Kings and Coins in Medieval England

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The Yorkist Kings

Introduction

This article looks at the coins from the last period of Plantagenet rule in England under the Yorkist kings, Edward IV, Edward V and Richard III. At the start of Edward IV's reign the coinage continued the fairly monotonous sequence of type and denomination that had prevailed under the ousted Lancastrian Henry VI and for the previous century, although under Edward there would be some small innovative episodes.

Edward IV

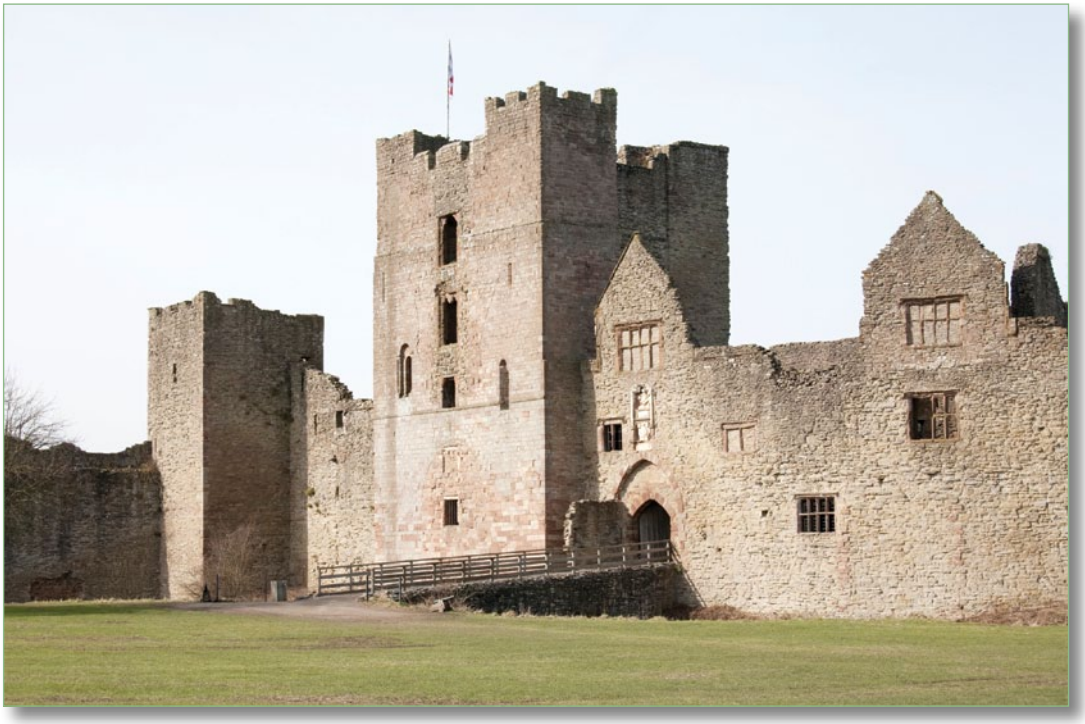
Edward IV reigned 1461-70 and 1471-83. Little is known of Edward's early childhood. He was born at Rouen in France to Richard, Duke of York (who had a strong genealogical claim to the throne of England) and Cecily Neville. He took his father's title of Earl of March in about 1445 and was based at Ludlow Castle in Shropshire (Fig.1.). He was certainly involved in his father's opposition to the circle around King Henry VI but was not present at the first battle of St Albans which opened the Wars of the Roses between the Lancastrians and Yorkists. The conflict escalated in 1460-1 and Edward became a central figure in a series of pitched battles. At Northampton Edward and his cousin Richard Neville, Duke of Warwick ("the kingmaker") captured Henry VI and took him to London in custody, ruling in his name. Henry's queen Margaret of Anjou led an army to the Midlands and defeated Warwick but did not enter London, possession of which was vital to the effective rule of England.

After a decisive Yorkist victory at the battle of Towton in Yorkshire, Edward was crowned at Westminster on 28 June 1461. One contemporary source claims 28,000 men were killed, including those who had surrendered. Early in the reign Edward was involved in campaigns in the north of England against Lancastrian supporters of Henry VI and their Scottish allies (Henry had escaped to Scotland with his queen and their son Edward Prince of Wales). Edward married Elizabeth Woodville in 1464 in a union that was a surprise to contemporaries given her relatively low status; however, she was known as "the most beautiful woman in the Island of Britain" with "heavy-lidded eyes like those of a dragon". The couple produced seven daughters and three sons.

