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# Hunt for Evidence of Henry VIII Farthings in the Early Numismatic Literature

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## Introduction

Until recently, the portcullis farthings of Henry VIII were amongst the rarest of English hammered coins. A recent acquisition of a second coinage farthing has prompted me to survey the literature on these fascinating coins with the aim of trying to answer the question: 'Who was the first to correctly describe a Henry VIII farthing?' This paper provides a brief overview of: the English farthing, the coinages of Henry VIII, Henry VIII farthing types based on the most recent scholarship, contemporary evidence for Henry VIII farthings, contemporary accounts of the coinage by Tudor authors, the early numismatic literature and early collectors of Henry VIII farthings.

## The English farthing: a short history

The first struck English farthings appeared in the reign of Henry III and were authorised by the Patent Rolls of 1222. Inflation took its toll over the next 300 years, with the last hammered silver farthings being struck (1551–53)<sup>1</sup> in Edward VI's reign. Silver farthings and halfpennies were often difficult to distinguish as they both had similar designs, with a portrait of the king on the obverse. To overcome this problem, a farthing with a unique design was introduced during the reign of Henry VIII, which included a portcullis (the family emblem

of his grandmother, Margaret Beaufort<sup>2</sup>) on the obverse. A new denomination, the three-farthings, was introduced by Elizabeth I in 1561, which when used in conjunction with either a penny or a halfpenny would allow a transaction for a farthing to take place. Copper City of Bristol token farthings were also trialed during the reign of Elizabeth I.<sup>1</sup>, pp.208–10 To meet the need for a farthing coin, James I and Charles I granted licences to strike copper farthings, the first of which was granted in 1613 to Lord Harrington. The severe shortage of small change during the Commonwealth and Regency prompted tradesmen to issue their own tokens. From 1672 milled farthings were struck in copper, or tin, or both. The farthing ceased to be legal tender in 1961.

## A short survey of Henry VIII's coinage<sup>3</sup>

Although Henry VIII was ill-regarded by early numismatists, the innovations of his father's (Henry VII) reign continued and were expanded to include the introduction of a number of new denominations as well as the new farthing design. His coinages are divided into: 1st coinage of 1509–26, which followed the designs of his father's last coinage; 2nd coinage (1526–44), which introduced a number of new designs including a youthful portrait for the groats and half-groats; and 3rd coinage (1544–47),

a period in which the pressure on the currency led to the great debasement which earned him the nickname 'old copper-nose'. Upon Henry's death his son, Edward VI, continued to issue coins with the portrait of his father, and this issue is classified as the posthumous coinage (1547–51).

### Survey of Henry VIII farthing types based on the most recent scholarship

Even as recently as 1973, only three types of Henry VIII farthings were known, of which two had their reverse legends incorrectly described.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship<sup>5–8</sup> has been fuelled by the discovery of new specimens, including unique types. These have appeared on the market since the 1970s due to excavations of the Thames embankment and the rise of 'treasure hunting' with metal detectors.<sup>9</sup> As a result of examining many of the known specimens, Withers and Withers<sup>7</sup> have classified the farthings of Henry VIII into the following types:

1st coinage, London<sup>7</sup>, p.22: Types 1a-c. This is the most common type (>10 known).

*Obverse:* Portcullis in circle: HENRIC DI GRA REX (Figure 1a). Withers and Withers note that there are at least 6 die types.

*Reverse:* Rose in centre of long cross: CIVITAS LONDON (Figure 1b). Withers and Withers note that there are at least 5 die types.

2nd coinage, London<sup>7</sup>, p.27: Types 1Aa; 1Ba and 1Bb; 1Ca. Rare (around 10 known) mm\*: rose, lis, sunburst.

*Obverse:* Portcullis in circle: \* RUTILANS ROSA (Figure 1c).

*Reverse:* Long cross with 4 pellets: DEO GRACIAS (Figure 1d).

2nd coinage, London<sup>7</sup>, p.27: Types 2a-c. Rare (<10 known) mm\*: arrow.

*Obverse:* Portcullis in circle: \* RUTILANS ROSA (Figure 1e).

*Reverse:* Rose in centre of long cross: DEO GRACIAS (Figure 1f).

2nd coinage, Canterbury<sup>7</sup>, p.29: Type 1a. Unique (found 1987), mm\*: Catherine wheel.

*Obverse:* Portcullis in circle: \* RUTILANS ROSA.

*Reverse:* Rose in centre of long cross: DEO GRACIAS.

3rd coinage, London<sup>7</sup>, p.33: Type 1a. Unique (found 1991).

*Obverse:* Rose in centre: \* H D G RUTIL ROSA.

