

CHRISTOPHER BLUNT

EARLY YEARS AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO LATER MEDIEVAL NUMISMATICS

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It is my part this evening to talk to you about Christopher's earlier years, what were described to me as his 'pre-Dolley years', though, of course, it is not true that his interest in Anglo-Saxon numismatics began only when Michael Dolley joined the Department of Coins and Medals in 1952, nor that his interest in later medieval numismatics ceased after this. Christopher's first paper on an Anglo-Saxon subject was published in 1943, and his continued interest in later medieval numismatics is evidenced by sporadic publications throughout the rest of his life.

Save for personal recollection it is difficult to find new things to say about Christopher's numismatic life, for much has been published already. There is Derek Allen's long and comprehensive Appreciation in *BNJ* 42, Lord Stewartby's Obituaries in *BNJ* 57 (1987) and in the Proceedings of the British Academy vol. 79 (1990), Robert Thompson's list of his publications in *BNJ* 42, updated in *BNJ* 53 (1983), and again in *BNJ* 57 (1987). And last, but certainly not least, there are Christopher's own recollections in *BNJ* 46 (1976). I shall not, therefore, dwell extensively on the ground already covered in these, though I shall use them sufficiently to give coherence to my narrative.

Christopher Blunt was the son of a Church of England clergyman, the middle of three brothers. He went to Marlborough school but, unlike his brothers, did not go on to university, preferring instead to go into the City joining the merchant banking firm of Higginson & Co where he later became a partner and subsequently a director of successor companies. He became a coin collector while at school and, about 1919, when he was 15, became friendly with John Shirley-Fox R.B.A., a distinguished portrait painter who lived with his wife in Marlborough. John's pastimes were numismatics and dry fly fishing in the chalk streams of southern England (as well as his numismatic writings, he wrote a book about the latter, as well as one about his experiences as an art student in Paris in the 1880s). Mr and Mrs Shirley-Fox, who were childless, were kind to young Christopher inviting him to their house. John encouraged Christopher's numismatic interests and the schoolboy, later the young merchant banker, and the elderly couple established a life-long friendship that only ended with Shirley-Fox's death in 1939 and his wife's two years later. Shirley-Fox left his collection of coins to Christopher in his will, and I well remember seeing coins in Christopher's trays with tickets saying 'ex Shirley-Fox bequest'. Mr and Mrs Shirley Fox had a small apartment in London and after Christopher had embarked on his banking career he used to visit them when they were there, and met many of their circle of numismatic friends. In Christopher's 'Personal Reminiscences of some Distinguished Numismatists of an Earlier Generation' (*BNJ* 1976) he describes how he was introduced to

Walters, Morrieson, Helen Farquar, Lawrence, Oman, Carter, Wheeler, Webb, Sydenham, and many others.

During the first decade of the twentieth century John Shirley-Fox with his brother, H. B. Earle Fox, had developed a classification for the coinages of Edward I, II and III. This was published in *BNJ* between 1909 and 1915. Although not the first to classify the coins of the three reigns (Burns had published a detailed and essentially correct classification based on the English coins in the huge Montrave hoard in *The Coinage of Scotland* in 1887, but that was not well known at the time in England), the Foxes added documentary evidence as well as the valuable accounts figures that Crump and Johnson were extracting from the Public Records Office (although these were not published until 1913 [in *NC*] they had been extracting them since about 1900 and they made the relevant information available to the Fox Brothers privately) and were able to end up with a much simpler and user-friendly classification. Neither Burns nor the Fox Brothers had dealt with the mint of Berwick-on-Tweed, a city ever in contention between England and Scotland, whose mint, when the town was in English hands, struck coins superficially similar to the English ones but in detail mostly very different. Encouraged by John Shirley-Fox, Christopher studied this coinage and his findings and classification were the subject of a paper read to the RNS in 1929 and published in *NC* in 1931. He had, in fact, adopted a similar approach as the Fox brothers had used with regard to the regular Edwardian coinage and the results of his work are a model of lucidity.

It was typical of Christopher that when he presented me with an offprint of this paper many years later, he modestly remarked that it was 'rather an immature work'. In fact his 'rather immature work' has stood the test of time so well that Jeffrey North, writing in 1989, could say that 'The classification and chronology of the Edwardian coins of the (Berwick) mint were formulated in 1931 with such accuracy that little refinement has been made and only two unpublished varieties subsequently discovered.'

In 1933 Christopher became a member of the BNS (he had been a fellow of the RNS since 1923) and throughout the 1930s the coinage of the later Plantagenets remained his main interest. His first publication in *BNJ* was 'The Nobles and Angels of Edward IV between 1461 and 1470' (*BNJ* 22, 1934-37). In this short paper he published a new variety of the rare, early, heavy noble of Edward IV and a new angel struck after 1465. The material in this paper was later integrated into the comprehensive study on the coinage of Edward IV and Henry VI (restored) that he wrote with Whitton of which I shall say more later on.

