

The Merton College Coin Collection

By J. D. A. THOMPSON

A COLLECTION of coins, tokens and medals, numbering 676 pieces was deposited on permanent loan in the Heberden Coin Room in the Ashmolean Museum by Merton College in 1951. The bulk of this collection which was contained in a small eighteenth century tortoise-shell cabinet, originally belonged to the Rev. Joseph Kilner, Fellow of Merton from 1744 to 1767.¹ The accompanying correspondence shows that he bought many of his coins from the famous London coin-dealer and numismatist, Thomas Snelling (1712-73). This correspondence stops in July, 1767: Kilner resigned in August of that year in order to become Rector of Gamlingay, Cambs., which living he still retained at his death in 1793. It seems that he left his collection behind—presumably in the hands of his younger brother Samuel Kilner, the well-known antiquary, who was Junior Fellow in 1761 and Sub-Warden in 1814. Amongst the papers there is a list of coins in (apparently) Joseph Kilner's own hand. It is not dated, but, to judge from the coins described, it must show the collection as it was in August, 1767; a number of pieces mentioned in Snelling's letters between 1766 and 1767 are to be found there and most are still in Kilner's cabinet.

Joseph Kilner did not collect on such a grand scale as his contemporary at Christ Church, Canon Philip Barton, but the composition of his collection is unusual for its period. Classical coins are in a minority and include only one Greek piece—a silver coin of Chios. His Roman series is not particularly choice, though it ranges from Republican times to the fourth century A.D. Out of 49 coins only two are outstanding; one is a very rare silver denarius (in poor state) of Augustus (Reverse: IOVIS TON[ANTIS]. A hexastyle temple), a variety not hitherto recorded. The other is a gold solidus of Julius Nepos (A.D. 475-80). This is presumably the 'gold Roman coin' for which Kilner paid Mr. Edward Lock (Snelling's agent in Oxford) twelve shillings in 1767. The bill for this and three other coins is amongst the documents and is endorsed 'pd. June 16, 1767, 3 gs'.

Kilner, like Philip Barton, was more interested in British coins and went to

¹ A small number of other coins, all Roman and Graeco-Roman of comparatively poor quality, are housed in a long wooden box. These are probably later additions to the Merton collection and have nothing to do with Joseph Kilner. A list written in ink inside the lid of the box is signed 'E. W. Head' and dated 1831. A few pieces were added as late as 1840.

Sir E. W. Head was a Fellow of Merton from 1830 to 1839. He became Governor-General of Canada (1854-61).

THE MERTON COLLEGE COIN COLLECTION

considerable trouble and expense to form a representative series—including many Scottish and some Irish issues. He did not collect much gold; in fact, it is not certain that all the specimens now in his cabinet belonged to him—some do not appear in his list or in Snelling's letters which are filled with lists of coins in stock which he sent to Oxford for Kilner's inspection. This is the case with two Edward III nobles and several other English gold coins. With the silver we are on safer ground as nearly all the coins now in the cabinet can be identified individually.

The British series begins with a fine example of a gold stater of Cunobelinus; there are also some Anglo-Saxon silver pennies, one or two of which are of high quality, though not of great rarity. Amongst these is an Oxford penny of Edward the Confessor (type IX) which, by an extraordinary coincidence, is a cast moulded from an actual piece in C. L. Stainer's cabinet acquired for the University collection in 1934. This cast appears in Kilner's list as 'ditto, his throne penny', referring to the obverse type of the King enthroned.

The general quality of Kilner's medieval and later coins is not first-class; like most eighteenth-century collectors he mixed a number of indifferent specimens of common coins with his choicest pieces (PL. XIV, 1; Commonwealth sixpence). His only example of Stephen's coinage is more noticeable for its poor execution and bad metal than for its artistic quality. It is probably a contemporary forgery of Stephen's time. I find it impossible to mention all the coins in Kilner's cabinet, but two other English pieces deserve to be recorded: a silver crown of Edward VI, bought from Snelling for 4s. 6d., and a gold 'Broad' of Oliver Cromwell for which Kilner paid two guineas (PL. XIV, 2). A modern collector might well feel envious of these prices.

Kilner, fired perhaps by the example of Dr. Browne Willis,² did not neglect the field of tokens and medals. His series of seventeenth century tokens, though not large, is well selected and comprises 36 pieces, 21 of which are Oxford issues. One other, produced for a London tradesman, John Marten of Queen Lane in Thames Street, is not recorded in Williamson's lists. There are only four later tokens, one of them a Bank Dollar of 1804, the others halfpennies of 1787 and 1794-5. These, of course, were put into the cabinet after Joseph Kilner's retirement from Merton. Such insertions into his cabinet may have been partly due, for a number of years, to one to whom Kilner must almost certainly have owed some of his interest in coin-collecting and even his choice of specimens, namely the Rev. Rogers Ruding, who was a Fellow of Merton from 1750 to 1813. He was a numismatist of great learning and subsequently wrote the *Annals of the British Coinage*, a work which is still considered indispensable for the study of English currency.

² Cf. *British Numismatic Journal*³, VI (1952), 333ff.

J. D. A. THOMPSON

The cabinet includes two early American coins of considerable interest, a Massachusetts 'Pine Tree' shilling of 1652 (PL. XIV, 3) and a threepence of the same period—the latter a very rare piece, though in bad state. Neither of these seems to have been in Kilner's original collection and must have been acquired after his departure in 1767.

