

Church Mints

by
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Chapter 5 Usury and the Church of England

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Chapter 5. Church Mints

The prohibition of usury was a negative way of protecting the social order that had been achieved. But positive action was also taken by *Church* and *State* to render usury unnecessary.

In our century it has, broadly speaking, been assumed that money can only be issued - and pound notes etc. printed - to represent a fixed quantity of gold held by certain individuals or companies, the bankers. These notes - or a credit for so many hundred or thousand pounds - are, we have been led to suppose, lent by the owners (the *Bankers*) and after the money has assisted a cycle of production to take place, it must be repaid and the debts contracted be cancelled.

Such ideas are deeply embedded in our thinking about money and are not much affected by nationalization. The nation, we are again apt to imagine, had merely bought the gold or cover for money from the private bankers. But we shall have to rid ourselves of all such theories if we are to understand the significance of *Church Mints*.

Money had not in the distant days we are to consider attained to its later sanctity, and was rather considered as a convenience of man which man could create when he needed it. In fact, it is only as the *Middle Ages* advanced in England that money was used to a large degree and payment was often made by service.

Money was certainly not considered the monopoly of private bankers or even of a caucus in charge of a nationalized bank. The circulating medium - silver and gold - had a value in itself, but money was used as a measure of price and a claim, not as a means to power. Perhaps it was an unconscious dread of this that spurred our ancestors against the *Usurer*. For there can be no question but that *Modern Banking* is an adaptation of the *Usurer's* craft.

In this matter of issuing coins, *King* and *Church* worked side by side for many centuries and not only kept out the *Usurer* but held the price level steady - an achievement that has baffled the modern specialists and experts. It might be easier to work backwards from the present to the times of the local mints, but the historical process will clarify itself if followed through from the beginning.

Julius Caesar is the first to mention currency in Britain but it is unknown when '*pecunia*', money of any kind, was first used in this country. The earliest circulation medium - a step from barter towards convenience - may have been leather tokens. In the same way, numismatists have assigned a coin to Egbert, the seventh *Archbishop of York* (732-766), but cannot say when bishops first issued coins¹.

Egbert was the brother of Eadbert, *King of Northumbria*, so that this is an early instance of the co-operation of *Church* and *State*. There was no scarcity of metal, so the *King* allowed his brother to issue money for the benefit of his subjects. This showed that the *Church's* authority in business matters was acknowledged - business was not yet business, but part of a *Christian* man's life - and the *Church's* desire was not to make life more difficult but to facilitate the exchange of goods. If Henry VIII's *Primate* had been a strong brother, the divorce of *Church* and *Business* would not have been so complete.

“York Archiepiscopal Mint's earliest products were *stycas* of Archbishop Ecgberht, bearing his name and that of his brother Eadberht.”

writes Rawlings in *Coins and How to Know Them*. *Styca* is old English for '*piece*'. *Stycas* were copper coins of uncertain value. Egbert issued a base silver '*scatta*', and appears to have been the only *Ecclesiastic* to do so.

Egbert's successors probably issued coins when they were needed, and Wigmund struck a gold coin bearing his bust, and the words '*Vigmund Arep*' and on the reverse a cross with the inscription '*Munus Divinum*'. Wigmund's gold coin was perhaps intended as a '*solidus*'.

In Canterbury, the same authority says, the earliest coins are those of Ianbert, who was Archbishop from 766 - 793, and these bear '*Ianbert Arep*' and '*Offa Rex*' on the reverse. The alliance between *Bishop* and *King* was close here also. Offa, it may be remembered, *King of Mercia* (756-796), did not at first own Kent. So, as the *See of Canterbury* was not in Mercia, he constituted an *Archbishopric* of his own at Lichfield.

Eventually the *Primate of Canterbury* submitted to him. It is possible that the *Primate* had issued coins before: perhaps Offa wished to console him for his action in founding Lichfield, or the motive may well have been the desire to co-operate in organising the kingdom. Ianbert was the twelfth *Archbishop of Canterbury*.

Wulfred (805-832) marked the coins with the archiepiscopal effigy, a tonsured bust, and this was a sign that Mercia was losing control of Kent, surrounded by water on three sides and with a mint of its own.

¹ '*Pecus*' means cow, and possibly one cow was once a measure of price. Cowrie shells, it may be recalled, have been used as money in Africa and South Asia.

Besides these undoubted instances, there were probably *Church Mints* at other centres in the ninth century: Durham, Hereford, Rochester, Norwich and Stamford are possible places.