*Reverse:* Long cross with 4 pellets: DEO GRACIAS.

### Contemporary Tudor government evidence for Henry VIII farthings

Many of the Tudor parliamentary and mint records have still survived, and Challis has reviewed them in his book.<sup>1</sup> These contemporary records are briefly reviewed here for their evidence on the farthing coins of Henry VIII:

Statutes of Parliament for 1523: these specifically mention a new design aimed at avoiding confusion in distinguishing between farthings and halfpennies: 'on one side a portcullis and on the other a rose with a cross'.<sup>10</sup>, p.392; 1, p.203

Indentures<sup>1</sup>, pp.310–17: these mention the farthing as a denomination to mint in: 1509 (Tower); 1526 (Tower); 1533 (Tower); 1542 (Tower); 1547 (Tower); 1547 (Canterbury); 1547 (Southwark). Other indentures do not mention farthings. Some indentures exclude all denominations except groats (1545).

Trials of the Pyx: Challis notes that just because they were mentioned in indentures



Figure 1.

does not mean they were struck.<sup>1</sup>, p.202 In fact, a case for them not being struck could be made based on the fact that the farthing was unpopular with mint workers. Thus by the time of the great debasement, 1 pound weight could comprise 45 shillings, 135 groats, 270 half-groats, 540 pence, 1080 halfpennies or 2160 farthings (with typical weights of 2–3 grains). Nonetheless, apart from the existing specimens, it is clear that farthings were struck in some numbers as they were tested during trials of the Pyx at the Tower Mint on the following dates: 4 June 1527; 21 November 1527; 20 May 1530; 1 March 1533; 30 October 1534; 16 June 1540.<sup>5</sup>

### Contemporary accounts of the coinage by Tudor authors

The Tudor period saw a flourishing of the sciences and an increased interest in the history of England, with the College

of Antiquaries of London being founded around 1586.<sup>11</sup>, pp.8–10 Unfortunately, British numismatics was still in its infancy, with most scholarship devoted to Roman or early British numismatics. Here the work of three authors is briefly discussed:

**William Camden** (1551–1623)<sup>11</sup>, pp.6, 7; 12, p.105 *Britannia*<sup>13</sup> and *Remains concerning Britain*.<sup>14</sup> Many regard Camden as the first modern English historian. His *Britannia* is a detailed study of the British Isles, which includes sections on Roman and Celtic coins.<sup>13</sup> Camden's *Remains*<sup>14</sup>, described by the author as the 'rubble' of a greater work, was published in 1605. Interestingly, this work contains a written discussion of English hammered coinage, although Camden does not describe the coins of Henry VIII in any detail.

**John Stow** (1525-1605)<sup>12</sup>, p.675, *Survey of London*.<sup>15</sup> Stow's book tells the history of London and provides a picture of what life in the contemporary Tudor city was

like. Although he does not describe the farthings of Henry VIII, he does describe the change in the designs of the small coins of his son Edward VI<sup>15</sup>, p.57: 'A penny with a double Rose, halfe penny a single Rose, and a farthing with a Porteclose'.

**Robert Recorde** (c1512–58),<sup>12</sup>, p.589 *The Grounde of Artes*, 1543 (1st edn). This famous Tudor mathematician, who invented the equal sign (=) and was a Mint official (at Durham house from 1548,<sup>1</sup>, p.100) wrote a widely used mathematical primer in English on the 'new' decimal arithmetic and the 'ancient' abacus arithmetic. In this book he also discusses the circulating coinage.<sup>1</sup>, pp.221–23 He specifically mentions the design of the farthing and the reason for his description: '...and last and least of all a farthing whose coin is on the one side a cross and the other a portcullis', since: '...because I see many that cannot know a farthing from a small halfpenny'.

### The early numismatic literature

The study of the complete English coinage did not seriously begin until Archbishop Sharpe (late 1690s). In fact, the Society of Antiquaries only in 1721 started to consider '...to attempt a Compleat description and history of all the Coyns relating to Great Britain from the earliest times to our own'.<sup>11</sup>, p.71 Ruding gives an excellent overview of the early numismatic literature.<sup>10</sup> Of these, the following have been examined for references to the farthings of Henry VIII:

**Bishop W Nicolson**, *The Historical English Library*.<sup>16</sup> He notes a lack of scholarly interest:

*Our common ordinary coins are still neglected and untouch'd, and therefore it's but a lame account that's to be look'd*

*for in this first essay* (p. 228).

