

The FLO and the case of an extraordinary medieval coin hoard

by Peter Reavill

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Shrewsbury Castle
(© Shrewsbury
Museum Service)

The Discovery

During the summer of 2007 a metal detectorist reported a relatively large hoard of 136 long cross (or voided long cross) medieval pennies of Henry III to me (Peter Reavill, Finds Liaison Officer for Shropshire and Herefordshire, Portable Antiquities Scheme). They had been found over several hours close to a hedge line which divided two farms in the Baschurch Area, north of Shrewsbury, Shropshire. The hoard had been spread by the plough over a relatively small area but the finder felt that it was likely to extend much further. Because of this it was decided that a very small excavation of the findspot, along with further metal detecting would be the best way to retrieve both the coins and also the archaeological context connected to them. With deliberately buried artefacts such as hoards the context of the find is often as important as the objects themselves as it allows us to understand how and why they were buried in the first place. With this in mind and with permission of the landowners a small excavation was planned.

The Excavation

The excavation took place on one of the nicest days of last summer and both the finder and landowners were present to help. After about two hours it was clear that we were making real sense of the archaeology, or what survived. We could see both the seat of the hoard, where the detectorist had discovered most



Large picture of coins Original discovery of the Baschurch Hoard

of the coins, and the marks in the ground where the plough had gouged its way through the coins, bringing them toward the surface and into detecting depth. The ground though was very disturbed, probably by rabbits, and it is likely that they had dug their way into the coins at one point and dragged them through their tunnel network. This was emphasised by the finder recovering coins from a relatively large distance away from the hole, on the opposite side of the fence / hedge line where the plough could not have spread them.

As for buried archaeology, there was no evidence of a ditch or pit in which the coins had been buried. Instead it is felt that they were likely to have been buried in a small hole on the edge of a bank and possibly marked by an object which could

have been moved, such as a large stone. During the course of the excavation we recovered a further 36 pennies (or fragments of coin) along with a small piece of medieval glazed pottery. However, the pottery was likely to be residual (in that it was in the top soil and not directly associated with the find) and was probably from a domestic cooking or serving vessel. The coins were probably buried in a leather or wooden container which didn't survive.

From what we could see of the coins, now a group of 167 coins and broken fragments, there were some oddities, in that there were very few cut halfpennies, although the detectorist had already pointed out there was a Scottish cut half-penny of Alexander III in the group, clearly identifiable by the stars in the

reverse. We also felt that there were a large number of early Henry III, Class III pennies and a few of the more common Class V but the coins were still mostly covered in mud and awaiting a much more detailed study at the British Museum. As with these things after the excavation all went quiet for a while, the coins were taken to the British Museum for further study and recording.

The finder and myself kept in regular contact and in April 2008 he got in touch again to say that he had found a further 25 coins (one broken into two parts) and we arranged to meet and deposit them. It is often the case with dispersed hoards that more coins are discovered at a later date and it is important that these are reported as quickly as the original groups as often the new discoveries help to refine the deposition date of the find. These coins were rushed down to London as I knew that the curator writing the report was in the process of finishing the hoard, and they were included with the original finds.

The Specialist Report

The report on these coins was produced by Dr Cook of the British Museum and is excellent in its detail and analysis. I have included the majority of it below because it shows that the study of a relatively large group of coins can produce some really interesting results, putting the flesh back on the bones of events 750 years ago.

Baschurch area, Shropshire, coin find (2007 T545)

General features of the find

I have examined 190 complete or nearly complete coins (plus three larger and several small fragments) reported found at a site in the Baschurch area in Shropshire. These were received in two batches, an original one of 167 coins (plus fragments); and a subsequent group of 25 coins (one of these in two fragments but forming a whole coin).

All but one of the coins are official English silver pennies of King Henry III, from the Long Cross coinage (issued 1247-1279). The remaining coin is a contemporary Scottish penny of King Alexander III, which would have been struck to the same standards and would also have circulated in England at this period.

Exceptional features of the find

It is necessary to point out the exceptional nature of the find as a hoard of the Long Cross period, of the 13th century in general – or indeed of any medieval hoard. Nearly 58% of the coins in the find, 111 in all, originate at the local mint of Shrewsbury, active during 1249-50 only and long-since closed by the date of issue of the latest coins in the group, those of class 5g. It would seem to be the case that the core of the group is a batch of Shrewsbury mint coins belonging to the earlier period of its activity, since only subclasses 3ab and 3b are present, with no coins of the last



Excavation of findspot showing edge of the bank and ploughed field

Shrewsbury coins of class 3c. While these latter are rarer than the earlier ones, this is not by a huge extent.

The Shrewsbury role in this hoard is massively disproportionate. The largest number of Shrewsbury coins in any other English hoard were the 58 among the over 14,000 pennies of the Colchester Long Cross hoard, of which 47 were of classes 3ab -3b and 11 were of class 3c. The Colchester numbers also indicate the general proportion of Shrewsbury coins in other Long Cross hoards – from not being present at all to a peak of 1.5% in the Tower Hill hoard. The corpus of coins used in John Brand's 1971 die-study of the Shrewsbury mint featured a total of 304, **so the new hoard increases the number of Shrewsbury coins known to exist by about 30%**. The only larger source of Shrewsbury-issue pennies known is the stupendous Brussels hoard, which had perhaps 200 out of its 145,000 coins. The only additional source of Shrewsbury pennies among hoards since Brand's study has been the recent Corley, Warwickshire hoard of 2007: 4 Shrewsbury coins (moneyers Lorenz and Peris) out of 166.