Athelstan succeeded to the kingdom in 925, which included England as far as the Humber. And in 928 he held a *Great Synod*, at which Archbishop Wulfhelme attended. Law 14 concerned *Moneys*. There was to be one money over all the *King's* dominions. The *Archbishop of Canterbury* was to be allowed two *Moneys*, the *Abbot of St. Augustine's* one and the *Bishop of Rochester* one.

Athelstan did not annex Northumbria until 937. This meant that the *King* alone was to have his image on English coins so that the *Archbishops* lost the privilege. This was not, as might appear, a loss of position to the *Church*. She still helped to run the *State* and provide services as they were needed, but without the show of archiepiscopal effigies.

After 928, dies were issued to subordinate mints from the *Tower of London Mint*. The *Ecclesiastics* kept the profits and paid rent. The modern historian would infer that the *Ecclesiastics* drew large profits from issuing money and that they would have kept it short. But on 1 lb. troy of silver minted the profit was in fact 12d, and there were 450 d. in 1 lb. sterling. Of the 12d. profit, the *Ecclesiastic* kept 1d., and the *Mint Master* 11d. This payment was for the service of issuing money and was in no sense usury on money lent. The money issued did not have to be repaid.

In modern times the distinction between the two ways of rendering money available is not clear, although it was recognized in and before the days of Egbert. A payment for the service of providing money (or credit, for that matter) is not usury: whereas lending at a fixed rate was thought of as a horror alien to Christianity.

The practice of the *Archbishops* who provided local currency to meet local needs was poles asunder from the declaration of Paterson who founded the *Bank of England* in 1684 and openly declared:

“The Bank hath benefit of the interest on all the money that it creates out of nothing.”

Between Athelstan's *Synod* and the *Conquest*, there was little activity, as far as is known, in the Canterbury, York, Rochester and hypothetical Durham mints. A license, it seems, had been granted to York after the annexation of Northumbria. But in 963 Edgar restored the monastery of Medhamstede, by Stamford, and allowed it one *Moneyer*.

This indicates the growing importance, from the social as well as religious point of view, of the monasteries and the power of the abbots. Bishop Walter of Hereford, consecrated in 1060, coined under Edward the Confessor, and Baldwin, the Abbot of St. Edmundsbury (1065-1095) was granted the privilege at the same time. It also appears from the *Doomsday Book* that the Bishop of Norwich issued currency. It was a period of growth during which the needs of the Midlands and of East Anglia were met. The North and South already had their mints to meet the local needs for currency.

William the Conqueror saw no reason to isolate the *Church* from the contagion of money. He removed the Anglo-Saxon bishops but left the mints undisturbed. He decreed however that there should be one standard of silver money: 11oz. 2 dwt. of fine silver, 18 dwt. of alloy. The profits of minting were little, if at all, affected by this. According to Charles K. Rawding:

“After the *Conquest* the chief *Ecclesiastical Mints* were at Canterbury, York and Durham. *Ecclesiastical Money* was like regal in every respect but distinguished by *Mint Marks*.”

The *Mint of St. Edmundsbury* was the most active immediately after the *Conquest*. The Abbot not only kept his right under William I but had it confirmed by his seven successors, and Stephen allowed him two more dies. His coins passed the test in Edward II's reign, when an order was made for the trial of monies, and in 1321 a new die was delivered ‘to strike money as often as it might be necessary’. The *Abbey Mint* is last heard of six years later (1327) when the inhabitants of Bury besieged the abbey, burned the gates and seized the die and metal. But the Abbot ordered the raiders to pay a fine of 2,000 marks over 20 years - quite generous treatment - and had his die replaced by order of the *King*.

We are so used to centralization in minting and issue of money that we find it hard to imagine a period in which local mints were used to meet local needs, and to avoid the necessity of resort to the *Usurer*. They have been replaced by ‘*loan finance*’. The old principle was the sound one, and Rawding's statement that ecclesiastical coining was confined to Canterbury, Durham and York may well be questioned.

There are many Cathedral cities with their *Silver Street*, indicative of a mint, and probably several of these were under control of the *Church* rather than the *King*. In those times, the bureaucracy was kept to the lowest possible proportions and among other duties the *Ecclesiastics* discharged many functions now spread among hordes of officials.

It has been conjectured that 'purely Durham bishops' issues' began in, or near, the time of Edward the Confessor, and that *Bishops* occasionally coined at Ipswich and in Norfolk. Noble's opinion is that the right originated under Stephen who 'indulged his subjects with mints'.

