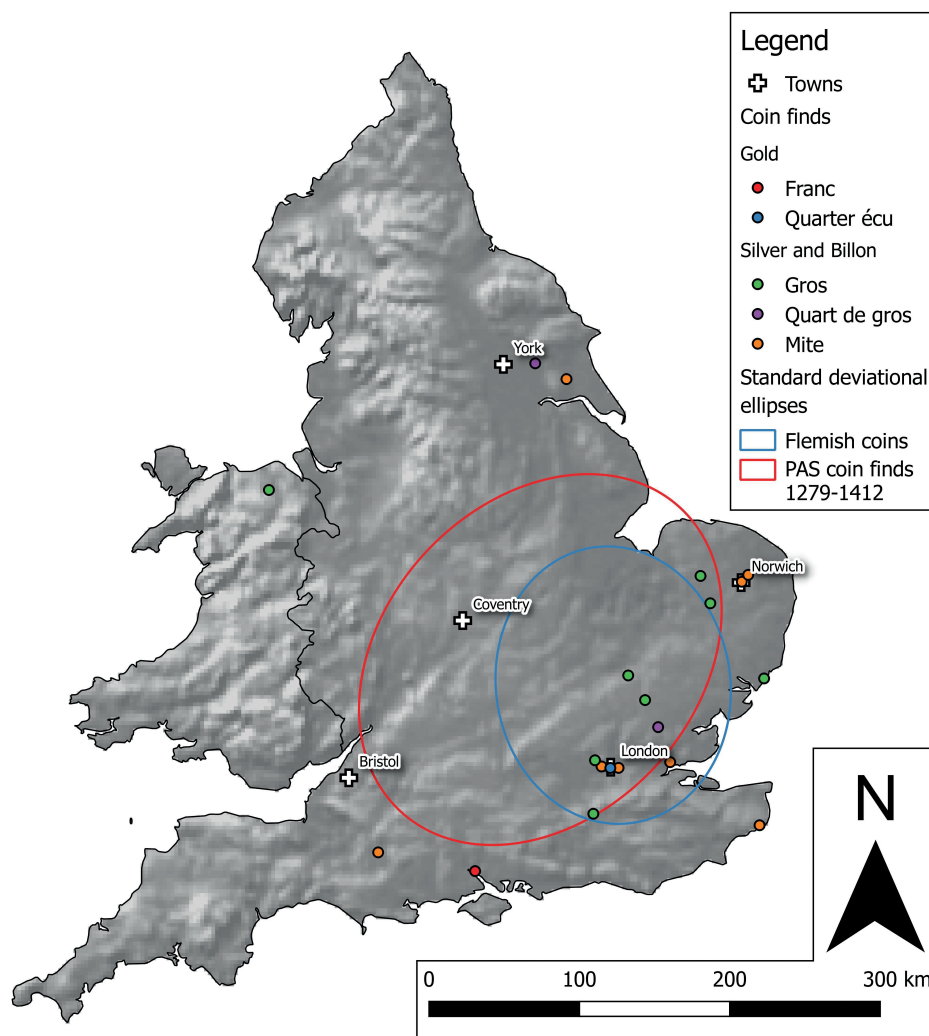


Fig. 2 - Spatial distribution of coin finds (n=22) of Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346) and Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384) in England and Wales

