

TWO (OR THREE ?) IDENTICALLY PIERCED COINS OF EDWARD THE CONFESSOR'S *SOVEREIGN/EAGLES* TYPE

While looking through available images of coins of Edward the Confessor's *Sovereign/Eagles* type, I noticed that a coin of Oxford, moneyer Beorhtweald, held in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow (*SCBI* 2, 1105), and an apparent die-duplicate of it, in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (*SCBI* 9, 918), were pierced in the same place, just below the king's outstretched arm on the obverse and at the top of the upper left-hand quarter of the central area of the reverse design.

The odds against two die-duplicates being pierced in the same place were such that further investigation seemed necessary. An initial difficulty was that the images of the two coins in the *SCBI* volumes were taken from plaster casts, disguising the precise nature of the piercings, but Jesper Ericsson (Hunter Coin Cabinet) and Dr Julian Baker (Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum) have very kindly provided me with photographs of the actual coins, and the discussion that follows is based on these. It should however be noted that as the two coins are held in geographically distant institutional collections it is scarcely going to be feasible to compare them physically against each other, and it is also proper to note that I have not myself seen or handled either specimen.



Of the two coins involved, the Ashmolean Museum specimen, shown in the images above, is clearly the better of the two in condition terms. It weighs 1.25g (its weight when struck will have been a little higher, since it will have lost weight from the piercing). The coin came to the Heberden Coin Room as part of the generous gift to the Ashmolean Museum in 1934 by Charles Lewis Stainer (1871-1947), author of *Oxford Silver Pennies*, 1904, of his specialist collection of coins of the Oxford mint. The coin is assigned no earlier provenance in *SCBI* 9, but it looks as if Stainer had put the bulk of his collection together between about 1900 and the beginning of the 1920s.

The Hunterian Museum specimen, shown below, weighs 1.37g (likewise implying a weight when struck which would have been a little higher). A projected weight of, say, 1.40g, would be on the high side for coins of this type, but would not have been

markedly so. As for its provenance, the coin formed part of the original Hunterian Museum collection, assembled by the fashionable London obstetric physician William Hunter (1718-1783) between the mid 1760s and his death.



Comparison of the images of both coins shows complete similarity between the two as regards the noticeable die-wear to some letters of the obverse inscription and as regards what is visible of their outer margins¹. It is very unlikely that two authentic hammered coins of this period should resemble each other so closely. It would seem to follow either that one is a cast from the other, or that both are casts from a third coin which was a genuine mid eleventh-century product.

A careful look at the images strongly suggests that the first option, that one is a cast from the other, is the preferable one. The quality of the engraving on the Ashmolean Museum coin is crisper than that on the Hunterian Museum coin, as is especially evident from the execution of the central area containing figures of eagles on the reverse of *SCBI* 9, 918, while the piercing on *SCBI* 9, 918, has an authentic-looking jagged appearance in contrast to that on *SCBI* 2, 1105, which seems by comparison to be rather too neat.

A seeming difficulty is that the provenance of the Ashmolean Museum coin only goes back to 1934, while that of the Hunterian Museum coin goes back to 1783, but here another piece of evidence comes into play. In his introduction to *SCBI* 9 Tony Thompson, in a paragraph devoted to the Merton College, Oxford, collection, deposited with the Ashmolean Museum in 1951, records that the collection contained ‘a cast (not included in this catalogue) of an Edward the Confessor penny (*BMC* type ix) of Oxford, which proved to be from an original (no.918) in the Stainer cabinet (1934)’². Regrettably, this cast cannot be traced in the Heberden Coin Room today³, but in an earlier paper Thompson had specifically identified it as a cast ‘moulded from an actual piece in C.L.Stainer’s collection’, indicating that it was not just a cast taken from a coin struck from the same dies as the Stainer specimen, but that it was

¹ See for example the way in which on both reverses the tops of the letters **P** and **O** (of **BRIHTPOLD**) and the outer beaded circle in that area of the design are missing from the flan.

² J.D.A.Thompson, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Anglo-Saxon Pennies*, London, 1967, xvi.

