

On Collectors and Museums

Part 1. Some Historical Opinions and Correspondence

Gary Oddie

Two recent events were still in my mind whilst recently trying to trace the provenance of a coin. The search was challenging, even with the annual indexes, and involved working through Seaby's Coin and Medal Bulletin (SCMB) from January 1946 to December 1958. Several hours in, and the provenance was found. Along the way I also stumbled upon other material of interest – the usual reason for a slow search!

The two recent events that spurred this note are (1) the changes in the Treasure Act⁽¹⁾ and (2) the trial and conviction of two people for handling and trying to sell Anglo Saxon silver pennies from a known hoard that had not been declared some years ago.⁽²⁾

In this first Blog, I will reproduce verbatim, several editorials and readers' letters that appeared in SCMB between 1947 and 1950. The material is interesting for both the familiarity in some ways and also how things have changed in the intervening 75 years.

Today, the two groups in the Blog title might be expanded to include the interests of: Collectors, Students, Academics and Writers, Museums, Dealers, Auctioneers, The Treasure Valuation Committee and Detectorists, each with a very broad population and complicated Venn diagram that I hope to steer a balanced course through. While I compose and distill my own thoughts for part 2, I would be happy to see readers' thoughts appear in the Blog or sent to me directly.

The originals have been scanned, and retyped where necessary, and are hopefully free of errors. Each entry has been numbered to allow future reference. GO additions are in blue.

[0] [SCMB 1947 p71.](#)

THE COLLECTOR VERSUS THE MUSEUM or CAN MUSEUMS BE TOO GREEDY?

I have recently heard that Sir Charles Oman's collection of Greek coins has been purchased jointly by the British Museum and the Ashmolean. This collection consisted of approximately two thousand silver coins and for the most part fairly common pieces in nice condition. At the present time the coin market is starved of Greek coins and the steadily increasing number of collectors of this series are likely to become discouraged owing to their inability to obtain sufficient specimens if some biggish collections do not soon come up for sale; the Oman coins would have helped. It would appear at first thoughts that the museums in question would have examples of most of Sir Charles' coins already in their collections and only need a very few of these pieces as minor die varieties. On the other hand, if these pieces had come into the market, at auction or through dealers' trays, they would have given pleasure to some hundreds of collectors, and then at later dates to some hundreds more, whereas now they are lost in two large collections where no numismatists except for a few advanced students will get any benefit from them, or will get any pleasure out of them.

A somewhat similar position occurred at Lord Grantley's sale when the Crondale [sic] hoard of thrymsas was sold. I then bid against the Ashmolean as a matter of principle as there were a large number of duplicates in this hoard. There have been so few thrymsas on the market the last fifty years that I felt many collectors would like to possess one. If the hoard had come our way, Mr. Sutherland, or others, could have had casts made and also studied the coins themselves as thoroughly as they liked, after which they would have been split up amongst museums and collectors and would have given a great deal of pleasure to many, whereas now after it has been studied and written up it will be buried in the Ashmolean collection and will afford little pleasure to anyone.

Mr. Blunt in his Presidential Address to the British Numismatic Society this year seemed to advocate collectors leaving instructions for their collections to be offered to museums after their death.⁽³⁾ Are there two points of view on this subject? A collector has got infinite pleasure in getting together his collection and he should

therefore be keen for his coins to give pleasure to other collectors after his death. By all means let museums have important coins they need for their collections and casts of die varieties, etc. If many extensive collections go to museums will it be to the benefit of numismatics in general or will it so starve the market that the greatly increased number of collectors will again decline owing to lack of really good coins?

A suggestion. Collectors might reasonably will their catalogues and records of their collections to some central organizations, such as the British Museum, or one of the numismatic societies, and leave instructions that this body should take casts of any specimens they considered of sufficient interest for purposes of record or study.

I hope in writing the foregoing I shall not be offending my very many friends in museums. I have not been looking at the question solely from the dealer's point of view, but from the angle of a collector. My object is rather to open up a discussion on this very interesting and important subject and I shall be very pleased to hear your views. In future issues of this Bulletin we shall be only too pleased to publish letters dealing with both sides of this question.

H.A. Seaby.

[SCMB 1947 p157](#)

THE COLLECTOR VERSUS THE MUSEUM.

Some letters in reply to the provocative note in the last Bulletin.

[1.] I was delighted to see that Mr. Seaby had called attention to the insatiable rapacity of Museums. His case is unanswerable; Museums that pursue a policy of blind acquisitiveness are doing a disservice to the very sciences which it is their duty to serve.