2. DISTRIBUTION

Figure 2 plots the spatial distribution of coins of Louis I and II in England and Wales, immediately revealing a strong eastern bias in the observed finds distribution; that this does not solely relate to biases in the distribution of metal-detecting activity is apparent when the point distribution of Flemish coin finds is transformed into a standard deviational ellipse and compared to an ellipse calculated for 8,119 metal-detected single coin finds from England and Wales dated to 1279-1412.^[1] That Flemish coins should be disproportionately frequent in those areas of England closest to Flanders is hardly surprising, and presumably reflects the role of ports in southeast and eastern England as points-of-entry into local currency; in a related fashion, Cook (1999, p. 255) has previously noted a tendency for finds of fourteenth century *gros tournois* to occur in or near ports in southern England, which he interprets as evidence for the arrival of such coins with the baggage of merchants from France and the Low Countries. While this phenomenon may be echoed in the explicitly coastal distribution of finds from Bawdsey (Suffolk), Dover (Kent), and Southampton (Hampshire), it is nonetheless the case that several specimens occur some distance inland, including examples of *gros* from Betchworth (Surrey), Heydon (Cambridgeshire), and Little Wilbraham (Cambridgeshire), and *mites* from Gillingham (Dorset) and Norwich (Norfolk). These finds suggest that the presence of Flemish coins in eastern and southern England was not a phenomenon restricted to the highly commercialised maritime contexts of ports and their hinterlands, but penetrated deeper into the surrounding networks of small towns and the countryside. The principal outlier to the distribution pattern is afforded by a single *gros* of Louis II recovered from excavations in the postern tower of Denbigh Castle in North Wales; its presence may reflect the peculiar circumstances of the site as a major castle established by Henry de Lacy, 3rd Earl of Lincoln, during the Edwardian conquest of Wales.

3. CHRONOLOGY

Elsen (1995) has outlined the documentary evidence for the production sequence of coins of Louis I and Louis II, which provide foundational *termini post quos* for dating the arrival and circulation of Flemish coins in England and Wales. The earliest dated specimens recorded as finds are four coins of Louis I (cat. nos. 11-12, 14-15) dated by Elsen (1995, p. 60) to the emission of 1331-1334, while the latest securely dated coin is a gold franc (cat. no. 1) of Louis II, dated by Elsen (1995, 115) to the emission of 1361-1364. Were one to assume that these dates directly equate to the period of export and circulation – that is, that coins left Flanders and entered local currency immediately after they were struck – it could be argued that the *floruit* of these coins in England and Wales lay in the period c.1330-1370. This conclusion is, however, challenged by numismatic evidence from the European mainland, which emphasises the longevity of such coins in currency contexts. For instance, finds from France and the Low Countries confirm that *mites* of Louis I continued to circulate in northwest Europe for several decades after their production terminated in the early 1340s; one specimen was present in the post-1354 hoard of twelve coins from Amersfoort (NL), for example (de Jong 1994), and eleven *mites* of Gaillard type 204 – dated by Elsen (1995, p. 76) to the emission of 1337-1338 – constituted the bulk of the Flemish element of the hoard from La Ferté-Imbault (dep. Loir-et-Cher, FR), deposited c.1373-1386 (Dumas 1981, p. 119, nos. 309-317). This impression of extended circulation phases is reinforced by evidence for the production of imitations of Flemish *mites* in the southern Low Countries throughout the period c.1350-1380 (Cardon 2012, p. 214-215). A similar trend is observed for *gros* of Louis II, which appear

^[1] I am grateful to Dr Richard Kelleher (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) for sharing his comparative dataset.

in the hoard record by c.1350 (e.g. Ladeuze I, arr. Ath (BE) hoard, Dengis 2009, p. 56, no. 108; Quimper, dep. Finistère (FR) hoard, Duplessy 1995, p. 119, no. 287) and were an established component of the currency by 1360; gros of Louis II are well represented in Low Countries hoards of the final quarter of the fourteenth century (e.g. Aalbeke, arr. Courtrai (BE) hoard, Ghysens 1987, p. 111-113) and were a persistent element of hoards deposited during the first three decades of the fifteenth century (e.g. Zutphen (NL) hoard, van Gelder 1958, p. 140; Sneek (NL) hoard, van Gelder 1956), although their numbers diminish in French contexts in the years after c.1360.