Coinage

The first coins produced after Edward's accession continued to follow the system that had originated in 1351 and at the time of Henry's replacement consisted of one gold denomination, the noble, and five in silver (Fig.2.). The standards of weight and fineness that had been in place under Henry were initially maintained under Edward. One small and yet significant change to the appearance of coins was the development of more advanced initial marking at the beginning of the legends. In previous reigns initial marks, although showing some variety, always took the form of a cross. Under Edward new devices such as the Yorkist rose or the lis began to be used, beginning what would develop into a large and complex system by the late Tudor and Stuart periods.

Fig.1. Ludlow Castle in Shropshire.



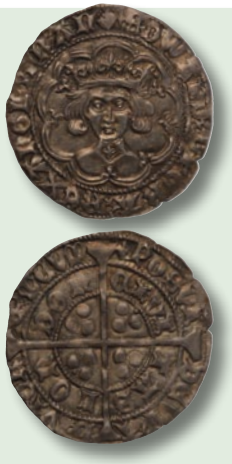


Fig.2. Silver groat of Edward IV, heavy coinage (1461-64/5), group I, minted at London. This early type has a lis on the neck of the bust. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fishpool Hoard

On 22 March 1966 a large hoard of gold coins and jewellery was discovered on a building site in the Nottinghamshire village of Fishpool. Of the original find 1,237 coins and a number of pieces of jewellery were acquired by the British Museum (Fig.3.). Based on the numismatic evidence we can pin its deposit date down closely to c.1464. This period (winter 1463 and summer 1464) was the height of the rebellion against the Yorkist king Edward IV. At the time of burial the hoard was worth about £400 (perhaps £300,000 in today's money). Such a sum would have only been available to a very few, which rules out most of the medieval population. The rich and powerful never needed to resort to hiding their treasure in the ground. Thus, the Fishpool hoard must have been deposited in a very unusual, emergency situation, in the circumstances of the failed revolt of 1464. It may have formed part of the Lancastrian royal treasury, entrusted to somebody fleeing south after the Battle of Hexham (15 May 1464) and concealed deep inside Sherwood Forest. Corroborative evidence for such sums comes from documentary evidence; when a Lancastrian noble named Sir William Tailboys was captured he had in his possession 3,000 marks – that is five times the value of the Fishpool Hoard.

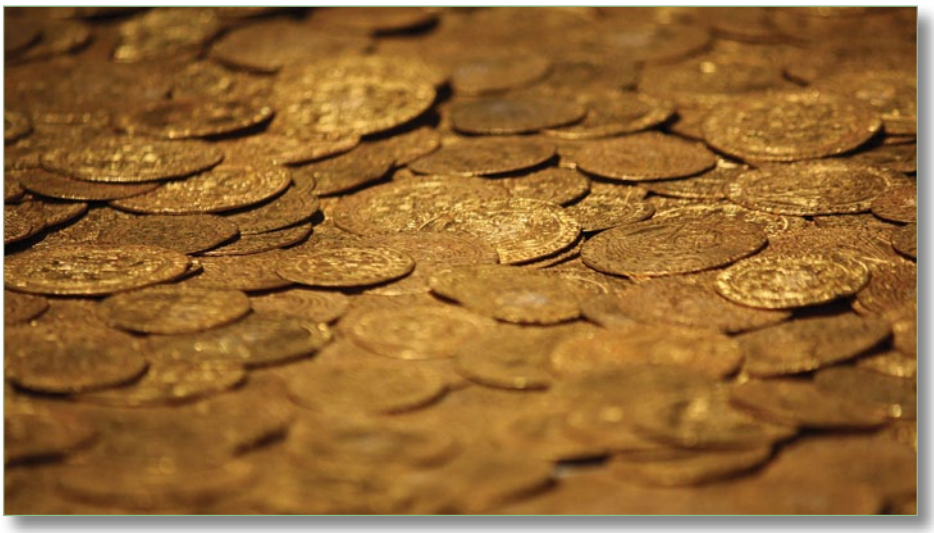


Fig.3. Coins from the Fishpool Hoard. Most of the coins were English nobles but there were also 33 Anglo-Gallic coins (those minted for the kings of England in their French domains), 13 of James II of Scotland, 11 French écus of Charles VII "the Mad" and 166 coins of the dukes of Burgundy (mostly lions of Philip the Good).

