Kings and Coins in Medieval England

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The Rise and Fall of the House of Lancaster Part 2: Henry VI

Introduction

In this second part of the coins of the Lancastrian kings I look at the reign of Henry VI, the third of the Lancastrian kings after Henry IV and V. His reign was in two parts, the first was from 1422-61 when he was deposed and replaced by Edward IV, followed by a second brief period of restoration in 1470-71. This article will look at the coinage of both these periods.

Background & Reign

Henry was born 6 December 1421 and was the only child of Henry V and Catherine of Valois. At nine months of age he became king of England when his father died near Paris having never seen his son. Not only did the infant inherit the throne of England he was also, uniquely in medieval English history, heir to the French throne. Its incumbent, the insane Charles VI, died two months after Henry V leaving an uncertain situation in which a baby was the recognised king of England and France. The English position in France was largely held in place thanks to an alliance with the powerful dukes of Burgundy who controlled parts of the north and east.

There was a general level of stability in Henry's minority thanks to his two uncles; in English-held France a regency was put in place under John, Duke of Bedford, while in England Humphrey Duke of Gloucester became "protector and defender of the realm and chief councillor for the king".

As a boy Henry grew up alongside his mother at Windsor, Hertford and Eltham (Fig.1.). He was crowned in England in 1429 at the age of eight (the youngest king in English history) and at Notre Dame in France two years later, though this would be Henry's only visit to his continental domains. Into his teens Henry gradually assumed control of royal affairs from the councillors who had ruled in his name.

Over the reign Henry's position as French king remained uncertain. He had been recognised as French heir by Charles VI "the Mad" who disinherited his own son by the Treaty of Troyes. Henry was criticised by members of his court for his

Fig.1. Eltham Palace, London. Eltham was a royal residence from 1305 until into the 16th century and even hosted the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos at Christmas 1400. Little remains of the medieval phase of Eltham Palace thanks to its later Tudor and Art Deco refurbishments but the great hall (rebuilt by Edward IV) stands in memory of the life of the site in the Middle Ages. © Duncan Harris.

Fig.2. King's College, Cambridge © Richard Kelleher.

Fig.3. Gold noble of Henry VI, annulet class struck at Calais. The c (or sometimes h) in the centre of the reverse marks this out as a Calais coin. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.5. Gold quarter noble of Henry VI, annulet class struck at London. The number of fleurs-de-lis above the obverse shield tell us the mint: one for London, two for York and three for Calais. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.8. Silver penny of Henry VI, annulet class struck at London. The annulets appear on the reverse only on the pennies and halfpennies of London © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.4. Gold half noble of Henry VI, annulet class struck at Calais. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.6. Silver groat of Henry VI, annulet class struck at Calais. The annulets are clearly visible beside the king's neck on the obverse and between the pellets in two of the angles, and within the legend of the reverse © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.9. Silver halfpenny of Henry VI, annulet class struck at London. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.7. Silver half groat of Henry VI, annulet class struck at Calais. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.10. Silver farthing of Henry VI, annulet class struck at London. The farthings are identified to this class based on the initial cross © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

pursuit of a peaceful resolution in France but with the emergence of Joan of Arc and a resurgent French royal line under the dauphin (Charles VII) English control was waning. To find a peaceful solution Henry was married to Margaret of Anjou, who was a niece of Charles VII, at Titchfield Abbey in 1444. The defeat of the English forces at Formigny in 1450 practically ended any idea of Henry's dual rule.

Henry had a passion for educational and devotional foundations, and this is seen in his creation of Eton College and King's College, Cambridge (Fig.2.). Recent histories have said of Henry that "his qualities and inclinations, admirable in a private person, did not make him a successful ruler". He kept a large household and soon incurred spiralling debts.

The years 1449-50 saw unrest and rebellion as the English continued to lose control of parts of France and the king became increasingly unpopular at home. At this time Richard Duke of York, a descendent of Edward III, began to rise to prominence. In the years 1453-54 Henry suffered a severe mental and physical breakdown which saw him stay in seclusion at Windsor for 17 months. During this time a son, Prince Edward, was born easing the dynastic uncertainty. Henry's recovery at Christmas 1454 was followed by conflict and defeat by Richard of York at St Albans; Richard was then appointed as the king's chief councillor.