If these hoards constitute reasonably secure evidence for the temporal composition of the coinage pool at the locations and dates of their assembly, then it is clear that coins of Louis I and Louis II could well have circulated for some time in mainland Europe prior to their eventual arrival in England and Wales; there is, then, no *prima facie* reason to assume that *any* of the coins attested in the finds record need necessarily have left Flanders – or indeed any of the other locations in mainland Europe that they are known to have circulated in – and arrived in England and Wales at the same time as, or shortly after, their date of issue. Indeed, it is quite possible that *all* of the recorded finds entered domestic circulation in the second half of the fourteenth century, during the reign of Louis II or shortly thereafter. Much, therefore, rests on the dating of coin finds of Louis I, and it is fortunate that four of the mites ascribed to this issuer originate in well-recorded archaeological or numismatic contexts. Three of these coins are excavation finds, with associated deposition dates provided by scientific and ceramic dating; two specimens from Norwich occurred in refuse deposits dated by associated pottery to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries (cat. nos. 18-19), while the third specimen occurred within the primary fill of a revetment of the River Thames at Trig Lane (London) dated by dendrochronology and associated pottery to c.1380 (cat. no. 22).

The fourth specimen is known from a recent hoard from the Corringham area (Essex; cat. no. 16), and is of a type dated by Elsen (1995, p. 75-76) to the emission of 1337-1338. The hoard appears to have been concealed in a ceramic jug of late fourteenth or fifteenth century date, and the dating of its latest coins – English coins of the post-Treaty period of Edward III's Fourth Coinage (1369-1377), and Scottish coins of Robert II (1371-1390) – strongly suggests that the hoard was deposited during the 1370s or early 1380s. Critically, analysis of the age-structure of the English element of this hoard demonstrates that the find matches the observed patterns of other English hoards of the period c.1370-1400; in particular, the distribution of English groats by type (fig. 3) mirrors the pattern observed in hoards from Grantham (Lincolnshire; Cook 1996) and Mansfield (Nottinghamshire; Cook 2003), while the distribution of English pennies (fig. 4) similarly resembles the pattern observed in the hoards from Grantham, Canon Pyon (Herefordshire; Stevenson 1999) and Piddletrenthide (Dorset; PAS DOR-018A13). There is, then, no inherent numismatic reason to suggest that the Corringham area hoard represents anything other than a classic 'currency' hoard withdrawn from local circulation in a single instance at some point during the 1370s or early 1380s, a conclusion that reinforces the observed general trend for mites of Louis I to occur in English deposits of the late fourteenth century. A final, albeit significantly more tentative, source of evidence is provided by the find of 111 coins – 109 English gold nobles and their fractions, a Lübeck guilder, and a Flemish mite of Louis I – recovered from the aftercastle of a wrecked Baltic cog near Vejby Strand (DK), a deposit dated on numismatic grounds to the mid- to late 1370s (Bonde & Jensen 1995). Although the widespread use of English gold coin as a trade currency during the second half of the fourteenth century means that this group of coins cannot be automatically assumed to have been directly sourced from English currency, it nonetheless demonstrates the concurrent presence of English coins and Flemish mites on merchant ships traversing the North Sea in the 1370s, approximately the same time as the latter coins occur in archaeological deposits and hoard finds from England itself.