Galfric, Henry's *Chancellor*, who was consecrated in 1128, defeated David of Scotland in 1129 when he was in temporary command of Stephen's forces during the illness of Thurston, *Archbishop of York*. He needed money to pay for the war and coined some himself 'probably by grant rather than by usurpation'. Stephen's reign, it is certain, admitted chaos into minting as well as castle building and, according to an anonymous article in the library of the Durham Close:

"Henry of Anjou did all he could to put a stop to usurpations of nobles and prelates."

Not only did the Bishops of Durham temporarily lose the privilege during Henry II's reign, but such as Henry of Winchester lost it for good. The Bishop of Winchester had apparently coined like other barons because he needed money and refused to use coins that bore the *Usurper's* name. So Bishop Henry put his own name on the money. The new king also suppressed the mint of *St. Augustine's Abbey*, forgetting his sense of history.

But it was not the principle of *Church Mints* that worried Henry so much as its abuses. Provided that they had not usurped the privilege and that they issued coins of standard alloy, he encouraged *Church Mints*. He confirmed the grant of a mint made by Henry I twice and allowed the mint to be in London or Reading. Stephen had insisted that it should be in London.

There is no record of Henry suppressing the *Mint of St. Chad's Church, Lichfield*, which had been granted by Stephen. Nor did he interfere with the *Mint of Medhamstede* - it is mentioned in a bull of Eugenius III - as coins had been struck there from *Saxon* times.

Church Mints expanded under Richard I and John. In the first year of his reign, Richard I granted the Bishop of Lichfield a pair of dies and stipulated that "the mint should be forever". He also granted a license:

"...to Philip, his Chaplaine, Bishop of Durham (1195-1207) 'to coyne in the City of Durham which liberty none of his predecessors had enjoyed of long time before."

It is probable that Richard was distressed for lack of money and that he received a "gratuity for the renewal of this privilege". He did not check any *Church Mints* then operating and:

"Richard, Duke of Aquitaine confirmed to the Church of St. Andrew, Bordeaux, all that his predecessors had granted, particularly a third of the profits of the mint."

In John's reign we have another instance of local money being issued when it was needed. In our own century goods have been destroyed and restricted for lack of money but in John's day money was neither invested with sacrosanct properties nor was it centralized. Currency was scarce in Chichester, so he commanded that there should be used there two dies, one for the *King* and one for the *Bishop* and, according to Rawding:

"...ordered by writ that the *Bishop's Coins* should be current in the city until money could be struck in the *King's Mint*."

The *Magna Carta* was designed to prevent *Tyranny* or, in accurate language, *Monarchy*. In the mints we see *Church* and *State* working hand in hand, so that the *Monarchy of the Usurer* is avoided and prices are kept steady. These are no small achievements.

John, further, granted the archbishops of Canterbury an *Exchange*, distinct from the *Royal Exchange*, and it is worth mentioning that the *Archbishops* held the privilege of coining 'of common right'. Mark Noble in *Two Dissertations on the Mint and Coins of the Episcopal-Palatine of Durham* points to this theory. William Rufus had given the city to the *Archbishops*, but none save *Archbishops* coined 'of common right'.

For the next two and a half centuries, the history of *Church Mints* is uneventful, and we do not hear much of the lesser mints in England. There were, as far as we know, none in Wales, Scotland or Ireland. Bury and Bordeaux continued working, and there was some activity at Reading. The Abbot of Reading had a grant from Edward I, but nothing more is heard of the mints after Edward III. There are interesting remains of the *Exeter Mint*, but it may have been a *King's* or *Bishop's* mint.

The *Dean and Chapter* and *Moneymen* of Bordeaux petitioned the King of England at least three times between 1315 and 1354 to restore their minting rights, and on each occasion the petition was granted. In 1400 there was 'a writ to the Archbishop and others allowing them to strike money in this mint and to give it currency'². There is next to no evidence about the *Bury* and *Bordeaux Mints* after 1400.

² Rawding.

In these years the mints at Canterbury, Durham and York worked side by side with the royal mints - also widely distributed - and as Leake puts it, "contributed not a little to answer the public occasions"³. Davies says that before Edward III's reign the *Church Mints* had only issued pennies, "because when the Bishops of Durham obtained the grant of a mint, it was the only sort of money we had."

They were, of course, silver pennies. The copper and, in the last century, the lighter bronze penny were much later innovations. But, he continues,

"During the reigns of the Edwards, highly important and beneficial changes were introduced into the currency. The silver penny was no longer to be the only coin of the realm to meet the demands and necessities of a population rapidly increasing in numbers."