Reform

A reform of the coinage was implemented in 1464-5. This came in response to a monetary crisis that saw English gold coins draining abroad where they could command a higher bullion price. Lord William Hastings, Master of the Mint and one of Edward's closest friends, produced a reformed coinage. This resulted in a reduction in the weight of the silver penny down from 15 to 12 grains (0.78g) and the introduction of a new gold coins valued at 10 shillings – the ryal (or rose noble) and its half and quarter (Figs.4-6.).

The issues either side of the important date of 1464-5 are termed by numismatists as the "heavy" and "light" coinages. The new coin was effectively a slightly heavier but more valuable version of the noble, complete with the same figure of the king on board a ship and reverse design. The only differences (other than weight) were the inclusion of a large white rose amidships and a banner with a large ɑ at the stern on the obverse and a rose in the centre of the reverse. The 6s. 8d. noble had been a popular coin as it neatly fitted into the medieval units of account being half a pound and a third of a mark. To fill this void a new gold coin – the angel – was introduced at the same value (Figs.7-8.). On the obverse is the figure of St Michael, winged and haloed, spearing and trampling the dragon of evil. On the reverse is a ship bearing a

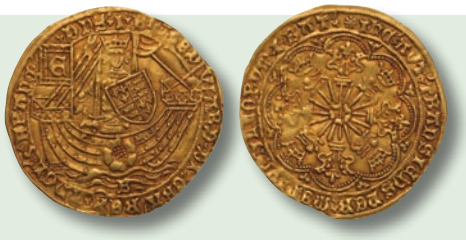


Fig.4. Gold ryal of Edward IV, light coinage, Bristol mint with the initial mark of a sun on the reverse. The design of the coin was a continuation of that of the old noble, but Edward added a large rose on the ship's side and an ɑ on the flag at the stern. The ß in the sea identifies the mint on this coin. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

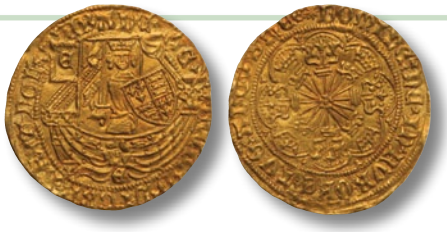


Fig.5. Gold half ryal of Edward IV, light coinage VI, York mint. The mint of York is identified by the e in the sea (for Eboracum) © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

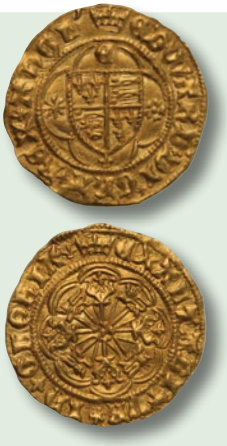


Fig.6. Gold quarter ryal of Edward IV, light coinage, London mint. London was the only mint to produce the quarter ryal. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

shield with the royal arms, a cross above flanked by a rose and sun and a radiant sun at the masthead. The reverse inscription reads PER CRVCEM TVA SALVA NOS XPC REDEMPTOR which translates as "By Thy cross, save us, O Christ, our Redeemer". The reforms were a success and immediately impacted the volume of bullion attracted to the mint, in 1465-6 for example £276,752 of gold and £103,752 of silver coins were struck.

The general trend, seen from as early as the reign of Henry II (1154-89), had been the centralisation of minting activity to ever fewer locations, with London becoming the powerhouse and a limited output coming from the ecclesiastical privilege mints (Fig.9.). In Edward's reign there was a short period of decentralisation which saw mints opened in towns such as Coventry, that had not had a mint before, and those that had last struck coins in the 13th century such as Bristol and Norwich (Figs.10 & 11.). Edward also used the extension of ecclesiastical minting rights to show favour to supporters and so in 1463 the Canterbury mint resumed production for Archbishop Thomas Bourchier. This grant also allowed Canterbury to strike half groats and halfpennies for the first time (Fig.12.). Ecclesiastical mints had hitherto not been permitted to strike coins of greater value than a penny (Fig.13.). In 1473 Laurence Booth, bishop of Durham received a grant to mint halfpence.

Edward's Second Reign (1471-83)

In 1469 Warwick moved into rebellion against Edward with support from Edward's younger brother George, Duke of Clarence. The king was captured and imprisoned although was at liberty again within two months. Edward attempted to reconcile with Warwick and Clarence but when a second opportunity to rebel presented itself Warwick, with French support, was able to place Henry VI on the English throne once more.