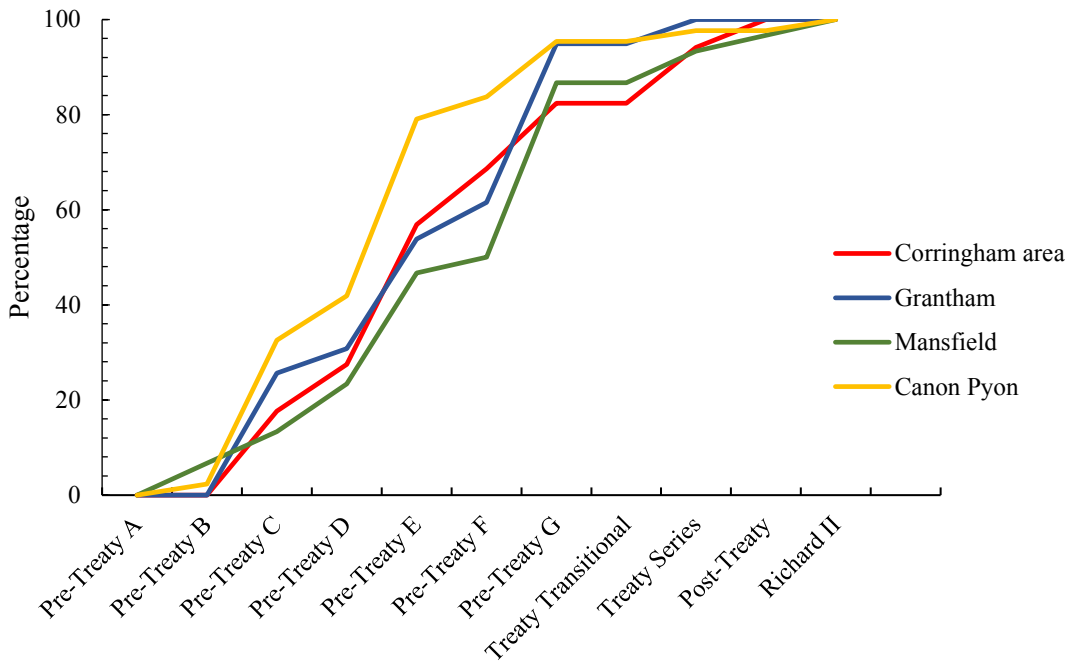


Fig. 3 - Age-structure of the English groat element of the Corringham area (dep. 1370s/early 1380s), Grantham (dep. 1370s), Canon Pyon (dep. 1380-1400) and Mansfield (dep. 1380-1400) hoards

