Kings and Coins in Medieval England

The Rise and Fall of the House of Lancaster
Part 1: Richard II-Henry V

Fig.2. The second great seal of Henry IV.

Fig.1. Hedingham Castle, Essex. Seat of the Earls of Oxford (© Giborn_134 2014 and made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic Licence).

Introduction

At the end of the last episode of this series I covered the death of Edward III, one of the longest reigning monarchs of the medieval (or any other) period. Edward III's son Edward (the Black Prince) predeceased his father and that left the old king's young grandson Richard as heir to the kingdom. This episode looks at the coinage of three kings who encountered differing levels of success and whose reigns would have long-lasting implications for future kings of England.

Three Kings: A Brief History

Richard II (1377-99)

Richard II was crowned at Westminster Abbey at the tender age of 10 and during his minority the kingdom was governed by a council which included knights formerly in his father's retinue, such as Simon Burley and Aubrey de Vere, 10th Earl of Oxford (Fig.1.). It was the influence that men such as these enjoyed over the young king that caused so much consternation among the leading magnates of the land.

A theme of the reign was the level of taxation levied to support standing armies in France and on the Scottish border as well as the extravagant spending of the king on his favourites. This led in 1381 to the Peasants Revolt. This armed rebellion protesting at the Poll Tax originated in Kent and Essex and was directed at the hated advisors of the king, in particular his uncle John of Gaunt. The action came to a head when the armies marched on London. In two encounters at Mile End and Smithfield the 14 year old Richard met the rebels led by Wat Tyler. At the second meeting a scuffle saw Tyler killed and Richard ride forward where he appeared to make himself the commander of the rebels. This diffused the situation and the rebels dispersed but not before they had stormed the Tower and executed the Chancellor and Treasurer as well as a more widespread rampage through London killing John of Gaunt's men, any foreigners and anyone associated with the legal profession.

Richard's next challenge came as a result of his lavish patronage of a group of favourites at the expense of the leading men of the kingdom. He also pursued peace with France, which was a sensible if unpopular move. In 1387 a group of five magnates who became known as the Lords Appellant moved against the king and his favourites, charging many with treason and having them executed while at all times claiming loyalty to the king. It would be 10 years of patient waiting before Richard was able to have revenge on the three leading appellants. His uncle the Duke of Gloucester was arrested and murdered in captivity at Calais, the Earl of Arundel was tried and beheaded while the earl of Warwick behaved "like a wretched old woman … wailing and weeping and whining that he had done all, traitor that he was" was spared and exiled to the Isle of Man. Richard's end came as an indirect result of his exile of Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt.

Henry had been exiled for 10 years but when Gaunt died and his vast duchy was to pass to Henry, Richard extended his exile to life. Both Richard's marriages were childless and the succession would pass to another branch of the sons of Edward III, that of Lionel of Antwerp rather than the younger John of Gaunt. These two men were where the Yorkists

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Fig.3. Tomb of Henry IV and his wife Joan of Navarre at Canterbury Cathedral (© Casey and Sonja 2011 and made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic Licence).

Fig.4. Harlech Castle in Gwynedd was originally built as part of Edward I's campaign of castle building in the 1280s. In 1404 it was taken by Glyndwr and became his principal residence and headquarters until it fell in 1409 (© Peter Broster 2013 and made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic Licence).

Fig.5. Château de Vincennes, near Paris. Site of the death of Henry V (© Christophe Pinard 2014 and made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic Licence).

and Lancastrians traced their claims back to in the later Wars of the Roses.

In 1399 Henry was able to leave France and land in Yorkshire with a small force. This quickly gained momentum with followers flocking from all over the country. Richard returned from Ireland and surrendered to Henry at Flint Castle in north Wales. Richard was deposed, imprisoned and most likely starved to death in captivity at Pontefract Castle.

Henry IV (1399-1413)

When Henry IV succeeded to the throne he brought his rich Lancastrian lands and those of his wife Mary de Bohun into the Crown Estate; the Lancastrian lands alone were worth £12,500 a year (Fig.2.). His usurpation of the throne made his position difficult among other European rulers; Robert III of Scotland refused to acknowledge Henry's title as did the French court, but these situations were often used as leverage over disputed territories. During the reign there were Welsh rebellions aided by the French as well as raids from Scotland. The Percy family became incredibly powerful in the reign through their support for the king and their position as earls of Northumberland guarding England against the threat of Scottish invasion. The king's son Henry Prince of Wales (the future Henry V) was active in the military campaigns in Wales against Owain Glyndwr (Fig.4.).