Fig.9. Tower of London.

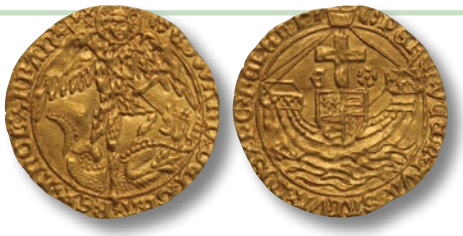


Fig.7. Gold angel of Edward IV, light coinage, London mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

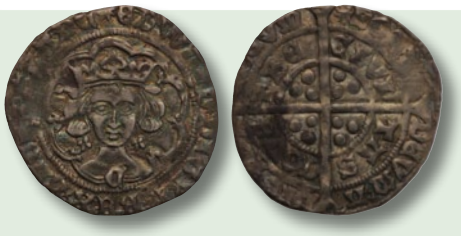


Fig.10. Silver groat of Edward IV, light coinage, Coventry mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

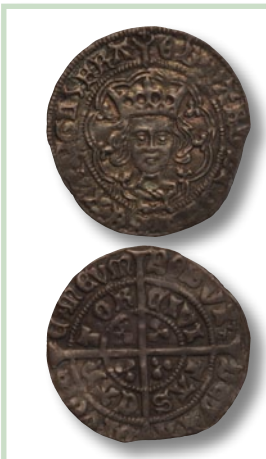


Fig.12. Silver half groat of Edward IV, light coinage, Canterbury mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

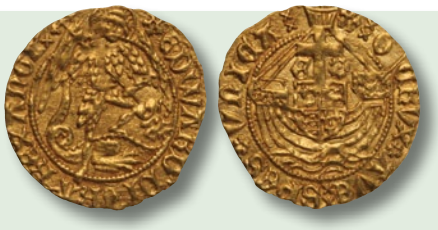


Fig.8. Gold half angel of Edward IV, light coinage, London mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

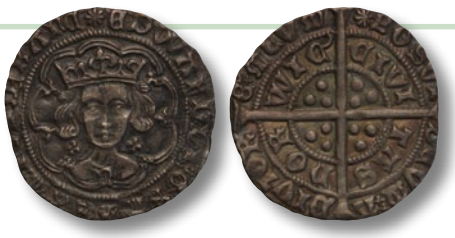


Fig.11. Silver groat of Edward IV, light coinage, Norwich mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

This was a short-lived second reign for Henry and a force led by Edward (who had fled to the Low Countries) landed at Holderness in March 1471. He was joined by his brother Clarence and the army entered London reuniting Edward with his wife who had been in sanctuary at Westminster Abbey and placing Henry back in the Tower. The resolution of the Wars of the Roses took place at Tewkesbury where the Yorkists defeated the Lancastrians, Edward of Lancaster (heir of Henry VI) was killed (Fig.14.).

When Edward returned triumphant to London Henry VI was killed despite the Yorkist claim that Henry died of "pure displeasure and melancholy". After the turbulence of the Wars of Roses Edward was keen to reconcile with the Lancastrian factions and it was only the most hardcore relatives of Henry VI, like Jasper Tudor and his nephew Henry (who would become Henry VII, the first Tudor king) and those who had no chance of reclaiming their estates, that did not come to terms with Edward.

Coinage

In the second reign of Edward there remained a level of continuity in denominations, weight and fineness. Gold coins came in the form of angels and half angels (sometimes called angelots) with the same five denominations in silver (Fig.15.). Bristol and the ecclesiastical mints were active but Coventry and Norwich were not. The placement of initial marks at the start of the inscription became firmly established and provides us with a detailed chronology with 18 sequential marks from 1471-83. Edward died on 9 April 1483 and was buried at Windsor with one contemporary claiming his death was caused by a chill contracted while boating on the Thames.

Richard III (1483-85)

Richard was born at Fotheringhay, Northamptonshire in 1452 and was the youngest of the four sons of Richard, Duke of York, his eldest brother became King Edward IV in 1461. Little is known of his early life but after Edward became king, Richard (then aged 9) became duke of Gloucester. His emergence on the political scene coincided with the rebellion of his brother George and the duke of Warwick in which he was in support of the king.