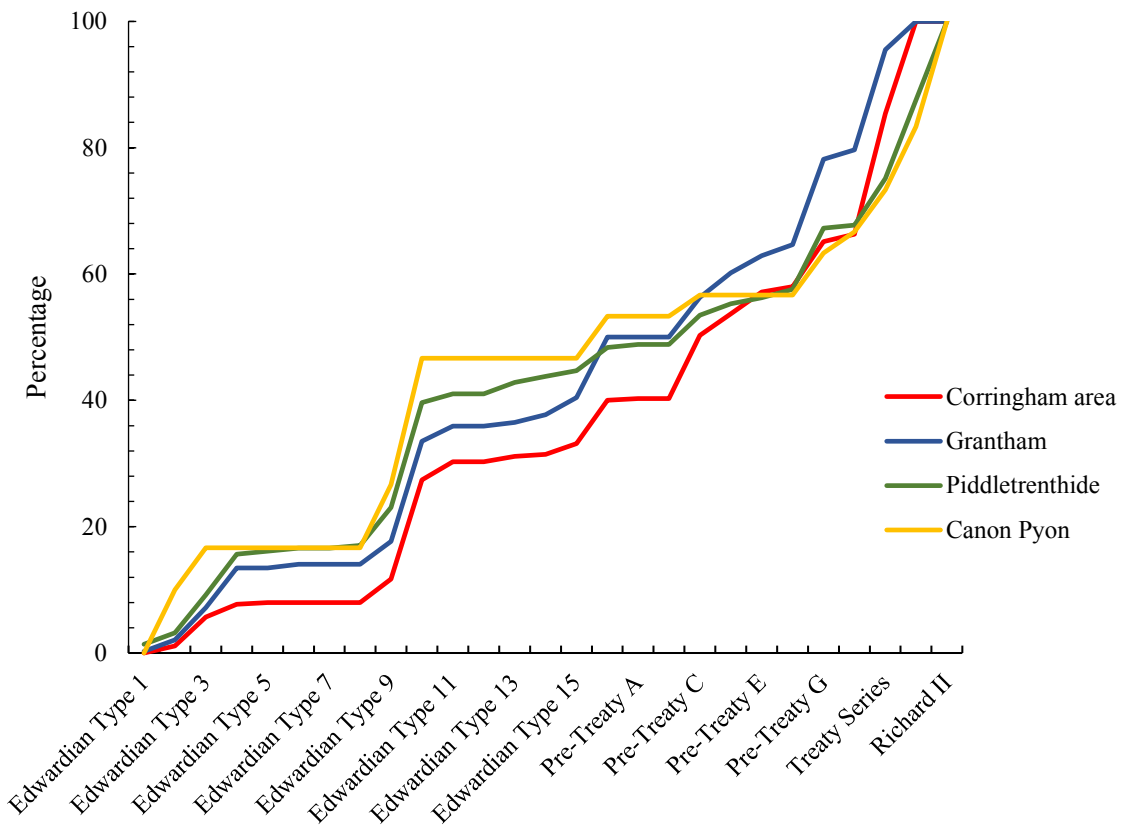


Fig. 4 - Age-structure of the English penny element of the Corringham area (dep. 1370s/early 1380s), Grantham (dep. 1370s), Canon Pyon (dep. 1380-1400) and Piddletrenthide (dep. 1380-1400) hoards

As such, though limited in size and scope, the evidence of English excavation and hoard finds supports the earlier suggestion that Flemish coins of Louis I are unlikely to have arrived in England and Wales until the second half of the fourteenth century, with a particular focus on the 1370s and 1380s as key decades in depositional chronologies. As this is concurrent with the core phase of circulation of the coins of Louis II in continental Europe, there is no clear reason to assume that coin finds of both issuers reflect two separate influxes of Flemish coin; as previously suggested, it is more likely that all of these coins relate to a single period of import and use during the reign of Louis II, or shortly thereafter. As such, allowing for a delay window between the arrival of the coins, their circulation, and their eventual deposition, we might suggest that the English and Welsh finds of Flemish coins result from a single phase of coin import and use broadly dated to c.1350-1390/1400.

If this chronology is accepted, it is possible to cast fresh light on an enigmatic historical note preserved in the Close Rolls for October 1368. This entry records an incident concerning the detention of an Aberdeen merchant, William Jonesson, at Grimsby after his ship was blown off course on a return voyage from Sluys; among the cargo detained from Jonesson's ship were '30 silver groats in coined money called "*Lowysgrotes*"' (Maxwell Lyte 1910, p. 441). The identity of these coins has long been an open question among lexicographers, with the editors of the *Middle English Dictionary* following the lead of Löfvenberg (1946) in attributing them to an unspecified French king Louis, a conclusion open to the obvious criticism that there were no French kings named Louis between the death of Louis X in 1316 and the coronation of Louis XI in 1461. Given that Jonesson was travelling back from the Low Countries when his ship was seized, it is far more likely that the '*Lowysgrotes*' were Flemish gros of Louis I or, more probably, Louis II. It is of no small interest to note that the location of detention fits neatly with the previously observed tendency for Flemish coin finds to concentrate in eastern England; moreover, the date of the record fits neatly within the proposed chronological parameters for the arrival and circulation of Flemish coins in England and Wales derived from the finds evidence.

4. USE

In view of the number of specimens attested and their coherent chronological and spatial distribution patterns, there seems to be a reasonable case for interpreting English and Welsh coin finds of Louis I and Louis II as a genuine reflection of a neglected minor role played by Flemish coins as an accepted component of local currency pools in the second half of the fourteenth century, in spite of continued efforts to exclude foreign coin from circulation at this date (Allen 2012, p. 363-366). Quite what roles Flemish coins performed in this context, however, are unclear. Dealing first with the gold coins, it is surely relevant to note the body of documentary evidence assembled by Cook (1999, p. 257-260) for the use of continental gold coins – principally florins and *écus* – in English mercantile contexts during the fourteenth century. While this phenomenon appears to have reduced in scale after the successful introduction of a domestic gold coinage in the period 1344-1351, there are nonetheless documented examples of continental gold circulating after these dates; of particular interest are two instances of London merchants settling debts in 1357 and 1358 with gold *écus* of Louis II (Cook 1999, p. 259), and to this body of evidence we might further note a reference from March 1362 recording payments by merchants in London made in '*florins of the coinage of France, Flanders, and Almain*' (Maxwell Lyte 1923, p. 216). It seems eminently plausible to suggest that the few English finds of Flemish gold coins of this period reflect a persistent, albeit low level, use of continental gold in international trade, a conclusion supported by the exclusive presence of such coins at major cities and ports like London and Southampton.

