

## Three Elizabethan Coin Hoards from the West Midlands

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Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers are a surprisingly rich source of archaeological data, and often contain records of otherwise-unknown discoveries made before the development of modern excavation techniques. Building on research previously published in *West Midlands Archaeology* (Andrews 2017), this article examines three such 'forgotten finds' of Elizabethan coin hoards from the West Midlands known only from newsprint sources, and places them in the wider context of coin hoarding in the Tudor West Midlands.

### 1. Warwick St Nicholas, Warwickshire, 1753: 63 silver coins, tpq 1561

On 28 January 1753 a hoard of silver coins was found at in St Nicholas' churchyard, Warwick. The sole account of the discovery, published in the *Derby Mercury* (2 February 1753, 4), reads as follows:

*'On Sunday last was sev'night, as the Grave-digger of St. Nicholas's Parish in Warwick, was digging a Grave in the Church-Yard, he threw out a Skull, out of which he took 63 small Pieces of Silver, of Queen Elizabeth's Coin, worth about four Pence each, some of which he sold for a Shilling a-piece.'*

There is no reason to doubt the attribution of these '63 small Pieces of Silver' to the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), whose distinctive silver coins employ personalised Latin legends, high-quality naturalistic portraiture, identifiable privy marks, and, on certain denominations, numerical dates (Brown, Comber, and Wilkinson 2019). With this in mind, the observation that most of the coins were 'worth about four Pence each' suggests that the hoard was dominated by Elizabethan threepences, whose average diameter of c.19mm is perfect match for the contemporary Georgian fourpenny piece. However, the reference to other coins 'sold for Shilling a-piece' must also indicate the presence of a small number of larger silver coins, for which the Elizabethan sixpence (diameter c.24-26mm) is the most likely candidate as congruent with the Georgian shilling (diameter c.25mm). The presence of sixpences and threepences sets a tpq for the hoard during or after the introduction of Elizabeth I's Third Coinage (1561-1571), and suggests a contemporary face value of 16s. 0d.+, equivalent to more than a fortnight's wages for a skilled labourer in the 1560s (Rappaport 1989, 405-406).

The hoard's findspot evidently lay within the bounds of the churchyard at Warwick St Nicholas (Warwickshire HER MWA1944; NGR SP 286 649), a possible pre-Conquest foundation first recorded in 1123 but totally rebuilt in 1779-80 (Bloxam 1847, 85-92). Its exact location within the c.7650m<sup>2</sup> churchyard is uncertain, but presumably lay to the east of the chancel or south of the nave aisle, a large stretch of burial ground with numerous extant nineteenth-century gravestones. The discovery of an Elizabethan coin hoard within an English churchyard is somewhat unusual, but is not without parallel: similar examples are known from Bolton-le-Sands in Lancashire (tpq 1566+; White 1984), Combe Longa in Oxfordshire (tpq 1558+; Lewis 1840, 604), and St John in Bedwardine in Worcestershire (tpq 1561+; Andrews 2022), and probably represent the tail-end of a relatively widespread phenomenon of churchyard deposition known from the medieval period (Andrews 2019a, 192-195). The observation that the coins were found alongside a skull might reflect the hoard's interment within a burial assemblage, perhaps as part of a purse slung around the shoulder of the deceased, but could equally represent unrelated human remains coincidentally dug out of a crowded post-medieval churchyard



## 2. Lichfield, Staffordshire, 1775: uncertain number of silver coins, tpq 1601

In March 1775 a hoard of silver coins was found at Lichfield. The Reading Mercury (27 March 1775, 1) carried a notice of the find, which reads as follows:

*'A few days ago as some workmen were pulling down the Chorister's old school at Litchfield, which has not been made use of for many years, they discovered an earthen pot, wherein was a great number of Queen Elizabeth's crown and half-crown pieces, shillings, &c.'*