When Henry VI was restored Richard accompanied Edward into exile in the Low Countries. Upon Edward's restoration Richard was the chief beneficiary receiving extensive lands and creating a significant power base in the north of the country. His marriage to Anne Neville secured additional lands. Throughout the reign Richard became an important figure and was constable and admiral of England. When Edward died unexpectedly, Richard first acted in the role of protector for the king's 12 year old son Edward who he had taken to the Tower. Once the second son Richard had been removed from sanctuary at Westminster (where he had been with his mother) Richard moved to make himself king. The two boys were almost certainly murdered on Richard's order, probably after a failed attempt had been made to rescue them from the Tower.

A failed rebellion in 1483 brought a new rival claimant into the public eye – Henry Tudor, son of Margaret Beaufort (who could trace her ancestry back to Edward III's third son John of Gaunt). Into 1484-5 there was a continuing defection of Edward IV's servants to Henry's side. Henry's landing at Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire was welcomed by Richard who believed his victory would "comfort his subjects with the blessings of unchallenged peace". He would be fatally disappointed. The armies met near Dadlington in Leicestershire on 22 August 1485 at what has since been known as the battle of Bosworth. Richard's larger army was defeated in a close-fought battle in which the pivotal moment was the introduction of the

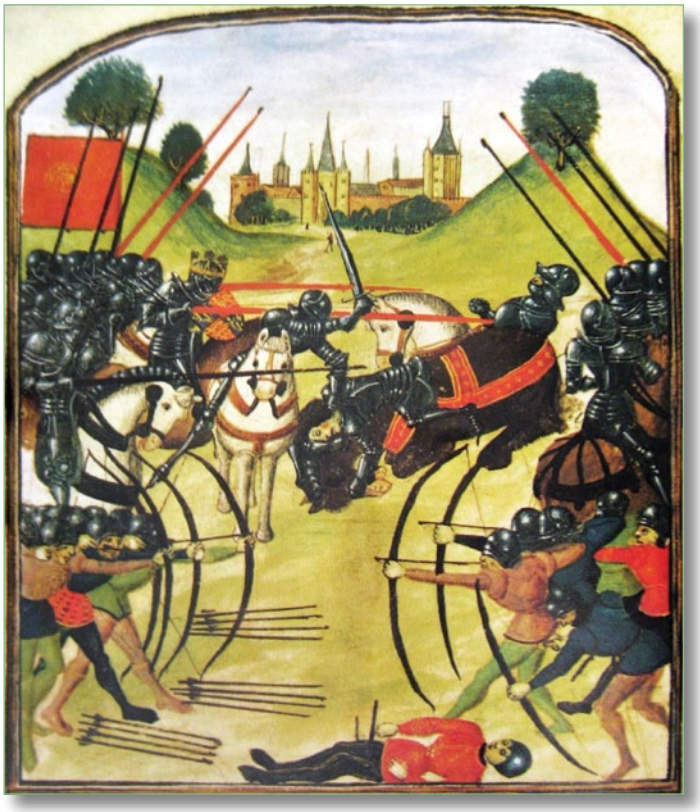


Fig.14. The Battle of Tewkesbury depicted in a Ghent manuscript.

Fig.13. Silver penny of Edward IV, light coinage, Durham mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

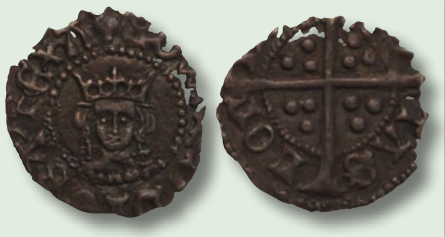


Fig.15. Silver halfpenny of Edward IV, light coinage, London mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

troops of William Stanley on the Tudor side. The dead king's body was taken for burial in the church of the Franciscans in Leicester and was recently excavated to much international interest.

Coinage

A few days after Richard's coronation orders were given to the new Master of the Mint Sir Robert Brackenbury to produce coins for the new king. Like many of Edward IV's chief councillors the old Master Lord Hastings was quickly arrested and executed. A few coins can be attributed to Edward V; these are gold issues with the boar's head badge of Richard. As king Richard struck angels, half angels, groats, half groats, pennies and halfpennies at London (Figs.16-19.), groats and pennies at York and pennies at Durham (Fig.20.). The transition from the use of EDWARD dies to those of RICARD can actually be seen in their re-cutting with RIC over EDW.