He gives a brief commentary on the coinage of Henry VIII and notes the new farthing design (p. 263):

*The state of Henry the Eighth's Money was like his Mind and Humor, very changeable and uncertain.*

*...good provision was made for the regulation of the mints; particular care being taken that all farthings (not heretofore distinguishable from half-pence) should have the portcullis on one side, and the rose with a cross on the other:*

**Bishop W Fleetwood**, *Chronicon Preciosum*.<sup>17</sup> This book is an early treatise on economics and is an excellent source on costs of goods over several hundred years. A few lists and plates of coins are 'tacked on' at the end. There is no mention of the farthings of Henry VIII.

**Stephen Martin Leake**, *An Historical Account of English Money*.<sup>18</sup> He makes a numismatic blunder (p. 206 and plate IV, illustrated in Figure 2):

*The portcullis farthings, by the statute were to have on the reverse a rose, but I have never seen or heard of any such: but there are farthings having on one side the portcullis, and on the other the cross and pellets.*

This coin is, in fact, a common half-penny of Elizabeth I.

**Martin Folkes**, *Table of Silver Coins*.<sup>19</sup> He was actively involved in both the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries and turned the Society of Antiquaries' scheme for compiling tables of coins to his own profit.<sup>11</sup>, p.95 He can thus be assumed to have had access to a wide range of numismatic material. Folkes comments on the rarity of farthings (pp. 23, 24):

*The half-pennies and farthings of this*

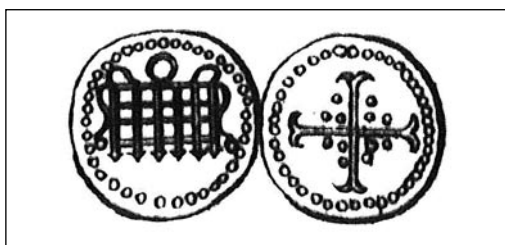


Figure 2

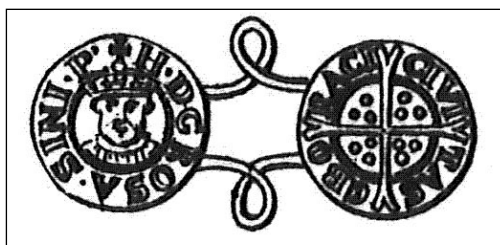


Figure 3

*period I can give no account of, as having seen no pieces I could know to have been such.*

*Yet I have never seen any pieces myself that could answer this plain description, nor indeed any others I could take for farthings after this time.*

**R Withy and I Ryall**, *Twelve Plates of English Silver Coins*.<sup>20</sup>

They correct Leake's error (from page 'z'):

*It has been conjectured by an author; (whose works when expunged from a few errors are truly valuable) that the 35th coin in his fourth plate is a farthing of this king's, but the coin there graved is a very common half penny of queen Elizabeth, And by the mint mark struck in the year 1600.*

They comment that: 'The late Mr. Bolton had a farthing of this king, of London mint, with a portcullis on one side, a cross and pellets on the other.'

Unfortunately they do not illustrate or describe the coin. They also make a numismatic blunder on page 'y' and in plate 12 where coin 15 is described as a farthing (obverse: H.D.G. Rosa. Spa; reverse: Civitas Eboraci. See Figure 3), but it is likely to be a third coinage halfpenny of York.

**Thomas Snelling**, *A view of the silver coin and coinage of England*.<sup>21</sup> He comments on the rarity of farthings (p. 22):

*The statutes enact that the farthing should have on one side a portclose, and on the other a cross with a rose; but no farthing with this type is at present to be found in any cabinet that we know of, they are of standard silver; and weight but three grains Troy, but few could have been coined, as the statute directs only 1/30 of any quantity of bullion brought to the mint, was to be coined into farthings.*

**Rogers Ruding**, *Annals of the coinage of Great Britain and its dependencies*.<sup>10</sup> Finally, after 300 years, Ruding was the first to correctly illustrate 3 types of farthings, although the legends were not all correctly drawn:

Plate XVI, #17: 1st coinage, type 1 (Figure 4a)

Plate XVI, #18: 2nd coinage, type 1 (Figure 4b)

Plate XVI, #24: 2nd coinage, type 2 (Figure 4c).

