

A Millenium of Numismatics at Hexham Church

Gary Oddie

The recent appearance at auction of a finely engraved shilling of George III showing Hexham Church with the legend W. Bewick, 1830, prompted the usual genealogical and historical searches.

Obv. HEXHAM CHURCH BUILT, A D. 674.
around view of church
W. BEWICK | 1830 in exergue.

Details Engraved on the smoothed reverse of a George III
shilling of 1816. [Shown 150%].



The surname is quite commonly found in Northumberland in the first half of the nineteenth century. Narrowing the search to Hexham revealed a single candidate.

William Bewick, was baptized at Hexham 15 August 1790, son of Thomas and Elizabeth Bewick.⁽¹⁾ The wear on the coin obverse looks reasonable for 14 years in circulation and it is not unreasonable for someone aged forty to engrave, commission or purchase a memento of Hexham church.

However, this is far from certain, as there was a wood-block engraver called Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) at Cherryburn, 15 miles to the west. Famous for his ornithological tail pieces and woodcuts of flora and fauna, he also cut the copper plates for the notes issued by the Northumberland Bank in 1821. Though deceased by 1830, his sons continued in the same occupation.

Without any solid evidence, W. Bewick shall remain unidentified.

The Church has been through many repairs, additions and reinforcements over the past few hundred years, and whilst many prints have been found, the image below is the only print from a similar view that shows the two buttresses supporting the central tower.



Hexham Church (1814).⁽²⁾

This might have been the end of the story, but for the following piece that had been acquired in 2014.

Obv. HEXHAM CHURCH BUILT by WILFRID, A
D. 674.
around view of church
JAMES BARKER | 1833 in exergue.

Details Engraved on the smoothed reverse of a very worn second bust shilling of George I (1723-27). With a triangular hatched countermark in the center of the original coin obverse. [Shown 150%].



It is interesting that the host coin predates the 1816/17 recoinage and silver recall. The wear on the obverse is reasonable for shillings still in circulation in 1816. As there is no show through, the countermark on the king's head was probably added to validate the coin as genuine in the years prior to the recoinage. The coin might have still been in circulation in 1833 or just being kept as a pocket piece.

Again, with the usual caveats, searches revealed just a single candidate. James Barker, baptised at Hexham 29 March 1789, son of Joseph Barker.⁽³⁾ Again, without any solid evidence, James Barker shall remain unidentified.

Searching for a contemporary image from a similar direction produced the following print attributed to Francis Grose (c.1780).⁽⁴⁾ The absence of the buttresses suggests it was copied from an earlier and less accurate plate.



Hexham Church (c.1780).⁽⁴⁾

At the same time, in 2014, a search of the internet produced the following images of a similar piece.

Obv. HEXHAM CHURCH.
around view of church
W. WEIR | 1830 in exergue.

Details Engraved on the smoothed reverse of a George III sixpence of 1816. [Shown 150%].



As with the two previous pieces, the name is local, but W. Weir remains elusive.

One engraved coin is interesting, but three is more than suspicious and it is likely that there were more, possibly many more. This leads to the obvious question – what was happening at Hexham church in 1830-1833?

The history of Hexham Church has been well documented. Founded by Queen Ethelreda 672-674 a timeline has been constructed and placed online by Hexham Abbey Heritage.⁽⁵⁾ The following summary of the nineteenth century suggests that the building had serious structural issues and, as might be expected, the repairs and upgrades were not met with universal approval.