Fig.21. sets out the frequency of coins by ruler and denomination recorded with the PAS. A small number of gold coins have been found, which is perhaps surprising given the relative value of such pieces. Among the silver finds the penny and the groat are dominant and provide physical evidence in support of mint output figures.

Ireland

Coinage had not been struck by English kings in Ireland in any serious way since the reign of Edward I. Under Edward IV this would change. An extensive series of seven consecutive types in silver denominations as well as a series of billon farthings and half farthings were minted over the course of Edward's reign and continued into that of Richard III. The designs were for the most part distinctively designed, a method employed to discourage the export of money from Ireland and to this end the weights of the coins were set a three quarters that of their English equivalents.

The first type was the anonymous crown coinage (c.1460-63) which consisted of groats and pennies from Dublin and pennies from Waterford (Fig.22.). The obverse of the coin omitted any reference to the ruler's name instead filling the field with a large crown. The second "crown" coinage followed in 1463-65 comprising groats, half groats and

Fig.16. Richard III, gold angel, London mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

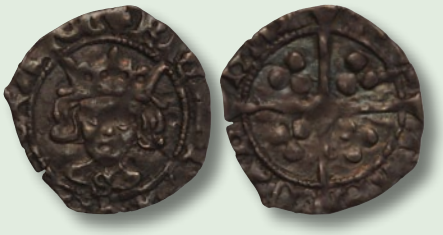


Fig.18. Richard III, silver penny, London mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

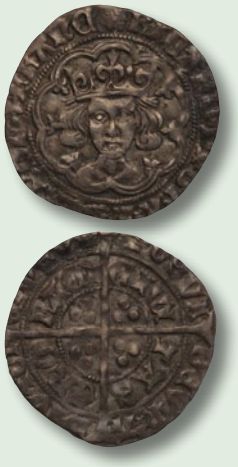


Fig.20. Richard III, silver groat, York mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

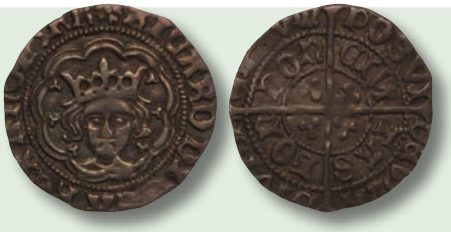


Fig.17. Richard III, silver half groat, London mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.19. Richard III, silver halfpenny, London mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

	Noble	Ryal	Half ryal	Quarter ryal	Angel	Half angel	Groat	Half groat	Penny	Half penny	Farthing	Total
Edward IV first reign heavy	1	-	-	-	-	-	9	-	15	8	0	33
Edward IV first reign light	-	5	2	1	0	0	89	28	46	25	3	199
Edward IV second reign	-	-	-	-	4	0	38	23	126	47	10	248
Richard III	-	-	-	-	1	0	7	0	15	7	0	30
TOTAL	1	5	2	1	5	0	143	51	202	87	13	510

Fig.21. Table of PAS finds of the Yorkist kings.

pennies at Dublin and Waterford (Fig.23.). These coins are similar to English contemporaries with the crown in place of the king's head. It was probably around the time of the 1464-5 weight reduction in England that that the Irish coinage was reduced to two-thirds the weight of that of the English. The third type is the small-cross on rose/radiant sun coinage which is a self explanatory type in which the Yorkist emblems of the rose and sun take centre stage (Fig.24.). In the fourth type (the bust/rose-on-sun coinage) there was a further devaluation bringing the Irish down to half the value of the English. The facing bust returned to the obverse, while on the reverse the sun was enlarged to fill the centre of the coin (Fig.25.). After the brief period of Henry VI's restoration Edward's Irish coinage was modelled entirely on the appearance of their English equivalents (Fig.26.).

Mints were active at Dublin, Drogheda, Limerick, Trim, Waterford and Cork and the first phase producing the heavy cross and pellets coinage. This was followed in around 1473-78 by a lighter coinage of the same basic design and while rare these are the most likely Irish types to be found in England (Fig.27.).

The final type of Edward was similar to those that went before, however suns and roses were added in the field around the bust and the reverse pellets were replaced with a central rose (Fig.28.).

Richard III continued the minting of coins in Ireland in his own name. The first was a transitional type of groat and penny which continued the last type of his brother and was minted at Drogheda (Fig.29.). Between 1483 and 1485 the "three crowns coinage" was issued for Richard at Dublin and Waterford. The obverse bears the royal arms while the reverse carries the three crowns, arms of the lordship of Ireland (Fig.30.).