A more significant puzzle is posed by the silver and billon coins, much of which would have constituted the sort of 'black money' whose circulation was proscribed by official statute (Raithby 1810, p. 273-4). An important hint as to their likely function is provided by the proposed dating of coin finds to the period c.1350-1390/1400. The late fourteenth century money economy of England and Wales is often characterised as starved of silver, and recent estimates by Allen (2012, p. 344) suggest that by 1377 the volume of silver coin in circulation had contracted to roughly 15 % to 40 % of its size in 1331. The relative scarcity of silver coins in domestic circulation during this period is reflected in numerous late fourteenth and early fifteenth century parliamentary complaints bemoaning its negative effects on everyday commerce, and there appears to have been a popular uptake in the domestic circulation of foreign coins – principally Scottish coins in the late fourteenth century, followed by an incursion of Venetian coins in the early fifteenth century - in response to the deficiencies of English currency (Allen 2012, p. 360-364; Kelleher 2012, p. 179-183). As Spufford (2014, p. 129-130) has noted, it was commonly the case in medieval Europe that foreign coins circulated in recipient countries where domestic demand for particular denominations exceeded the volume of domestic equivalents in local circulation, and in view of the character of the finds evidence it is not imprudent to suggest that Flemish silver and billon coins, like their Scottish or Venetian counterparts, probably passed in everyday currency as equivalent to English coins of broadly similar weight and size. As such, it is likely that the gros and quarts de gros of Louis I and Louis II were respectively accepted, if somewhat begrudgingly, as lightweight groats and pennies. Identifying a plausible equivalent for Flemish mites is more difficult, as their flan sizes and weights occupy a position somewhere between English pennies and halfpennies; in view of their considerably debased character, it is more likely that these coins circulated as equivalent to halfpennies, much like the Venetian *soldini* observed in the early fifteenth century, or possibly even as farthings.

5. CONCLUSION

Coin finds, in conjunction with a much smaller body of documentary evidence, provide a modest yet nonetheless consistent body of material evidence for the presence of Flemish coins in England and Wales during the period c.1350-1390/1400, where they are likely to have circulated in two discrete contexts: gold coins may have found limited use as a medium of payment for merchants engaged in large-scale interregional and international trade, while silver and billon coins are likely to have circulated as debased or lightweight versions of English silver groats, pennies, and halfpennies or farthings in the context of a well-documented shortage of silver coinage in domestic circulation. These general conclusions, however, are subject to certain caveats; distributional evidence suggests that their circulation was almost exclusively restricted to the regional coinage pools of eastern and southeast England, and the limited volume of surviving evidence presumably suggests that such coins were never more than a minor contributor to the circulating currency in these regions during the second half of the fourteenth century. The continued growth of hobbyist metal-detecting in particular, however, means that these tentative conclusions are liable to change as new finds are uncovered; a single hoard find akin to the 150lbs of '*black money found under ground*' in Hampshire in January 1378 (Maxwell Lyte 1914, p. 44) would certainly revolutionise our understanding of the role played by debased Low Countries coinage in the currency of England and Wales in the later fourteenth century.

6. CATALOGUE

6.1. GOLD COINS

1. Franc d'or, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Gaillard 212-3 (1361-1364), mint Ghent or Malines.
Single find, circumstances of discovery unknown. Found at Southampton.
Reference: Cook 1999, 274, no. 180.
2. Quarter écu, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Gaillard 209 (1352-1353), mint Bruges.
Single find, metal-detected in excavation spoil. Found at the Vintry, London.
Reference: Kelleher and Leins 2007, 230, no. 1174.

