

THE PONTEFRACT AND DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

NUMBER 30. SPRING 1995.

EDITORIAL

So much has happened since the last *PontArch* that it is difficult to realise that a mere matter of months separates issues. The main and most exciting news, reported in the next issue, concerns our entries in the British Archaeological Awards. When one considers that this was the Society's first entry in this prestigious competition, the degree of our success may be properly appreciated.

As a sort of footnote to the BAA, your Editor received a letter from the editors of *Current Archaeology* requesting transparencies for the Archaeology in Pictures feature. (High quality colour reproduction is always done from transparencies as prints cannot compete for saturation and sharpness) Three were duly dispatched with an article by Janet McNaught, who drafted our original entry. We now eagerly await the Society's appearance in the only colour

archaeological periodical.

Immediately after the season closed at Wood Hall the Society began planning its latest dig, a prehistoric site at Upton. Because of deadlines etc it proved impossible to notify members and it is hoped that those interested found out from the Museum or from the Pontefract & Castleford Express. The dig is currently in progress and reports will appear in *PontArch* eventually.

Running parallel for a short time at the beginning of December was an exploratory dig at the rear of Bartram and Coppack, Veterinary Surgeons on Northgate. In this case the opportunity arose with no notice, and volunteers were seconded from the Upton site. We thank the owners of both sites.

Congratulations to member John McIlwaine, better known to most of us as site supervisor at Wood Hall. In

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An occasional newsletter published by the Pontefract & District
Archaeological Society, The Museum, Salter Row, Pontefract, WF8 1BA.

Editor, Eric Houlder, Past President.

September, John took up a new post in the Department of Archaeological Science, Bradford University. In spite of the pressures of beginning a new job, John has continued to direct our prehistoric dig, for which we thank him sincerely.

A couple of PontArchs ago, we mentioned that Don Brothwell, the noted palaeopathologist, had been appointed to a chair at York. Professor Brothwell has been involved with Wilmslow Man, the Danish Bog Bodies, numerous other preserved remains, and the Alpine Ice Man. Of more direct relevance to the Society is the fact that your Editor and his contemporaries cut their teeth, skeleton-wise, with a copy of his book in their hands well over thirty years ago. Now Pauline has persuaded Professor Brothwell to speak to this Society. The date will be 20th October 1995. It promises to be a memorable evening.

Members working on the Northgate site and passers-by may have been amused to see the Editor, complete with white Fujichrome flash-brolly, being photographed taking a photograph. The picture was for the front cover of the new CBA Practical Handbook,

Photography, A Guide for Archaeologists,

which the Editor has just completed. The handbook will appear by April, and as many of the pictures feature Society excavations, it may further heighten our currently rising profile.

Couched in non-photographic language the handbook should be of use not only to members who aspire to picture digs, but to those who wish to make meaningful records of buildings and landscape features too.

A lady in Castleford (actually the Editor's cousin) is seeking photographs of two shops in Pontefract which her ancestors owned. They are the fish-and-chip shop on the corner of Colonel's Walk and Stewart Road, and Garlick's watch/clock repairers which was one of the buildings demolished for the dual carriageway down the side of Woolworths. If you can help, contact me in the first instance.

Following my request for comments about the last issue, I have had two letters, one in favour and one against, plus a number of verbal observations the great majority of which were in favour. My thanks to those of you who took the trouble to contact me.

Again seeking readers' views, I would appreciate your observations regarding the re-printing of articles from other archaeological publications. These are only used if topical, of local concern, or of general archaeological interest, and with the permission of the original editor, where possible. Few individual members subscribe to national journals so the items will be new to nearly everyone.

E.H.

BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL AWARDS 1994.

The bi-annual awards ceremony was removed for the first time since its inauguration, from the City of London and was conducted in the Tempest Anderson Hall of the Yorkshire Museum, York.

Master of Ceremonies was David Breeze (Historic Scotland and specialist in Roman history and archaeology), presenter of the awards was Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, who arrived in a 1930s open topped Bentley for the occasion.

Upwards of one hundred and fifty people gathered in the auditorium for this prestigious event. These people came from many different backgrounds and occupations, as this was not just a back slapping exercise for archaeology.

Seventeen main awards were to be presented and many certificates of merit. To set the scene, we were seated in an auditorium facing a raised dais where recipients of awards would stand to receive the same and have photographs taken; To the back of this area a full sized screen was set up to show a slide of each project, as the reason behind the award was stated and the prize presented.

