

# THE LAXFIELD HOARD: SOME PUZZLES EXPLAINED BUT NOT YET RESOLVED

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At a recent Dix Noonan Webb sale, 6 May 2020, the present writer was fortunate enough to acquire lot 499, a late ninth century Carolingian denier of GDR type of the mint of Rouen. This had previously been offered by Dix Noonan Webb in their sale of 12 June 2018, lot 1926, as part of the extensive collection of coins of this character formed by the late Tony Merson.

What the cataloguer of these sales was unaware of was that the coin, when in Merson's possession, had been discussed and illustrated by Jens Christian Moesgaard in an article on the late ninth and early tenth century coinage of Normandy contributed by him to the volume of essays published in 2007 under the title *Silver Economy in the Viking Age*, edited by James Graham-Campbell and Gareth Williams<sup>1</sup>.

Moesgaard pointed out that the coin, which has mis-spelled inscriptions, closely resembles a specimen of this type and mint illustrated a century and a half previously by Faustin Poey d'Avant in his *Monnaies Féodales de France*, vol.1, pl.III, no.11<sup>2</sup>, which, as Moesgaard remarks, is "the most degenerate of those [of this general type] illustrated by Poey d'Avant". The coin illustrated by Poey d'Avant was said by him to weigh only 1.40g., and might thus readily be assigned to an early tenth century date, but Moesgaard records that Merson's coin was "almost full-weight", at 1.63g., and that this would indicate "a rather early date" within the late ninth century Rouen GDR series.<sup>3</sup> This was something of a conundrum in view of the coin's mis-spelled inscriptions.

Moesgaard cited in this context Merson's own belief that his coin derived from an hoard of Carolingian deniers found in the early nineteenth century at Laxfield, Suffolk, a belief engendered by the fact that the coin had come to Merson as part of a small parcel of Carolingian deniers of GDR type which had included a very uncommon denier with a Karolus monogram and the obverse inscription IMPERATOR AGUST, and the reverse inscription SCS GAVGERICI MON, showing that it had been struck at the abbey mint of St.Géry in the city of Cambrai<sup>4</sup>. Both a denier of this character and a denier of GDR type of Rouen, as Merson was

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<sup>1</sup> J.C.Moesgaard, 'A survey of coin production and currency in Normandy, 864-945', in J.Graham-Campbell and G.Williams, eds., *Silver Economy in the Viking Age*, 2007 (reissued 2016), 99-121.

<sup>2</sup> F.Poey d'Avant, *Monnaies Féodales de France*, vol.1, 1858, p.21, coin no.103, ill. pl.III, no.11. Poey d'Avant records that the coin was then in the Lecarpentier collection, formed by Barthélemy Lecarpentier, a businessman in Honfleur (Calvados). The collection was donated to the Bibliothèque Municipale, Rouen, by Lecarpentier's widow in 1863.

<sup>3</sup> The coin was re-weighed for the Dix Noonan Webb catalogue and the weight is again recorded as 1.63g.

<sup>4</sup> This coin was offered by Dix Noonan Webb in their sale of 18-20 September 2018, lot 1514, without any stated provenance. Merson had however reported the existence of this parcel verbally to the present writer (to whom Merson also showed the coins concerned), to Moesgaard, to the late Peter Woodhead and doubtless to others as well.

aware, had featured in the only known list of coins from the Laxfield hoard, cited in an article published in *BNJ* in the 1960s by Michael Dolley and Prof. Karl Morrison<sup>5</sup>, and it seemed natural to Merson to make an equation between the coins in his parcel and those listed as having been found at Laxfield.

### *The Laxfield Carolingian parcel*

The primary evidence for a hoard of Carolingian coins having been found at some date in the early nineteenth century at Laxfield, Suffolk, a village in the farmland belt towards the north of the county some five miles west of the larger town of Halesworth, is a list of nine Carolingian deniers discovered in the early 1960s among “Banks MSS” in the Department of Coins and Medals in the British Museum<sup>6</sup>. The list in question could not be found when the late Mark Blackburn investigated the topic in the late 1980s, and has not surfaced since, and it is seriously annoying in retrospect that Dolley and Morrison chose to summarise its content rather than to reproduce it verbatim, but there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of their statement that the list indicated that the coins were found at Laxfield.

The coins comprised six deniers of GDR type, of which two were of Quentovic, one of Laon, one of Rouen, one of Nivelles, and one of St.Géry at Cambrai, and three coins described by Dolley and Morrison, presumably following in part the wording and in part the sense of the list, as “illegible” but of “Temple types, (*Christiana Religio*)”. Dolley and Morrison’s identifications of the deniers of GDR type, with attached references to Prou and to Morrison/Grunthal, indicate that all carried a Karolus monogram on their obverse, and Dolley and Morrison chose to attribute the coins of Quentovic, Laon and Rouen to Charles the Bald, the coin of Nivelles to Charles the Bald with a query, and the coin of St.Géry, with the IMPERATOR AGUST inscription on its obverse, to the Emperor Charles the Fat, again with a query. They assigned a deposit date of c.875 to the hoard, evidently without focusing on the fact that if the hoard was deposited in the mid 870s the coin of St.Géry, with its imperial inscription, must have been struck during Charles the Bald’s brief reign as Emperor between 29 December 875 and his death on 6 October 877, rather than in the reign of Charles the Fat, who was not crowned Emperor until 12 February 881.

