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NUMISMATIC COLLECTIONS

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THE COIN COLLECTION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS, UK

The University of Leeds was founded in 1904, although its origins stretch back further to 1831 through the merger of various predecessor institutions. Leeds University Library holds the University's collections, which are particularly strong in rare books, manuscripts, and various archives. Leeds University Library Special Collections in the Brotherton Library is also the home of the University's collection of over 20,000 coins, tokens, and medals.

History of the Coin Collection

The University of Leeds first began to develop a coin collection in the early 1920s when the then Department of Latin acquired a small teaching collection of Roman Imperial bronze and silver coins. For a number of years this small group remained the full extent of the numismatic collection at the University until the donation, in 1949, of a further group of Roman Imperial coins by the Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society. These approximately 200 coins were presumably found locally given the interests of the Society, although it is not currently possible to identify any provenance beyond their donation to the University. In the early 1950s, however, the University began to take a serious interest in the development of the coin collection. W.V. Wade, who published several articles on excavations at Roman sites in Yorkshire as well as a Roman hoard from the county, was appointed honorary curator of the Collection.¹ Wade was responsible for the donation of a hoard of 253 Roman sestertii apparently from the Greek island of Paros, although the circumstances of discovery and the exact location of the find are unknown.² This assemblage from Paros is the only hoard in the collection and the only instance in which some indication of provenance is given.



Fig. 1 – Sestertius from Paros hoard (CC/PAR/100)

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¹ HILDYARD & WADE 1952.

² GLENN 2022, p. 375.

The desire to hold a serious numismatic collection at the University of Leeds led to the acquisition of the so-called Winchester Cabinet group of coins in 1954. This remarkable group of over 4,000 coins was formed in the eighteenth century by William Eyre, a fellow of New College, Oxford and lawyer who, on his death in 1764, bequeathed his coin collection to the Dean and Chapter of Winchester Cathedral in memory of one of his brothers. Unfortunately, due to a lack of surviving documentation, some uncertainty surrounds the Eyre family, although it seems that William bequeathed his coins to Winchester Cathedral as he was from the city, and that at least one other member also held an interest in numismatics. The University of Leeds holds a manuscript list of coins 'in my possession at Aleppo in 1769' compiled by an anonymous Eyre. Unfortunately, the descriptions of the coins are brief, but from those that are recognisable as particular (rare) issues, it seems that they were not part of the collection now held in the Winchester Cabinet at Leeds. Rather, the coins (Hellenistic, Roman Imperial, and Roman Provincial) seem to have found their way into the possession of the great 18th-century collector William Hunter and are now part of the collection of the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow.



Fig 2 - The Winchester Cabinet

Of the approximately 4,000 coins which make up the collection contained within the Winchester Cabinet, a majority are Roman Imperial issues. Thirty-two aurei were presumably Eyre's most prized coins, being placed at the beginning of the trays. Indeed, the Cabinet itself betrays a sense of grandeur in its compiler. Each tray being wrapped in red leather with marbled undersides and gilded labels of the period and metal of the coins

within on the edge. The largest group of coins in the Winchester Cabinet are Roman imperial gold, silver, and bronze, numbering approximately 1,300, with 100 Greek specimens and a similar number of medieval English coins. Small numbers of Ancient British, Byzantine, Scottish, and European medieval and modern coins make up the rest of the coins in the Cabinet, along with a larger number of English coins from the Tudor period to the early 19th century, including some important 17th-century trade tokens. Finally, the Cabinet also includes a small collection of medals which are mainly English in origin.

In addition to a curator and the Winchester Cabinet, the coin collection acquired, in 1955, a University committee which was responsible for its 'safe keeping', the 'conditions under which the Collection may be used for teaching and research', and (most crucially) its further expansion. Initially chaired by John Le Patrouel, professor of Medieval History at the University, members of the Committee often had expertise in history or archaeology. Among those from a Classical background were B.R. Hartley, lecturer in Romano-British Archaeology, Ernst Badian, Professor of Ancient History at the University from 1965 to 1969, and his successor Harold B. Mattingly whose publications on numismatic subjects are well-known. Coins were used beyond the teaching of Greek and Roman History, and Benedikt Isserlin, head of the Department of Semitic Studies, persuaded the Committee to acquire electrotypes and coins related to his own field. The presence of Jack Nutting, professor of Metallurgy led to the undertaking of programmes of metal analysis of the coins, although these were not without their difficulties. The subjection of some 'late Roman brass small denomination duplicate coins' to neutron activation analysis in 1961 led to a visit from the Radioactivity Inspector of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government four years later and the instruction to dispose of the analysed coins and the advice only to undertake X-ray fluorescence experiments from then on.

