

A STRAY ELIZABETHAN GOLD COIN FROM THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MADELEY COURT COIN HOARD

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In December 1839 a large hoard of 16th- and 17th-century gold coins was found by a ploughman working in a field immediately southwest of the 16th-century manor house of Madeley Court. No surviving specimens from this hoard are known, and such records of its composition as exist are frustratingly terse: a contemporary newspaper report describes a parcel of *c.*50 coins from the hoard as having consisted entirely of gold coins of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and James I (1603–25) (Lewis 2006, 75), while a slightly later account by the Madeley historian John Randall (1880, 14–15) summarises the find as ‘a large number of gold coins, chiefly of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, and of the modern value altogether of between three and four hundred pounds’. At 1870–80s bullion prices this would suggest a hoard weighing upwards of 2kg, representing anywhere from *c.*500 to *c.*1500 Elizabethan and Jacobean gold coins.

Fresh insights into the 1839 hoard, however, may be provided by a previously unnoticed newspaper report concerning the discovery of a gold coin in a field near Madeley Court in 1870. An account of this later find, published in *Eddowes’s Shrewsbury Journal* (2 November 1870, 7), reads as follows:

DISCOVERY OF AN ELIZABETHAN GOLD COIN. – On Saturday last a young man found a gold coin of the reign of Elizabeth in a field near the Court House, an old Elizabethan structure, where a jar full of similar coins were found some time since. The coin, which is in an excellent state of preservation, has a very good profile of Elizabeth, with the inscription, “REG. ELIZABETH, D.G. ANG. FR. ET. HL.” and on the reverse side the Royal arms, with the following, “SCVT. VM. FIDEI. PROTE. GET. EAM.”.

Details provided in this account leave no doubt that the gold coin found near Madeley Court in 1870 was indeed Elizabethan, and the description of the design,

enhanced by the reproduction of obverse and reverse legends, provides important clues as to its numismatic identification. The reverse legend ‘SCVTVM FIDEI PROTEGET EAM’ (‘The shield of faith shall protect her’), circumscribing a crowned shield bearing the royal arms, appears on four separate denominations struck at the Tower mint during the reign of Elizabeth I: the pound (struck during the Third Issue (1593–1603) only), half pound, crown, and halfcrown (all struck during the First (1558–72) and Third Issues only). Of these four options, a small flan denomination is implied by the heavy use of titular contractions on the obverse (‘D G ANG FR ET HI REG’), narrowing the field to either a half pound or halfcrown instead of a whole pound or crown (cf. Woodhead 1996, pls 67–76). The complete rendering of the royal name provides an important chronological indicator, since this form was eschewed on Third Issue half pounds and halfcrowns in favour of the abbreviated form ‘ELIZAB’ (Brown and Comber 1989); indeed, as far as can be determined the closest parallels for the Madeley Court coin are a First Issue half pound with the obverse legend ‘ELIZABETH D G ANG FRA Z HIB REG’, now in the British Museum collection, and a First Issue halfcrown with the obverse legend ‘ELIZBETH D G ANG FRA ET HIB RE’, now in the private collection of C. H. Comber (Brown and Comber 1989, 111, G4; *ibid.*, 116, J2). On the balance of probability, therefore, it seems highly likely that the Madeley coin was either a half pound or halfcrown of Elizabeth I’s First Issue, and hence struck in the period 1558–72, although it is presently impossible to favour either one of the two denominations over the other.

The observation that this coin was found ‘in a field near the Court House...where a jar full of similar coins were found some time since’ provides an explicit spatial connection between the 1870 half pound or halfcrown and the 1839 hoard, and constitutes strong circumstantial evidence for interpreting the former as a ‘stray’ coin from the latter, perhaps having been disaggregated from the rest of the hoard as a result of

historic plough action or disturbance by burrowing animals. This phenomenon is well attested in British hoard contexts (Andrews 2019, 16–17), and seems considerably more likely than the alternative interpretation of an unrelated casual loss incurred on the same field; indeed, ‘single finds’ of casually-lost Elizabethan gold coins are exceptionally rare, with just 15 examples having been recorded across the entirety of England and Wales by the Portable Antiquities Scheme to December 2019. If the ‘stray’ interpretation is accepted, the 1870 half pound or halfcrown assumes a great deal of significance as the sole coin from this hoard to have been documented in any level of detail. It is reassuring, therefore, to find that the coin poses no substantive challenge to those compositional descriptions of the hoard outlined in other sources: a First Issue half pound or halfcrown would certainly not look out of place in a hoard dominated by Elizabethan gold, and evidently would not extend the *terminus post quem* of the deposit beyond the reign of James I.

Recent research into the 17th-century history of Madeley has drawn attention to episodic disturbances caused by the events of the English Civil War (1642–51), which have been used in turn to interpret the Madeley Court hoard as a sum of money hidden for temporary safekeeping at a time of military and political unrest (Phillpotts 2006, 56). This interpretation, however, is precluded by numismatic evidence from both the Madeley Court hoard and other English and Welsh coin hoards of the early to mid-17th century. While the latest coins in the Madeley Court hoard were issued for James I, Randall’s account of the find suggests that most were struck in the reign of Elizabeth I, a point at least partly corroborated by the early Elizabethan half pound or halfcrown found in 1870. This composition is entirely consistent with a sum of money removed from circulation in the first decade of the 17th century, before a dramatic expansion in the scale of gold coin output at the Tower mint from 1608 began to significantly alter the relative shares of Elizabethan and Jacobean gold coins in domestic currency (Challis 1992, 313). The effects of these shifts in production are confirmed by the contents of a hoard of 59 gold coins buried after 1619 at Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire, which consisted exclusively of Jacobean issues struck no more than 15 years before its terminal coin (Kelleher and Cook 2008, 424). Given these developments, gold coins predating the reign of James I are predictably rare in Civil War coin hoards. For example, just two pre-Jacobean coins, both half sovereigns of Edward VI (1547–53), were present among the 41 gold coins buried c.1642–44 at Pembroke College, Cambridge (Allen 1999, 225), and none at all were present in the hoards from Catford, Kent (110 gold coins; Besly and Briggs 2013, 184, no. F6) and Lewisham, Kent (420+ gold coins; Besly and Briggs 2013, 186–87, no. H13). These latter hoards were both buried in 1644–45, a

particularly tumultuous period in which the Royalist owner of Madeley Court, Sir Basil Brooke (d.1646), was imprisoned in the Tower of London, and the town was occupied by successive garrisons of Royalist and Parliamentary troops (Phillpotts 2006, 56). It therefore seems most improbable that the deposition of the Madeley Court hoard might relate to the upheavals of the English Civil War, but instead is rather more likely to relate to events occurring two generations earlier. Quite what circumstances induced an individual in the early 1600s – perhaps Basil Brooke himself, in view of the high monetary value of the hoard and its proximity to the family seat – to bury their gold coins in a Shropshire field and never recover them is unclear, but there is no reason to favour a catastrophic explanation over simple misfortune and forgetfulness.

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