A date of deposit for the Laxfield hoard of c.875 was emended to a date “probably during the late 870s” by Mark Blackburn in his paper on the Ashdon hoard published in 1989, rightly taking account of the fact that the St.Géry coin could not on any view have been struck earlier than at some point in the year 876<sup>7</sup>. What Blackburn however does not mention is that in the relevant volume in the MEC series authored by Grierson and Blackburn jointly, published in 1986, Grierson’s specimen of the St.Géry coin had been attributed to Charles the Fat, not to Charles the Bald<sup>8</sup>, and

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<sup>5</sup> R.H.M.Dolley and K.F.Morrison, ‘Finds of Carolingian coins from Great Britain and Ireland’, *BNJ* xxxii (for 1963), 75-87.

<sup>6</sup> Dolley and Morrison, *op.cit.*, hoard 11 on p.79.

<sup>7</sup> M.A.S.Blackburn, ‘The Ashdon (Essex) hoard and the currency of the Southern Danelaw in the late ninth century’, *BNJ* 59, 1989, 13-38. The date of deposit of the Laxfield hoard is discussed by him in n.28 on p.22, where he also records his inability to locate the list of the Carolingian coins utilised by Dolley and Morrison.

<sup>8</sup> P.Grierson and M.Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage 1 (MEC 1), The Early Middle Ages (5<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries)*, 1986, coin 969 (on p.548). The reasons for the reattribution to Charles the Fat are explained, not very clearly, on p.235.

readers of Moesgaard's article of 2007 will find that he dates the deposit of the Laxfield hoard to somewhere between 882 and 887 on that basis<sup>9</sup>. More recently the question of the attribution of the St.Géry coin has seemingly been cleared up by Simon Coupland, who has drawn attention to the presence of a coin of this nature in a hoard from Cauroir (Nord), which he plausibly argues to have been deposited c.880<sup>10</sup>. On this basis the coin should be securely attributable to Charles the Bald's reign as Emperor, and Coupland uses this as an argument to date the deposit of the Laxfield hoard once again to the late 870s<sup>11</sup>.

*Was there an Anglo-Saxon component in the Laxfield denier hoard ?*

The evidence that a hoard containing Anglo-Saxon coins was found at Laxfield in the early nineteenth century is quite distinct from the evidence for a find of Carolingian deniers at Laxfield, and will be set out below. This is particularly necessary in the light of the fact that it is pretty certain that the list of Carolingian deniers found among "Banks MSS" in the Department of Coins and Medals did not refer to the fact that there were also Anglo-Saxon coins in the hoard, for Dolley and Morrison would surely have mentioned this explicitly if this was the case. The proposition that the hoard also contained Anglo-Saxon coins must in fact have been imported by Dolley and Morrison, whether rightly or wrongly, from the reference cited by them from the *Victoria County History for Suffolk* to the discovery of a ring and accompanying Anglo-Saxon coins in Laxfield churchyard in 1819<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, it seems more likely than not that the list of Carolingian deniers, although indicating that the coins were found at Laxfield, did not assign any date to the discovery, for the reference to "Banks MSS" in the British Museum seems overwhelmingly probable to be to the documentary material accompanying the great collection of medieval and modern coins, tokens and other numismatic material formed by Miss Sarah Sophia Banks (1744-1818) and given to the British Museum almost immediately after her death by her surviving brother Sir Joseph Banks, and it is not obvious why a list of this character, which would necessarily have been drawn up after Miss Banks's death if it gave an 1819 year of discovery for the hoard, should have found its way into the departmental archive relating to her collection.

By contrast, if the list did not include an 1819 date, it could well have been drawn up for or by Miss Banks in her own lifetime, for she was interested in all the coinages struck on the European continent in the mediaeval and modern periods, and that would automatically involve the discovery of the Carolingian deniers being made at Laxfield at some date prior to Miss Banks's death on 27 September 1818. If the discovery of the Carolingian deniers was in fact made within Miss Banks's lifetime, the hoard may nonetheless have contained both Carolingian deniers and Anglo-Saxon coins, for, as will emerge, the 1819 year date for the discovery of the Anglo-Saxon coins, if not given in the Banks MSS list, rests on the testimony of a single individual several decades after the event, and may itself be wrong. It is as well though to keep

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<sup>9</sup> Moesgaard, *op.cit.*, 100 (table 6.1), and n.5 on p.101.

<sup>10</sup> S.Coupland, 'A checklist of Carolingian coin hoards, 751-987', *NC* 2011, 203-56. The Cauroir hoard is his hoard 169. listed on p.218, and discussed in n.90 on pp 233-4.

<sup>11</sup> Coupland, *op.cit.* hoard 152, listed on p.218, and discussed in n.78 (hoard is dated by him to 875-7).

