

A NINETEENTH-CENTURY FIND OF A ‘GREAT DEBASEMENT’ COIN HOARD FROM CIRENCESTER

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Introduction

During the nineteenth century local newspapers regularly carried notices of archaeological discoveries, many of which were overlooked by antiquarian surveyors and are consequently unknown to modern scholarship. This note discusses one such ‘forgotten find’ recorded in a nineteenth-century Gloucestershire newspaper: a hoard of early Tudor silver coins found in Cirencester in 1858, and reported in the *Cirencester Times and Cotswold Advertiser* (21 June 1858, 1).

The newspaper report of this find reads as follows: ‘TREASURE TROVE. – On Monday evening, a man named Lapper, in the employ of Mr. Thomas Bridges, builder, was hosing some potatoes in his master’s garden, near the gas-works, when he turned up a heap of silver coins, chiefly half-crowns and shillings of the reign of Henry VIII, to the number of sixty-seven. The coins are in good preservation. What makes the discovery singular, is that the same man dug the ground and planted the potatoes, without finding any sign of them. The coins remain in Lapper’s possession.’

The finder, ‘a man named Lapper’, is almost certainly identified as Frederick Lapper (1817-1899), an agricultural labourer resident in Gloucester Street, Cirencester, at the time of the 1851 census; his employer, Thomas Bridges Snr. (1804-1858), was a building contractor of some note, and had directed works on the Royal Agricultural College, the Temperance Hall, the New Church at Watermoor, and, at the time of his death, the new Cirencester Police Station on the corner of Castle Street and Park Lane (*Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard*, 14 August 1858, 8). The precise whereabouts of Bridges’ garden is uncertain, but the nearby gas works are clearly shown on the Ordnance Survey 1st edition County Series 1:2500 map of 1875 as being situated a short distance south of Watermoor beyond the town walls on the north bank of the Thames & Severn Canal (NGR SP029009). The subsequent fate of the coins is unknown, but it seems likely that Lapper – a poor man who frequently found himself on the wrong side of the law (*Gloucestershire Chronicle*, 30 October 1858, 8) – would have sold them on to a jeweller, goldsmith, or collector; in any case, no surviving examples from the hoard are known today.

Discussion

Despite its brevity, the newspaper report provides reasonably good information concerning the contents of this hoard. Since Henry VIII’s silver coins bear regnal ordinals and, on second (1526-44) and third (1544-47) coinage issues, naturalistic Renaissance portraiture (Stewartby 2009, 450-66), the attribution of the coins to this issuer is reasonably secure, although it is possible that some of the ‘Henry’ coins were in fact posthumous issues struck in 1547-51 during the early years of Edward VI’s reign (*ibid.*, 481). The identification of their denominations as ‘half-crowns and shillings’ is clearly mistaken, since neither denomination was struck in silver during this period; however, if this line is taken as an anachronism, alluding instead to Henrician coins of comparable size to Victorian halfcrowns (diameter 32mm) and shillings (diameter 24mm), then the description becomes perfectly comprehensible as referring to a group of testoons (an English shilling, diameter 31-32mm) and groats (diameter 24-26mm), both denominations having been issued in silver and debased silver under Henry VIII. Some uncertainty, however, must surround the use of the word ‘chiefly’, which could suggest that the testoons and groats were either accompanied by silver coins of other denominations – for example, halfgroats or pence – or alternatively of different issuers – for example, earlier groats of Henry VII, or perhaps even Irish ‘Harp’ groats or Burgundian double patards, all of which are known from hoards and documentary sources to have circulated in England during the reign of Henry VIII (Challis 1978, 214-226; Allen 2005, 54).

The apparent presence of testoons in the Cirencester hoard provides a significant clue towards its date of deposition. Valued at 12*d*, testoons were introduced to the English coinage in 1544 during the Tudor ‘Great Debasement’ (1544-51), and were demonetised less than half a decade later in January 1549 (Challis 1978, 97); their incidence in this hoard, coupled with the apparent absence of silver coins in the name of Edward VI, therefore suggests a burial date in the mid-to late 1540s for the deposit as a whole. This conclusion is supported by the close compositional parallels between the Cirencester hoard and other hoards of ‘Great Debasement’ silver: these include a hoard of 35 testoons, groats, and halfgroats in the names of Henry VIII and Edward VI

found at Nynehead (Somerset) in 1815 and buried c.1549 (*Hereford Journal*, 22 November 1815, 4; Symons 1990, 83, no. 3), and a hoard of 21 silver groats, pence, and a testoon of Henry VIII found at Rugeley (Staffordshire) in 2015 and buried in the mid- to late 1540s (Andrews and Ghey 2019, 261, no. 196). Hoards buried during the 'Great Debasement' are relatively uncommon (Symons 1990, 82), and consequently the Cirencester hoard provides an important contribution to the national numismatic corpus. Moreover, it has an additional local significance as one of only three early Tudor hoards from the entirety of Gloucestershire, joining a hoard of three silver coins buried at Wanswell in the early 1520s (Allen 2012, 513, no. 542), and a hoard of 37 debased silver coins buried in the Forest of Dean in the late 1540s (Symons 1990, 80-82).

Conclusion

Without further information a precise statement of the hoard's contemporary face value is impossible, but a group of 67 testoons and groats would certainly have fit within the range of £1 3s. 0d. to £3 6s. 4d., equivalent to one to three months' pay for a skilled worker in the late 1540s (Rappaport 1989, 405), or 50 to 145 lbs of wool at 1540s prices (Clark 2004, 82-83). A modest sum of money like this would have been within reach for many Cotswold yeomen farmers, like those who supplied the Moreton-in-Marsh wool merchant John Heritage a generation earlier (Dyer 2012, 120-31), or for a middling urban innkeeper or businessman based in Cirencester itself. The circumstances that led someone of this stature to bury their coins just beyond the town wall and never recover them are ultimately unknowable, but need not have a catastrophic explanation; the hoard could well represent a stash of personal savings, or the proceeds of a good day at market, hidden away for safekeeping,

their whereabouts having simply been forgotten by their owner.

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