The identification of the coins as 'a great number of Queen Elizabeth's crown and half-crown pieces, shillings, &c' is largely accurate: Georgian crowns (diameter c.38mm) and halfcrowns (diameter c.34mm) were roughly the same size as their Elizabethan forebears (diameter c.39mm and c.35mm), although the shillings are more likely to be misattributed sixpence than Elizabethan shillings (diameter c.30-32mm; see above). In this case, the hoard's tpq is set by the introduction of the crown and halfcrown in Elizabeth I's Seventh Coinage (1601-1603). While a contemporary face value cannot be calculated, a hoard consisting of a 'great number' of Elizabethan crowns (5s. 0d.), halfcrowns (2s. 6d.), and sixpences (6d.) can hardly have been insubstantial, and was probably equivalent to several month's earnings for a skilled labourer.

Built in c.1527 under the episcopacy of Bishop Blythe (1503-1530), the 'Chorister's old school' is a partially extant Tudor building in the north-west corner of Lichfield Cathedral Close (Staffordshire HER 07497; NGR SK 1145 0977). Originally consisting of a freestone common hall and gatehouse flanked by east and west cross-wings, the building was subject to several phases of alteration in the Georgian era, which included the demolition of the gatehouse, re-fronting of the common hall, and extension of the east wing by its lessee, John Daniel, in 1772-1800 (Jackson 1805, 204-205). Daniel's works are evidently those that occasioned the discovery of the hoard, which was probably found on the south side of the property near the former gatehouse. Since the building is known to have been leased to private tenants during the 1580s-1620s (Greenslade et al 1990, 57-67), the hoard is probably more closely related to the world of secular commerce than the wealth of Lichfield's post-Reformation canons. The use of an 'earthen pot' as a hoard container is of no small interest, and finds a local parallel in the hoard of 48 silver coins found in a ceramic jug at Kingsley in Staffordshire (tpq 1573+; Allen 1949) as well as the more distant hoard of 40 silver coins found in a glazed ceramic tyg at Bridge Trafford in Cheshire (tpq 1594+; Dolley and Webster 1952). Similar forms of concealment are well-attested in the late medieval and early Tudor periods, and demonstrate the continued potential of repurposed domestic table and kitchenware as tools for the short-term storage of coins and other valuables in the early modern era (Andrews 2020, 318-320).

## 3. Aston Botterell, Shropshire, 1872: 300 silver coins, tpq 1602

In May 1872 a hoard of silver coins was found at Aston Botterell. The discovery was reported in the Shrewsbury Chronicle (17 May 1872, 8) in the following manner:

*'TREASURE TROVE DISCOVERED THROUGH A MAGPIE. – A most extraordinary circumstance has occurred at Aston Botterell, near Bridgnorth, in the discovery of three hundred silver coins. It appears that a tame magpie belonging to one of the villagers, named Bryan, has been in the habit of visiting the ruins of an old cottage, and bringing therefrom various silver coins, which the bird placed on potato mounds and stones. This attracted the attention of a boy, who watched the very frequent visits of the magpie to the ruins, and went and began to look about, when in the wall he saw a portion of an old bag, and on lifting up a window sill near found a large quantity of silver coins of the reigns of Henry 8th, Edward 6th, Mary, and Elizabeth. They are half-crowns, shillings, and sixpences; dates from 1524 to 1602. The wall formed part of an old building in the occupation of Mr J. Lawley, of the Fox Inn, Aston*



Botterell.'

