

Kings and Coins in Medieval England

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The Long 14th Century Part 2: Edward III

Introduction

In the last episode I looked at the major events that occurred in the reign of Edward I and the significant impact that he had on the coinage (Fig.1.). The reign of his son Edward II was eventful but the coinage essentially continued unchanged and as such I will move forward to the reign of Edward I's grandson Edward III which saw further innovation.

Edward III (1327-77): A Brief History

Edward's 50 year reign was one of the longest in English history (Fig.2.). He became king at the young age of 14 after his father Edward II had been deposed by Edward's mother the queen Isabella "the She-Wolf of France" and her lover Roger Mortimer. In his early years he was little more than a puppet of his mother and Mortimer. In 1328 he married Philippa of Hainault who would be his wife for the next 40 years with the couple producing 12 children, half of whom survived beyond their teens. At the age of 17 Edward had his revenge on his mother and Mortimer successfully leading a coup which saw Mortimer executed and his mother bundled off into retirement at Castle Rising in Norfolk (Fig.3.). The

*His like had not been seen since
the days of King Arthur.*

Jean Froissart, French chronicler
(c.1337-c.1405).

accomplishments of Edward's reign were many and varied. He is credited with bringing stability to the country after the disastrous reign of his father while also advancing legislation, transforming England into one of the most powerful military forces in Europe and also developing notions of chivalry and national identity (among the aristocracy at least) in establishing the Order of the Garter (Fig.4.).



Fig.1. Edward I silver penny, Class 8, minted at London. (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

In June 1348 the first instance of the Black Death in England was reported at Weymouth in Dorset. The epidemic had its origins in China and travelled along the trade routes from the east to the capital of the Khans of the Golden Horde at Sarai (modern Russia). From here it spread via the Genoese trading stations on the Black Sea to Constantinople and then into the Mediterranean Sea. By the summer of 1348 it had attacked most of the cities of Italy, southern France and eastern and southern

Fig.2. Edward III's tomb effigy at Westminster Abbey.



Fig.4. Miniature showing Edward III and Henry Duke of Lancaster wearing their blue garter mantle over plate armour.



Fig.3. Castle Rising castle, Norfolk. (© Richard Kelleher).

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Spain and then moved into England. Estimates suggest that between a third and a half of the population was killed by the disease and the royal family did not escape unscathed. The infant Thomas of Windsor died aged about one year old, but more problematic from a political perspective was the death of Edward's daughter Joan. She was betrothed to the king of Castile Pedro I "the Cruel" (Fig.5.) but died in France en route to Spain.

Some of the most famous English military successes of the medieval period

came in the early part of Edward III's reign. Chief among these was that at Crécy in northern France on 26 August 1346 where an English force led by Edward defeated a larger one under the French king Philip IV. Edward III had a claim to the French crown through his mother. This battle was a key victory in the Hundred Years War and led to the capture of Calais which would remain in English hands – and function as a mint – well into the 15th century. In the same year another English army routed an invading Scottish army at Neville's

Cross, near Durham, and captured the Scottish king David II (Fig. 6). While the first half of the reign was generally a success the second half was marred by military failure and political problems at home. Edward died at Sheen in 1377 and was succeeded by his grandson Richard II, son of Edward the Black Prince who had perished a year earlier.

Coin Types & The Mints

The first coins attributed to Edward III are silver pennies of the type brought in under Edward I but these were not



Fig.5. Pedro I "the Cruel" (1350-66) gold dobla. (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.7. Edward III silver farthing, struck at London (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.6. David II, king of Scotland. Silver groat, second coinage, struck at Edinburgh (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.8. Edward III silver halfpenny, struck at Reading (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). There had not been a mint at Reading before Edward III's reign and this would be the only reign in which coins were struck there.



Fig.9. France. Philip VI (1328-50) gold ecu d'or (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.10. Florence commune (1332), gold florin (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.11. Edward III gold quarter noble of 1344-46 (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). The first issues of nobles were deemed too heavy and reduced in weight from 1346-51.



Fig.12. Edward III gold noble of 1346-51 (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

struck in any great quantity and are rare today. In 1335 Edward's "second coinage" was issued. This consisted entirely of slightly debased silver halfpennies and farthings minted at London (Fig.7.) and, for the first time, Reading (Fig.8.).

Since the 1279 re-coinage there had been numerous complaints by the public about the inadequate provision of small change in currency. Mints preferred to strike larger coins as they were more cost effective to produce. These new fractional coins are often referred to as "star marked" as many bear a small star of six or eight points somewhere in the legend. After the limited issue of small silver coins in the second coinage, the third coinage of 1344-51 was much more ambitious. This coinage is commonly referred to as the florin coinage as in 1344 it came in alongside a new gold coin (the florin or double leopard) with its half and quarter. The need for a gold coinage at this time was apparent to many as merchants would typically be

using foreign gold coins for high-value transactions rather than the heavier equivalents in silver; indeed parliament had earlier petitioned for French and Italian gold coin to be made legal tender in the kingdom (Figs.9 & 10.).