I have collected coins for 24 years (since a boy of ten) but in the last decade I have concentrated more attention on Roman antiquities of British origin or type, specializing in fibulae. As numismatics are really a branch of archaeology I feel that some facts in connection with my other collection are by no means irrelevant to the point at issue and coin collectors would do well to read the warning signs.

At the present time it is extremely difficult for the private person to collect antiquities found in Britain (possibly some of your readers may be able to help me). The old collectors have very often fallen into the pitfall pointed out by Mr. Seaby and allowed their collections go out of circulation by being bequeathed to a Museum, where they are not infrequently lost or allowed to deteriorate. On the other hand fresh material found on official excavations is almost invariably consigned to a Museum. The methods used to bring this about would not always bear examination.

This is not the place to argue the case in detail (though I will gladly do so with anyone wishes) but in general it may be said that, provided an object, be it a coin or anything else, is properly recorded, preferably by publication, it is of no importance archaeologically whether it remains in public or private hands as long as these (in both cases) are alive to their responsibility.

But let us go a step further and see what is the attitude of "official circles" towards collectors. Many of my archaeological friends, including professionals, are reasonable men but there is a strong body of opinion among both professionals and so-called "purists" among amateurs who, though they may tolerate a coin collector, regard the collection of other antiquities as immoral and of course any form of competition to a Museum a black crime.

Numismatics and archaeology owe a permanent and irredeemable debt to the private collector. Even in my own short experience I have been able to make a few contributions as a direct result of my collecting activities. What then is the origin of this antagonism to them? If we get to the root of the matter it is clear that this is just one more manifestation of the working of the socialistic, bureaucratic mentality which has penetrated every branch of the national life and which more or less overtly condemns private enterprise and private property.

It would be a tragedy if humane research, archaeological, numismatic, or any other were to fall entirely into the hands of a professional caste. But this is what seems to be visualised in some quarters.

Speaking of the claim of Museums to an exclusive right to all objects found in their territory Sir Hercules Read, when President of the Soc. of Antiquaries, once said, "The demand for knowledge and for intellectual

possessions whether they be owned by persons or by corporations will never subject itself to myopic parochial laws.” But it is up to collectors to see that under present tendencies the wishes of Museums do not extend further and gain translation into actual laws.

The collecting instinct is one of the most deepseated in human nature and will never be eradicated. Would it not be more sensible to harness this force in the service of science and scholarship rather than frustrate it and possibly divert it into less desirable channels?

E.J.W. Hildyard, F.S.A., F.R.N.S.

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[2.] I have read with interest my brother’s note on the subject and while I cannot agree with him in certain details I feel there is much to be said for his statement about the greedy attitude adopted by certain national and other public institutions. It is of course important that the national numismatic collection should be as representative as possible, and it is certainly desirable that all new important die varieties should be represented at least by casts if the originals are not obtainable. At this stage in our cultural history might not the *National collection* be considered as all those museums with a really first class numismatic cabinet. Unhappily, so as I know, there is no complete set of catalogues of the contents of all these cabinets, nor a method of keeping it up-to-date, although the British Museum has done magnificent work by publishing most of its series from time to time. I imagine that were legislation passed for the sale of duplicates in public collections very many coins might be placed on the market to the benefit of the private collector and implementing public funds for the purchase of new acquisitions.

Speaking as the Keeper Of a public museum possessing only a medium-sized and relatively unimportant collection, I know the difficulty of refusing coins of even fair merit from would-be donors since the amount of “junk” which is continually being offered, and refused, must run into thousands of pieces a year. Yet the museum has no funds, except petty cash for the purchase of coins and medals, and the Birmingham collection is an “accumulation” rather than a systematic assemblage.

I must, however, remind H.A.S. of several important functions that the public institutions and their staffs perform and which I feel he has somewhat overlooked. Keepers of Numismatic collections (as of other departments) are available to give what help they can to all students and collectors with genuine requests for information. Much of the research work and most of the published lists, catalogues and handbooks are the work of museum staffs and are of the utmost value to dealer and collector alike. It is only by a study of *all* the available evidence that such works can give the maximum data on a coin subject or series. Here surely the private collector, the antiquarian the chance finder and even the dealer, can play his part by informing the local or national museum of new discoveries if he is not in a position to publish the finds himself. So much valuable historical information is certain to be lost if a hoard, or group of coins from an archeological site, is not recorded in some form available for study. Too often, I fear, such discoveries find their way into private hands or are split up (often in the case of silver or gold to avoid an inquest at the coroner’s court) and marketed before an adequate analysis has been made, thereby losing for all time valuable documentary evidence which the pieces as a whole might have supplied. Many such finds might, I feel, be placed on the market through dealers or auction rooms when students have gleaned all reasonable information from them and a selection of specimens retained or cast. The suggestion that collectors should will their catalogues to a central organisation or responsible body for permanent record with instructions that casts may be taken is, I feel, a good one but of small practical value unless by law.

