

LAURIE ASHER LAWRENCE AND HIS FIRST COLLECTION

PART I: PROFESSIONAL LIFE, PLAYING CARDS, FAMILY, HOUSES

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As those who visited the late Christopher Blunt at his house at Ramsbury, Wiltshire, may recall, two items of memorabilia casually lying around in his study related to Laurie Asher Lawrence (1857-1949), numismatic scholar, coin collector, joint founder of the British Numismatic Society, and still one of only a handful of individuals to have received the medals of both our national numismatic societies. One was Lawrence's magnifying glass, identified as such, if the present writer remembers correctly, by the engraved initials L.A.L. on its mount, and the other was an unopened pack of playing cards in mint condition.

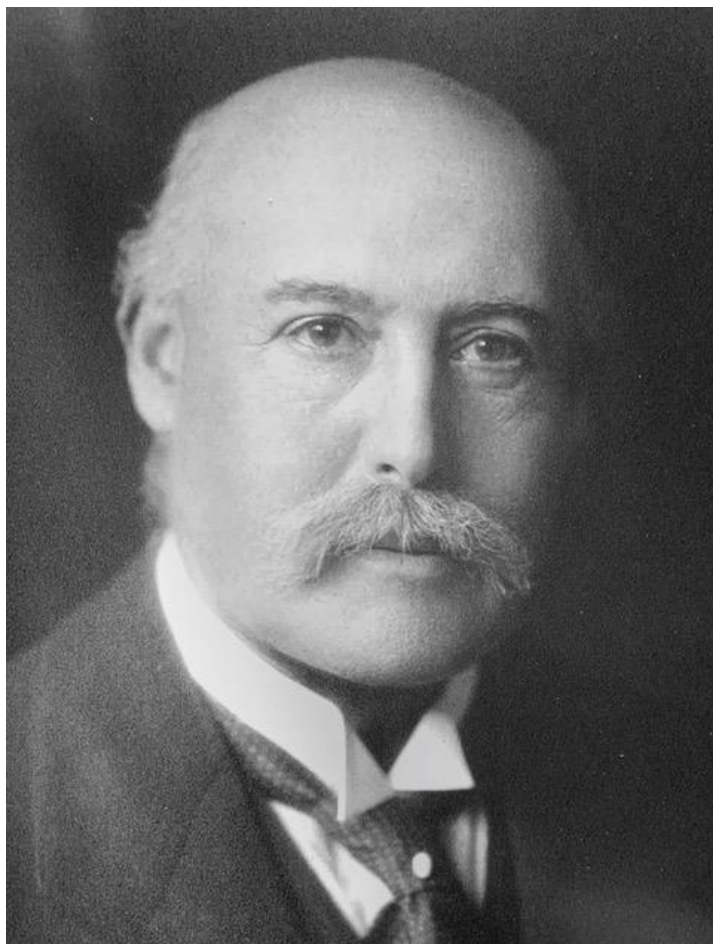
Blunt's bookshelves held one further Lawrence item, Lawrence's own manuscript catalogue of the English coins in his first collection, formed by him from the 1880s onwards but sold off by him in 1903, partly by a private transaction with Lord Grantley and partly by a sale at Sotheby's (24-27 February 1903). This catalogue, along with the rest of Blunt's numismatic library, was retained in the Blunt family until 2012, when the library was purchased by Douglas Saville, and it has since then been in the present writer's possession. More will be said about this catalogue in the second part of the present note.

The nature of Lawrence's contribution to the classification of the coinages of England's Plantagenet rulers, the principal focus of his researches in his years of greatest scholarly activity, has been well explained by Lord Stewartby¹, and it is not necessary to go over the same ground here. It may however be helpful to say a little about Lawrence himself. He was by occupation an ear, nose and throat surgeon, a specialist field on which he had settled early in his medical career, becoming Chief Aural Assistant at St.Bartholomew's Hospital in the mid 1880s, and subsequently coupling a private practice from a succession of consulting rooms in Harley Street, Upper Wimpole Street and in that general area, with official positions as Surgeon in charge of the throat and ear department at the Seamen's Hospital, Greenwich, and as Consulting Surgeon at the Western General Dispensary in Lisson Grove, London NW8. Ironically, as Blunt has recorded², he became deaf in later life, and latterly very deaf indeed.

His professional life does not seem to have impacted much on his activities as a numismatic scholar or as a collector, although it can be deduced that having consulting rooms in the centre of London enabled him to keep a close watch on coin auction sales,

¹ Lord Stewartby, 'Lawrence and his successors', BNJ 73, 2003, 98-106.

² C.E.Blunt, 'Personal reminiscences of distinguished numismatists of a previous generation', BNJ xlvii, 1976, 64-74 (at p.67).



as well allowing him to make frequent visits to coin dealers and to the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum.

A rather more significant element behind Lawrence's ability to put together in succession two of the most extensive study collections of English coins formed by any numismatist of his era lies buried in his family background. His father, John Moss Lawrence (c.1826-1888), a London-born member of a middle-class Anglo-Jewish family, had had the good fortune to have had an uncle, Lewis I. Cohen, resident in New York, USA, who possessed very considerable entrepreneurial skills and who had patented in 1835 the first machine capable of printing four-

colour playing cards, an invention that revolutionised playing card manufacture and that gave Cohen's firm a dominant position in that industry. Cohen liked to employ his own relatives in the business, among whom John Moss Lawrence, brought over from London, was one, and when Cohen decided to retire from active involvement in the playing card trade in the early 1860s, Lawrence benefited from the fact that Cohen's son was too young at the time to head the family firm, and the firm was reconstituted as Lawrence, Cohen & Co. (subsequently Lawrence & Cohen).

