
Mark Blackburn (1953–2011)

and the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*

The British Academy's annual awards ceremony in October 2011 marked the fact that the Derek Allen Prize for Numismatics had been awarded to Dr Mark Blackburn – who had sadly died just the month before. Professor Simon Keynes FBA describes the singular contribution Mark had made to one of the Academy's most fruitful long-term projects.

MARK BLACKBURN first attended a meeting of the committee that oversees the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* (SCBI) in 1977 – with Professor Dorothy Whitelock FBA in the chair, and Christopher Blunt FBA an authoritative and formidable presence. He was then approaching his mid-twenties; and he continued to serve on the SCBI committee for the next 35 years, as co-editor from 1980, and as general editor and secretary from 1987, until his death on 1 September 2011. An impressive tally of 24 volumes had been published by the time of Mark's first appearance on the committee; a further 35 volumes were published during his years of close association with the project (with two more appearing at the beginning of 2012), representing just one important aspect of his singular contribution to the study of the coinage of the

British Isles from the earliest times to the Norman Conquest and beyond.

Cataloguing British coins

The importance of numismatic evidence for all manner of different and complementary purposes has long been recognised; and a historian looking in from outside the fold of distinguished numismatists who have driven the project for well over 50 years could not fail but to be impressed by the sense of collective commitment and common purpose which takes the project forward. The origins of the SCBI can be traced back to the early 1950s. The project was inspired by the British Academy's catalogue of ancient Greek coins, *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum* (1936-), and it was seen from its inception as a way of facilitating access to important public and private collections of early British, Anglo-Saxon and later medieval coins, located in many different places in Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, eastern Europe, and the USA. After introductory remarks on aspects of a given collection, the format allowed each coin to be classified in due order, with details of type, weight, inscriptions, die-axis, and provenance, keyed to illustrations of obverse and reverse on the facing page. As the volumes of the series spread across the shelf, the significance of numismatic evidence for the early history of Britain and Ireland could be appreciated as never before. Each volume would have some particular focus of its own, but as the number of published volumes increased, a corpus of one type or another began to take shape, and, true to the adage, the whole became far greater than the sum of its component parts.



Figure 1. Mark Blackburn (1953–2011) in the Grierson Room, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. When Mark was first formally appointed to the British Academy's *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* committee, he wrote prophetically: 'It is a project which, even though it is now over twenty years old, is still an exciting one and has much still to achieve. I hope that I will be able to contribute to its future.' Photo: Dan White (Kansas City USA).

Early interest

As an undergraduate at Oxford in the early 1970s, Mark was at first a scientist, and thereafter a lawyer – though the fact



A fantastic creature on a Series K early penny. Fitzwilliam Museum.

Coins are not shown actual size.



A coin of King Offa of Mercia (757-796). Fitzwilliam Museum.

that he served during those years as president of the university's Archaeological Society, and of its Numismatic Society, suggests that he did not neglect his other interests. He published a study of the mint of Watchet in 1974, and soon afterwards visited Poland, in search of Anglo-Saxon coins, leading to another of his earliest publications. On leaving Oxford, Mark embarked upon a career as a barrister, switching direction in 1978 to become a merchant banker. He set to work soon afterwards (in 1979) on a part-time PhD on the regional organisation of the Anglo-Saxon coinage, c. 973–1035, under the supervision of Professor Henry Loyn FBA. But the thesis was transferred from one of his front burners to a slow cooking oven when he decided in 1982 to take up a post that had been created for him in the University of Cambridge, working as an assistant to Professor Philip Grierson FBA. Mark's new task was to assist in the preparation of what would become the inaugural volume of a multi-volume survey of medieval European coinage, based on the coin collection formed by Grierson over many years. The volume (published by the Cambridge University Press in 1986) covered the various Germanic peoples of Europe from the 5th to the 10th century. Grierson himself took primary responsibility for the coinages of the Vandals, the Ostrogoths, the Visigoths, the Lombards, the Burgundians, the *Suevi*, the Frisians, and the Franks; Mark prepared the sections on Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Scandinavian coinages over the same period, and produced the catalogue of 1,500 coins.