Henry arranged diplomatic marriages with the Continental nobility to strengthen his position. His two daughters were married to the son of Rupert, count palatine of the Rhine and king of the Romans, and Erik VII king of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, while he himself married Joan widow of John de Montfort, duke of Brittany, and daughter of Charles II of Navarre.

A theme of the reign was a shortage of money, which was made worse by the expensive royal household Henry maintained. One measure to ease this was an adjustment to the coinage (see below).

Rebellion was not limited to the Scots and Welsh but also Englishmen. A northern rebellion led by the Archbishop of York, Richard Scrope, was quelled in 1405 and the cleric was executed outside York. Towards the end of the reign Henry suffered with ill-health and was frequently unable to function. A new government featuring Prince Henry managed affairs for the king and was able to bring some financial reform of the king's expenses. Henry died at Westminster in 1413 and was buried at Canterbury Cathedral (Fig.3.).

Henry V (1413-22)

History remembers Henry in a more favourable light than his two predecessors, largely thanks to his famous military successes in France. Henry was much more aggressive in asserting his claim to the French crown as his great-grandfather Edward III had been. Henry was well suited to become king. He had served with some distinction in campaigning in Wales as well as in

government while his father was ill. One of his first acts was to exhume the body of Richard II and have him interred next to his wife at Westminster Abbey. Henry V was interested in reconciling the factions that had created rebellion in earlier reigns and in this regard was successful and ultimately his rule was seen as firm with peace and stability at home.

With a stable England Henry was able to press his claim to the French crown. The French king Charles VI suffered bouts of debilitating mental illness and the struggle for control was fought between the Burgundian and Armagnac factions. Henry used this to his advantage. The port of Harfleur was blockaded and taken to provide a point of entry into France for the English army. On 25 October an English force took on a larger French one near the village of Agincourt and was victorious, opening the route to Calais. Following this success Henry invaded Normandy taking the strategically important city of Caen (burial place of William the Conqueror). By the Treaty of Troyes it was agreed that Henry would marry Catherine, the daughter of the king of France and would succeed as king on Charles' death. In 1421 Catherine bore Henry a son, named Henry although the king never got to see the infant. He died of an illness, probably fluid loss, at the Château du Vincennes in 1422 (Fig.5.). He was buried at Westminster.

Medieval Minting: Coins & Mints

The composition of the currency under these three kings followed what had come before with eight denominations (three in gold and five in silver) that had been established in 1351. At the top was the gold noble, valued at 6s. 8d. (Fig.6.), along with its half and quarter (Figs.7 & 8.). In silver was the penny (Fig.9.), with its half and farthing (Figs.10 & 11.), as well as two multiple penny denominations, the groat (4d.) and half groat (2d.) (Figs.12 & 13.). A mint at the Tower of London was the traditional workhorse for the production of English coinage and continued to be in this period, even if there was a general dearth of silver available in Europe in the late 14th and early 15th

Fig.6. Richard II, gold noble, Calais. CM.5.356-1933.

Fig.8. Richard II, gold quarter noble, London. CM.1.124-1930.

Fig.10. Richard II, silver half groat, London. P.43-1960.

Fig.7. Richard II, gold half noble, London. CM.5.358-1933.

Fig.9. Richard II, silver groat, London, type III. CM.5.364-1933.

Fig.13. Henry IV, silver farthing, heavy, London. CM.1.1797-1990. Blunt.

Fig.11. Richard II, silver penny, Durham. CM.5.369-1933.

Fig.12. Henry IV, silver halfpenny, heavy, London. CM.5.395-1933.

centuries, a phenomenon sometimes called the "bullion famine". This meant that production was not as high as in previous reigns. London struck all the gold coins (apart from some rare Henry IV coins struck at Calais) and most of the silver, with York (Fig.14.) and Durham acting in a supporting role by striking pennies under the bishop (Calais farthings under Henry V are known but scarce).

The coinage over this period was pretty much consistent, the only change coming in Henry IV's reign when in 1412 the noble weight standard was reduced from 120 to 108 grains (Fig.15.) and the pennies from 18 grains to 15 (Figs.16 & 17.). The two groups are termed the "heavy" and "light" coinage.

A phenomenon that began in this period was the use of visible privy marks on the coins. These were devices that enabled the mints to keep track of different batches of coins in order to help maintain standards. These can be seen as additional symbols in the field or on the reverse of a coin. On this coin from Durham a mullet (star) and annulet can be seen to either side of the crown with an annulet added between the reverse pellets in one quarter (Fig.18.).