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 1810 | The lead was stripped from the Transept roofs and sold, and the roofs covered with Westmoreland slates. |
| 1818 | The Abbey House was seriously burned, the west wing or Abbey-barn was removed, and the other portions were almost entirely rebuilt from the ground. |
| 1828 | On 9 th September a part of the East wing fell with a tremendous crash, and broke through the roof of the building adjoining, called the Old School (formerly the Eastern Chapels) in which were deposited the town lamps, all of which were demolished. |
| 1829 | The upper portion of the east end was rebuilt, Mr. John Dobson, of Newcastle, being the architect. The window was rebuilt according to the former design, except that the transom was omitted. The iron tie through the south wall of the south transept was inserted. |
| 1830 | The church was closed for repairs. Heating apparatus was first introduced, and a furnace constructed on the south side of the quire. The church was re-pewed throughout. |
| 1832 | Monday October 15 th , when digging William Errington's grave, 7 feet deep in Campy Hill, a vessel containing a large number of coins was discovered. Many coins were dispersed by the finders, but about 9000 were collected. |
| 1856 | Houses, which had been built right against the Eastern Chapels (the Old School), were purchased and removed so that the Chapels could be restored. Unfortunately the funds were exhausted before the rebuilding could begin, and in any case the east end of the Abbey fell out, and the church had to be closed for two years so that its east end could be completely rebuilt. |
| 1858 | Wentworth Blackett Beaumont paid for the construction of Beaumont Street and repairs the east end of the Abbey. A wholesale 'restoration' was begun, which resulted in the destruction or removal of nearly all the ancient fittings of the quire. "A permanent disgrace to Hexham" – Hodges, 1888. Mr John Dobson turned the scale in favour of the destruction of the eastern aisle in order that he might remove his 1829 design and replace it with the present east end. A three-light window in the east bay of the south aisle of the quire was wantonly destroyed. The eastern chapels were finally swept away in July. The Leshman Chantry was pulled to pieces and placed in the south transept; it was considerably shortened, and some portions were destroyed. |
| 1859 | The churchyard, which had long been overcrowded, was closed, and the new St Andrew's Cemetery was opened to the west of the town. |
| 1860 | An ugly and senseless compromise at raising the roof at the east end of the quire was made. A large warm-air drain, 6 feet wide and 6 feet deep, was dug through the length of the north transept, cutting through layers upon layers of coffins and skeletons. A small copper-gilt burial chalice was found beneath the floor of the transept. |
| 1866 | Canon Barker, the incumbent (resident priest) and Mercers' Lecturer, assumes the title of Rector on 14th December. This was possible because the previous year an Act of Parliament ruled that all incumbents who received corn tithes might call themselves Rector. |

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|----------------|---|
| 1869–70 | The transepts were restored and the north doorway was closed up, as was that from the cloister to the south transept. The west wall of the tower crossing was taken out and a two-storey vestry annex was built, one bay deep. |
| 1878 | On Easter Day the facing of the south wall of the transept fell out and damaged the stonework of the vestibule to the chapter house. |
| 1887 | The roof bosses in the north transept were replaced by new ones, similar to those in the south transept. |
| 1898 | Rev. E. Sidney Savage instituted as Rector on 14 th August. He soon embarked on a programme of improvements. |
| 1899 | Joint report of C.C. Hodges and Temple Moore was read to a Vestry Meeting on 16 th May about the completion of the nave and restoration of the quire to the pre-1858 layout. The Hexham Abbey Completion Fund was launched. The repair of the pinnacles of the North Transept was completed. |

The 1832 entry was quite an unexpected numismatic surprise.

News of the find spread quickly and a **very inaccurate report** appeared a few days later in the Newcastle Journal – on Saturday 20 October 1832 p3 col3.

<p>HEXHAM ANTIQUITIES. – An interesting discovery was made last Monday, which, on further investigation, may be found to elucidate an eventful period in the History of Hexham. The Sexton, with an assistant, in constructing a grave of unusual dimensions, in the burying-ground on the west side of the church, and near to the wall of the north transept, found, at the depth of about eight feet, a great quantity of old coins enclosed in a metallic case, and together with a crown, cap or helmet, of peculiar construction, deposited in a stone coffin, either dilapidated or originally consisting of several stones. The number of coins is amazing, amounting to many thousands, and weighing together several stones. They are various in size, but generally very small, and formed of different metals. The workmanship is rude in the extreme; but on removing the mould from the surface of the coin, the letters are found quite legible. Such as we have seen, seem to belong to the period of ETHELRED'S reign, when the troublesome incursions of our northern neighbours, and the frequent laying of DANE-GELD, would lead to various modes of secreting money. This BAG is in a high state of preservation. The bulk of the treasure is deposited, for the present, in the hands of the churchwardens, but many samples have got abroad.</p>

On the same Saturday, a different but **equally inaccurate report** appeared in the Newcastle Chronicle - Saturday 20 October 1832, p2 col4.

