

Summarising the corpus of 'Watford' type pence from the Sussex mint of Rye, with discussion of a newly discovered cut halfpenny

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1.1: Introduction

Today, the East Sussex town of Rye is best known for its picturesque houses, coastal setting and riotous Bonfire Night celebrations. However, in the late Early Medieval period it was part of the great estate called *Rameslie*- held by the Abbey of Fécamp in Normandy and possessing 64 burgesses by the Domesday survey of 1086. Instituted as a borough by around 1130, by 1189 it was an important full member of the so-called 'Cinque Ports'-the latter status causing it to be heavily fortified against French raiding just before the middle of the 13th century. Befitting its importance as a regionally significant economic hub and administrative centre, it has also been established that the town accommodated a mint during the reigns of Henry I (1100-1135) and Stephen (1135-1154).

1.2: Historical research into the mint at Rye

It was W J Andrew who tentatively posited the possibility of Rye as striking for Stephen in 1914¹, with later work by the same author hinting at the discovery of a BMC type I (cross moline/'Watford') example in 1929². However, this piece was neither illustrated nor provenanced. The latter work also discussed the identity of the single moneyer working at Rye during the reign of Stephen from c. 1142 onwards, who is variously rendered on coins as RAVL, RAVLF, RADVLF and RAPVLF. It appears that he is the same individual named in the 1176 Pipe Roll as one 'Radulf of Rye, moneyer at Canterbury' in the context of being fined the sum of 1000 marks³. Andrews states additionally that prior to Radulf's appointment at Rye a moneyer named Willelm was sent from Canterbury to oversee 'start-up' operations⁴, though I can find no reference to any published coin of Stephen from the mint of Rye bearing this moneyer's name. All the evidence suggests that for the totality of its operation in the reign of Stephen, Rye was a mint overseen by only a single moneyer.

Andrew cursorily describes a total of ten coins known at his time of publication (most, according to him, seeming to originate from what appears to be a small hoard or purse loss discovered at Linton, Kent), though it would be another twenty-five years before the first coins securely attributable to Rye were formally published. These all consist of examples in the collection of Horace King, the *doyen* of Sussex mint coins⁵. He lists a total of seven Rye coins, though interestingly these were all BMC type II pieces (voided cross and stars). In 1966 a mule of BMC I/II emerged and was duly published by Mack⁶, though it would be another

¹ Andrew, W, J. 1914. SNC for November/December 1914

² Andrew, W, J. 1929. *The mints of Rye and Castle Rising in the reign of Stephen*, BNJ vol. 20, p. 120

³ Andrew, W, J. 1929. *The mints of Rye and Castle Rising in the reign of Stephen*, BNJ vol. 20, p. 121

⁴ Andrew, W, J. 1929. *The mints of Rye and Castle Rising in the reign of Stephen*, BNJ vol. 20, p. 120

⁵ King, H, H. 1955. *The Coins of the Sussex Mints, Part I: Bramber (?), Chichester, Pevensey and Rye*, BNJ vol. 28, p. 74

⁶ Mack, R, P. 1966. *Stephen and the Anarchy 1135-1154*, BNJ vol. 35, pp. 38-112

decade before a true BMC I struck at Rye would take the numismatic centre stage thanks to Robert Seaman in 1977⁷. Surprisingly, this coin had been known to exist since about 1830, being a penny misattributed to the Norfolk mint of Castle Rising in the collections of Norwich Castle Museum⁸. Alongside this example, Seaman also published a cut halfpenny originating from the Wells collection, bringing the total of known BMC I type coins from Rye to two. This would remain the sum total of coins known for this type/mint combination for over thirty years.

1.3: Extant 'Watford' type coins from the Rye mint

Recent finds

The advent of metal detecting as a hobby in the late 1970s and the emergence of recording schemes such as the PAS and EMC has added vastly to our knowledge of coins from all periods, especially those of Stephen. Since 2012, a further three BMC I Rye issues have been found and duly recorded with either aforementioned institution. These more recent discoveries are listed below:



1. Obverse: [...]IEFNE:- crowned and mantled bust right with sceptre before. Reverse: +RAVLF:ON:RIE:V- cross moline within inner border, fleur in each angle. Recorded on the PAS and EMC (KENT-3D031C/2019.0349), found Luddesdown, Kent, 2019. Coin retained by finder. Image courtesy KCC/PAS.