This description of a hoard of silver halfcrowns, shillings, and sixpences of Henry VIII (1509-1547), Edward VI (1547-1553), Mary I (1553-1558) and Elizabeth I is entirely plausible, with the proviso that the pre-Elizabethan 'sixpences' must instead have included some misidentified groats (Stewartby 2009; North 2018, 106-129). The tpq of 1602 is presumably set by datemarks on the reverses of the sixpences (**Figure 1**), and would suggest a date of deposition in the final years of Elizabeth I or at the very beginning of the Stuart era. Since most early Tudor silver coins had been swept out of circulation by the Great Debasement of 1544-1551 and Recoinage of 1560-1561 (Challis 1978, 223-231), the presence of so many pre-Elizabethan coins in such a late hoard is a little unusual. However, it is not unprecedented for a find from a rural location: groats of Henry VIII's First (1509-1526) and Second Coinages (1526-1544), for example, are known from the Elizabethan hoards from Houghton in Cambridgeshire (tpq 1579+; Keary 1877) and Penybont in Powys (tpq 1595+; Andrews and Ghey 2020, no. 181), while fine silver shillings and groats of Edward VI and Mary I were also present in the Houghton hoard as well as another find from Whaplode in Lincolnshire (tpq 1569+; Grueber 1891). While it is possible, therefore, that the presence of older silver in the hoard reflects a more-or-less prolonged process of accumulation, perhaps involving years or decades of personal savings, it might equally reflect differences in speed with which freshly minted coin flowed into the towns and countryside of Tudor England. With these details in mind, the newspaper description nevertheless implies a hoard worth at least £7 15s. 8d. in 1602, equating with more than three month's wages for a skilled labourer in the early seventeenth century (Rappaport 1989, 407).

The observation that the coins had been placed within 'an old bag' and concealed beneath a windowsill in 'the ruins of an old cottage' is of considerable archaeological interest, and invites comparison with a hoard of fifteenth-century silver coins hidden in a textile wrap and



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**Figure 1:** Silver sixpence of Elizabeth I dated 1602



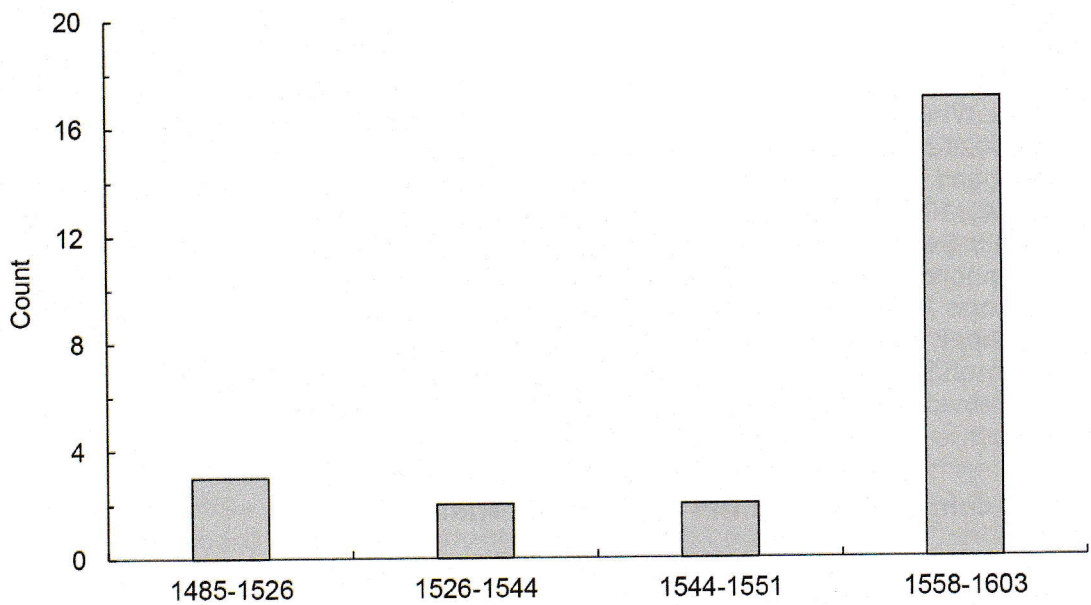
placed in the frame of a medieval shop window at Shoemaker's Row in Chester (Andrews 2019b, 146). This depositional configuration might reflect attempts to mitigate against the risk of theft when storing cash in accessible domestic spaces, an inexpensive alternative to the dedicated strongrooms and treasuries found in contemporary gentry houses (Andrews 2019a, 192). While the exact location of the ruined cottage is left unstated, it is likely to have lain opposite the Fox Inn on the north side of Aston Lane (NGR SO 6319 8424), the site of a 'Cottage and Garden' shown on the 1838 Aston Botterell tithe map (Kew, The National Archives (TNA), IR 30/29/22) that had been demolished by the time of the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 County Series map of 1883-4. This identification is supported by evidence from the 1838 tithe apportionment, which notes that both this cottage and the Fox Inn were then occupied by one Francis Lawley (1776-1867), the father of the 'Mr J[ohn] Lawley' named in the newspaper report. Though no longer extant, this cottage lay 140m north-west of the parish church of St Michael at the junction of three roads leading towards the village, and would have provided a suitably prominent residence for a well-to-do yeoman or prosperous peasant farmer.