<sup>12</sup> *VCH Suffolk*, vol.i, 1911, 350. The VCH entry is founded in its turn on two of Whincopp's notes cited in what follows, and is of no independent authority.

an open mind for the present as to whether or not the deniers were found together with any Anglo-Saxon numismatic material.

*The ring and Anglo-Saxon coins found in Laxfield churchyard*

The earliest reference in print to the discovery of a ring and Anglo-Saxon coins in Laxfield churchyard in 1819 is a note in the published proceedings of a meeting of the Archaeological Institute on 6 March 1857, recording the following exhibit at the meeting :

By Mr. Whincopp. – A collection of rings of gold and silver, chiefly found in Suffolk, several of them considered to be of the Anglo-Saxon period : one of these ornaments was found, in 1819, in the churchyard at Laxfield, near some Saxon coins ; it bears on the facet a cruciform ornament, formed of small concentric circles, such as appear on objects of that age<sup>13</sup>.

The exhibitor of this collection of rings, William Whincopp (1795-1874), in business as a wine merchant at Woodbridge, Suffolk, was an active local collector and antiquary, with interests including geological specimens, fossils, prehistoric implements in stone and bronze, mediaeval finger rings and older oak furniture.

The next published mention of the ring found at Laxfield and the associated coins is in a short note published in issue no.9, for January 1861, in the periodical *The East Anglian; or Notes and Queries on subjects connected with the counties of Suffolk, Cambridge, Essex, & Norfolk*<sup>14</sup>.

The note, signed W.W. and evidently contributed by William Whincopp, is printed under the heading “Antiquities found in Churchyards in Suffolk”, and reads thus :

A few weeks since, in digging to construct a vault in Melton churchyard, a jet amulet was found, evidently early Saxon. My friend, Mr. Edge, the late Rector of Waldingfield, presented me with an urn of Saxon type, dug up in his churchyard; and in 1819, a silver ring ornamented with amulets, was found in Laxfield churchyard, with several coins of the East Anglian stamp, shewing the early interments in these burial sites.

What Whincopp meant by the phrase “coins of the East Anglian stamp” is not at all obvious, but fortunately he repeated this information in an almost identical note, again signed W.W. and contributed to the May 1863 issue of the same periodical.<sup>15</sup> Here the statement about the ring and the coins is very slightly reworded, so that it reads “and in 1819 a silver ring, ornamented, with the Saxon amulet, was found with coins of the East Anglian kings in Laxfield churchyard”.

The statement that the accompanying coins were “of the East Anglian kings”, i.e. of the rulers of the independent East Anglian kingdom in existence before the Viking conquest of East Anglia at the end of the 860s, was picked up by Stanley West in the entry for the ring from Laxfield in his *A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Material from*

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<sup>13</sup> *The Archaeological Journal*, vol.xiv, 1857, 177.

<sup>14</sup> *The East Anglian*, vol.1, 1858-63, 114.

<sup>15</sup> *The East Anglian*, vol.1, 347.

*Suffolk*, published in 1998<sup>16</sup>, but seems not as yet to have found its way into the literature of Anglo-Saxon numismatics, and it is good to be able to put it on record here.

Whincopp was to exhibit the ring once more at the National Exhibition of Works of Art at Leeds in 1868, where it features in the published catalogue as item 1995 : “A Ring, with amulets; found with Saxon coins”<sup>17</sup>. The entry is uninformative but does testify to Whincopp’s enduring belief that the ring had been found with accompanying Anglo-Saxon coins<sup>18</sup>.

These statements by Whincopp remain the only certain source for the proposition that his ring, and the coins, were found in Laxfield churchyard in 1819, and also for the fact that the coins involved were of East Anglian kings, and it is not particularly reassuring that Whincopp, on the available evidence, seems to have been only peripherally interested in numismatics. Nonetheless Whincopp was twenty-four years old in 1819, and thus of an age to have had some sort of knowledge of the circumstances in which his ring had been found, and it is not unreasonable to give a degree of credit to his statements.

Whether or not the Carolingian deniers were found on the same occasion is a more difficult issue. In this connection the present writer very much regrets that he did not make a detailed note of the content of the parcel of Carolingian coins supposed by Tony Merson to derive from the Laxfield hoard and which Merson showed to him not long after the coins concerned had come into his possession. In partial self-exculpation, the coins did not appear to the present writer at the time to have quite the uniformity of patination that might have been expected if all the coins had derived from a single source, and it may therefore be that nothing significant evidentially has been lost by the present writer’s idleness on that front.



*Lot 499, ex the late Tony Merson, images courtesy of DNW.*



<sup>16</sup> Stanley E. West, *A corpus of Anglo-Saxon material from Suffolk*, 1998, 80.

<sup>17</sup> *National Exhibition of Works of Art, at Leeds, 1868, Official Catalogue*, Leeds, 1868, 256

<sup>18</sup> It is worth putting on record that Prof. James Graham-Campbell believes that this ring, although not traceable today, was of Viking-age character and indeed of probable Viking manufacture (J. Graham-Campbell, *The Cuerdale hoard and related Viking-age silver and gold from Britain and Ireland in the British Museum*, 2011, 9 and 106).