<p>On Monday, as the sexton and his assistant were making a grave in that part of Hexham Churchyard, known by the name of the Camp-hill, which formerly formed part of the cloister attached to the west wing of the Cathedral, they discovered amongst the remains of a stone coffin, at the depth of about eight feet from the surface, a metal box or safe, which was found to contain an ancient helmet covering a skull, and a very great number of silver and copper coins of various sizes and dates. Some of them bear the names of Ethelred and other of the Saxon Kings, and others appear to be of a still earlier period, being dated in the year 510. One of our correspondents estimates the number of coins at 10,000, some of which he says are of gold, and he represents the helmet more as a sort of crown, with curious devices upon it.</p>
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The original (inaccurate) announcement had reached Scotland in the Edinburgh Evening Courant by Monday 22 October 1832, and various London publications a few days later, for example the Evening Mail on

Wednesday 24 October 1832. A similar erroneous story appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine in November 1832, p.465.

A week after the original report, a longer, **corrected account** was published in the Newcastle Chronicle, on Saturday 27 October 1832 p2 col 4.

Several erroneous accounts as to the late discovery of coins, at Hexham, having got abroad, we are enabled to give the following, which we believe to be accurate:- The sexton and an assistant were employed in forming a grave on the west side of the north transept, in a piece of ground known by the name of the Campy-hill, and which has been for several years back appropriated as an additional church-yard. From some local cause it was necessary to go to the depth of about 7 feet. In doing so, the sexton struck a brass vessel, in the form of a pitcher or flagon, in which were contained the coins, which are all *brass*, to the amount of about 10,000. This vessel is very thin and with a loose handle, highly ornamented, and had, most probably, been placed in the ground and had the coins poured into it, being too thin in substance to have borne the weight. On the coins presenting themselves, they were imagined to be gold, and were readily seized by the persons employed, and many in consequence have been dispersed, the bulk of them, however, is in the possession of the Rev. Mr. Airey the perpetual curate, who, by virtue of such office, claims them. This gentleman, actuated by the laudable wish, that a discovery of such importance should, in the first place, enrich the Museum of the Antiquarian Society of this district, has determined that an accurate examination shall be had, and that the vessel, with a complete set of the coins, shall be deposited there. The coins which have been as yet examined, are found to be *stycas* of Eanred, Ethelred and Redulf, Kings of Northumberland, and of Eanbald and Vigmund, archbishops of York. Of the two former Kings and second Bishop, there are the greatest number, and many varieties occur as well from the names of the moneyers as from the different construction of the letters. It will be fair to infer as there are not any coins of Osbert, that they may have been concealed about the time of Redulf, nearly 1000 years ago, and although found so deep now, were not probably above two feet below the surface when placed there, as from the ruins of parts of the church and other causes, a great accumulation of rubbish has taken place. No coffin or remains were found which could have any connection with the concealment of these coins.

Following an initial claim by the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries, the hoard was transferred to the British Museum for study. This resulted in a paper read by John Adamson to the Society of Antiquaries in London on 2nd May 1833 and published in a lengthy paper in *Archaeologia, Or, Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity*. Volume 25. 1834 pp279-310.⁽⁷⁾

On working through the paper, along with the details of the hoard, it revealed much of incidental interest which will be summarized below.

p.279 Gives details of the location of the find, and estimates of the numbers misappropriated by the workmen and others, before coming to the attention of the authorities. Some of the pieces appeared to be precious metal.

p.280 Gives first estimates of the numbers for each king represented. The numbers are all rounded, so no counting has taken place. Also mention of the 1808 Kirk Oswald and 1813 Heworth hoards.

p.281 The container was damaged during the discovery and there was no sign of a cover.

p.281 There is an interesting speculation

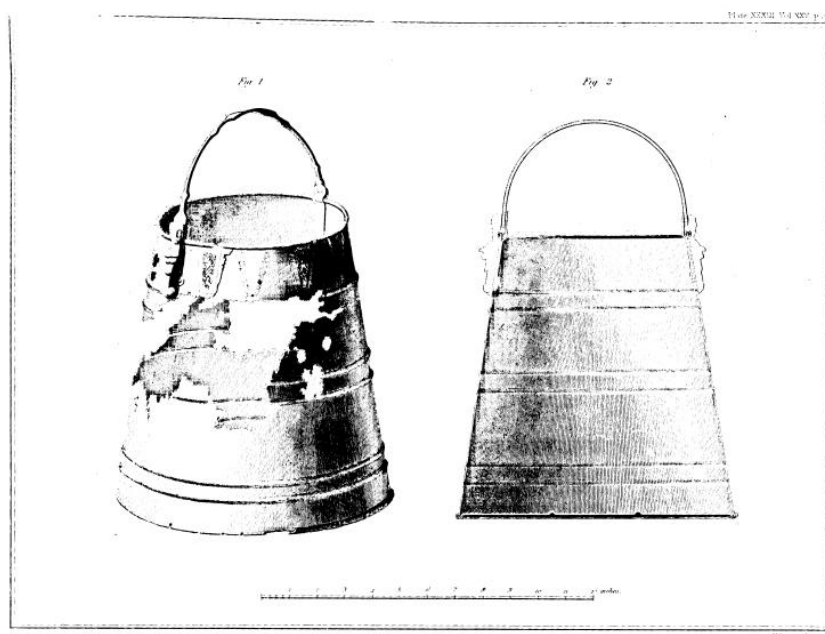
Perhaps not the least curious fact relating to these Coins, is the variety of dies which have been used in their fabrication. The dots, which so frequently occur upon them, render it not improbable that they have some meaning beyond being merely ornamental.