### **Discussion: coin hoarding in the Tudor West Midlands**

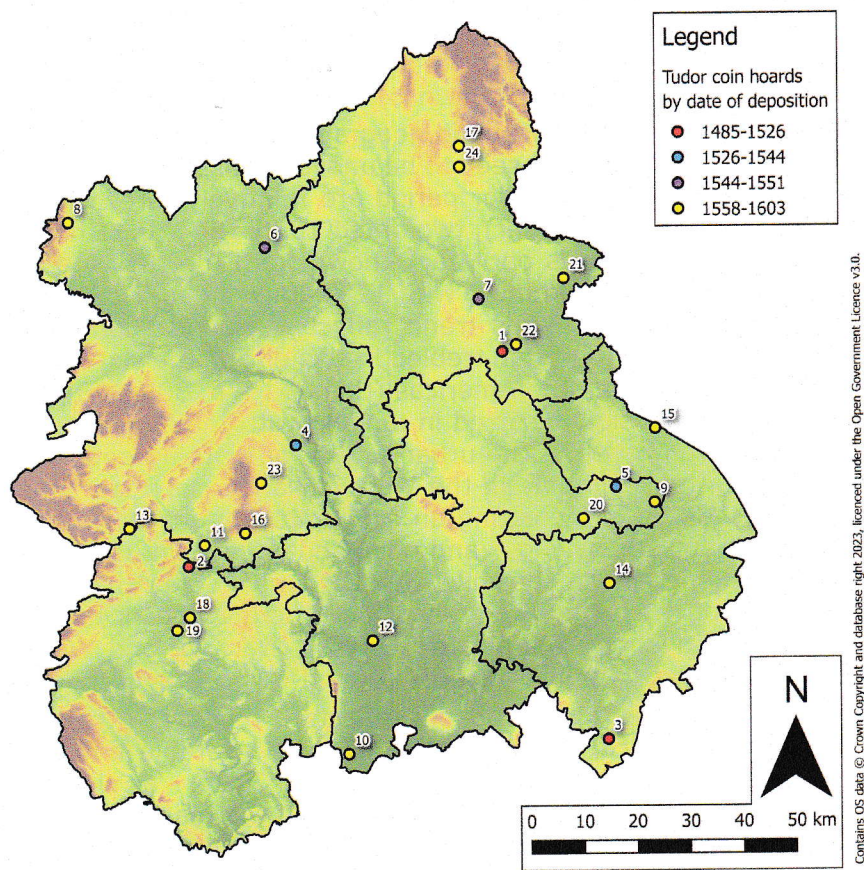
The three hoards discussed in this article are among 24 Tudor-era coin hoards now known from the West Midlands (**Table 1**). Nearly two-thirds of these hoards have been found within the past 25 years, mostly through hobbyist metal-detecting, with the remainder consisting of 'casual finds' unearthed by farmers, builders, grave-diggers and other members of the public. While the absence of examples found during controlled archaeological excavations is regrettable, the dataset is large enough to draw some preliminary conclusions concerning the regional pattern of coin hoarding and its broader relationship to coin use and economic activity during the Tudor period.