Scotland

In the reigns of both Edward IV and Richard III, James III (1460-88) was king of Scotland. The Scottish coinage from this period is extremely interesting and innovative. A range of iconography was used, particularly on the gold coins, and we see gold, silver and billon or brass issues. The gold rider (23s.) with its half and quarter were struck for the first time from 1475 (Fig.31.). On the obverse is the armoured figure of the king galloping forward holding a sword, an image inspired by coins of the Low Countries, while the reverse displays the arms of

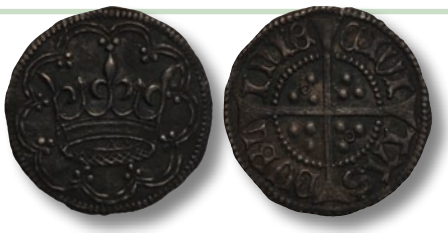


Fig.22. Ireland. Edward IV anonymous crown coinage groat, struck at Dublin.

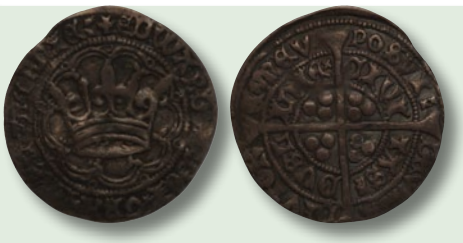


Fig.23. Ireland. Edward IV second "crown" coinage groat, struck at Dublin.

Fig.24. Ireland. Edward IV small-cross on rose/radiant sun penny, struck at Dublin. This is the only mint which struck the type.

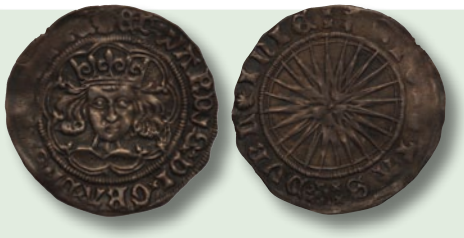


Fig.25. Ireland. Edward IV bust/rose-on-sun double groat, struck at Dublin. Drogheda and Trim joined Dublin in the production of this type.

Fig.26. Ireland. Edward IV, heavy "cross and pellets" coinage silver half groat, struck at Dublin.

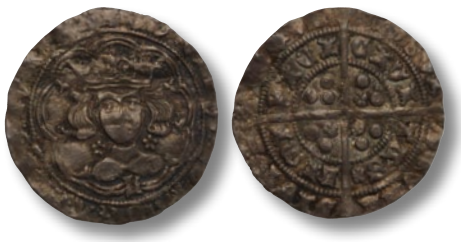


Fig.27. Ireland. Edward IV, light "cross and pellets" coinage silver groat, struck at Limerick.

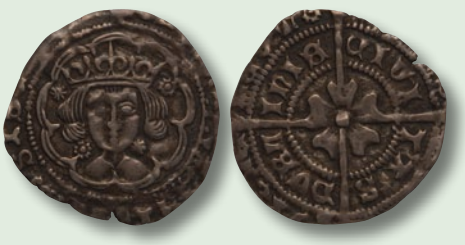


Fig.28. Ireland. Edward IV, bust with suns and roses/rose-on-cross coinage, silver groat, struck at Dublin.

Scotland over a long cross. A second gold coin type, unique to Scotland, is the unicorn issued 1484-88 and valued at 18s. (Fig.32.). The obverse design shows a unicorn facing left and holding a shield. While the silver coins tended to imitate the English some of James' groats and half groats employed a three quarter facing bust of the king (Fig.33.). Philip Grierson wrote that the resemblance of the portrait to contemporary panel portraits suggests it is a real likeness of the king and an isolated example of a trend that would not come to Scotland until 1526. In Scotland there were also low value issues in billon (an alloy containing less than 50 per cent silver) such as the plack (Fig.34.).

A group of copper coins has confounded numismatists over the last century. The obverse is composed of an orb surrounded by the legend ✠IACOBVS ⁘ DEI ⁘ GRA ⁘ REX ⁘ while on the reverse is cross in tressure with the legend ✠CRVX PELLIT OMNE CRIMEN abbreviated slightly. This translates as "The cross takes away all sin" (Fig.35.). These coins were first attributed to Crosraguel Abbey thanks to a hoard found in a drain there in 1919. In 1949 it was suggested that they were produced for Bishop Kennedy of St Andrews while today it is thought that they were regal issues of James III.