This was followed by a paper on the heavy silver coinage of Henry IV which was published in the *Transactions of the International Numismatic Congress in London, 1936* (London, 1938). His work on this difficult and rare series continues to be used as a reference.

Christopher then turned his attention to the famously difficult subject of which coins could be attributed to the brief, 2 ½ month reign of Edward V in a paper entitled 'The Coinage of Edward V with some remarks on the later issues of

Edward IV' (*BNJ* 22, 1934-37). This was a controversial subject that had fascinated numismatists for some time. Hawkins, writing in 1841, even doubted whether any coins were struck during the short period. Briefly, the problem was that the last initial mark that could be attributed to a king Edward (that is Edward IV or V) was 'sun and rose dimidiated' and that its successor mark 'boars head' was unquestionably related to Richard III. However, there were coins with 'boars head' on the obverse and 'sun and rose' on the reverse which, as then seen, might be mules or might be a deliberate combination perhaps issued during Richard's protectorship, and again one angel was known in the name of Richard with 'sun and rose' both sides and the E beside the cross on the reverse altered to R. How this was to be accounted for was a subject of much debate.

Montagu, Grueber, Brooke and Oman had all expressed views on the subject and early in the 20th century H. B. Earle-Fox (Shirley-Fox's brother) brought to light in the Public Record Office an account that clearly showed that 49lb 10oz of gold and 434 lbs of silver had been struck into coin in May-June 1483, the very period of Edward V's rule.

By the 1930s no certainty had been reached but the general view seems to have been that the only coins in the name of Edward and definitely struck during Edward V's reign were the ones bearing both marks.

Against this background Christopher entered the lists using as his point of departure some recent work by Lawrence on the subject of privy marking on late medieval coins, which he hoped, perhaps rather optimistically, might provide a key to unlock the uncertainty. In his closely argued paper he concludes that the coins attributable to Edward V all read Edward, have the 'boar's head' mark on the obverse and, in most cases, 'sun and rose' on the reverse.

Knowing that Lawrence did not agree with his views, Christopher tactfully sent him a draft of his paper and invited his comments. Lawrence's reaction is printed in *BNJ* immediately after Christopher's paper – his view was that the coins with the 'boar's head' mark had definitely to be attributed to Richard.

Christopher was, at this time Director of the Society and at that date that position included the function of Editor. At the same time that his own paper was to appear in the *Journal* and with Lawrence's comments to hand another paper was received from F. O. Arnold on precisely the same subject. Arnold's conclusions, however, were again different from Christopher's and more in line with the conventional view though he attributed more coins with the 'sun and rose' mark only to Edward V's reign.

These three contributions, Arnold's, Christopher Blunt's and Lawrence's, appeared one after the other in the same volume of the *Journal* and that they could do so without friction or acrimony says much for Christopher's qualities of tact and diplomacy.

Generally speaking Christopher's views prevailed at the time and they were supported by Whitton. However, much later, encouraged by Christopher, Tim

Webb Ware took up the subject and read a paper to the Society in 1987. As a result of a minute study of the dies he was able to establish that, at least as far as the gold was concerned, with respect to those coins reading EDWARD with initial mark 'sun and rose' those with DEI GRA related to a batch of dies delivered in Edward IV's reign, while those with DI GRA related to Edward V's reign. Those coins reading RICARD with initial mark 'sun and rose' relate, of course, to Richard III and are a first issue. Those with the initial mark 'boar's head' whether reading EDWARD or RICARD and even if they also show the 'sun and rose' mark relate to a second issue of Richard III. In other words at that stage Richard's moneyers were using up existing dies modified to the extent of having a 'boar's head' placed on the obverse. Mr Webb Ware's work on the silver has yet to be concluded. I have explained this in some detail because it shows how the work of one numismatist is built on the work of others. The truth is seldom simple and (if Bernard of Chartres, Sir Isaac Newton and Mr Dyer will forgive me for stealing their simile) we all need giants whose shoulders we can stand on!