**Figures 2 and 3** plot the chronological and geographical distributions of Tudor coin hoards from the West Midlands, which can be seen to be unevenly distributed across time and space. Hoards dating to the early- to mid-Tudor period are relatively rare, with just three hoards dated 1485-1526 (0.07 hoards per year), two dated 1526-1544 (0.11 hoards per year), and two dated 1544-1551 (0.29 hoards per year) known from the region. Elizabethan hoards, meanwhile, are noticeably more common, with 17 examples dated 1558-1603 (0.38 hoards per year) now recorded. This upwards trend reflects external changes in the volume of currency in circulation, which more than trebled in size during the sixteenth century as fresh bullion flowed in from Europe and the Americas (Challis 1978, 305-308). As in other English regions, this monetary expansion occurred in tandem with the increased commercialisation of agriculture and relative growth of the urban and wage-earning population (Challis 1989, 27; Dyer 1991, 51-57), most notably in the West Midlands charcoal, coal, and iron trades (Morton 1966; Poyner 1998, 24), creating an economic 'perfect storm' that stimulated the use of money for payment and saving – and hence hoarding – in urban and rural contexts. From a geographical perspective, meanwhile, we can identify some distinctive regional trends in the pattern of hoarding, including the presence of discrete or concentrated findspots near towns like Bridgnorth, Coventry, Leominster, Ludlow, Warwick and Worcester, as well as a noticeable gap in the distribution of hoards around Birmingham and the Black Country. Intra-regional variation of this kind probably reflects a mixture of modern archaeological 'affordance biases' – for instance, the distribution of urban vs arable land, modern population, and hobbyist metal-detecting (Robbins 2013; Green et al 2017) – as well as genuine features of the region's Tudor economic geography, most notably the major role of Midland towns as centres of commerce and economic activity throughout the sixteenth century (Dyer 2000, 101-108).





**Figure 2:** Chronological distribution of Tudor coin hoards from the West Midlands



**Figure 3:** Spatial distribution of Tudor coin hoards from the West Midlands (numbers correspond with Table 1)



One notable feature of West Midlands coin hoards in this period is the near-total dominance of silver coinage over gold, the latter of which is only present in the hoards from South Warwickshire and Pendock in Worcestershire (**Table 1, nos. 3 and 10**). This phenomenon partly reflects the composition of the Tudor currency, which was increasingly dominated by silver coin by the reign of Elizabeth I (Challis 1978, 232), and perhaps understates the use of gold coin for personal savings – for instance, the 20 gold coins owned by the Ombersley widow Agnes Tylars in 1540 (Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology Service, Prob. Rec. MF 5, Will no. 72a) – as well as in high-value transactions, like the four gold coins kept by the Bordesley tilemaker James Nichols for the upkeep of ‘the Stannywey croftes’ in 1546 (Geater 2016, 100). However, given the relative inflexibility of gold coinage, the preference for silver seen in West Midlands coin hoards might equally reflect a more active attempt to hoard coins that would meet the needs of everyday commercial liquidity as well as longer-term savings (Andrews 2019a, 100). In this respect, it is significant that hoards from the region do not show a clear distinction between small ‘purse hoards’ of low-value coins and larger ‘savings hoards’ of high-value coins (cf. Grierson 1975, 131-136), but instead exhibit a continuum of small, medium, and large hoards dominated by mid-value silver groats, sixpences, and shillings (**Figure 4**), coins that could be more easily mobilised when making payments or clearing debts. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the stores of ‘ready money’ recorded in contemporary account books, like the £71 15s. 8d. cash float kept in a ‘whit lether bage’ by the Warwickshire sheep farmer-turned-gentleman Peter Temple in 1545 (Alcock 1981, 211). Indeed, given the obvious similarities between finds like the Aston Botterell hoard (Table 1, no. 23) and Temple’s bag of ‘ready money’, we would do well to consider hoards of this period as more than fossilised stashes of dead coin, but instead as formerly active constituents within the dynamic money economy of the Tudor West Midlands.