In the years that followed Henry withdrew from his responsibilities leaving his wife to make decisions in his name. At Northampton in 1460 Henry was taken captive by the Yorkists – Richard and his son Edward (the future Edward IV) – and while still king in name was effectively a puppet monarch. The following year Edward defeated the Lancastrian army and entered London declaring Henry unfit to rule and was crowned himself as Edward IV. Henry and his family fled to Scotland but in 1464 he was captured and placed in the Tower of London where he remained captive for five years.

Henry VI	Noble	Half noble	Quarter noble	Groat	Halfgroat	Penny	Halfpenny	Farthing	Unknown	Total
Annulet (c.1422-7)	0	2	2	83	47	63	53	0	0	250
Rosette-Mascle (c.1427-30)	0	0	0	39	13	36	16	0	0	104
Pinecone-Mascle (c.1430-4)	0	0	0	8	3	8	9	0	0	28
Leaf-Mascle (c.1434-5)	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3
Leaf-Trefoil (c.1435-8)	0	0	1	0	0	1	3	0	0	5
Trefoil (c.1438-43)	0	0	0	3	0	1	2	0	0	6
Leaf-pellett (c.1445-54)	0	0	0	0	0	8	9	2	0	19
Cross-pellett (c.1454-60)	0	0	0	0	0	5	6	0	0	11
Uncertain Henry VI	1	0	3	39	23	76	84	10	10	246
Total	1	2	6	172	86	198	185	12	10	672

Fig.11. Table of denominations and classes recorded on PAS. Some of the rarer issues are unknown as finds.

Fig.12. Silver groat of Henry VI, rosette-mascle class struck at Calais. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.13. Rosette enlarged.

Fig.14. Mascle enlarged.

Fig.15. Gold noble of Henry VI, pinecone-mascle class struck at York. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Coinage In Henry's Reign

The structure of the coinage under Henry was a continuation of the stable model that had been in place since 1351. This comprised three gold denominations – the noble and its half and quarter (Figs.3-5.) – and five in silver: the groat, half groat, penny, halfpenny and farthing (Figs.6-10.). The implementation of privy marking on the coins is a very obvious feature of the coins of Henry VI and allows us to divide the coinage into 11 consecutive issues. Each is identified by the inclusion of symbols like annulets, rosettes, leaves or pinecones in the legend or field, although on the smaller coins these are sometimes more tricky to locate or sometimes absent (Fig.11.).

The annulet coins, struck in Henry's minority, are the most abundant, more than twice as common as the next ranked class – the rosette-mascle (Fig.12.). These are identified by the rosettes (Fig.13.) and mascles (Fig.14.) placed within the inscription. The next class is known as the pinecone-mascle type (Fig.15.) incorporated a small pinecone (Fig.16.) alongside the mascle as stops in the inscription. The leaf-mascle class came next (Fig.17.) introducing a small leaf in the spandrel below the bust of the king (Fig.18.). From c.1435-38 the leaf-trefoil class was struck (Fig.19.). In Henry's reign the bulk of the responsibility for minting fell to the mints of London and Calais. York was active briefly in 1423-4 striking the larger denomination coins for the first time, the gold noble and the silver groat and half groat, as well as the usual issue of pennies. These can be identified on the basis of the personal mark of the bishop if the reverse is obscured or worn.

Finds & Hoards

Taking the long view of the levels of medieval currency in circulation from single finds (1158-1454), those of Henry VI are positioned at the point where numbers are fewest. This period coincided with a distinct lack of available silver (and gold) bullion with which to strike coins. A distribution map of finds recorded on PAS from 1412-1464 (Fig.20.) shows the spread of coins to be less prolific than in previous periods. Levels of hoarding are also lower in this period than in any other. Numbers range from the very small, such as three Burgundian coins in a small hoard from Headington in Oxfordshire, to the spectacular gold treasure found at Fishpool, Nottinghamshire. This find of at least 1287 gold coins and accompanying items of gold jewellery can be seen on display in the British Museum's medieval gallery and was surely the unrecovered property of a senior member of the aristocracy at the time of the Wars of the Roses.

Fig.16. Pinecone enlarged.