Eastern Europe

As a member of the Sylloge committee from the late 1970s onwards, Mark was active in developing contacts in many countries. The project had already extended its reach from the UK, and Scandinavia, into Finland; and for good reason attention turned thereafter to what were then the less readily accessible parts of eastern Europe. Mark's own explorations in Poland, as a student in the mid-1970s, would lead one way and another to the preparation by his friend Dr Andrzej Mikołajczyk of a volume covering Anglo-Saxon and later medieval British coins in Polish museums,

published in 1987. In 1979, soon after joining the committee, Mark accompanied Michael Dolley, a key mover in the project, on an exploratory visit to the coin cabinet of the State Museum, Berlin, and in the same year he accompanied Tuukka Talvio, of the National Museum, Helsinki, on a visit to Tallinn in Estonia. Following the visit to the DDR, Dolley reported back to the committee that they had 'such a profitable and enjoyable time' that they didn't mind being 'marginally out of pocket' with regard to expenses; and their initial listing of the coins formed the basis of the catalogue edited by Bernd Kluge, published in 1987. Contact was next established with the Hermitage Museum, in St Petersburg, where there was well known to be a spectacular assemblage of Anglo-Saxon and later medieval coins. Mark went to Leningrad in 1989, with Stewart Lyon, leading to the publication of the first two of a projected series of four volumes, one prepared by Vladimir Potin (1999) and another by Marina Mucha (2005), with a third being published early in 2012. A contact established by Mark in 1990 led to the publication of a volume prepared by Tatjana Berga, of the Institute of Latvian History, in Riga, covering Latvian collections (1996), and the initial contact with Estonia, established in 1979, led to a volume prepared by Ivar Leimus and Arkadi Molvögin, covering Estonian collections (2001). The significance of Mark's role in bringing all of these volumes into existence shines out from their respective prefaces.

Scandinavia

As general editor of the series, from the late 1980s, Mark was tireless in doing everything in his power to facilitate work on a variety of other volumes, ranging from regional or private collections to the major 'national' collections of Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia. A good example had



A pre-reform penny of King Edgar (959-75). Fitzwilliam Museum.

Coin not shown actual size.

been set in the 1960s and 1970s, with the Royal Collection of Coins and Medals in Copenhagen – to the extent that the seven volumes covering this collection provide as compelling an insight into Anglo-Danish relations before, during and after the reign of King Æthelred the Unready as the annals in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* or the surviving corpus of charters and law-codes. The preparation of the two volumes required to cover coins in Norwegian collections, prepared by Dr Elina Screen, is well advanced. Yet much of the silver (and gold) that was taken from England during the reigns of Æthelred and his successors soon found its way to the Baltic; and the material that has accumulated since the 18th century in the Royal Coin Cabinet, in Stockholm, is thus central to our understanding of England and Scandinavia in the 11th century. Mark was close behind all but one of the four ‘Swedish’ volumes already in the bag (the first was before his time); but a challenge remains in the form of the several volumes that will be required to cover the coinage up to and including the reign of Cnut. Mark would have liked nothing more than to see this mountain climbed, and to have been able to enjoy the view from the top.

Custodian

In 1991 Mark was appointed Keeper of Coins and Medals at the Fitzwilliam Museum, in Cambridge. At a recent gathering there, in his memory, we were told how the syndics of the museum used to groan audibly when Mark would appear before them time and again to make his case for the acquisition of yet more coins (regarded by an erstwhile director as ‘bent bottle-tops’), and how they were invariably won over by his persuasive powers. It was from this base, over the next 20 years, that he was able not only to ‘grow’ the collection of which he had charge, but also to nurture the work of the SCBI and of what became its sister project, *Medieval European Coinage* (MEC). As the opportunities arose, from the late 1990s onwards, Mark

was determined to harness the power of the microchip in widening access to the corpus of numismatic evidence, and in bringing together all the data collected under the auspices of the SCBI so that it could be deployed and interpreted to its full advantage. He led the way, moreover, in the development of an online database for recording single finds of coins, in Britain and Ireland, reaching out at the same time to the ever increasing community of metal detectorists, not to mention the network of dealers and collectors, uniting all interests in the cause of good scholarship.

Mark Blackburn would have been the first to acknowledge the role of the British Academy, over many years, in lending its support to the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*, and to acknowledge all that he gained from his close association with the Fitzwilliam Museum and with Gonville and Caius College in the University of Cambridge. There are very many more of us, in academe and elsewhere, who have cause to acknowledge him, for all that he was able to accomplish for his subject, and for all that his subject can bring to our understanding of the past.

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The latest two volumes in the British Academy’s *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* series – featuring collections of Anglo-Saxon coins in the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, and the Grosvenor Museum, Chester – are published early in 2012. More information can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/