Within eight months, however, it was clear that these new coins were not a success. This lay in their value. The florin, at 6 shillings, was not a convenient fraction against the two monies of account – the pound (240d) and the mark (160d). The gold was quickly recalled and a new set of coins – the noble (valued at 6s 8d equal to one third of a pound or half a mark), and its fractions were introduced (Fig.11.). The noble and its half bore as its obverse design an image of a ship with a standing armoured figure of the king (Figs.12 & 13.), which has been interpreted as a reference to the English naval victory at Sluys in 1340 (Fig.14.). Alongside the three gold denominations were three in silver; the penny, halfpenny and farthing (Figs.15-17.). The

bust of these issues is similar to that of the earlier pence but sees the inclusion of the king's shoulders.

In 1351 yet another innovation took place. This involved a general weight reduction across the denominations, so that new pennies weighed less than those of the florin coinage which would be required to be exchanged for the new money. The reduction took the penny from 20 to 18 grains (1.30 to 1.17 grams) (Fig.18.). In addition two new silver denominations were added to the mix: the groat and half groat valued at 4 and 2 pence respectively (Figs.19 & 20.). The new coins were larger and thus provided space for a more elaborate design. The obverse carried a large bust within a tressure of nine arches and the inscription was extended to read **†EDWARD D·G·R·EX·ANGL·Z·FR·ANC·D·h·Y·B**, for the first time claiming the title of the king of France. On the reverse the extra room allowed for a second band of text reading **POSVI·DEVM·ADIVTORE·MEV** ("I



Fig.13. Edward III gold half noble of 1346-51 (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.14. Miniature of the Battle of Sluys, Bruges c.1470.



Fig.15. Edward III silver penny, struck at York (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

Fig.16. Edward III silver halfpenny, struck at London (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.17. Edward III silver farthing, struck at London (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



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have made God my helper" from Psalm 54.4). The fourth coinage is subdivided into the pre-treaty period (1351-61), the treaty period (1361-9) which followed the treaty of Brétigny in which the claim was omitted (Fig.21.) and the post-treaty period (1369-77) where it was reinstated. Most of the minting of coins took place in London with small issues from Durham and York; however, after 1363 significant numbers of coins began to be struck to the English model at Calais (Fig. 22.).

Hoard & Finds

Fig.23. shows the numbers of single

finds of each denomination in the fourth coinage recorded with the PAS. It is very clear from this breakdown that the pennies were circulating in greater numbers than the other denominations. They are followed by the groats and half groats in significant numbers which is interesting. Perhaps surprising are the low numbers of halfpennies and farthings but what is clear is that after 1351 both the production of smaller coins and their consumption by the population was much reduced (Fig.24.).

Could the population decline seen as a result of the Black Death have played a part? It is certainly possible as

the amount of money per capita would have increased markedly with the severe reduction in population. An interesting point of note in seeing how the currency changed over the period is found if we compare the PAS single finds against an exceptional archaeological find from London. In the late 1980s excavations at the site of the old Royal Mint next to the Tower of London at East Smithfield revealed a large Black Death period cemetery. Of the hundreds of skeletons recovered a few were accompanied by parcels of coins. One of these was a woman aged 25-35 who had two separate parcels (totalling 181 coins) on her;



Fig.18. Edward III silver penny, Series C, struck at Durham (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.20. Edward III silver half groat, Series G, struck at London (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.19. Edward III silver groat, Series E, struck at London (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.21. Edward III gold noble, treaty period (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.22. Edward III silver groat, struck at Calais (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

	Noble	Half-noble	Quarter-noble	Groat	Halfgroat	Penny	Halfpenny	Farthing	Uncertain	Total
Pre-treaty (1351-61)	4	4	11	170	133	222	4	0	3	551
Treaty (1361-69)	1	6	28	11	18	63	9	2	1	139
Post-treaty (1369-77)	0	1	0	8	10	64	2	2	0	87
'Fourth coinage'	3	8	8	110	127	199	15	4	2	476
Total	8	19	47	299	288	547	30	8	6	1253

Fig.23. Table of PAS coin finds of Edward III's fourth coinage © Richard Kelleher.

one slung under the armpit, the other at the waist, perhaps from a purse on a belt (Fig.25.).

These were of special interest for a number of reasons not least because the two parcels were comprised of different denomination coins. The waist purse was made up of a large proportion of farthings and halfpennies while the group from the armpit included most of the full pennies. The interpretation of this find is that the easily accessible coins at the waist were for everyday use while the hidden group under the armpit kept the larger value coins safe. If we compare these groups with what we see from

single finds by 1351 the shift away from small denominations is striking.

The Hundred Years War & The Black Prince

The Hundred Years War was a series of conflicts fought between England and France for the French throne between 1337 and 1453. In areas of France controlled by Edward III and his son Edward the Black Prince an interesting and wide ranging series of coins were produced. The series, known as the Anglo-Gallic coinage, began as early as the reign of Henry II (1154-89) as English kings minted coins in their Continental

domains. In the 14th century the levels of production intensified significantly.