Ireland

In Ireland a small number of pennies were struck in 1425-6 at Dublin but

Fig.17. Silver groat of Henry VI, leaf-mascle class struck at Calais. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.18. Leaf enlarged.

Fig.19. Silver groat of Henry VI, leaf-trefoil class struck at London. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

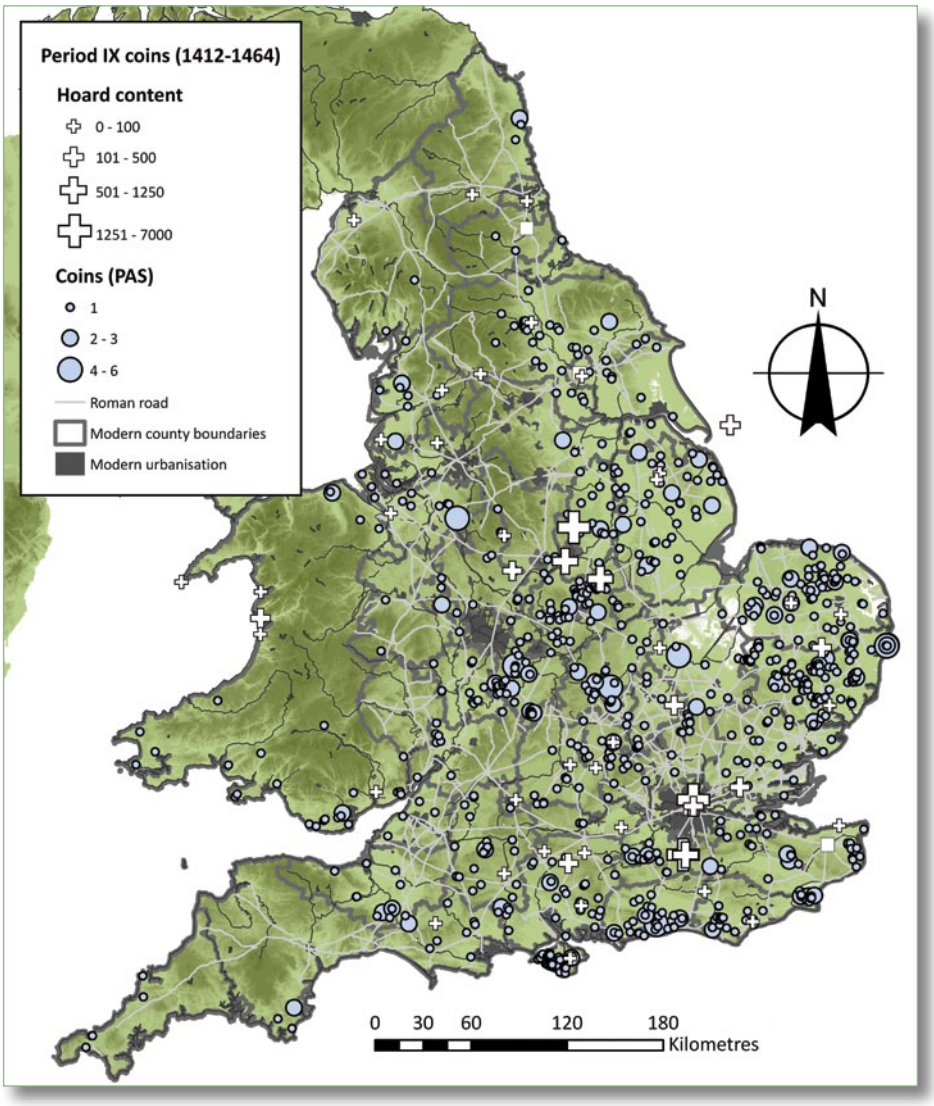

Fig.20. Distribution map of finds recorded on PAS from 1412-1464.

just three specimens survive, one in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Fig.21.), one in the British Museum, and one in a private collection. These were contemporaneous with the annulet coinage in England (1422-6). A phenomenon also seen in Ireland and cited in Acts of Parliament for 1447 and 1450 was known as "O'Reilly's money". These were English groats and half groats that were cut down to their inner circle and also included Irish-made plated copies of such coins (Fig.22.).