Though some of the hoard was dispersed, some pieces lost to the spoil heap, some badly struck, and others corroded, the numbers of surviving specimens should be sufficient to contemplate carrying out a full and proper

die study. This task would likely involve modern computer image processing and would provide proper statistics of Kings, moneyers, dies, die links and die sequences.

p.282 Gives a description of the vessel. A conical section, $10\frac{3}{4}$ inches high, $9\frac{3}{4}$ inches at the base, $7\frac{1}{4}$ inches at the top, all made from riveted sheet brass, ranging from $\frac{1}{16}$ to $\frac{1}{20}$ of an inch in thickness. Details of handle and ornaments are also given.

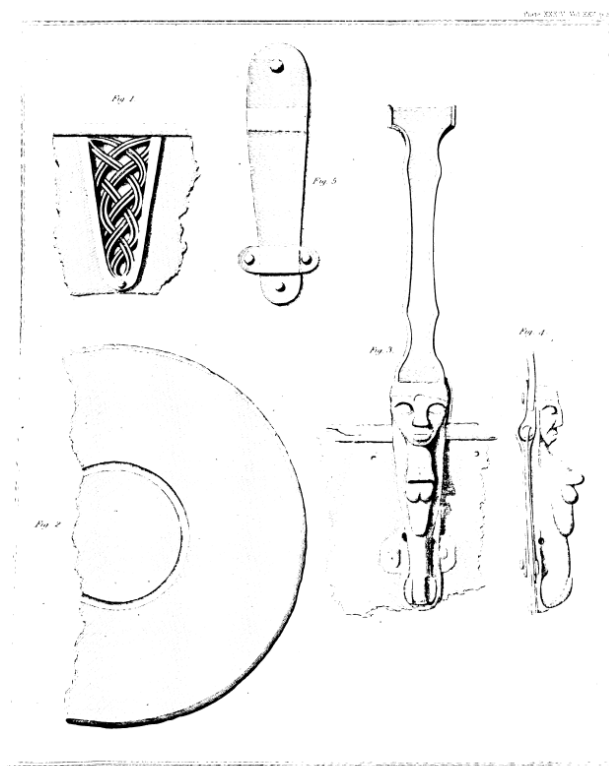
Opposite p.282 A plate showing the container.



Vessel in which the Anglo-Saxon Stycas were found at Hecham.

Published by the Trustees of the British Museum, 1891.

A second plate shows details of the ornaments and the base of the container.



Details of the Vessel found at Hecham.

p.282 The coins, originally dusty and dry, were cleaned with water, significantly changing their colour, some appearing gold, others silver.

p.283 Gives a first metallurgical analysis of some of the coins – 60-70% copper, 20- 25% zinc, gold 0.5% and higher, silver 5-10%, others show tin. Analysis of the vessel gives bronze – 89.09% copper and 10.91% tin. Many of the coins at the bottom of the vessel had corroded but had not become cemented together.

p.284-290 A Chronological Table of the Kings of Northumberland 547- 950, with an addendum of later kings up to Henry II.

p.291 Gives a brief description of the Heworth hoard of 1813 that also included coins of earlier kings.

p 292-306 Describes the kings and moneyers whose names appear on the coins in the Hexham hoard.

Facing p.306 Plates XXV - LVII showing over 900 stycas.

p.307-310 – Is the final section of the kings and moneyers whose names appear on the coins in the Hexham hoard.