The fabric and denominations in this series borrow from both English and French models. The sterling type is very much reminiscent of English pennies, but with a three-quarter facing bust and crowns in the angles of the reverse cross instead of pellets (Fig.26.). Another larger coin, the gros a la porte (Fig.27.) is very much in the style of the French gros tournois while some coins were struck in billon (a debased silver) which did not occur in England (Fig.28.). Edward the Black Prince predeceased his father and so never became king in England or struck

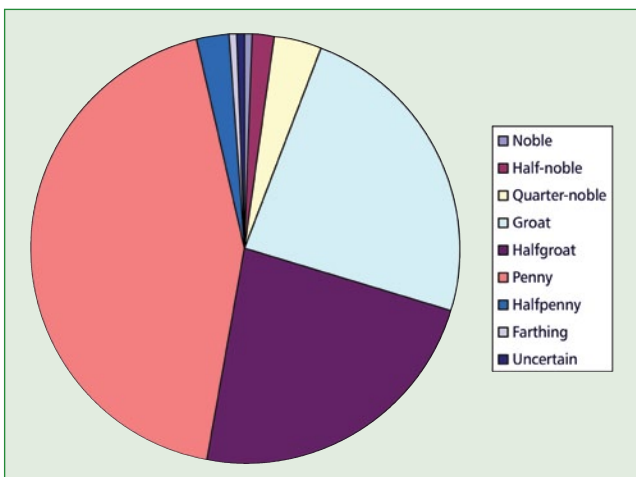


Fig.24. Denominations of Edward III coins on PAS.

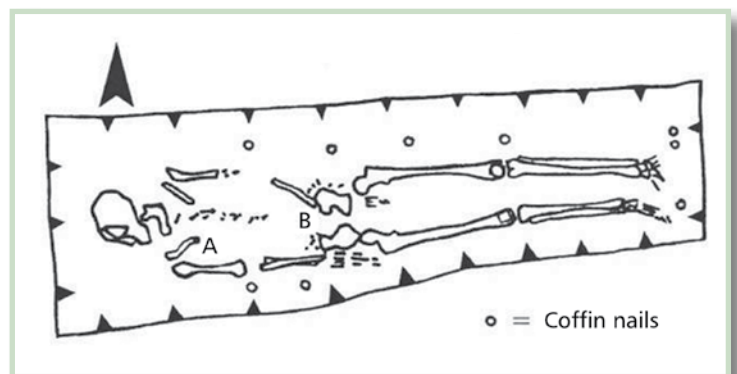


Fig.25. Skeleton from the East Smithfield Black Death cemetery. (© Richard Kelleher).



Fig.26. Edward III Anglo-Gallic silver sterling (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.27. Edward III Anglo-Gallic silver gros tournois (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

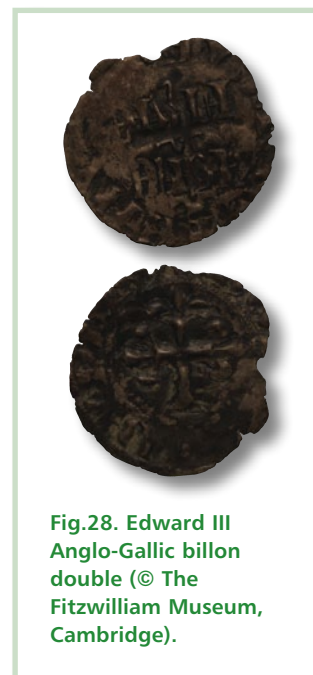


Fig.28. Edward III Anglo-Gallic billon double (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.29. Edward the Black Prince Anglo-Gallic gold pavillon d'or, struck at Bordeaux (© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).



Fig.30. Edward the Black Prince
Anglo-Gallic silver demi-gros, struck
at La Rochelle (© The Fitzwilliam
Museum, Cambridge).

Fig.31. Edward the Black Prince
Anglo-Gallic hardi d'argent, struck
at Limoges (© The Fitzwilliam
Museum, Cambridge).

coins there. He was, however, responsible for a large output in France. A large gold coin called the pavillon d'or imitated coins of the French kings with Edward standing holding a sword under the Gothic portico (Fig.29). This aggressive imagery is continued on the silver coins with a right facing figure of the prince holding a sword over his right shoulder (Fig.30.) and is even more prevalent on the small

silver hardi on which the prince is actually pointing at the sword as if challenging the viewer (Fig.31.).

Conclusion

Edward III's long reign was a significant one in terms of the development of coinage of England. The innovations in currency which built on Edward I's reforms of 1279 saw the addition of new

denominations and created a system that would endure into the Tudor period shaping a currency that was more flexible – particularly at the top end for those encountering gold coins. The overall distribution of wealth as seen in the coinage was also concentrated in the hands of fewer, richer people. Wars in France also generated a fabulously diverse range of coin imagery, unlike the quite conservative English currency where expressions of wealth and power would be played out. At the start of Edward's reign there were three denominations in silver, at his death this had increased to eight in both silver and gold, marking out the mid-14th century as a key phase in the history of the English coinage.

Further Reading

Allen, M. **Mints and Money in Medieval England**, (Cambridge, 2012).

Harvey, J. **The Plantagenets** (London, 1978). TH



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