Anglo-Gallic Coins

Henry VI was the last English king to strike coins in France (bar a small issue at Tournai under Henry VIII). Coins in gold, silver and billon were struck for the 27 years of existence of Lancastrian France and the denominations remained stable throughout. The mint network was extensive, with at least 13 mints active at some point in the reign. These are recognisable on the coinage from their distinctive initial marks at the start of the legend; for example, Amiens has a paschal lamb, Paris a crown, and Rouen a leopard.

The largest gold coin was the salut d'or (Fig.23.) valued at 22s 6d tournois (i.e. the French standard). This handsome coin has, on the obverse, shields bearing the arms of France and England with the Virgin Mary and the angel Gabriel behind and the word 0Ve on a scroll between them. The reverse bears a Latin cross with a leopard to the right and the initial h below for Henry.

The main silver coin was the grand blanc aux écus (Fig.24.) valued at 10d tournois. This coin similarly carries the arms of France and England but with the simpler word heRIcVS in place of the elaborate figures seen on the gold; a similar arrangement adorned the reverse.

At the bottom of the denominational scale were the "black coins", so called thanks to their low silver content and thus dark appearance. The denier tournois (Fig.25.) had a leopard on one side and a cross on the other. These are rarely found in England and circulated within Lancastrian controlled areas of France.

Scotland

The reign of Henry VI coincided roughly with those of the Scottish kings James I and James II. At the start of his reign James I was a captive of the English and had grown up at the courts of Henry IV and Henry V and had come to be more of a guest than hostage. He was finally ransomed in 1424 for the hefty sum of £40,000 and immediately set about administrative matters, which included a reform of the coinage. A new gold coin was struck with a lion rampant within a lozenge on the obverse and the reverse inscription "Save thy people, O Lord" a quote from Psalm 28:9 (Fig. 26.). The Scottish groats continued to be influenced by their English equivalents in

Fig.21. Ireland. Henry VI penny, Dublin. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.26. Scotland. James I (1406-37), gold demy. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.22. Henry VI silver groat clipped down to the centre circle. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.23. Anglo-Gallic. Henry VI gold salut d'or, Paris mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.24. Anglo-Gallic. Henry VI, silver grand blanc aux ecus, struck at Le Mans. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.25. Anglo-Gallic. Henry VI, billon denier tournois, struck at St Lô. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.27. Scotland. James II (1437-60), second coinage, silver groat, Edinburgh © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig.28. Silver groat of the restored Henry VI, York mint. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

design as shown in this piece of James II (Fig.27.).

Henry's Restoration & Death

Divisions in the Yorkist ranks in 1470 allowed supporters of the deposed king, Edward's brother George and the Duke of Warwick "the Kingmaker", to free Henry and restore him to the throne. During this brief period coins were again struck in Henry's name but are not common today (Fig.28.).

The restoration did not last long. At the battle of Tewkesbury Henry and Margaret were captured and their son Edward killed. Henry was taken back to the Tower and within hours of Edward IV's entry into London was put to death. His body was taken for burial to Chertsey Abbey, although Richard III transferred it to Windsor in 1484.

In the Middle Ages prominent political figures who died a violent death, such as Thomas Becket or Thomas of Lancaster, often attracted popularity as unofficial saints. When the Yorkist line came to an end with Richard III at Bosworth the tomb of Henry VI in St George's Chapel, Windsor became one of the most popular pilgrim sites in England for the next 20-30 years. Pilgrim badges of Henry are well known and remind us of the powerful belief in miraculous healing that saints' shrines could engender (Fig.29.). Henry VII (nephew of Henry VI) petitioned the pope on several occasions to have him canonised without success.

Fig.29. Lead alloy pilgrim badge of Henry VI © Portable Antiquities Scheme (NLM-FACEC6). Found at Winteringham, Lincolnshire.

Further Reading

J.D. Bateson, **Coinage in Scotland** (London 1997).

R.A. Griffiths, "Henry VI (1421-1471)", **Oxford Dictionary of National Biography**, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2010 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12953, accessed 28 Aug 2014].

J.J. North, **English Hammered Coinage** Volume 2, (London 1991).

In the next article I'll look at the coinage of the Yorkist kings, Edward IV, Edward V and Richard III and the end of the Plantagenet line of English kings. TH