A passing mention of a few pieces from the Hexham hoard can be found a few years later in Fairless, J., “Stycas found at York”. *Numismatic Chronicle* vol. VII 1845, pp.34-36.

To bring the story of the hoard up to date, the simplest and quickest route is via the Medieval Coin Hoards of the British Isles project - “MCHBI” (<https://www.britnumsoc.org/mchbi>)⁽⁸⁾. Accessible from the front page of the British Numismatic Society website (<https://www.britnumsoc.org/>)⁽⁹⁾ this leads to the results of an ongoing multi-year project to fully record all hoards found in the British Isles with coins dating 450-1544.

With just a few clicks, the full record of the hoard is revealed. [Note that the record has subsequently been updated to include the first Newcastle Chronicle reference of 1832.]

[← Back to map](#) [Download PDF](#) MCHBI Ref: ENG0775
Updated: 30-11-2024

Hexham 1832

LOCATION AND SETTING
Region: England
County: Northumberland
Mapped location accuracy: <100 meters

TIMING
Deposited: c. 855-c. 860

DISCOVERY
Discovered: 1832-1841
Circumstances: Grave-digging
Context: Burial ground, cemetery
Feature: Unknown

SUMMARY NOTES
This hoard was found when digging a grave on the west side of the north transept of Hexham Church, in a piece of ground known by the name of the Campy-hill, in a bronze bucket which was damaged during the grave digging, but was subsequently reconstructed at the British Museum.

A substantial hoard of AE Northumbrian stycas, including 14 stycas of the first or second reign of Aethelred II, as there were very few of these comparatively in ratio to other hoards, and even fewer by a highly active moneyer known as Eardwulf, it is suggested that this hoard was deposited early in the second reign of Aethelred II of Northumbria as Eardwulf was extremely active in the second reign of Aethelred II.

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Newcastle Chronicle, Saturday 27th October, 1832, page 2, col.4.

CONTAINER AND CONTENTS
Container: Other metal container(s)
Hoard Type: Coins only

COIN SUMMARY
Num. of coins: c. 8000-c. 10000
Latest Coin: Data req'd.
Coins issued by: Eardwulf (Northumbria), Stycas Coinage - undiff. [2000], Stycas Coinage - Eanred [2000], Stycas Coinage - Aethelred II (1st reign) [2000], Stycas Coinage - Redwulf [100], Stycas Coinage - Abp Eanbald II [60], Stycas Coinage - Abp. Wigmund [800]

OTHER ITEMS
Found in a bronze vessel.

DISPOSITION
Parcels of coins from this hoard are held at the British Museum, the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle, the Ashmolean Museum (who also had a portion of the bucket for a period of time), Whitby Museum and Manchester Art Gallery however some 2000 coins are thought now to have been lost in the immediate aftermath of discovery either through private sale or loss in the spoil heap.

Extracting the references and sorting chronologically reveals that the Hexham hoard was first published in mainstream numismatics in 1956:

Newcastle Chronicle, Saturday 27th October, 1832, page 2, col.4.

Thompson, J.D.A., (1956), *Inventory of British coin hoards*, A.. 600-1500, RNS Special Publication #1.

Mack, R.P. 1973. *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* 20. Mack Collection. Ancient British, Anglo-Saxon and Norman Coins (London, 1973).

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Where it appears as Entry 188 on p.69 of Thompson, J.D.A. (1956). *Inventory of British Coin Hoards A.D. 500-1500*. RNS Special Publication No. 1.

188. HEXHAM, Northumberland, 1833

c. 8,000 Anglo-Saxon Stycas, found at the west side of the transept of Hexham church, in a bronze vessel 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. high. Deposit: c. 850/60.

KINGS OF NORTHUMBRIA: Eardwulf, 'A few'; Eanred, 2,000; Ethelred II, 2,000; Redwulf, 100. ARCHBISHOPS OF YORK: Eanbald, 60; Vigmund, about 800.

John Adamson in *A xxv* (1833), p. 279.

Disposition: About 2,000 coins dispersed when first discovered, 300 acquired by the British Museum, and 4 given to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, by Mr. Boyd of University College in 1834, together with a fragment of the metal vessel.

With just one reference to John Adamson's 1833 paper of 2nd May 1833, published in *Archaeologia*, Volume 25. 1834 pp. 279-310, this connects the story of the Hexham hoard to the most recent numismatic studies.

