

Letter Regarding the Countermarking of the Base Testoons of Edward VI at Bedford – 16th October 1560

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When Edward VI was crowned king on 28 February 1547, he was just nine years old. He inherited a silver coinage in a very debased state and though the base testoons and other coins of his father were quickly called in, and there were a few early patterns in fine silver, he continued to issue a debased silver coinage. Different weights, silver quality and initial/mint marks were issued for the next four years. This base coinage has been well documented⁽¹⁾. As might be expected with a debased and often poorly struck coinage, contemporary counterfeiting was rife and counterfeit base shillings of Edward VI are some of the most commonly met from the hammered series⁽²⁾. Some of the official mint workers were also involved with some questionable practices including striking far more pieces than accounted for, thus multiplying the value of their own good silver by converting it into base coin.

In 1551 a new 'fine' silver coinage was issued with pieces of good weight, well struck and fully round. The new fine silver coins were circulating alongside the base pieces and proclamations were issued to devalue the base pieces. The devaluing happened in stages, thus causing much confusion and speculation amongst merchants and the general public. There was even a proclamation outlawing open speculation about the coinage and the spreading of rumours about the next devaluation. The proclamations have been transcribed⁽³⁾ and an excellent discussion of the public and official response to the devaluations has recently been published⁽⁴⁾.

Following Edward's death on 6 July 1553, the high standard silver coins continued to be produced through the reigns of Mary and Philip and Mary, but the debased and devalued silver coins continued to circulate. An interesting observation, confirming Gresham's Law, is that I am unaware of any surviving contemporary counterfeits of the fine silver coins of Edward VI or Philip and Mary. As was usually the case the counterfeiters took the easiest route and copied the commonest circulating coins, imitating the very base and easily worn coins with brass and copper.

Elizabeth I came to the throne on 17 November 1558 and the next year saw more proclamations issued regarding the coinage, including the circulation of foreign coin, export of gold coin, further devaluation of the base coins (27 September 1560) and suppressing rumours on currency (23 December 1560), etc⁽⁵⁾. The silver coinage was certainly in need of tidying up.

Thus a decision was made to bring an end to the circulation of base testoons. The whole sequence of proclamations and letters leading up to the countermarking of the coins has been described in detail by Pridmore^(6,7) and Challis.⁽⁸⁾ The second period shillings that were 60 grains at 8 oz 2 dwt fine (1st issue) or 80 grains at 6 oz 2 dwt fine (2nd issue) were to be countermarked with a portcullis and the third period shillings that were about 70 grains at 3 oz 2 dwt fine with a seated heraldic greyhound.

A total of 955 punches were made⁽⁸⁾ and sent to the following 45 provincial locations along with a covering letter explaining when and how they should be used.^(7,9)

Aylesbury	Chichester	Huntingdon	Norwich	St Albans
Bedford	Colchester	Ipswich	Nottingham	Stafford
Boston	Coventry	Lancaster	Oxford	Stamford
Bristol	Derby	Launceston	Poole	Wales (President of?)
Bury	Durham	Leicester	Salop	Warwick
Cambridge	Exeter	Lincoln	Sarum	Wells
Canterbury	Glastonbury	Ludlow	Sherbourne	Worcester
Carlisle	Hereford	Newcastle	Skipton in Craven	Wynton
Chester	Hull	Northampton	Southampton	York

Table 1. Provincial locations used for countermarking base testoons.⁽⁷⁾

I have not inspected the original documents that list the place names, but Pridmore's interpretation of 'Wales (President of ?)' is from an entry in parentheses next to Coventry, so may also suggest that Coventry would carry out the countermarking for Wales. Similarly, the location of Wynton is questioned, but surely this is

Winchester? Challis states 42 locations without listing the names.⁽⁸⁾ The similarities and differences between this list of places and the locations of the old medieval mints is interesting as it points to where the wealth of the country was thought to be located in 1560. York received 24 portcullis and 12 greyhound punches and eleven of the livery halls in London had stamping stations, several assisted by hammermen borrowed from the Armourers' Company.^(7,9) The city of Wells had just one of each punch.^(8,10)

The punches sent out are all too similar and the surviving specimens too rare to be able to identify where a particular countermark was applied. Two pieces are shown below with typical countermarks. Coins shown at 1.5× and close-up of the countermark ~5×.



Fig. 1. Second period shilling dated MDL, mm Y, 4.825 g, (74.5 grains) with Portcullis countermark.

XRF analysis of the obverse gives: Ag 92.4%, Cu 4.9%, Si 0.9 %, with traces of Pb, Sb, Bi and Au etc.
For the reverse: Ag 92.6%, Cu 4.6%, Si 1.1 %, Pb 0.9% with traces Sb, Bi, Au etc.



Fig. 2. Third period shilling dated MDLI, mm lion, 4.132 g, (63.8 grains) with Greyhound countermark.