He might have added that payment by service was being commuted to money payment and that money itself was growing in importance for the national life. So "at length the introduction of a gold coinage was accomplished by the third Edward." The *Church Mints* responded with halfpennies at York and Durham.

In 1280 the Lord King summoned William de Wickwane and asked him '*quo warranto*' if he had two dies at York. He answered that his predecessors had been "in seisin of having dies from time immemorial."⁴

In Edward III's reign, the *Ecclesiastical Mints* at Durham and York issued halfpennies in addition to the usual pennies. In 1400, farthings were added at York and in 1500 half-groats (2d.). In 1473, a charter was granted to the Bishop of Durham allowing him and his successors to coin halfpennies as well as pennies, and this seems to have confirmed previous practice rather than to have instituted new work. But the privilege of minting half-pennies was soon dropped at Durham. The purchasing power of these small coins was so far maintained that larger were not needed. Davies said:

"The majority of Henry VII's coins struck at York were archiepiscopal."

In Henry VIII's reign Cardinal Wolsey⁵ struck a groat (4d.) and decorated it with a cardinal's hat. This angered the king but authorities are uncertain whether the groat or the hat caused the offence.

As Davies says:

"among the enormities attributed to this monarch, not the least was the debasement of the currency."

Henry was getting into difficulties which finally tempted him to put an end to the local mints altogether and to centralize the issuing of coin. Debasement of the coinage began to rob the coinage of its purchasing power, and after many centuries, prices began to rise and wages to limp behind them.

But during the first twenty five years of his reign Henry did not tamper with *Church Mints*. A letter is preserved in Durham from William Franklyn to Cardinal Wolsey:

"At last being in London, I spoke to a friend to provide me silver for coining at Durham, and on Good Friday received a line from him, whereby I perceive that I shall have of him every year 1200 lb. of silver, which will be very profitable to your Grace and to all the countrie..."

But Henry's finances were muddled and such considerations as 'profiting all the countrie' were sacrificed. The *King* took the extreme step of despoiling Bishop Tunstall of Durham of his mint in 1536, and at about the same time the Archbishops - Cranmer at Canterbury and Lee at York - lost the privilege they had held 'from time immemorial'.

The result of losing a local mint is hard to estimate. It has been said of the older civilizations that 'any contribution to local autonomy contributed to their stability.' After centuries of centralization, experiments were carried out in Guernsey and Wörgl with the equivalent of local mints and were most successful. They were suppressed, perhaps, in fear that the success might endanger the money monopolists.

The loss in a locality of the right to issue its own money was at the least a loss of freedom. And the loss of the *Church Mints* meant the loss of the *Church's* benevolent interest and help in business and, soon enough, a loss of attention.

³ quoted by Mark Noble in *Two Dissertations on the Mint and Coins of the Episcopal-Palatine of Durham*

⁴ Authorities, especially for the York Mint, are Caesar Caine in *Archiepiscopal Coins of York*; Robert Davies *Historical Notices of the Royal and Archiepiscopal Mints and Coinages at York*; and S. Pegge *Essay on the Origins of the Metropolitan and other Subordinate Mints*.

⁵ One of the accusations against Wolsey in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII (Act III, Scene II)* is: "That, out of mere ambition, you have caused Your holy hat to be stamp'd on the king's coin." This is the solitary reference in English literature, outside the work of the numismatists, to the bishops' power of minting.

The *English Ecclesiastics'* money had been almost identical with regal money. It had not, it is true, aspired to the glories of the *Papal Bracteates*. These were leaves of metal stamped and used as currency that were so thin that it was dangerous to hoard them. The image in low relief on one side stood out in high relief on the other.

Much has been made of these *bracteates* of late, as well as of *tallage* - a medieval tax on coinage - on the ground that they prevented hoarding. The man with money was at no advantage over the man with perishable wares, and so the velocity of circulation was speeded.

We read in *Le Grand Encyclopedie*, under the heading *Bracteates*,

“Leur usage a été fort répandu en Allemagne, en Suisse, en Bohême, en Pologne, et dans les pays Scandinaves.”

Yet only a few of this kind of *Demurrage Money* have been found, owing, doubtless, to their friability. *Tallage*, the other device that speeded the circulation of money and prevented hoarding, was imposed from 1140 onwards in England and elsewhere. The holder of coins would be eager to pass them on to avoid the tax.

Yet as long as there was plenty of metal and as long as money was thought of as a means and not an end, the *Church Mints* did their work. They were more efficient than centralized money, which even now has little relation with the needs of circulating medium.