There was an array of cups, plaques, glass-ware and sponsorship cheques.

We were there as the nominators of "THE COUNTING HOUSE" known to us as "SWALES YARD", which had won the Ironbridge Award for the adaption and reuse of an historical building. Not only had we entered this competition, we also entered the Pitt Rivers competition, for a project of a voluntary nature using archaeological techniques and the Medieval Book Award, for which we were highly commended. We did not win an award, this was mainly due to the stiff academic competition; This was not to say that we were also runners. 26 books were submitted and we reached the final 12. Bob Evison has a congratulatory letter addressed to the society from the judging panel.

You could feel the tension rise as would be winners got closer to their part in the proceedings. Eminent archaeologists ie., Patrick Ottoway (book prize), Tim Taylor (Time Team) the Education Award, then the amateurs who reported significant finds in the course of their work:

- 1) the gravel digger from Scunthorpe who uncovered a complete set of bronze age tools
- 2) the farmer from Gwent for the discovery of a carved Roman stone.

THE WOODHALL MOATED MANOR team were there as runners up in two sponsorship awards, The Wedgewood Award and The Virgin Award. "Congratulations ! Next time we hope to see you win."

Then it was us! Malcolm Lister and his sons collected the Ironbridge Award; a cast iron plaque almost three feet in length and in relief upon it, the building's name, the specific award and year of presentation.

We the society, in nominating the building can be justly proud of bringing the award back to Pontefract. This is the first time since the inauguration of the award in 1974 that it has not gone to a civic building.

The Chairman of the Ironbridge Museum was fulsome in his praise of our surveying project and book production, having been to Pontefract, visited our museum and then inspected Swales Yard's exterior and interior, before making his final judgement.

I am sorry more of us were unable to attend, but a Wednesday afternoon at short notice is not a very convenient time for the majority of people.

The reception afterwards to which we were all invited was preceded by an invitation to view The Middleham Jewel and Ring, then to food and drink. We were able to speak to many archaeologists of different disciplines, amateurs like ourselves and sponsors of the awards. People moved freely about introducing themselves and wanting to know "how, where and why," we came to be present and then usually expounded their own personal theories on their own favoured project.

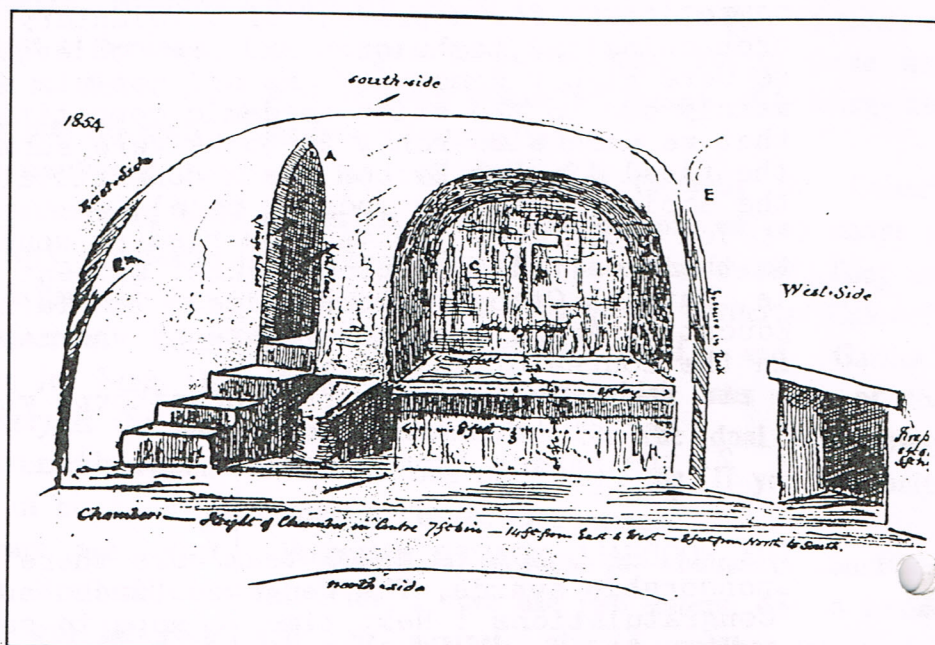
It is to be hoped that this is only our first entry to these awards, as there are many ongoing and future projects worthy of the same depth of research and reporting as Swales Yard.

