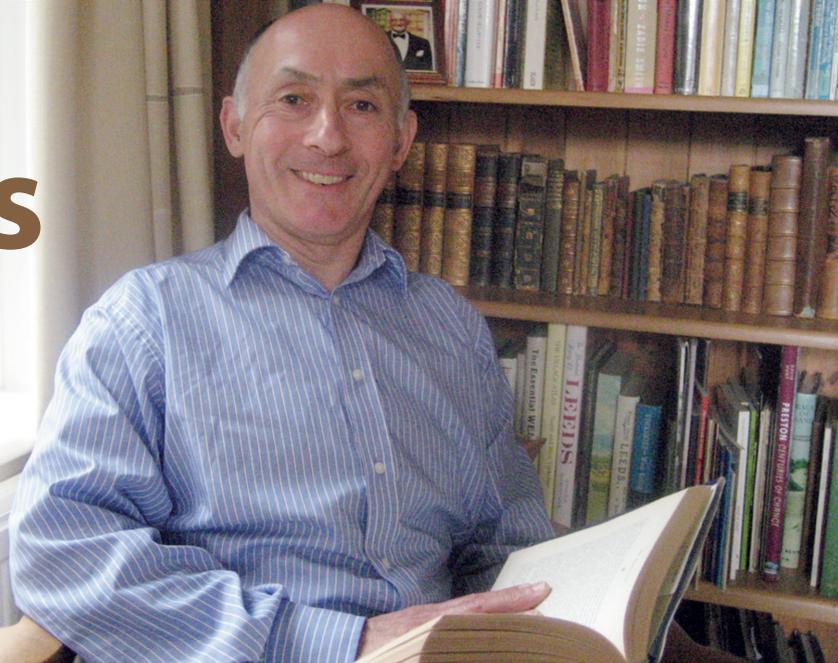


A lifetime's work

Tony Abramson will be known to many of our readers as both a stalwart of the Yorkshire Numismatic Society and as one of the world's leading authorities on the coinage of the "Dark Ages". This year sees Tony selling his vast collection in a series of four sales at Spink in London. Recently COIN NEWS caught up with him (virtually of course) to ask him a little about his collecting history and why he's decided to sell now.



Thanks for agreeing to chat to us Tony, let's start at the beginning if we can. When did you start collecting?

The primeval hunter-gatherer instinct has produced a dominance of male collectors, most of whom started when young.

I was recently clearing out the attic - I would recommend this as a catharsis, especially during lockdown and certainly while you're still able to lift heavy boxes. Actually, the roof was about to collapse. I'd had the inside of the roof foam-insulated 20 years ago, but the foam had penetrated the liner, encapsulated the timbers, rotted them, and adhered rigidly to the tiles. An utter disaster.

I started the clearance with a filing cabinet full of numismatic "stuff", amongst which was a note written in English class at primary school and describing my collection. I was clearly proud of a 1694 farthing bought in the antique shop at Port Isaac—premises which, much later, featured in ITV's *Doc Martin*. This is one of the 50 or so coins that I will keep for sentimental reasons.

I recall seeing sceats in Seaby's 1960 *Standard Catalogue* and dreaming that one day I may own one. It wasn't until about 30 or so years ago that a friend who lived close by, Tim Owen, a dealer now in Scarborough, started to show me intriguing little coins—metal-detector finds—with unfamiliar designs, often embellished with enthralling runic inscriptions. I was captivated and before too long had amassed a substantial number, eventually selling my Iron Age and hammered coins to feed my growing sceatta habit.

Probably because this early coinage was little understood and there was no market for it, I was able to build a varied collection. When I had a couple of hundred, Mark Blackburn warned that if I continued, the collection would be unsaleable as the market was far too small to absorb such a number. I thought I'd take the risk and, as you read this, the extent of my folly is being revealed in Spink's auction room!

What little literature was available was opaque and academic, but it did enable me to devise a relatively easy, visual means of identifying finds. I thought this would be useful to others and published it as *Sceattas: An illustrated Guide* (2006). I was rather apprehensive when the publisher decided on a print run of 1,500 and astonished not only that it sold out but also that it was shortlisted for the first North Book Prize.

So why did you decide to collect sceats? Why not modern coins or something completely different?

Chacun à son goût! [to each his own taste] I was always attracted to coins which conjured up historical associations and those that showed trading relations between different cultures. It was the hand-struck archaic, eclectic and unusual coins which

I found had a compelling charisma that couldn't be matched by mass-produced, machined coins.

What was it about early Anglo-Saxon period and its coinage that attracted you most?

In a word, Discovery. Not only were new types being discovered at an unprecedented rate, but it was a coinage almost entirely neglected in the literature. Michael Metcalf's tome on the Ashmolean collection (1993–94) was a watershed and Anna Gannon's exploration of the iconography (2003) hugely expanded our horizons. It was shortly after this that I initiated the biennial symposia and edited the associated publications.