One more point. In theory, at least, the public collection is available to-all, whereas the private collection is not. Too often in the past the method of housing coins in a museum has prevented their being seen by the majority of visitors. The collection is kept in cabinet trays for research students and only electrotypes of the more valuable or more beautiful specimens of numismatic art are displayed. These, however, make dull exhibits when set out with monotonous regularity in rows of wall frames or desk cases. In an article I have recently published in the Museum’s Journal (November, 1946) and which I shall hope to publish, perhaps in part form, in this Bulletin, I have set out method which we are adopting at Birmingham for the permanent display of coins and medals. It is a compromise between the “inaccessible” numismatic cabinet and the kind of exhibition where valuable space is taken up by many wall frames, multileaves or display cases. Without giving details here I will only add that in the experimental stage of this exhibition and of the large philatelic collection which Birmingham has recently

acquired, and which is being exhibited in much the same way, the public in general, and collectors in particular, seem to agree that we are solving a problem which has been a thorny one for very many years.

*W.A. Seaby, Keeper of the Department of Archaeology,
Coins and Metalwork, at Birmingham Museum.*

[3.] *Extract from Will of Edmond de Goncourt* (French novelist and artist, 19th century). "My Wish is that my Drawings, my Prints, my Curiosities, my Books - in a word, those things of art which have been the joy of my life - shall not be consigned to the cold tomb of a museum and subjected to the stupid glance of the careless passer by, but I require that they shall all be dispersed under the hammer of the Auctioneer so that the pleasure which the acquiring of each one of them has given me, shall be given again in each case, to some inheritor of my own tastes."

Contributed by L.G.P. Messenger.

[4.] In my opinion the only coins that should be left to a museum are peculiarities that are of use for study, or coins of other outstanding interest; and then should be left to the British Museum, where one can be sure of their safe keeping.

J.C. Lewis.

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[5.] A collector wrote that he was in communication with a museum about the disposal of his collection on his death, but that our note had set him thinking. ". . . . But I am not sure my main motive is not a selfish one. It had taken me over sixty years to bring my collection together and I have a sort of fancy feeling for them and I am loth to see them separated. I dare say this is silly, but perhaps they will come to the hammer after all."

[6.] A high official of one of our principal museums comments as follows, "Perhaps it worth pointing out that it is only by making our collections as complete as possible through the acquisition such as the Oman purchase, that we can hope to give adequate answers to the steady stream of questions referred to us by collectors and dealers."

[7.] I was interested in your remarks regarding "Can Museums be too Greedy?" published in your February Bulletin, and I think it would be generally agreed that the British Museum should have priority in purchasing any type of coin not already in their possession, however, they seem to mix the word type with the word die, which as we all know can be very numerous, the coins otherwise being identical. This is the only main reason that I can see, as to why the Museums are anxious to buy whole lots. There could be another reason, which would be to prevent loss or damage through individual possession, which in my opinion is hardly likely, because most collectors will not allow you to breath on their coins.

It would be interesting to read replies from the British Museum and the Ashmolean Museum through the Bulletin on why they purchase whole lots, and what their future programmes are regarding same. I would like to say that it would be a great benefit and pleasure to most of us if the Museums would disperse their extensive duplications in the open market.

Finally, I should like to know why Mr. Blunt, President of the British Numismatic Society advocates that members should leave their collections to Museums, other than my remarks above.

O. Theobald.

[8.] You have placed the case for the Collector versus the Museum so ably in your last Bulletin. It is, of course, right that we should make our national collection as perfect as we can, and this applies, perhaps, to the collections of our universities and one or two other institutions where there is adequate provision for the study of coins, but this is not the case in the majority of our provincial museums. But even in the case of our national and large collections I think the hoarding of duplicates is to be deprecated and that periodical sales should be held for their disposal, no matter whether the subject of private bequest or however otherwise obtained.

Hugh Goodacre.

[9.] Your paragraph on p. 71, “Can Museums be too Greedy?” also interested me, especially the phrase “would have given pleasure to some hundreds of collectors.” I would add a point from my own experience here in Edinburgh where there are reputed to be fine collections of Scottish and English Coins in the National Museum of Antiquities and in the Royal Scottish Museum. As an amateur I go to both to learn about my own little collection, but I find that the most interesting coins are represented in the glass cases by electro-types and if I dare to ask the attendant for a sight of the real thing either he takes me for a probable thief or else he indicates that to get the coins out of a safe and the concomitant ceremonies would take up much more time than I, a busy C.A. can spare. Of course I agree that if a coin is unique then the Nation should have it - otherwise let the private collector have a chance.