XRF analysis of obverse gives: Ag 72.3%, Cu 19.2%, Fe 3.5%, Pb 3.2%, with traces of Sb, Si, Bi, P etc. R
For the reverse: Ag 49.6%, Cu 40.6% Fe 3.6%, Si 2.0%, Pb 1.65%, with traces Al, P, Sb, Zn, Bi, Au etc.

The discrepancy between obv. and rev. of the third period shilling is easily explained by the clear corrosion on the obv. which will have enriched the silver content of the surface. However both pieces are a long way from the expected fineness for their respective issues. The machine calibration was checked against metal standards and other known 'silver' coins without a problem. Measurements of other base shillings of Edward VI did highlight some significant discrepancies in the silver content of some second and third period shillings. This requires a larger sample and further work, but all would not appear to be as it is stated in the textbooks.

Returning to the documents sent out to the various towns, very few originals have survived. Those transcribed by Pridmore are in The National Archives (TNA)⁽⁸⁾ and a full set is known from the Record Office at Wells in Somerset.⁽¹⁰⁾ An original copy of the letter sent to Bedford has survived.⁽¹¹⁾ During the late 1970s the document underwent a typical repair of the time, which involved reinforcing areas without text with Barcham Green's Bodleian repair paper and areas with text with text with fine gauze. Colour images have been taken and the repair paper digitally removed. The pages below reproduce the pages and offer a transcription of the text. There are some subtle differences between the transcription in Pridmore⁽⁷⁾. These give the impression that the documents were dictated, and each scribe used slightly different abbreviations and spellings.

Elizabeth

To the Queen

Wise and wellbelovéd ma^ytie yo^r well / whereab it is com^e to our
knowledge that syn^e our late proclamacyon for the derry of base
moneye ther^e ariseth som^e differenc^e amongst sundry o^r subiecte
being ignorant for the knowledge and derymynge of the base moneye
of i^{ij} q^{rs} from the other of i^{ij} ob^s and that the water beynge synce
market as now^e at the first added to the said base moneye be
worne of us to w^ome the w^oale and quyetnes of o^r people is
moste tender, have by advise of our counsaile published & notified
dyvers good meanes as in synce a r^ecord be devised for the
informacyon of our people in the knowledge of the same from the other
and yet as we privyly the ignorant sort be not so fully instructed
as we w^ould have them, and therefore we have ordered, that in sundry
place of our Realme there shal be w^oten trusty p^{er}son appointed
not only to inform o^r people theron, but also to stamp the said
testons w^oth severall stamped or printe, and considering that town
is populous, and that many of o^r subiecte resort thither at sundry
tymes, we having confydence of yo^r discrecion do ordeyne that you
the w^omp^{er} of this o^r towⁿ shal synce a^ssemble yo^r
bretheren together, and if there be any gentelman dwelling in
that towne or w^othyn one myle of the towne being a justice
of peace in any parte therabouts, yo^r shal also send for hym
and in yo^r hall or tolbooth or other comen place of yo^r assemblye
by what name soever it be called in the open presence of them, all
yo^r shal rede this l^{et}re and have constable a bag w^oth this messinge
shal deliver unto yo^r containing in it two stamping yron and a
rounde plate of stele. The one of the yron containing the printe
of a greyhound, the other a portcullis, and being so in open place
considered, yo^r shal by consent of yo^r bretheren and synce justice of
peace ab yo^r shal the^re call if any be my^ore hande, or by the w^ore
partes of them, those to yo^r selfe some more of the wisest & mekest
parson of that towne, w^ogore the justice of peace to becom^e
to sett w^oth yo^r for the governynge of the content following, w^oth the
same p^{er}son chosen shal synce sett in the said open place or at

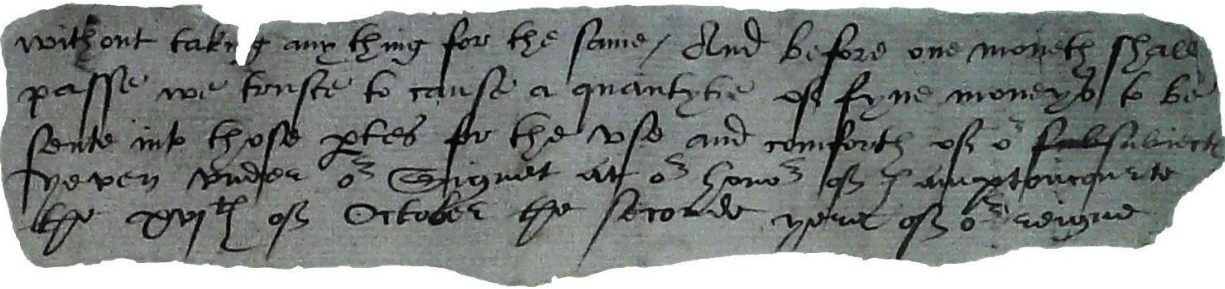
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Elizabeth R