⁷ Seaman, R. 1977. SNC for January 1977

⁸ SCBI 26, p. 110, no. 1457



2. Obverse: +STIEFNE: crowned and mantled bust right with sceptre before. Reverse: [.....]F:ON:RIE:V- cross moline within inner border, fleur in each angle. Recorded on the EMC (2015.0172), found Eaton Bray, Bedfordshire, 2015. Coin sold by finder, passing through dealer Simon Hall. Current whereabouts unknown. Image courtesy Simon Hall.



3. Obverse: [..]TIEFNE:-crowned and mantled bust right with sceptre before. Reverse: +[.]AVLF:ON:RIE:[]-cross moline within inner border, fleur in each angle. Recorded on the EMC (2012.0291), found Chart Sutton, Kent, 2012. Sold by Spink in 2014. Current whereabouts unknown. Image courtesy Spink.

Detector finds have also produced examples of other types of Stephen from Rye, including two pieces of BMC type VII (the so-called 'Awbridge' type-his last issue, struck posthumously into the early reign of Henry II), both recorded with the EMC (1996.0307/1993.0275). An example of BMC type VI recorded on the PAS (cross fleury and piles, see NARC-052AFC) is postulated by the recorder to have potentially have been struck by Randulf/Radulf at Rye- though the mint signature is unclear. Unhelpfully, a moneyer of the same name also strikes at Colchester in type VI.

The two coins described by Seaman in 1977

Images of the cut halfpenny referred to in section 1:2 could not be located. However, the full penny originally misidentified as an issue of Castle Rising is published on the EMC database (1026.1457) though the images are of too low a resolution to utilise here. Whereas the three coins described above clearly come from the same die pair, the reverse die on the Norwich Castle piece is obviously different- the mint signature reads RIEE: opposed to the more common RIE:V in this type. This gives a current total of one obverse die and at least two reverse dies currently known in use for this type at Rye, perhaps inferring a relatively low output-which would corroborate the small number of coins currently known.

1.4: A new addition to the corpus of known coins struck at Rye

In August of 2019, the author was made aware of a BMC type I cut halfpenny, reported to have been found by a metal detectorist in Manston CP, Kent. Duly purchased as an unattributed example with only three letters being present on the reverse, attempts to assign the piece to a mint and moneyer were initially thwarted by the uncertainty of reading. That is until December of 2019, when a chance viewing on the PAS database of KENT-3D031C lead to the subsequent realisation that this cut halfpenny was not only of the Rye mint, but also a die-pair duplicate for the three more recent finds cited in the previous paragraph (but not the reverse of the Norwich Castle example). The description of this coin is as follows:



Obverse: +ST[.....], crowned and mantled bust right with sceptre before. Reverse: [.....]IE:V, cross moline within inner border, fleur in each angle. EMC 2019.0388, found in Manston CP, Kent, prior to 2019. Image by author.

1.5: Conclusion: implications of this new find

This new discovery brings the current known total of Rye mint coins for Stephen's type I to six examples in total, with the possibility that there are further un-identified pieces (perhaps in the form of more heavily circulated halfpence and farthings) still waiting to be brought to light. In addition to this, it further reinforces the propensity for Rye mint coins of this type to reflect a decidedly Kentish distribution, the exact reasons for which (aside from closeness to the county border with East Sussex) are currently uncertain. Coins from this mint appear to have preferentially travelled east or north, perhaps inferring the main direction of trade and travellers towards London and Canterbury as opposed to Hastings, Lewes and Chichester.

In addition to the above, it is interesting to note that although (as stated previously) three out of four of the true 'Watford' pence from Rye are observed to have been struck with the same die-pair, the obverse die utilised to produce the BMC I/II mule described by Mack is entirely different. The differences between this die and the 'usual' example are quite pronounced: the portrait is of better style, the frontmost fleur on the crown tilts forward at a fairly pronounced angle and the lettering style is slightly more developed-with proper serifs set at the terminals of limbs. Similar features are seen on the obverses on pence struck for Stephen at London and Canterbury, perhaps suggesting that between the changeover of types an obverse die from those mints was perhaps pressed into service at Rye (for whatever reason), to produce coins in the interim.

1.6: Acknowledgements

Primary thanks are given to the detectorist responsible for discovering this important new find, and providing the necessary findspot data so it could be recorded. I am grateful also to Jo Ahmet (Kent FLO) for bringing a recently recorded full coin to my attention, and Dr Martin Allen for recording the find onto the EMC database.