The period during which Lawrence had a decisive influence in the firm's management was relatively brief, for in 1871, to meet increasing competition from trade rivals, the Lawrence & Cohen business was amalgamated with two other playing card manufacturing companies headed by relatives who had also previously worked for Lewis I. Cohen. Lawrence nonetheless retained a substantial financial stake in the new enlarged firm, the New York Consolidated Card Company, and the "estate of John M. Lawrence" remained a significant shareholder in that company and in its successor company, The United States Playing Card Company, long after Lawrence's death,

providing a continuing income stream for his children and certainly facilitating L.A.Lawrence's activities as a coin collector³.

The pristine packet of playing cards manufactured by the family firm that eventually passed to Blunt symbolised both the fact that the descendants of John Moss Lawrence were "playing card royalty", and the fact that as late as the 1920s, as Blunt has recounted⁴, the New York playing card business was sufficiently thriving at the time of a boom in the US economy that it brought "an unwonted measure of prosperity" to L.A.Lawrence's household, enabling him to commandeer the principal room on the first floor front of his London house as his personal coin room, accommodating massed ranks of coin cabinets⁵. It was doubtless at this period that Lawrence was able to perfect his second collection of coins, this time incorporating extensive holdings in the Roman series as well as an outstanding collection in the English (and related) series.⁶

Freed from his business responsibilities in New York, John Moss Lawrence had come back to live in England at the beginning of the 1870s, and by the time of the 1881 Census he was living in some comfort at 37 Belsize Avenue, London NW3, a semi-detached house of the mid Victorian period, with his wife, nine children, and six domestic servants⁷. It should be noted that seven of the children, including the eldest, Laurie Asher Lawrence, had been born while the Lawrences were still resident in New York. The house at 37 Belsize Avenue, which still stands today, was to be occupied by members of the Lawrence family until well into the twentieth century, and it is currently mooted that a blue plaque should be erected on it to commemorate the fact that one of Lawrence's sisters, Reina Emily Lawrence (c.1860-1940), elected to Hampstead Borough Council in December 1907, was the first woman elected to any London borough council, following the passage of the Qualification of Women Act earlier that year.

Laurie Asher Lawrence's other brothers and sisters included Arthur Moss Lawrence (1859-1933), a London barrister and businessman who financed the construction of Neptune Studios at Borehamwood, Hertfordshire, one of the very first purpose-built film studios in this country ; Esther Ellen Lawrence (1862-1944), an authority on child care who was for a thirty-year period Principal of the Froebel Educational Institute ; Harry Walton Lawrence (1869-1933), who during a spell as a partner in the publishing firm of Lawrence & Bullen accepted for publication books by such authors as George Gissing and William Butler Yeats (probably unwisely, for the firm did not last for very

³ In 1894 the New York Consolidated Card Company was in its turn amalgamated with other playing card companies into a new company, The United States Playing Card Company, but on a basis which involved continuing representation of the Lawrence and Cohen families on this new company's board. The Lawrence family representative was, in 1902, L.A.Lawrence's younger brother Arthur Moss Lawrence.

⁴ Blunt, loc.cit.

⁵ The money from this source must eventually have run out, since L.A.Lawrence was hard pressed financially at the end of his life, as explained by Blunt, loc.cit.

⁶ Under Lawrence's will, the British Museum was given first option on any coins that the Museum authorities wished to purchase for its collection. The remaining coins were offered in six sales held by the Glendining firm between May 1950 and November 1951, except for Lawrence's specialist collection of gold coins of Edward III, sold en bloc to Gordon Doubleday.

⁷ John Moss Lawrence's estate, following his death on 19 October 1888, was valued for probate at £51,386 17s 9d (later resworn as £51,732 7s 9d), the equivalent of something over £6,750,000 today. As that valuation would have excluded any assets that he possessed outside the United Kingdom, he is likely to have been substantially richer than the mere probate value of his estate suggests.

long) ; and Gerald Leslie Lawrence (1873-1957), a “matinée idol”, who acted both on the London stage and in early silent films.

By 1899 Lawrence had moved out of the family home at 37 Belsize Avenue, initially to 51 Belsize Park, London NW3, and then, about 1908, to 44 Belsize Square, London NW3. 44 Belsize Square, which again still stands today, is a semi-detached house of similar type to the house in Belsize Avenue, but of slightly earlier and more elegant design, and Lawrence was to live there until his death. He had married in 1886 Elizabeth Rachel Joseph (died 1937), another member of the London Anglo-Jewish community, and Christopher Blunt recorded that Lawrence was a “sincere practising Jew”⁸, but the non-Jewish given names of their children, like the given names of several of Lawrence’s younger brothers and sisters, indicate that the Lawrence family must have belonged to one of the various Reform branches of Judaism. They had five children themselves, four sons and a daughter, but the eldest son died when a child and the third son at the age of twenty-one, and the two remaining sons do not seem to have left any great mark behind them. Christopher Blunt did however remain in touch with the daughter, Mary Reina Lawrence (1894-1979), who had acted as her father’s executor, and the present writer has a distant memory that the late Mark Blackburn, when a very young man, was in contact with Mary Lawrence, perhaps via an introduction from Blunt.

The second part of this note will discuss the content of Lawrence’s first numismatic collection.



⁸ Blunt, loc.cit.