The hoard does not seem to reflect the actual output of Shrewsbury, however, as pointed out above, it lacks any coins of class 3c and it also does not represent the output of the four moneyers named on the backs of the coins. Brand's die-study and the evidence from other hoards suggest that the two most productive moneyers were Nicole and Peris, with the other two Lorenz and Ricard perhaps responsible for only half as much of the output. The Baschurch coins, however, include just two pennies of Peris, and a seemingly greatly enhanced proportion of Ricard. This would again indicate a batch acquired in unusual circumstances, and not taken from general currency.

The hoard probably represents a core of material initially acquired straight from the Shrewsbury mint and exchange and then kept together for many years - though not necessarily by a single owner – identifiable parcels of coins (groups struck from the same pair of dies, for example) can sometimes stay together for a surprisingly long time. The essential thing is that they do not enter general currency. That the findspot of the hoard is so close to



Scottish cut half penny of Alexander III



Detail of some of the coins

Shrewsbury itself, might suggest that this portion might well have remained in the possession of one original owner.

New coins were subsequently added to the Baschurch hoard, either occasionally or else in one batch during the issues of class Vg. The unusually small proportion of class 5 coins in the hoard – 21%, by some margin the lowest on record - might suggest the former to be the case, since it is unlikely that, even discounting the Shrewsbury element, the coins represent the general currency of the later period of class 5. The group might well, therefore, represent a carefully-husbanded savings hoard – someone's emergency stash - occasionally augmented with good money as and when this could be afforded.

Dr Barrie J. Cook

Curator of Medieval and Early Modern Coinage, Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum

Both the finder and myself were stunned by the results of the study of the group, not only was this the largest Medieval coin hoard from Shropshire for some 30 years, but a large percentage was actually made within the county.

How Common Are Shrewsbury Coins?

As Dr Cook suggests in his report coins from Shrewsbury are relatively rare, they represent a very small fraction of all the coins of this period. For example, the PAS database has recorded only 3 complete Shrewsbury pennies and three further cut fractions. When this is compared to the long cross pennies of Henry III on the database (over 1500) this is a tiny proportion (0.4 %). There have been no discoveries of Shrewsbury based coins of this period from Shropshire, which makes this group even more interesting.

In the major study of the Shrewsbury coins John Brand suggests that £7167 were struck at Shrewsbury by the four moneyers. This equals the equivalent of 1,720,080 pence, which is a phenomenal number of coins. The fact that very few survive and

are found today would suggest that medieval recycling of currency was extremely effective and that the medieval people were especially careful with their silver money.

The Value of Money

The following table outlines the value of food and goods approximately 70 years after the hoard was deposited, but acts as a relatively good guide to what you could buy with your money.

The cost of goods and services in around 1350 (taken from the PAS website www.finds.org.uk/medievalcoins)

- Average pay for a carpenter: 4 1/4 d.
- Bull: 7 s. 8 d.
- Cart-horse: 24 s. 7 d.
- Sow: 3 s. 9 d.
- Lamb: 4 d.
- Hens: 2 d.
- Geese: 3 3/8 d.
- Pigeons (12): 4 1/4 d.
- Gallon of butter: 8 1/4 d.
- 100 eggs: 4 1/4 d.
- 12 lbs candles: 1 s. 10 d.
- 252 gallons of cider: 13 s. 5 1/4 d.
- 12 gallons of imported wine: 10 s. 1 1/4 d.
- 100 nails: 6 1/4 d.
- 100 horseshoes: 8 s. 9 d.
- lb of sugar: 1 s. 2 d.

The Mint

Very little is known about the Shrewsbury mint. We do not know where it was based but it has been suggested that it was within the town castle complex. This would make sense as value of the bullion, coins and more importantly the dies for making the coins would have needed a lot of protection and security. A building known as The Old Mint (Bennet's Hall) on Pride Hill, Shrewsbury is likely to refer to the site of the civil war mint rather than this much older example.

The Moneyers

The names of the moneyers are recorded as Richard (Ricard) Pride, Nicholas (Nicole), son of Ives, Laurence (Lorenz) Cox, and Peter (Peris) son of Clement. It is highly unlikely that these were actually the people who made the coins; they were more likely to be the foremen who were in charge and were responsible for a team of workmen.

What Happens To The Coins Next

This group of coins was declared Treasure, by Mr Ellery, Coroner for North Shropshire in August 2008. They are currently awaiting valuation. It is hoped that they will be purchased by Shropshire County Museum Service and Shrewsbury Museum Service and displayed at venues around the county before becoming one of the central displays in the new Shrewsbury Museum which is due to be opened in 2011 at the Music Hall, Shrewsbury.

Sincere thanks are extended to the finder and landowners who wish to remain anonymous for their help during the excavations and for their exemplary conduct in all relations to this find.

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