Alongside the Winchester Cabinet, the University acquired a second major collection of coins in the 1950s. In 1957 a large number of coins was given, initially anonymously, by Alderman Horace Hird of the nearby Yorkshire city of Bradford. Hird had been involved with the Collection before his donation as an honorary member of the Coin Committee, was a lifelong coin collector, and was keen to make sure his coins stayed together and were available for teaching and research. To this end, four years earlier, he had given his large collection of Scottish gold coins to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.³ At Leeds, Hird specifically chose coins for his donation which were not previously represented in the collection. As a result, Hird's donation contained no Roman material, but many gold coins. The University received 69 (mainly gold) Iron Age coins and 171 Anglo-Saxon and medieval silver

³ BATESON & MAYHEW 1987.

coins minted in the north of England, mainly at York. Hird's donation of gold coins was substantial, with 86 hammered specimens representing almost every denomination of English gold money struck from Edward III to the Commonwealth and 57 milled gold coins from Charles II to William IV. The local focus of the donation is also clear from the inclusion of approximately 320 seventeenth-century tokens specifically from Derbyshire and Yorkshire, undoubtedly selected by Hird with the intention of making this one of the most complete collections of such tokens from these two counties.



Fig. 3 – Triple Unite, Charles I, Oxford mint, 1643 (CC/AH/MOD/1)

Following these two major acquisitions in the 1950s, the Coin Collection continued to grow at a much slower rate in the second half of the twentieth century, as funds for purchases were limited. The Coin Committee acquired a new Chair in the mid-1970s in the form of Dr Christopher Challis, an economic historian and numismatist who published important books on Tudor coinage and the history of the Royal Mint.⁴ Challis's expertise in these fields led to the limited funds made available by the University for the purchase of coins often being used to purchase Tudor coins, or medieval issues with local significance. At a similar time, the presence of Elizabeth Pirie as Keeper of Archaeology at the Leeds City Museum led to her inclusion on the University's Coin Committee. Beyond her civic position in Leeds, Pirie was keen to engage with other collections nearby, writing an overview of the coins held in the Yorkshire Museum at York for this journal.⁵ Indeed, it was Pirie's work which, until the recent publication of the Paros hoard, was alone in presenting a large selection of material held at the University of Leeds. Her *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles* volume covered coins not only from the Leeds City Museum for which she was responsible, but also from the Yorkshire Museum and the University of Leeds.⁶ The volume covers Ancient British and Northumbrian coins as well as English, Scottish, and Irish issues up to 1279.

⁴ CHALLIS 1978 & 1992.

⁵ PIRIE 1985.

⁶ PIRIE 1975.

The final major donation of material for the University's numismatic collection came in the 1990s with the extremely generous gift of Mr Paul Thackray. In several stages Mr Thackray donated over 15,000 coins. Many specimens expanded existing parts of the collection, particularly with further Roman Imperial and ancient Greek bronze issues, while even more coins introduced entirely new areas of coverage for the Collection. Roman Provincial coins were included for the first time, while the Byzantine and Medieval sections were expanded dramatically. More importantly, the Thackray donation increased the scope of the collection by introducing large numbers of coins produced outside Europe. Ancient and Mughal India, the Sassanian Empire, China, Japan, and Vietnam were all represented for the first time, and in significant quantity. The donation also augmented the existing collection of seventeenth-century tokens, expanding coverage significantly beyond the local Derbyshire and Yorkshire areas selected by Alderman Hird.



Fig. 4 - Rupee, East India Company, Bengal mint, 1809 (CC/TH/IND/9)

Beyond the mainly English examples present in the Winchester Cabinet, the University coin collection also includes a small number of medals which make up a rather disparate group, since they were usually acquired as gifts from staff or students of the University. As a result, the collection includes several prize medals from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries awarded for various achievements, mainly in the fields of engineering or agriculture, as well as a small number of military medals awarded to members of the University.



Fig. 5 - Winchester Cathedral commemorative medal, 1860 (CC/WC/MDL/1)

Recent developments

With the retirement of Dr Challis, and a reorganisation of the University's administrative structures leading to the dissolution of the Coin Committee, the collection was somewhat neglected for a number of years. Recent work has, however, led to a renewed focus on the coins aimed both at audiences within and without the University of Leeds. Coins have been reintroduced into several different teaching sessions for undergraduate and postgraduate students, from ancient Greek and Roman, to Medieval European, and East Asian history. Cataloguing continues and the development of a specific numismatic interface for the online catalogue of the Leeds University Library allows researchers from all over the world to access the material and perform targeted searches on numismatic fields.⁷ Coins from the University of Leeds have appeared in various digital numismatics projects such as the American Numismatic Society's PELLA portal, and the University of Oxford's Roman Provincial Coinage Online and Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire projects.⁸ It should be noted that only a small proportion of the coin collection currently appears in the online catalogue and Leeds University Library Special Collections welcomes enquiries from researchers as to its uncatalogued holdings.

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⁷ https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/collection/1491/coin_collection

⁸ <http://numismatics.org/pella/>; <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk>; <https://chre.ashmus.ox.ac.uk>