On 26 September 1956, C.S. Lyon gave a presidential address to the British Numismatic Society. "A reappraisal of the Sceatta and Styca coinage of Northumbria". This makes reference to Thompson's inventory and was published the following year - *British Numismatic Journal* 28. pp.227-38.

https://www.britnumsoc.org/publications/Digital%20BNJ/pdfs/1955_BNJ_28_16.pdf

Returning to the vessel itself, it is described in detail by R.N. Bailey.⁽¹⁰⁾ The exact location of its discovery relative to the original building cannot be determined with any accuracy and further excavations in the nineteenth century suggested that the original depth of the burial of the hoard was very shallow, and the ground level had built up over the centuries with spoil and building debris. In December 1841 William Errington's grave was reopened and another 50 coins were found.

The vessel itself was claimed for the local Antiquarian Society by Mr. Beaumont, one of the members of Parliament for the Southern Division of the County of Northumberland. The vessel was in fragments and the largest part was sold to the British Museum. Other fragments were dispersed, along with hundreds of the coins, into the Hexham neighbourhood. A small fragment is in the Heberden coin room at the Ashmolean Museum and further fragments were presented to the British Museum in 1884 by W.D. Fairless.

The fragments were significantly restored by the British Museum, with some holes filled with card and glue. It was mounted on a wooden frame using nails through the original brass sheet. There are now traces of solder on the surface and these may be from Fairless or the British Museum. The many additional nail holes from the nineteenth century "restoration" can be identified by comparing Adamson's 1833 drawing with modern images.

A colour image of the vessel can be found by searching the British Museum catalogue for "Bucket" or "Campey Hill". https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1833-0701-1 And a greyscale image of the vessel and close ups of the decorations and handle can be found in R.N. Bailey's chapter.⁽¹⁰⁾



Further references to the hoard and Northumbrian coinage of this period can be found on the Wikipedia page for the Hexham Hoard. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hexham_Hoard

Conclusions

This Blog began as a simple description of three skilfully engraved silver coins, each showing a view of Hexham church and dated 1830 and 1833. Each of the pieces has an engraved name, but with too many local possibilities, they are unlikely to be identified with certainty.

Whilst searching for events at the church during this period, a completely unexpected numismatic connection was made. On Monday 15 October 1832 the Hexham hoard of about 8,000 Northumbrian Stycas was discovered. The hoard had been deposited c.865. At the time the discovery was reported in local newspapers across the country. The discovery and contents of the hoard were published in 1833. The first specific appearance of the hoard in numismatic literature was in J.D.A. Thompson's *Inventory of British Coin Hoards* of 1956.

The dates on the engraved coins may be just the result of a local engraver creating mementos or may have some significance relating to the closure of the church for the refurbishment in 1830. There is every possibility that the original owners of the three engraved coins were aware of the discovery of the hoard.

References

- (1) <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=GBPRS%2FB%2F303131605%2F1%2F1&tab=this>
- (2) Scott, W. (1814). *The Border Antiquities of England and Scotland, Vol. II*. Longman & Co., London. Artist: John Greig.
- (3) https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=R_894663402&tab=this
- (4) <https://www.hexhamhistorian.org/historic-hexham/photograph-archive/photo-archive-choices/hexham-choices/churches-and-chapels-choices/abbey-gallery/>
- (5) <https://www.hexhamabbey.org.uk/heritage/timeline.htm>
- (6) https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Archaeologia_Or_Miscellaneous_Tracts_Rel/V0BGAQAIAAJ?hl=en
- (7) Adamson, J. (1833). An Account of the Discovery at Hexham, in the County of Northumberland, of a brass vessel containing a number of the Anglo-Saxon Coins called Stycas. Communicated to the Society of Antiquaries by JOHN ADAMSON, Esq. M.R.S.L., F.SS.A., London and Edinburgh, F.L.S. Corresp. Memb. Roy. Acad. Of Sciences at Lisbon, Memb. of the Roy. Soc. for Ancient Northern Literature at Copenhagen, one of the Secretaries of the Lit. and Phil. Soc of the Antiq. Soc. of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. &c. &c,
- (8) <https://www.britnumsoc.org/mchbi>
- (9) <https://www.britnumsoc.org/>
- (10) Bailey, R.N., 1974. "The Anglo-Saxon metalwork from Hexham", in *Saint Wilfrid at Hexham*, ed. D. P. Kirby (1974), pp.141-67.