**Figure 4:** *The Ludlow South (Shropshire) hoard of Tudor shillings and groats, tpq 1560+*



Cat. No.	Findspot	Contents	Minimum face value	TPQ	Reference
1.	Lichfield district, Staffs.	18 silver coins of Edward IV to Henry VII	6s. 0d.	1490+	Andrews 2019a, LDS
2.	Richards Castle, Herefs.	11 silver coins of Edward IV to Henry VII	2s. 10d.	1501+	Andrews 2019a, RCH
3.	South Warwickshire	20 gold and silver coins of Edward III to Henry VIII, plus one finger ring	11s. 4d.	1509+	Andrews 2019a, SWA
4.	Bridgnorth, Salop.	5 silver coins of Henry VIII	1s. 8d.	1529+	Andrews 2019a, BDN
5.	Corley/Coundon, Warks.	13 silver coins of Henry VI to Henry VIII	4s. 1d.	1532+	Andrews 2019a, CCW
6.	Stoke upon Tern, Salop.	2 silver coins of Henry VIII	8d. +	1544+	Andrews and Ghey 2019, no. 197
7.	Rugeley, Staffs.	21 silver coins of Henry VIII	6s. 8d. +	1544+	Abdy et al. 2017, no. 102; Andrews and Ghey 2019, no. 196
8.	Selattyn and Gobowen, Salop.	3 silver coins of Elizabeth I	1s. 6d.	1558+	Cook 2010
9.	Caludon Castle, Coventry	Uncertain no. silver coins of Henry VI to Elizabeth I, plus one finger ring	?	1558+	Brown and Dolley 1971, EN30
10.	Pendock, Worcs.	Uncertain no. gold and silver coins of Henry VII to Elizabeth I	?	1558+	Andrews 2021, 122-124
11.	Ludlow South, Salop.	20 silver coins of Henry VIII to Elizabeth I	14s. 0d.	1560+	Abdy et al. 2017, no. 104; Andrews and Ghey 2019, no. 203.
12.	St John in Bedwardine, Worcs.	6 silver coins of Elizabeth I	2s. 0d. +	1561+	Andrews 2022
13.	Bedstone, Herefs.	4 silver coins of Elizabeth I	2s. 1d.	1561+	Portable Antiquities Scheme HESH-1CE8F2
14.	Warwick St Nicholas, Warks.	63 silver coins of Elizabeth I	16s. 0d. +	1561+	Derby Mercury, 2 February 1753, 4
15.	Nuneaton, Warks.	3 silver coins of Elizabeth I	2s. 3d.	1570+	Allen et al. 2013, no. 120
16.	Clee Hill, Salop.	8 silver coins of Mary I to Elizabeth I	3s. 2d.	1571+	Abdy et al. 2017, no. 105; Andrews and Ghey 2019, no. 206.
17.	Kingsley, Staffs.	48 silver coins of Mary I to Elizabeth I	£1 1s. 0d.	1573+	Allen 1949
18.	Leominster, Herefs.	Uncertain no. silver coins of Elizabeth I	?	1583+	Andrews 2017, 24
19.	Ivington, Herefs.	5 silver coins of Elizabeth I	2s. 6d.	1584+	Andrews and Ghey 2019, no. 213
20.	Balsall Common, Warks.	4 silver coins of Elizabeth I	1s. 8d.	1594+	Andrews and Ghey 2019, no. 219



21.	Tatenhill, Staffs.	26 silver coins of Mary I to Elizabeth I	9s. 7d.	1597+	Cook 1994, 82-83
22.	Lichfield, Staffs.	Uncertain no. silver coins of Elizabeth I	?	1601+	Reading Mercury, 27 March 1775, 1
23.	Aston Botterell, Salop.	300 silver coins of Elizabeth I	£7 15s. 8d. +	1602+	Shrewsbury Chronicle, 17 May 1872, 8
24.	Cheadle, Staffs.	894 silver coins of Edward VI to Elizabeth I	£37 4s. 0d.	1602+	Allen 1941

**Table 1:** Catalogue of Tudor coin hoards found in the West Midlands

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