Trusty and welbeloved we grete you well. Whereas it has come to our knowledge that syns our late proclama^cion for the decry of base moneys there ariseth some difference amongst sundry o^r subjecte 5 being ignorannt for the knowledge and discerning of the base teston of ii^d qr from the others of iiij^d ob and that the rather because suche markes as were at the first added to the said basest testons be worne of. We to whom the weale and quyetnes of o^r people is most tender, have by advise of our counsell publisshed and notified 10 dyvers good meanes as in such a cace could be devised for the informa^cion of our people in the knowledge of the one from the other And yet as we perceive the ignorant sorte be not so fully instructed as were convenyent, and therefore we have ordered, that in sundry place of our Realme there shuld be certen trusty persons appointed 15 not only to informe o^r people herein but also to stampe the saide testons with severall stampe, or prints, and considering that towne is populouse, and that many of o^r subjects resorte thither at sundry tymes, we having confidence of your discretion do ordayne that uppon the receipt of thies o^r l^ettre yo^u shall ymmedyatly assemble your 20 brethren tognither and if there be any gentleman dwelling in that Towne or within one myle of the Towne being a Justice of peace in any parte thereabout yo^u shall also send for hym and in yo^r hall or tolbooth or other comon place of yo^r assembles by what name soever it be called in the open presence of them all 25 ye shall rede this l^ettres and than unseale a bag whi^{ch} this messenger shall deliver unto yo^u conteyning in it two stamping yrons and a rounde plate of stele. The one of the yrons conteyning the printe of a grey hounde the other a portculles and being so in open place considered, ye shall by the assent of your bretheren and such Justice of 30 peace as ye shall therto call if any be nighe hande, or by the morr parte of them chose to yo^r self four more of the wisest and mekest parsons of that Towne, whereof the Justyce of peace to be one to sytt wth yo^u for the execu^cion of the contents following. Ye wth the four persons chosen shall forthewth sytt in the saide open place or at 35

the market woffe calling to y^e some golde smyte of the beste
 knowledge that ye can get or som other lesse saving best know
 ledge in the matter of moneye and shalbe there wth to indge &
 decree of almaner of treston that any one subiecte shal bring
 unto y^e wth be of the value of ij^d q^{rs} and no^t of m^o sh^l And ye shal
 cause the treston of ij^d q^{rs} to be stricken wth the yron saving the groy
 grounde appoy that y^e of the treston wth appoy the kinge faw^r id
 be yond the god over the shildes And the treston of m^o sh^l ye
 shal stryke wth the treston yron saving the pouthullis before the
 faw^r And so wth sped wth elyver the saide moneye wth the syde
 of the treston that dyd present hem wth y^e And ye shal take good wth
 that in no wise ye stamp any treston wth valued at ij^d q^{rs} wth the stamp
 of the pouthullis / yon shal also by authoritye of the shire
 the golde smyte to indge and decree tynly betwixt the moneye
 and the treston to the uttermost of his knowledge And for the contyn
 uance of ye suttynge at some tyme or for ye dayes of suttynge wth
 do wth referre that to ye discretion as ye shal see cause geyn
 yon by confinemente of o^r people to ye wth the moneye / So as
 yon wth the treston before me of the cloke in the p^{re}son now after
 the at after moneth wth the appoy any gollidays wth the treston
 of yon sutt at one tyme than forme bysye the golde smyte if any
 surge can be had And at every tyme wth the appoy ye shal sutt and
 have doon yon shal before yon dayes in open p^{re}son wth the
 the yron wth the bag and cause the same to be sealed wth the
 wth the wth the scale of wth the appoy and wth the appoy
 to kepe the saide yron wth the appoy the wth the appoy wth the appoy
 them to be safely locked wth the appoy the wth the appoy
 wth the appoy the wth the appoy the wth the appoy
 yron to be wth the appoy the wth the appoy the wth the appoy
 shalbe assembled together for this p^{re}pos^t / After one moneth
 passed if y^e see more neede of the wth the appoy ye shal cause
 them to be sealed wth the appoy and sent to one T^{re}as^{re} of o^r myn^{te}
 by some trusty p^{re}son / and so not doubtinge but yon wth the appoy
 wth the appoy the wth the appoy the wth the appoy
 and distraction geyn as to surge a rare d^{re} appoy the wth the appoy
 before yon labour geyn the wth the appoy the wth the appoy