A problem in most periods of coin production was forgery. During this phase not only were there fraudulent coins made of base metal and made to look like official gold issues being produced (Fig.19.), but there was also a spate of copies of English gold nobles produced in the Low Countries (Fig.20.).

Coins In English Possessions

No coins of these three kings were minted in Ireland despite their

Fig.14. Henry IV, silver penny, heavy, York. CM.5.387-1933.

Fig.15. Henry V, gold noble, class E, London. CM.33.3.329-1936. This new weight standard continued into the reigns of Henry V and VI and was only altered in 1464/5.

Fig.16. Henry IV, silver groat, light, London. CM.5.382-1933.

Fig.18. Henry V, silver penny, Durham. CM.1.1908-1990. Blunt.

Fig.19. Richard II, contemporary forgery of gold half noble. CM.473-2006. Found at Abridge, Essex.

Fig.17. Henry IV, silver penny, light, London. P.46-1960.

Fig.20. Henry V, Continental imitation of gold noble, class C. CM.682-2012. Clipped and water worn.

Fig.21. Anglo-Gallic Richard II, CM.57-1956, gold hardi d'or, Bordeaux. Bordeaux mint indicated by the B at the end of the reverse legend. Continuation of the coinage of his father the Black Prince, although Richard wears a crown, his father was never king.

activities there. However, coins were minted for each of them in their possessions in France. These are known as the "Anglo-Gallic" series. Those of Richard and Henry IV were struck in the traditionally English-held territories of Gascony (Figs.21-23.). Under Henry V the English position regarding France hardened and he, like Edward III before him, asserted his claim to the French crown. Unlike earlier issues the coins struck by Henry would be at the same standard as the French currency and so the denominations shift to imitate the local coinage (Figs.24-26.).

The Impact Of Foreign Coins

In the medieval period non-native coins were constantly coming into the country (be it into England and Wales, or Scotland). The vast majority of these were intercepted and exchanged at the main ports and coastal towns, but some made it into circulation, and on occasion would require the action of the king's council to curb their use. In the period discussed here there were two significant sources for coins coming into England: Venice and Scotland.

Venice

The Republic of Venice, ruled by elected Doges, was a major maritime power in the Mediterranean in the medieval and early modern periods linking the European markets with the Byzantine and Islamic worlds (Fig.27.). In facilitating this commercial enterprise Venice became rich and powerful and like other Italian cities had a huge influence on the development of money, coinage and banking (Fig.28.).

Italian coins are generally rare finds in England before about 1400

Fig.27. The Doge's Palace in Venice (© Dennis Jarvis 2010 and made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic Licence).

Fig.22. Anglo-Gallic, Richard II, denier, known as "black money" due to the colour they went having very little silver content. CM.37-1990.

Fig.23. Anglo-Gallic, Henry IV, hardi d'argent, Aquitaine. CM.1.3070-1990. Blunt Collection.

Fig.26. Anglo-Gallic, Henry V, billon niquet, Rouen. [A224].

Fig.24. Anglo-Gallic, Henry V, gold salut d'or. CM.1956. Rare.

Fig.25. Anglo-Gallic, Henry V, silver guenar, Caen. CM.42-1990.

when there was the first major incursion of Venetian money. These small silver coins became known in common parlance as "gally ha'pens" (galley halfpennies) as their appearance in circulation resulted from the arrival of the large Venetian trading fleets that came annually to England to purchase wool from ports like London, Sandwich and Dover (Fig.29.).

That they found a place in circulation at all was down in large part to the paucity of small silver coins that were being produced at the English mints, so the Venetian soldino operated as a substitute for a halfpenny. These soldini became a major problem in circulation leading to governmental action, both in terms of forcible searches of galleys and in applying pressure to the Venetian senate. The single find evidence, and to a lesser extent hoards, bear out their popularity at this time (Fig.30.).

Fig.28. Venice, Doge Michel Steno (1400-13), gold ducat [1276].

Fig.29. Venice, Doge Michel Steno (1400-13), silver soldino [1288].

Fig.31. Scotland, Robert III (1371-90), silver groat, heavy coinage (c.1390-1403). CM.1.2695-1990. Blunt.

Fig.32. Scotland, Robert III (1371-90), gold lion, heavy coinage (c.1390-1403). CM.9-1966.