Grade I medieval hermitage 'falling apart'

Archaeologists in Yorkshire fear that a Grade I listed underground hermitage may soon collapse for want of repairs. The monument, carved out of the bedrock at Pontefract in the 14th century, has developed cracks which are widening by up to 20mm a year. Parts of the ceiling have already fallen in.

According to English Heritage, 116 Grade I buildings in England (one per cent of the total) are in a 'critical condition', and last month Jocelyn Stevens, English Heritage Chairman, announced a campaign to contact all owners of Grade I buildings to inform them of the repair grants available.

The case of Pontefract Hermitage reveals the necessity of the English Heritage campaign. The building's listed status allows its local authority to enforce necessary repairs, but although cracks in the walls began to widen in 1988, the authority has made no attempt to contact the owner since then.



Where hermits prayed: 1854 sketch of the chapel, drawn soon after the building was rediscovered

When approached by *British Archaeological News*, an official representing the owner, the region's NHS executive, claimed to be unaware of the monument's condition, but promised to give the matter immediate attention.

The three-roomed hermitage, probably established by monks from St Richard's Priory nearby, consists of a chapel and a living cell, both about 20ft below ground, and a room about 30ft lower, which is reached by a carved spiral staircase and contains a well.

The domed chapel contains an altar, wall-seating, fireplace and chimney all carved out of the rock, and crosses carved into the walls. The living cell contains an

alcove with seating, and its ceiling is carved to resemble ribbed vaulting.

The worst damage is in the chapel, where a 70mm crack runs up one wall, across the dome, and down to the floor on the other side. But it is the ribbed ceiling of the living cell that is falling down. Three large pieces have fallen this year.

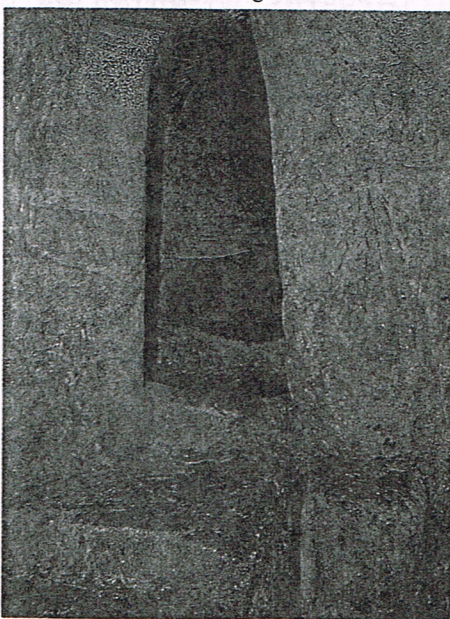
Amateur archaeologists from the Pontefract and District Archaeological Society are monitoring the site, which lies directly underneath Pontefract General Infirmary and can only be entered through hospital buildings. It is not open to the public.

According to Michael Holdsworth, a member of the society, further widening of the cracks – probably caused by heavy road traffic above – could be reduced by fitting reinforced steel bars to the walls. 'Unless something is done, the hermitage will be unsafe to enter within two years,' he said.

Hugh Mayfield, Conservation Officer for Wakefield District Council, said the authority was aware of the monument's condition, but had not contacted the owner as a matter of policy.

'We don't press for repairs of listed buildings here, in case the owners can't pay, and we get lumbered with the cost,' he said. Listed Buildings Repairs notices are a preliminary to compulsory purchase proceedings.

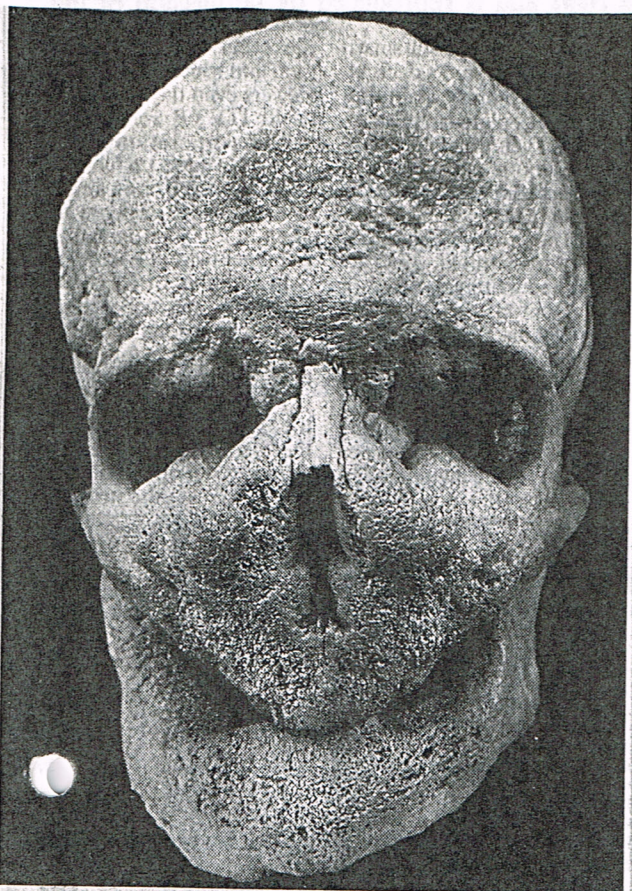
Andrew Proud, Director of Estates for the Northern and Yorkshire branch of the NHS executive, admitted responsibility for the hermitage but said the problem had not previously been brought to his attention. 'I can assure you it will be looked at forthwith,' he said. ■



