

A quarter-noble assigned to the Trefoil Issue of Henry VI re-examined

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Martyn Frederickson's note in BNJ 2017, pp. 252-3, on the discovery of the letter Whitton A2, with distinctive pointed lower left end to the horizontal top-bar, on a quarter-noble assigned to the Trefoil Issue of Henry VI has a greater significance for the development of the coinage than he sets out.

Whitton notes that evidence supplied by the lettering is a valuable index to the period and sequence of the coins, since considerations of economy generally ensured that a puncheon was used continuously until it was worn out, but that differences in letter puncheons at this period probably had no privy significance whatever to the makers of them (C. A. Whitton, BNJ 1938-41, pp. 221-3: https://www.britnumsoc.org/publications/Digital%20BNJ/pdfs/1938_BNJ_23_18.pdf)

Whitton also notes that letter A2 is a feature of the larger groat font (p. 222), while the legends on the Henry VI quarter-nobles are from the smaller font used on some of the last half-groats and quarter-nobles of Henry V, which does not show the breaks and peculiarities of the larger letters (p. 60). Finding letter A2 in the quarter-noble font suggests a coordinated alignment of the lettering in the Trefoil Issue. This can only be deliberate and points to a revived privy significance of the lettering.

Unfortunately, a close examination of the illustration of the Frederickson quarter-noble, his Fig. 4, reveals that the letter A is the same letter, with deeply forked ends, found on the denomination right through from the Annulet Issue. This is confirmed by a reverse die duplicate, struck on a superb full flan, that appeared in Lockdales Auction 152 (27 - 28 January 2018), lot 1977, see Fig. 1 below.



Fig. 1, Lockdales 152, lot 1977; Henry VI, Annulet Issue, quarter-noble, London, double saltire stops on reverse. Wnr. 21.5mm. Image courtesy of Lockdales Coins Ltd.

Frederickson's note also discusses the additional trefoil found at 11 o'clock on the obverse tressure, Frederickson Fig. 2, and this also has interesting implications.

The only Henry VI quarter-noble to show a comparable symbol is the Leaf-Mascle Issue, where a leaf is found at 11 o'clock on the reverse tressure. This is clearly intentional since a leaf also found on the circle below MEVM on the reverse of many of the Leaf-Mascle groats. There is no instance of a trefoil being found on the reverse circle of any of the Trefoil groats. Again there is either a break with precedent or the additional trefoil does not have privy significance.

The additional trefoil on the quarter-noble, Frederickson Fig. 2, is a small neat symbol identical to that found on the Annulet Issue. In contrast the trefoil diagnostic of Leaf-Trefoil and Trefoil Issue coins, both gold and silver, is a larger bolder mark. On the Leaf-Trefoil quarter-noble, Schneider Collection 334, this mark appears prominently in the legend on both obverse and reverse. It would seem unlikely that the subsequent issue would revert to a completely different type.

This is again borne out by Lockdales Auction 152, lot 1977. This piece, a reverse die duplicate of the Frederickson coin, is struck from an entirely normal Annulet Issue obverse die. There is no additional trefoil on the tressure. Whitton (p. 61) refers to the many misspellings on this coinage – ‘the output of coinage must have been immense and mistakes, therefore, humanely speaking, inevitable. Miss Stokes records payment for 6,303 dies for Calais alone between 1425 and 1431. Equally numerous examples of letters struck over other letters reveal mistakes that were detected in time’.

Why therefore does the Frederickson coin show the undoubted aberration of double saltire stops on the reverse when the usual Annulet Issue quarter-nobles show a mullet before and an annulet after IN? Possibly the most plausible explanation is that the reverse stops on Annulet Issue pennies may be double saltires, and that quarter-noble and penny dies are not dissimilar in size.