the market crosse calling to yo^u some goldsmithe of the beste
 knowledge that ye can get or som^e other person having best know-
 ledge in the matter of moneys and shallbe there redy to judge &
 discerne of almannor of testons that any our subjects shall bring
 unto yo^u w^{ch} be of the value of ii^d q^r and which of iiⁱⁱ^d ob. And ye shall 5
 cause the testons of ii^d q^r to be striken wth the yron having the grey-
 hounde uppon that parte of the teston whereuppon the kings face is
 behynd the hed, over the shulder, and th other teston of iiⁱⁱ^d ob ye
 shall stryke wth thother yron having the portcullos before the
 face. And so with spede, redelyver the saide moneys unto the same 10
 persons that dyd present them unto yo^u. And yo^u shall take good regar^d
 that in no wise ye stamp^e any teston^s valued at ii^d q^r with the stampe
 of the portcullis. You shall also by authoritye hereof swere
 the goldsmythe to iudge and dicerne truly betwixte the one moneys
 and the other to the uttermost of his knowledge. And for the contynu- 15
 ance of yo^r sitting at one tyme or for yo^r dayes of sytting we
 do referre that to yo^r discretion as ye shall see cause geveng unto
 you by confluence of o^r people to yo^u wth their moneys. So as
 you neither sytt before nyne of the clocke in the forenone nor after
 thre at after none, neither uppon any hollyday, neither that fewer 20
 of you sytt at one tyme than four besyde the goldsmyth if any
 such can be had. And at every tyme when yo^u shall sytt and
 have doon^e, you shall before you depart in open presence put upp
 the yrons into the bag and cause the same to be sealed upp wth
 wax and wth the seale of one of yo^r assistants, and yo^rself either 25
 to kepe the saide yrons untill the nexte sitting, or else to cause
 them to be safely locked upp in your com^{on} chest where your
 charters or such lyke do remayne in such sorte as the same
 yrons be no wise used nor seen but in theopen place whein yo^u
 shalbe assembled tognither for this purpose. After one month 30
 passed if yo^u see ^{no} more nede of the use hereof yo^u shall cause
 them to be sealed upp and sent to our Treasurer of our mynt
 by some trusty person. And so not doubting but you wyll have
 regarde to our good meaning, we pray you to use such expedition
 and discretion herein, as to suche a cace dothe apperteyne you. And to 35
 bestowe your labours herein to the quietinge of our people



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Bedfordshire Archives

without taking anything for the same. And before one month shall
 passe we truset to cause a quantytie of fyne moneys to be
 sente into those partes for the use and comforth of o^r sub^j subjects
 geven under o^r Signet at o^r house of Hampton courte
 the xvjth of October the second year of our reign

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Interestingly on page 2 line 13 of the Bedford document the text diverges from the Pridmore transcription in that it lacks the following section:

... of the portcullis, **but in cases very doubtfull ye shall forbear such doubtfull testons and per-itt them to pass without any stamp and so to be brought to or mynt where ye just tryall shallbe made, and ye very value paid for ye same,** you shall also by authoritye hereof swere . . .

This may suggest that The National Archives document is an early draft and this would be consistent with the dating of the above document on the 16th rather than the 10th October. In a similar way, another draft exists of the proclamation from September 1560 stating that it was originally intended for the base testoons to be stamped with a fleur-de-lis. This was then replaced by a dragon, and in the final version a greyhound.⁽¹²⁾

Discussion

The pages above have transcribed a rare surviving document relating to the countermarking of the base testoons of Edward VI that was sent to the mayor of Bedford. This previously unnoticed document confirms that Bedford had just one of each of the portcullis and Greyhound punches. Even with Pridmore's transcription of a different version of the document, and the online help pages from the National Archives to help, working with a manuscript written in chancery hand was surprisingly challenging. This style of handwriting had evolved in the Middle Ages for government and legal use, and different departments had their own styles. I now understand why, under the Commonwealth (1649-60), such set hands were banned, along with the use of Latin in domestic administrative documents, and records were to be 'written in English and in an ordinary and legible hand'.

Looking at several auction archives has revealed that there are several identifiably different portcullis countermarks surviving. Identifying different greyhound punches is unlikely to be fruitful as the punch is rarely well impressed and the baser metal corrodes more, further degrading the impression.

The discrepancy in the measured silver content of the two illustrated pieces (and others) when compared to the expected fineness was very surprising and requires further work to determine the cause. It could be poor alloy control at the mint, surface enrichment at the mint, or subsequent changes in the surface metallurgy due to environmental effects (e.g. soil corrosion or the use of electrolysis for cleaning finds). I have not been able to find any past measurements of the silver fineness of Edward VI base coinages.

References and Acknowledgements

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- (8) Challis, C.E., *The Tudor Coinage*. Manchester, 1978, pp122-3.
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- (10) Bird, N. du Q., Countermarking at Wells, Somerset, in 1560. *Coin News*, August 1995, p.27.
- (11) Bedfordshire Archives reference BorBA1/25.
- (12) TNA, SP 12/13/40. Mentioned in (4), footnote 117 on p.786.

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