One of the Fellows—by name Hartley—was a friend and correspondent of Benjamin Franklin and it may have been through him that these coins came to Merton. Alternatively they may have been bought or given during the American War (1773-83): the College is thought to have been 'anti-Government' at this time and may have shown its interest in this way.³

The English medals present nothing very outstanding though a small silver 'tribute' medal of Charles II, designed by Philip Roettier in 1667⁴ is a rare piece. Unfortunately it is not in good condition.

Joseph Kilner had a pretty taste in continental issues, mostly of his own time, and Snelling was able to supply him with some fine sets of French, Italian Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish and Russian coins (PL. XIV, 4; gold half-Doppia of Genoa). One of the best of these pieces is a portrait coin of Charles XII of Sweden (PL. XIV, 7; silver 4 marks, 1716); this, together with a rouble of the mad Peter III of Russia (PL. XIV, 5), another of Catherine II and a beautiful Papal scudo of Innocent XI, makes up a quartette of coins, the condition and execution of which it would be hard to match. Dutch and German coins are well represented, some of the 'Anglo-Hanoverian' pieces issued by George I and II being in unusually fine condition. There are many other good coins in the European series, but perhaps the most attractive group, apart from those mentioned above, comes from the Spanish American colonies of Mexico and Peru—mostly from the former country. These include several dollars ('Pieces of Eight') and a number of smaller coins issued during the reigns of Philip V, Ferdinand VI and Carlos III (early and mid-eighteenth century).

There are a number of reckoning counters (or 'Jettons') in Kilner's cabinet. Two of these are French medieval pieces, the rest sixteenth and seventeenth century. Most of them are medallic in conception and include counters of Mary Queen of Scots, Queen Anne (wife of James I) and Charles I and Henrietta Maria. The two latter pieces are engraved in the manner of Simon Passe and were produced as part of a set, about 1636. The French counters were all issued for Louis XIII's and Louis XIV's government departments ('Conseil du Roi', 'Trésor Royal', 'Marine').

The last section of the Merton collection to be described has an interest of a

³ David Hartley, the younger (son of the philosopher), was Fellow from 1750 to 1813; he was Chief British envoy at the Anglo-American peace treaty of 1783. His secretary George Hammond (first British ambassador in the United States, 1791-5) was also a Fellow of Merton (1787-1853).

⁴ *Medalllic Illustrations of British History*, no. 194.

THE MERTON COLLEGE COIN COLLECTION

quite different kind. A small hoard of twelve gold coins was discovered near the college chapel in 1903.⁵ It comprises one half-'Laurel' of James I (issued 1623-4), ten guineas and half guineas ranging from Charles II to George I, and one Brazilian half-'moidore' (=half guinea) of John V of Portugal, struck at Bahia in 1715 (PL. XIV, 6).

Assuming that this hoard is complete, it must have been deposited after 1723, the date of the latest coin. The presence of a Portuguese coin confirms the documentary evidence that various foreign pieces equivalent in value to English gold coins were admitted into circulation in the eighteenth century. There is further abundant evidence that the Brazilian 'moidore' and its divisions were used in England, in the shape of numerous brass weights made for the convenience of merchants and tradesmen in handling these coins. The only coin-weight in the Merton collection is, however, of much earlier date. It is for the English gold rose noble—fifteenth or sixteenth century.

Thomas Snelling—to return to him for a moment—was not content merely to send coins on approval; his letters also contain numismatic information and advice about how to clean coins. In April, 1767, he wrote:

'S^r I receiv^d your favour by Dr. Ruding together with the Crowns & $\frac{1}{2}$ crowns, should not have had the least doubt in regard to the 3 crowns you mention—however you have put it quite out of dispute in regard to the Geo. I & Will & Mary, as the boiling them at the Silversmiths has quite spoiled them if you would at any time mend the look of your modern coins either gold or silver take some clean water and make a lather with some soap, only take care the soap is well mixt, then put your pieces into it and boil them for a $\frac{1}{4}$ of an hour, and you will perceive a fine effect when taken out and wiped with a soft rag.'

Amongst the papers there are several early sale catalogues including those of Thoresby and Mussell, both undated. It is possible that some of Joseph Kilner's coins came from these sales, but I have not succeeded in identifying any specimens.

This latest addition to the long and almost complete list of college collections deposited in the Heberden Coin Room is an important one. It is, of course, neither so large nor so varied as the Christ Church collection (accumulated over a much longer period), but it is conspicuous for its own individual interest in throwing light on eighteenth century tastes in coin-collecting and contains a number of specially fine coins. The Warden and Fellows of Merton deserve general gratitude for releasing this collection and depositing it where it is so

⁵ One coin was given to Mr. Axtell (the builder) 'in consideration of the trouble he took in recovering the hoard.'

J. D. A. THOMPSON

easily accessible to the scholar and numismatist. Many of the coins—properly distinguished by coloured tickets—are already incorporated in the general collection in the Coin Room, where they can be studied in relation to other examples. A hand-list is in preparation in duplicate, one copy of which is to be deposited in the college, and a more detailed catalogue is also projected.⁶

⁶ Many years ago, Sir Arthur Evans compiled a manuscript list of the Merton coins. This tallies to a great extent with the series now present in Kilner's cabinet, but it does not include any of the foreign pieces. If, as I believe, this list was made about 1875, it must have been one of Evans's first excursions into numismatics.

PLATE XIV



SELECTED COINS FROM THE MERTON COLLEGE CABINET

1. Commonwealth : silver sixpence, 1672. 2. Oliver Cromwell : gold 'broad', 1656. 3. Massachusetts : silver shilling, 1652. 4. Genoa : gold half-doppia, 17th century. 5. Russia, Peter III : silver rouble, 1762. 6. Brazil, John V of Portugal : Gold half-moidore, 1715. 7. Sweden, Charles XII : silver 4 marks, 1716.