### Records of early collections<sup>22</sup>

Another related question is: 'Who was the first collector to own a Henry VIII farthing?' Apart from the numismatic texts described above, information on the early collectors of Henry VIII farthings may be gleaned from auction<sup>23</sup> and coin dealers' records. Using Webb-Ware's list<sup>5</sup>, an attempt has been made to establish the earliest

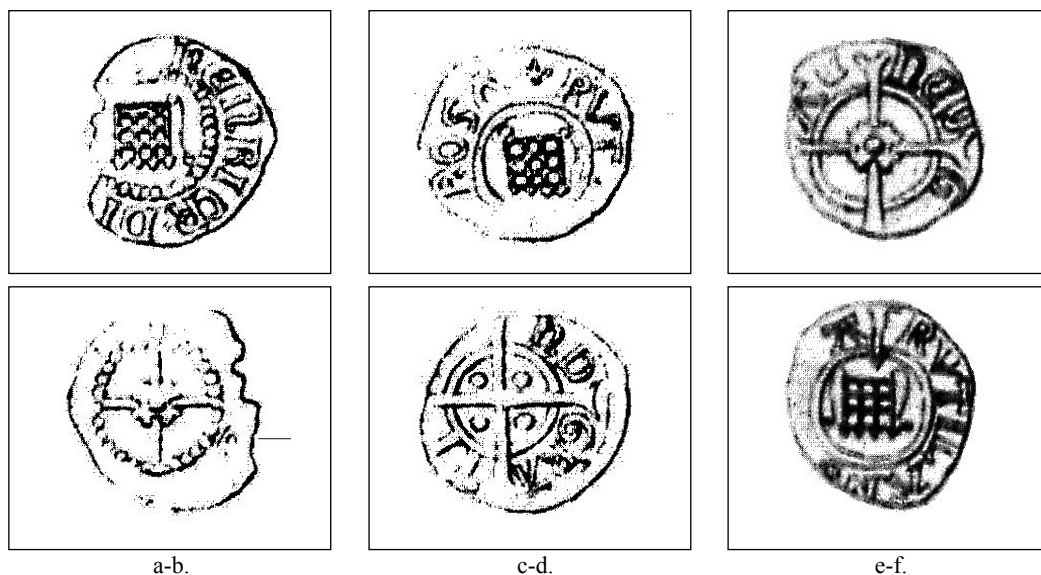


Figure 4.

provenance of a known Henry VIII farthing. Of the 15 farthings listed by Webb-Ware, only the following seven are 'early' examples (i.e. pre-metal detector and Thames River finds), with the earliest collector shown first, along with brief details on their collection:

*First Coinage (1523–1526):* mm Portcullis:

1. **BM Grueber** 402; this British Museum coin has no other registration details or provenance and so its exact date of acquisition is uncertain. Its registration number is given by reference to Grueber's book (where it is listed on p. 72 as coin number 402).<sup>22</sup>

2. **Walsingham Heirlooms** 281; Wheeler 311; Ryan 976; Norweb 324. This coin was from a sale of 'Walsingham Estate Heirlooms' by Major C.B. Lee-Warner and the Trustees at Sotheby's (21 November 1921). Although the Lee-Warner family owned Walsingham Abbey since the 1750s,

it is unknown when they acquired this farthing.

3. **Dimsdale** 491; Edmonds; Shepherd 222; Montagu 747; Bascom 109. This coin is from the Thomas Dimsdale collection, sold at Sotheby's on 6 July 1824. I have been unable to confirm if this Dimsdale corresponds to the renowned and wealthy medical practitioner and banker, Baron Thomas Dimsdale (1712–1800).<sup>25</sup>

*Second Coinage (1526–1544)*—Type 1 with pellet reverse: mm Rose (1526–29), Lis (1529–32 & 1538–41), Sunburst (1537–38):

4. **British Museum** 1927 2-6-1; ex Littledale. From the W.A. Littledale collection, which was sold at Sotheby's (22 June 1931). This coin was, however, an earlier donation to the British Museum.

5. **Martin** 156; Murchison 126; Addington; Montagu (1888) 185; Crowther 87 (Ruding, plate XVI, 18). This coin was from the Rev. J. W. Martin collection sold by Sotheby's

on 23 May 1859.

6. **Henderson**; Wigan; Brice; Montagu 757; Bascom 111; Mann 280; Wheeler (uncertain). Recently I discovered from John Sharples that this specimen is in the collection of the Museum of Victoria and I am now able to revise its provenance based on their records.<sup>26</sup> Thus it first appears to have been part of the John Henderson collection, which was sold at Sotheby's (24 June 1818; 18, 23 Feb 1830).

*Second Coinage (1526–1544)*—Type 2 with rose reverse: Arrow (1532–42):

7. **British Museum** 1842 1.10.11; ex Wellings. This coin was in the collection of Rev. Thomas Wellings, sold at Sotheby's (17 July 1839; 20 Dec 1841).