Scotland

By the middle of the 14th century the silver content of the Scottish coinage, which was once equal to that of England, became less and less fine, so much so that Scottish coins were re-valued at a lower tariff against the English. In 1356 Edward III had forbidden the circulation of Scottish coins, but in 1374 it was decided that the Scottish groat could circulate at the equivalent of three English pence; later in 1390 this had been reduced to two (Figs.31 & 32.). As the Scottish coinage lost parity with the English the stylistic influences – particularly on the gold coins – shifted from an English to a French axis and was linked to the wider range of foreign coins available in Scotland.

Most foreign coins found in the

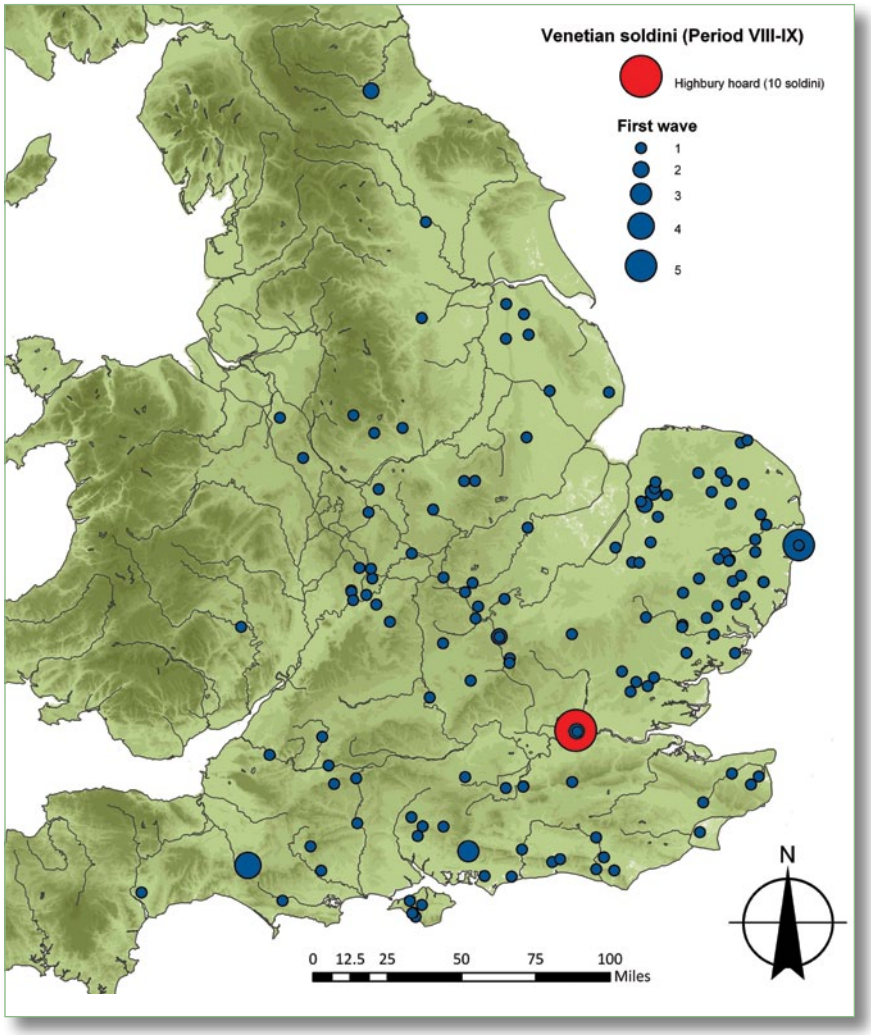

Fig.30. Map of soldino first wave. © Richard Kelleher.

Fig.33. Teutonic Order, Winrich of Kniprode (1351-82), silver vierchen (1364-c.1380). CM.6335-2007. Found at Low Toynton, Lincs.

Fig.34. Portugal. John I (1385-1433), real.

British Isles can be plausibly linked to direct routes of trade and the movement of people. As well as the Venetian and Scottish coins a small numbers from other regions are known. These come from the Teutonic Knights of the Baltic and (Fig.33.), and Portugal (Fig.34.) which shared links with England – based on diplomacy and trade. Indeed, before he became king, Henry IV visited the Baltic and besieged the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius.

Conclusion

In monetary terms very little had changed over the period discussed here, other than the 1412 weight reduction. However, in political terms the usurpation of the rightful king by a junior branch of the royal family was a major cause of the Wars of the Roses and the idea that the king could be replaced, as would come to pass in 1485 when the Tudors replaced the Plantagenets.

Further Reading

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