Alex Cuthbert.

[10.] I like your remarks about “Coins buried in Museums.” It is very apt. Here in Cape Town they have some splendid coins which will never see the light of day. I know about three people who have ever seen them.

J.E. Miles.

And there is more 1947 pp266-267.

The Collector versus the Museum.

[11.] I am in wholehearted agreement with your article in the February Bulletin, and would just like to add a few remarks on the subject of museum collections. I feel sure that up and down the country there must be thousands of perfectly good coins languishing in obscurity, especially in the smaller provincial museums. One of the root troubles is probably lack of expert knowledge . . . and hence lack of proper arrangement. Coins are too often exhibited carelessly, and even when there are duplicates available they are not always placed so as to show obverse and reverse. Thus neither the museum visitor nor the collector can derive full enjoyment from the coins.

I also know of several museums where the collection possesses three, perhaps four, specimens of the same coin. Surely this is an unhappy state of affairs when the demand for coins is greater than ever.

In any case I feel that coins should be labelled and exhibited with as much care as other objects of interest. If so arranged, even a small museum collection can perform a useful service.

Anthony Walsh.

[12.] The Collector who desires to benefit a Museum by leaving to it his collection can do so in a useful manner by stipulating that it be sold at auction - the proceeds, of course, to go to the Museum. This enables the Museum to bid in any items they really desire, without cost, and makes available to others the items which may duplicate what they already have or which they do not desire.

This of course makes no provision for the man who feeds his egotism by requiring that his collection must be kept intact.

Col. Geo. L. Hamilton. California.

[13.] I feel that there is something to be said for the museum side of the argument of Museum v. Collector. Leaving aside the rarities whose financial value ensures their safe custody, many decent coins seem to change hands very casually and run considerable risk of being lost by getting into unappreciative hands.

Again, a coin suitably displayed in a museum case has an educational value a thousand times that of a similar coin snugly hidden in a private cabinet, and in such a case, I suggest that the national, or public, claim overrides any private interest.

There is always a sense of dismay and disappointment to me to learn that a collection, which probably represents the lifetime's work and interest of its owner, is brought under the hammer and dispersed on his death, as though all the concern of the trustees was to turn it into money again. A good collection is a unit that has grown by individual and personal skill, its dispersal seems to me the deliberate waste of a life's work, which would be avoided if it passed, by gift or purchase, to some suitable museum.

Incidentally if museums would exhibit their coins - not sunk in circular recesses - but raised above the flat tray on cardboard discs - such as gunwads - their coin cases would be much more attractive and informative than they often are.

G.W. Willis, Basingstoke Museum.

[14.] SCMB 1947 p319

**LLOYD BEQUEST TO THE BRITISH MUSEUM.
GREEK COINS OF ITALY AND SICILY.**

Extract from the Times of June 21st.

In the magnificent collection of Greek coins of Italy and Sicily recently passed to the trustees Of the British Museum by Mrs. Lloyd the Department of Coins and Medals has received its most notable addition since Richard Payne Knight bequeathed his collections to the nation in 1828 The Lloyd bequest, by which name it will be known, containing nearly 1700 pieces, has been published as Vol. II in the British Academy's series *Sylloge Numorum Graecorum* [sic]. It forms a memorial of Dr. A.H. Lloyd of Cambridge, and his daughter, Miss M.E.H. Lloyd, by whom the collection was made in the years following the first world war.

By a fortunate chance the Greek cities of south Italy and Sicily attained their widest material development in the period when Greek art was at its finest; and the dazzling succession of coins issued from their mints for daily use is the best, and sometimes the only testimony to their former greatness. Not only are the coins of high artistic merit; their types have as well a picturesque variety which often yields us precious information about local cults and contemporary events, and about political and economic relations in general.

Realizing to the full the exceptional importance that the coins thus have for research, father and daughter, working together in the closest collaboration, devoted themselves with passionate enthusiasm to the special field they had marked out. Visits were paid to the principal museums of Europe; archaeological journeys were undertaken year after year in the remoter parts of Italy and Sicily to study doubtful questions of topography and other matters on the spot, to acquire coins, and to work through all available material.

Too rarely these researches found their way into print, but their abiding monument is the magnificent collection built up in so short a time: a scholar's collection full of detailed archaeological interest, yet containing a remarkable number of the finest examples of Greek numismatic art in a condition which enables us to appreciate to the full their beauty.