Before the 1939-45 war too little money was issued to buy the available goods⁶, while after the war inflation was caused by wages paid against exported semi-manufactures. So *Church Mints* were the positive contribution of the *Church* to financial rectitude and reality, while *Prohibition of Usury* was the negative.

Indeed, the *Church Mints* show that the *Church* did not skimp her work. The provision of a reliable local currency - only in Stephen's day was there any question about it - where and when needed prevented monopoly and enabled the *Just Price* to be paid. In fact, it implemented the provisions of the *Great Charter* directed against *Monarchy*, political or financial.

We are still, in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, far from the days of *Scarcity Economics* when money was restricted to the amount of gold held in a *Central Bank*. It was to be a century before England advanced to the use of *Paper Money*, but we may conceive that the responsible bishops who had issued coins would have been capable of issuing paper. The *Ecclesiastical Mints* were not stopped because they were unworkable. They had worked very efficiently. But the *King* was led by his greed and his difficulties to take this regrettable step.

We are in fact at the great watershed of English history. The *King* is no longer '*primus inter pares*' but covets *Monarchy*, and one kind of *Monarchy* or another is to be the fate of this land until the present day. Land-grabbing tyrants, manufacturers, financiers and politicians vie with each other to violate the *Charter*.

The tempo of economic change now moves with bewildering speed. In the vortex we shall see the whole Catholic doctrine caught up and tossed out. In little more than 150 years the thought of all the previous centuries was disposed of.

But the suppression of the *Ecclesiastical Mints* was not the only step taken by Henry VIII to hurry the process. The substantial achievements of the previous centuries are swept away, but before we review the process, we may see in the first place what result the enforcement of the ban on usury and the local mints together had on prices, and in the second we must take note of the other force - that of manufacture and trade - which indirectly helped to breach the catholic order of civilization.

The order of *Catholic Christendom* was guarded from usury - or any other abuse of the *Just Price* - by statutory prohibition and by the provision of local currency. These measures, as we shall see in the next chapter, sufficed to ward off from the people the fluctuation in price, which is but another method of obtaining *Monopoly* and ruining the small farmer and the system which took husbandry as its base. Trade and manufacture were the servants of husbandry as long as the system was preserved from its horde of rapacious enemies, but they meanwhile were preparing to burst their lawful bounds.

These two matters will occupy us before we look closely at the end of one system and look in vain for the beginning of anything sound to take its place. But before we review the process, we may see in the first place what result the enforcement of the ban on usury and the local mints together had on exported semi-manufactures.

⁶ Due to the accountancy flaw discovered by C. H. Douglas and discussed in the literature of the *Social Credit* movement.

A Few Notes on Semi-Ecclesiastical Coins

It would appear proper to add a few notes on *Semi-Ecclesiastical Coins*. Such, apparently, were not connected with *Church Mints*, and the circumstances under which they were coined are not very clear. They are the pennies of St. Edmund, St. Peter and St. Martin.

St. Edmund's Pennies, it is supposed, were issued in memory of King Edmund, martyred by the Danes in 870. They mostly belong to the East Anglian series, but some were struck at York.

St. Martin's pennies were coined some time before 943, at Lincoln.

St. Peter's pennies were struck at York, perhaps about 920-940, and are commonly but incorrectly believed to have been intended for the payment of *Peter's Pence* to Rome. But it is certain that these coins had nothing to do with papal exactions. St. Peter was the patron of the Church of York, St. Martin of Lincoln (it was before the time of the Hughs), and St. Edmund of Bury.

This is a summary of all the evidence available concerning the semi-ecclesiastical coins. Whether they were intended for charitable purposes locally - as remote predecessors of *Maundy Money* - or as an Easter offering for the bishop does not appear.

They had no connection with alms paid to support an *English College* in Rome (754-1533). These latter, according to Caesar Caine, were called *Denarius Eleamosuna*. As late as 1657 *Smoke Money* was paid in monastic manors, and Hartland Manor was paying *Peter's Farthings*. These must, it seems, refer to Rome and not to the 'cathedral of Devon', as the locals call their church, for it is dedicated to St. Nectan, a missionary in King Arthur's time.

William the Conqueror, in his zeal to regulate the coinage, put an end to these semi-ecclesiastical coins.

The *token pennies* of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, issued by various trades-people, were perhaps the last survival of the principle of local mints once so efficiently run by the *Church* to stop usury. These pennies were of copper, and of much less purchasing power, while their issue was severely limited.

◀ Chapter 4

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Chapter 6 ▶