Looking at the coinage itself, many of the inscribed coins are by issuers described in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The vast majority of collectors are not as familiar with these shadowy kings and archbishops as the better-attested later kings, so again we come back to Discovery. After all, isn't that a major driver in collecting coins—better to understand the historical context of the issue? Such is the pace of discovery in this coinage that my classification published as *Sceatta List* has now gone through two revisions, each with scores of new varieties.

Do you have a favourite coin in your collection?

I'm selling all 1,200+ "Dark Age" coins and many others—classical, archaic Oriental, English hammered and milled, World coins and primitive currencies. Those few I am keeping have family connections.



Gold shilling of Paulinus of York.

For me, the stand-out coin in the sale is the Paulinus gold shilling of York. It was found by a near neighbour who insisted I should have it despite better offers! It was while preparing my thesis that I discussed possible interpretations with colleagues before having a Eureka! moment. I think there was a close association between two emissaries who supported Augustine's mission, arriving in 601—Mellitus and Paulinus—and they initiated the English coinage. The specimen remained unique until immediately after I had suggested the interpretation at the October 2016 symposium. I would hazard a speculation that the



Gold shilling of Eadbald of Kent.



Early penny Fledgling.



Early penny of Willibrodr.



Early penny of Valdoberhtus.



Early joint issue penny of Aethelwald Moll and Aethelred I.



Early penny Eardwulf.

specimen of Eadbald of Kent's gold shilling offered in the sale actually reads "Mellitus" on the reverse.

There are other coins to which I attach special significance: the fledgling type and its possible association with St Cuthbert; a primary "porcupine" type that appears to be inscribed Willibrodr, the long-lived Northumbrian missionary who

became Bishop of Utrecht; a type that is inscribed Valdoberhtus; both types naming Æthelwald Moll; several die types of King Eardwulf. If holding these fragments of history in your hand doesn't give you a frisson of excitement, you're in the wrong place!

In such cases, a prime specimen is included in Part I and a second—often the only other known—will appear later. And this is just the tip of the iceberg—Parts I and II include an unprecedented run of Northumbrian issuers.

Part III follows—perhaps mid-year with Part IV in Autumn. While Part I was entitled *Connoisseurs' Choice*, Part III, *Collectors' Selection*, offers an unparalleled cross-section of this early English coinage. Many are excellent specimens of their variety and some are highly elusive and unlikely to be offered again for decades. Others evoke Lord Stewartby's "Academic" cabinet, providing the opportunity for dedicated collectors, hopefully inspired by what was offered in Parts I and II, to build a selection of this much under-rated early coinage. Many are plate coins in both Spink's *Coins of England* and *Sceatta List*.

Part IV covers Continental tremisses, deniers and sceats found in England, witnesses to extensive trading relations. There is some stunning gold, some exceptionally rare deniers and far more in unusual varieties than the typical Low Countries assemblage – including many "Wodan" types. There will certainly be lots in Parts III and IV for the budget collector.

Why are you selling now?

The collection has 75 per cent of all known sceat varieties and it was not my original intention to disperse it. It was the Fitzwilliam Museum who, having housed it for a decade, decided they could no longer accommodate it—they do have the, albeit smaller and largely unprovenanced, De Wit cabinet and, after all, my collection has been published.

After a great deal of thought, I resolved that widespread dispersal would generate far greater interest in the coinage and thereby, potentially contribute more to our understanding.

What advice would you give to anyone starting to collect today?

Stay focussed. There are two ways of progressing: either try to assemble a representative cross-section of the entire coinage or concentrate on a specific Series or Group. The Northumbrian group is popular for a number of reasons: it's literate, good quality silver, well-engraved, the issuers are described by Bede, it's a cohesive sequence and it's available. If you don't hail from the land of Hervey Smith, Geoffrey Boycott and Norman Hunter, choose your local type—for example, Series H for Hampshire, Q or R for East Anglia, A or K for Kent, L for London. There's plenty of headroom for expansion.

Try to buy in very fine condition or better but bear in mind that for sceats this can be challenging as many varieties will appear once in a blue moon. You can only resolve for yourself the conflict between your inner prudent investor and obsessive numismatist!

Will you start again? Maybe with a different theme? And if so what would it be?

I'm not aware of any coinage that would allow me to contribute to our knowledge the way I have with sceats. It has been enormously gratifying, but now I have shared all my knowledge of them and would encourage others to carry the process forward through the biennial symposia at Cambridge.

My energies will be directed elsewhere. I have a couple of middle-grade (9–12) fantastical adventure novels about to be published, with much more in the pipeline. I thought I'd take the risk . . .

Thank you Tony, best of luck with the sales, which we will of course, report on in COIN NEWS—and best of luck with the novels too!