6.2. SILVER AND BILLON COINS

3. Gros, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346) or Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Uncertain type and mint.
Single find, metal-detected. Found at Bradenham, Norfolk.
Reference: Besly and Holmes 1994, 162, no. 348.
4. Gros, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Uncertain type and mint.
Single find, 'dug up' in a garden. Found at St Johns Wood, Westminster.
Reference: Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, 15 February 1939, 8.
5. Gros, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Gaillard 219 (1346-1364), mint Ghent, Bruges, or Malines.
Single find, metal-detected. Found at Snetterton, Norfolk.
Reference: PAS NMS-B35A52.
6. Gros, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Uncertain type and mint.
Single find, metal-detected. Found at Bawdsey, Suffolk.
Reference: PAS SF-E6D404.
7. Gros, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Gaillard 219 (1346-1364), mint Ghent, Bruges, or Malines.
Single find, metal-detected. Found at Heydon, Cambridgeshire.
Reference: PAS BH-CA3DE2.
8. Gros, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Gaillard 219 (1346-1364), mint Ghent, Bruges, or Malines.
Single find, metal-detected. Found at Betchworth, Surrey.
Reference: PAS SUR-601648.
9. Gros, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Gaillard 219 (1346-1364), mint Ghent, Bruges, or Malines.
Single find, excavated in the postern tower of an Edwardian castle; stratigraphic context unknown. Found at Denbigh Castle, Denbighshire.
Reference: S. Rigold papers, British Museum, previously unpublished.
10. Gros, Louis II de Mâle (1346-1384). Gaillard 219var (no pellet on L) (1346-1364), mint Ghent, Bruges, or Malines.
Single find, metal-detected. Found at Little Wilbraham, Cambridgeshire.
Reference: PAS SF-58E2E2.
11. Quart de gros, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Gaillard 195 (1331-1334), mint Alost, or Gaillard 189 (1334-1337), mint Ghent.
Single find, metal-detected. Found at Roxwell, Essex.
Reference: PAS ESS-4A7C17.

12. Quart de gros, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Gaillard 195-6 (1331-1334), mint Alost. Single find, metal-detected. Found at Kilnwick Percy, East Riding of Yorkshire. Reference: Allen, de Jersey, and Moorhead 2007, 340, no. 411.
13. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Gaillard 191 (1343-1346), mint Ghent. Single find, metal-detected in excavation spoil. Found at the Vintry, London. Reference: Kelleher and Leins 2007, 230, no. 1173.
14. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Gaillard 197 (1331-1334), mint Alost. Single find, metal-detected. Found at Gillingham, Dorset. Reference: PAS DOR-E85F59.
15. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Gaillard 197 (1331-1334), mint Alost. Single find, metal-detected. Found on the Thames Foreshore at Billingsgate, London. Reference: PAS LON-F6709A
16. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Gaillard 203 (1337-1338), mint unknown. Hoard coin; sole Flemish specimen in a hoard of 5 AV and 513 AR coins, primarily English. Latest English coin dated 1369-1377; latest foreign coin (Scottish penny of Robert II) dated 1371-1390. Deposited in a jug, ceramic date late fourteenth century to fifteenth century. Found near Corringham, Essex. Reference: PAS ESS-AB0B30.
17. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Gaillard 203(?) (1337-1338), mint unknown. Single find, metal-detected in excavation spoil. Found at the Vintry, London. Reference: Kelleher and Leins 2007, 230, no. 1172.
18. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Uncertain type and mint. Single find, excavated in a castle site; stratigraphic context ceramic dated to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. Found at Norwich Castle, Norfolk. Reference: Davies 2009, 710.
19. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Uncertain type and mint. Single find, excavated in a medieval town; stratigraphic context ceramic dated to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. Found at Norwich, Norfolk. Reference: Margeson 1993, 207.
20. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Uncertain type and mint. Single find, circumstances of discovery unknown. Found at St Mary's Cemetery, Dover, Kent. Reference: Archibald 2005, 77.
21. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Uncertain type and mint. Counterfeit; pierced. Single find, probably metal-detected. Found in East Yorkshire. Reference: Cook 1999, 275, no. 208.
22. Mite, Louis I de Crécy (1322-1346). Uncertain type and mint. Single find, excavated in a primary refuse dump within a Thames revetment; stratigraphic context dated by ceramic and dendrochronology to c.1380. Found at Trig Lane, London. Reference: Rigold 1982, 102, no. 54.

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