Conclusion

England under the three kings considered above was witness to some of the more turbulent events of the later medieval period. The Wars of the Roses and the deposition of the Lancastrian line in favour of the Yorkists divided the political elite. The premature death of Edward IV set in train a second period of division which culminated in the Yorkist branch of the Plantagenet line (in the person of Richard III) being replaced by the Tudors. In this period the coinage was only changed in subtle ways. The 1464-5 weight reduction enabled the mints be competitive in their bullion acquisition and new gold denominations were introduced in turn. However, these small changes are as nothing compared to the monumental shifts that would occur under the first Tudor king Henry VII who will be the subject of the next article.

Further Reading

M. Allen, "The English crown and the coinage, 1399-1485", **The Fifteenth Century** vol. XIII, pp.184-99. TH

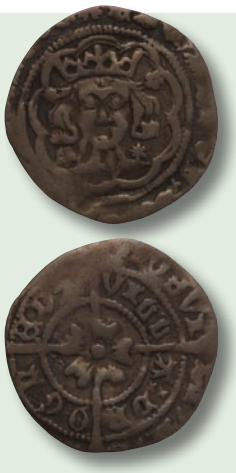


Fig.29. Ireland. Richard III, bust with suns and roses/rose-on-cross coinage, silver groat, struck at Drogheda.

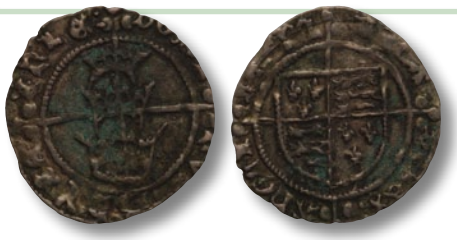


Fig.30. Ireland. Richard III, three crowns coinage, silver groat, struck at Dublin.

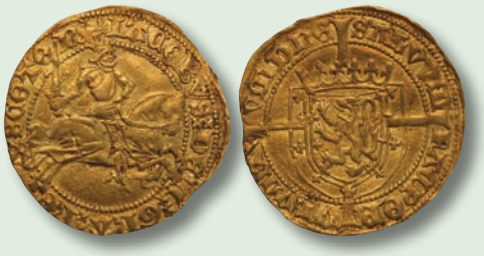


Fig.31. Scotland. James III, gold rider.

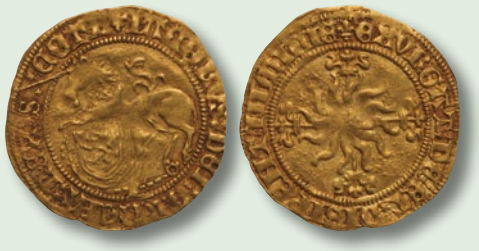


Fig.32. Scotland. James III, gold unicorn.

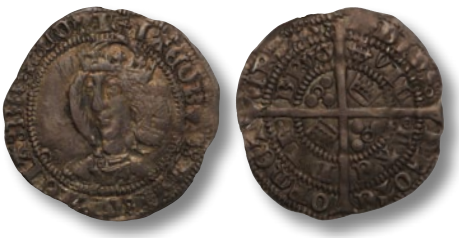


Fig.33. Scotland. James III, main issue silver groat (1484-88), struck at Edinburgh.

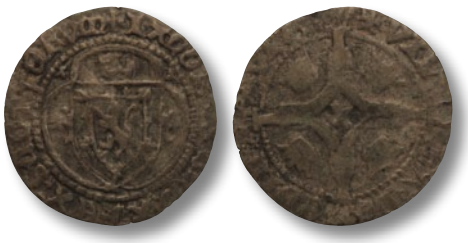


Fig.34. Scotland. James III, billon plack.

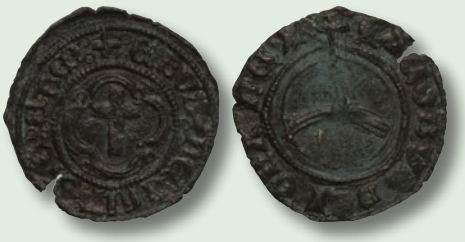


Fig.35. Scotland. Copper "crux pellit" penny. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.