A selection is on view in the King Edward VII Gallery.

[15.] EDITORIAL COMMENT.

We read this announcement with mixed feelings. Our first reaction is the thought of yet another collection of fine Greek Coins lost to the collector. What joy it would have given to hundreds of collectors to have possessed one of the gems of the Greek craftsman's art, including so many pieces of the very best period. We know that Dr. Lloyd and Miss Lloyd got great pleasure in getting together this magnificent collection and now other collectors are deprived of the pleasure of possessing any of them for all time.

On mature consideration, however, we feel that this collection is so beautiful and so important that perhaps it is only right that it should be preserved together for the nation, and for all of us who are interested to see and appreciate. We trust that students will now make full use of this wonderful gift.

There is, however, one aspect of the matter on which we must comment, as, perhaps, this is the crux of the matter an many collector's minds. Undoubtedly many of the pieces are already represented in the British Museum's collection, by this we mean coins from similar dies. There is undoubtedly a strong case for the B.M. to get together the finest possible collection of coins but there is no possible justification for them to amass a lot of duplicates. We feel, therefore, that we must ask the following questions:

What do the museum propose to do with coins that now become duplicates owing to the Lloyd bequest? Do they intend to let collectors have the opportunity of possessing them? If so, how?

Would it be too much to ask the Keeper to make an authoritative statement on this matter.

Editor

[16.] SCMB 1949 p431-2

Museum Duplicates. Some time ago there appeared in your columns a number of letters bewailing the alleged greed of Museums in retaining duplicates. A recent experience at the British Museum may be of interest. The examination of about 50 English silver coins in a very narrow field of numismatics revealed the following. Of ordinary common-to-rare coins there were sometimes as many as four specimens from the same pair of dies.

Coins rated as extremely rare and normally appearing only as items in old Sale catalogues were represented in one case by three specimens identical but for condition and in two others by four and three coins respectively which included die duplicates in both cases. One other coin of almost legendary rarity appeared twice, one specimen being plugged, but still very desirable. It was noted that in some cases duplication had occurred through private bequests such as that of Clarke-Thornhill. The retention of so many duplicates that would give pleasure to private collectors (and profit to the museum) would seem to be unjustified and must lead to an undeserved degree of rarity being awarded the remaining specimens.

Peter Sanders

[17.] SCMB 1950 p113-4

Museum Duplicates. While I agree with those collectors who protest when museums accumulate duplicates of desirable coins, there is one aspect of such situations which seems to have been ignored. Rarely are museums free to accept and dispose of coins as may a dealer or individual collector. When a museum receives a gift or bequest of coins each is catalogued and recorded as a gift from the particular donor. The donor assumes that the coins will remain in the museum for if he wanted to sell them he would not have given away in the first place.

As an example, we will suppose that a man wishes to erect a monument to himself by giving a museum a collection of perhaps several hundred ancient coins. The museum accepts the collection and then along comes another collector with the same idea, only his coins are in much better condition than the first ones. If the museum was to sell gift number one it would be a long, long time before another collector could be induced to give the museum anything worthwhile.

On rare occasions the terms of the gift allows the museum to dispose of duplicates, but in the event of a bequest this provision is often omitted and if a museum accepts the collection it cannot very well use it as “stock” to offer to the first collector who comes along.

The collector who adds to the collection of a museum will be remembered centuries hence. He will be much better off than the collector who sold his coins at a public sale, unless the latter was fortunate enough to be able to take his money with him.

Stuart Mosher, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

[18.] SCMB 1950 p14

Museum Duplicates. Previous correspondence in the “Bulletin” has drawn attention to the loss to private collectors through the accumulation in museums of so many collections by bequests and other means, including, inevitably, many duplicates. As a practical suggestion would it not be possible for representations to be made to the Museums Associations by the two learned societies (or through the Federation mooted at the Coin Day last June) whereby the museum authorities might be induced to offer their duplicates for sale to collectors? There is reason to think that some, at least, of the museums might be willing to do so.

Clifford H. Allen.

To be continued.

References and Acknowledgements

- (1) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-more-treasures-to-be-saved-for-the-nation-as-rules-about-discoveries-are-changed>
- (2) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/apr/27/two-men-guilty-of-trying-to-sell-history-changing-anglo-saxon-coins-illegally>
- (3) C.E. Blunt. Presidential Address, 29 November 1946. *BNJ* vol. XXV pp104-111, esp. pp109-110, The Dispersal and Recording of Collections. Not present in the scanned BNJs online.

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