It appears that the earliest auction records for Henry VIII farthings date to the early 1800s. Thus the earliest recorded piece may be the second coinage farthing described by Wither & Ryall, 1756<sup>20</sup>:

*The late Mr. Bolton had a farthing of this king, of London mint, with a portcullis on one side, a cross and pellets on the other.*

## Conclusions

Why did a farthing with a striking, new and innovative design remain a numismatic phantom for so long? There appear to be two main reasons: their minute size meant that farthings were easily lost; and secondly, they were still neglected by numismatists more than 100 years after they were minted, as noted by Bishop W Nicolson.<sup>16</sup>

It is a shame that contemporary Tudor authors did not bother to describe or illustrate their own current coinage in any detail. Indeed, Lower laments that 'Had the Times existed in his day, I have no doubt that Master Camden, from his large acquaintance with things in general,

could have produced a very able "Money Article" in that journal'.<sup>14</sup>, p. 208

Finally, it is worth commenting on the likelihood of new discoveries of Henry VIII farthings. Given the continued appearance of new metal detector finds, I echo de Roger's sentiments that 'other mintmarks or mints may still be found'<sup>6</sup>.

## Acknowledgments

This article could not have been written without the help of several people. Firstly, I would like to thank Bradley Shepherd for images of Henry VIII farthings used in Figures 1c-f and for many useful comments and encouragement. I thank John Sharples for kindly drawing my attention to the Museum of Victoria's farthing and providing me details on its purchase. I am indebted to Dr Barrie Cook (Curator of Medieval and Early Modern Coinage, Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum) for furnishing detailed information on the provenances of the seven 'early' specimens of Henry VIII farthings. I acknowledge CNG for the images used in Figures 1a and b. I would like to thank the librarians from: Rare Book Collection of the University of Melbourne; State Library of Victoria; Matheson Library at Monash University.

## References

1. CE Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, Barnes & Noble, 1978.
2. S Anglo, *Images of Tudor Kingship*, Seaby, London, 1992, p. 35.
3. CA Whitton, 'The Coinage of Henry VIII and Edward VI in Henry's Name', *BNJ* 26, 1950–52, pp. 56–89, 171–212, 290–332. These now dated

articles still remain the definitive description of the coinages of Henry VIII.

4. EJ Harris and PF Purvey, 'Notes on English Hammered Halfpence and Farthings: Henry



- VIII', *SCMB*, 1973, 88–90.
5. TG Webb-Ware, 'The Farthings of Henry VIII', *NC*, 1987, 218.
  6. DJ de Rogers, 'The Portcullis and Rose Farthings of Henry VIII', *NC*, 1994, 399.
  7. P Withers and BR Withers, *Small Change V: The Small Silver of Henry VIII to the Commonwealth*, Galata, 2004.
  8. For an excellent website on hammered farthings, see:  
[http://hammered\\_farthings.tripod.com](http://hammered_farthings.tripod.com)
  9. The only list of known Henry VIII farthings and their pedigrees appeared in Webb-Ware's article [5]. This list is now completely out of date as a significant number of new examples have appeared on the market. Bradley Shepard is compiling an updated list of all known specimens<sup>8</sup>.
  10. Revd R Ruding, *Annals of the coinage of Great Britain and its dependencies: from the earliest period of authentic history to the reign of Victoria*, J Hearne, London, 1840 (3rd edn).
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  18. SM Leake, *An Historical Account of English Money*, London, 1745 (2nd edn).
  19. M Folkes, *Table of Silver Coins*, 1745 (1st edn).
  20. R Withy and I Ryall, *Twelve Plates of English Silver Coins*, London, 1756.
  21. T Snelling, *A view of the silver coin and coinage of England*, London, 1762.
  22. The most complete collection of Henry VIII farthings to appear at auction was the celebrated Shuttleworth collection sold by Spinks in 2001, which included the following specimens: Lot 110 1st coinage, London; Lot 151 2nd coinage, London (mm lis); Lot 152 2nd coinage, London (mm sunburst); Lot 153 2nd coinage, London (mm arrow); Lot 154 2nd coinage, Canterbury (mm catherine); Lot 185 3rd coinage.
  23. HE Manville and TJ Robertson, *British Numismatic Auction Catalogues 1710–1984*, Spink & Son, 1986.
  24. HA Grueber, *Handbook of the coins of Great Britain and Ireland in the British Museum*, London, 1899.
  25. *Dictionary of national biography*, L Stephen (ed), Smith, Elder, London, 1885–1900.
  26. The museum records indicate that it was bought from Seaby, and the account for the farthing reads (26 October 1932):  
*M1695 Henry VIII Farthing Second Issue fine and of the highest rarity, from Henderson, Wigan, Brice, Montague, Baron, Mann and Wheeler Collections only one other said to be known £21.10.0.*

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