³ It is conceivably the penny of *Sovereign/Eagles* type pierced in this position that is ill. T.Abramson, *Anglo-Saxon Counterfeits, Fakes, Forgeries & Facsimiles A.D.600-1066*, 2012, 192, item 1181-100 (then in the Baldwin firm’s forgery cabinet), although the photograph is too poor to be certain of the coin’s identification. The Baldwin specimen, wt. 1.26g, may alternatively be a further cast from *SCBI* 9, 918.

certainly taken from the Stainer specimen itself and is thus likely to have been pierced at the same position on the coin as the Stainer specimen and the Hunter specimen⁴.

As Thompson demonstrates, the Merton College collection was in all essential respects that formed by Rev. Joseph Kilner (c.1721-1793), a Fellow of Merton College between 1744 and 1767, and a known customer of the London coin dealer Thomas Snelling. Kilner vacated his Fellowship in 1767 on his appointment as Rector of Gamlingay, Cambridgeshire, but, as Thompson suggests, seems to have left his coin collection behind in the hands of his younger brother Rev. Samuel Kilner (1732-1815), a Fellow of Merton College from 1753 continuously until his death over sixty years later. Although legal possession of the collection does not seem to have passed to Merton College until some date after Joseph Kilner's death, no additions to it seem to have been made after 1767, and a surviving list of it in Joseph Kilner's hand, undated but assigned by Thompson on good grounds to 1767, shows that a coin of Edward the Confessor's *Sovereign/Eagles* type identifiable as this cast was already in the collection at that date.

The existence as early as 1767 of a cast of a coin of Edward the Confessor's *Sovereign/Eagles* type taken from SCBI 9, 918 demonstrates that the fact that SCBI 2, 1105 has a provenance going back to 1783 is no obstacle to deeming it to be a cast from SCBI 9, 918 likewise.

It is relevant in this connection that although there is no evidence that the coin dealer Thomas Snelling (1712-1773) was involved in marketing casts taken from genuine specimens, his contemporary John White (died 1787), a hatter with premises in Newgate Street in the City of London, who dealt in coins and antiquities as a side line, is reported as having taken casts both from coins and from antiquities⁵. White's willingness to act fraudulently in transactions with his collector clients is otherwise evidenced by the fact that he is known to have sold coins to William Hunter and to other customers of his which were genuine specimens on which the inscriptions had been altered by tooling to make the coins in question seem more desirable.

As White's numismatic career, initially as a coin collector rather than as a dealer, can be traced back to the early 1740s, there is no undue difficulty in suggesting that he might have been the individual who at some date in or before 1767 had been responsible for producing the cast acquired by Kilner of a *Sovereign/Eagles* penny of Oxford by the moneyer Beorhtweald, and who at some later date sold to William Hunter another cast from the same original coin.

A curiosity in all this is that SCBI 2, 1105 and the Merton College specimen, despite being eighteenth-century productions rather than genuine eleventh-century coins, are

⁴ J.D.A. Thompson, 'The Merton College Coin Collection', *Oxoniensia* 17-18, 1952-3, 188-192. Thompson would not, in my judgement, have stated so definitely that the Merton College coin was a cast from the 'actual piece' in Stainer's collection if the Merton College coin was not pierced at this position.

⁵ J.T. Smith, *Nollekens and his Times*, London, Turnstile Press 1949 (a twentieth-century edition of a book first published in 1828), 49-50. In this passage Smith specifically mentions that 'old White' had 'turned his wine-cellars into manufactories for the produce of cast coins, and modern squeezes from Roman lamps'. Smith goes on to say that 'these imitations White put into auctions and venders' shops for sale, and they were actually bought with avidity by the profound judges and collectors of such trash'.

in one case certainly, and in the other case probably, pierced. It is puzzling that White, or whoever else might have been responsible for the casts, should have sold them in this condition, for the piercing would have significantly decreased their potential commercial value. Presumably marketing the casts pierced was something that was forced on the perpetrator by the fact that the casting process left a hole in the place where *SCBI* 9, 918 had been pierced, and that if this hole had been plugged there would have been a flat, unengraved circular area at that place on the coin which would have given rise to suspicion.

If the manufacture and marketing of ostensibly genuine but pierced coins of *Sovereign/Eagles* type was nonetheless a commercially viable proposition, this would indicate that for eighteenth-century coin collectors coins of *Sovereign/Eagles* type were still very significant rarities, and that they would have been desirable acquisitions almost regardless of condition.