Christopher next turned his attention to the heavy gold coinage of Henry IV (*BNJ* 24, 1941-42) and here he was able to collate information from a lot of different sources and to come to some very sound conclusions. This paper was followed up by an additional one in 1967 and taken together these are of the highest importance and the best record and analysis we have for these rare coins. It is possible to see in these early papers how he is forming his own style and growing much more sure and confident in his understanding of medieval material

Soon after he joined the BNS Christopher threw himself into the affairs of the Society which in the 1930s was going through a rather thin time. The strong personalities who had taken the lead in its formation were getting old, membership had dropped off, the *Journal* had fallen behind, and money was short. There was a need for the Society to be revitalised. Christopher became Director and Editor in 1935 and held the former position to 1940 and the latter right through to 1970. And, of course, he was our President from 1945 to 1950 and Vice-President to the end of his life. His influence has been described as leading to a rebirth of the Society and to a necessary strengthening of the academic standards of the Society's publications. It was not only in our Society's interest that his influence was felt. He had become a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1936 and was on its Council between 1957 and 1958, and he became President of the Royal Numismatic Society between 1957 and 1961. He was later to be elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1965. He was also an Honorary Member of the Société Française de Numismatique from 1965.

The war inevitably caused much disruption to numismatic affairs and Christopher was in the army. After its recapture in 1944 he was in Paris for a while, where he had already spent some time in the earlier in his life and he took advantage of being there to spend time in the Bibliothèque Nationale and, as Allen says, developed his ideas on the European influences on English coins during the Anglo-Saxon period, a prelude to his later work. He

ended the war as a full colonel, but with characteristic modesty did not bring this rank into his later, post war, life.

But this is to move on too quickly, for what was perhaps his greatest contributions to later medieval numismatics written in collaboration with C.A. Whitton appeared in successive numbers of *BNJ* starting in the 1945-6 volume, continued in the 1947 volume, and completed in the 1949 volume. This was 'The Coinage of Edward IV and of Henry VI (restored)', which is still today regarded as the authoritative work on the series. In this series of papers Christopher can be seen to have reached maturity as a scholarly student of numismatics. One can see that, as Lord Stewartby said in his obituary, that he scrupulously sought to give the material he was writing about every opportunity to speak for itself by carefully recording it and relating it to other known data, whenever this was available. He never sought to fit coins into some preconceived pattern and he was always ready to learn, correct and adapt previous notions, whether those of others, or his own. His collaborator in this great work, C. A. Whitton, was a schoolmaster who had been forced to retire prematurely because of having contracted tuberculosis and who was to die in 1950. Undoubtedly, some of the work on this collaboration had been done before the war arising out of Christopher's earlier short papers on the reigns.

In 1943 he published his first Anglo-Saxon paper and from 1948 Christopher's publications were mostly on Anglo-Saxon subjects, often in collaboration with others. His work on the later medieval coinage had been considerable and of lasting value but his greatest achievements lay before him, not only on Anglo-Saxon numismatics but in being the main force together with Sir Frank Stenton, Dorothy Whitelock, Michael Dolley, Philip Grierson, Philip Whitting, and Sir Edward Robinson in establishing the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* in 1953. However, he still found time to write notes on the Perkin Warbeck jetton (*BNJ* 1950), a new angel of Edward IV (*BNJ* 1950), and, as already said, an addition to his 1942 paper on the heavy gold of Henry IV, particularly with reference to a contract of 1409 newly published by Professor Reddaway and to work done by Herbert Schneider (*BNJ* 1967), and, finally, together with John Brand, a publication of the mint output figures for the reign of Henry III (*BNJ* 1970).

And, finally a personal word. I first met Christopher in the 1950s in Baldwins, the dealers, on a Saturday morning. A small group of collectors used to meet there regularly, including F. Elmore Jones, Philip Whitting, John Brand, and, from time to time, Stewart Lyon, Frank Snow, a young Ian Stewart (Lord Stewartby) and Christopher Blunt, all presided over by a kindly Albert Baldwin. Christopher did not come very often for he had moved to Ramsbury in about 1953 and he only appeared on those occasions when he had had to stay overnight in Town (he had an apartment in the Albany about this time). When he learned that I was interested in the coins of Edward I, II and III an invitation to Ramsbury soon followed and there I was able to see the Fox collection and use the excellent library. Many other invitations followed and there were opportunities to meet other numismatists and to discuss problems and projects. Christopher generously gave me access to manuscript information

originally extracted by or for the Fox Brothers and he was able to steer several Edwardian finds into my hands for publication. Christopher was also for a time President of the Association of British Numismatic Societies and he and Philip Whitting induced me to join several of the lecture courses that they arranged.

Nor was his interest limited to coins alone and I remember interesting discussions on a wide range of antiquarian subjects ranging from Anglo-Saxon carvings in churches, to place names, and even genealogy (I was able to secure an 18th century manorial roll in a local auction which included the name of one of his Sussex ancestors).

Christopher and his wife, Elisabeth, created at Ramsbury an ambience where good humour and good scholarship lived in happy harmony and where I, and I know many other numismatists, learned their trade.