Building at risk: steps from the hermitage chapel lead up to street level, 20ft above

PHOTO: PONTEFRACT & DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Comment, p9



Egil's forbidding skull Photograph: Royal College of Surgeons

BY STEVE CONNOR
Science Correspondent

A quick-tempered Viking warrior whose thick skull and cold feet became legendary owed his brutal appearance to a rare bone disease rather than poetical licence, according to research.

Egil Skalla-Grimsson, who died in about 990AD and was so physically menacing and irritable that he became the subject of an Icelandic saga, may have suffered from Paget's disease, when the bones and skull become grossly deformed.

Part of the legend of Egil is that his skull was dug up 150 years after his death and was so thick it could withstand the hardest blow from an axe. He also complained of cold feet, a sign of poor circulation.

A reappraisal of Egil's exploits by Jesse Byock, Professor of Old Norse and Scandinavian Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, found the warrior was the victim of the progressive bone disease.

"What set Egil apart was more than simply a small, personal peculiarity," Professor Byock says in the current issue of *Scientific American*.

"Through prose and verse, the saga tells us that Egil became deaf, often lost his balance, went blind, suffered from chronically cold feet, endured headaches and experienced bouts of lethargy."

Egil has puzzled scholars because he displayed all the attributes of a thug yet still man-

aged to write good poetry and verse. "Rather than attributing conflicting aspects of Egil's personality to artistic hyperbole, I believe the descriptions stem from the progress of Paget's disease," Professor Byock says.

One account of Egil records him "with broad forehead and large eyebrows, a nose that was not long but enormously thick, and lips that, seen through his beard, were both wide and long . . . He was thick-necked and broad-shouldered and, more so than other men, hard-looking and fierce when angry".

His skull was ridged all over like a scallop shell and was so thick it survived the hardest blow from a heavy axe when Egil's bones were exhumed in Iceland 150 years after his death.

Professor Byock says that no matter how realistic this description, it was evident that no normal skull could survive such treatment and so the story of Egil's skull was thought to be a purely literary device that was "intended to magnify his heroic qualities".

Paget's disease, however, causes exactly this type of ridge growth on the skull, which becomes thickened and deformed, often affecting the sight and hearing, but leaving the brain unaffected.

Egil's notorious cold feet were probably the result of blood being diverted from the extremities to support the rapid bone growth elsewhere in the body, Professor Byock says.

Slides Re-Kindle Sixties Memories
by Peter Rooley

Among those who worked at Sutton Hoo in the late 1960's, re-examining the Mound One ship burial and sifting through the 1939 spoil heaps under the direction of the late Rupert Bruce-Mitford, Angela Evans and Paul Ashbee, were a number of West Yorkshire folk with excavating experience largely gained in the Pontefract/Leeds area - Eric and Joan Houlder, Ken and Peggy Wilson, Terry Coney and Don Lodge, to name but a few!

For many, Sutton Hoo took on a personal and very special significance, even though they could perhaps spend only a couple of weeks there each year. Don Lodge was certainly in this category, as the wide-ranging photographic record of his visits to the area clearly show. They include views of Mound One during the 60's re-excavation and some quite different shots taken after working hours in the Sorrel Horse at Shottisham, bringing back happy memories for those who made this

their 'local' whilst at Sutton Hoo.

Don re-visited the site in 1986 and apparently spoke of little else before his sad death from cancer only a few weeks later. Don's widow, Margaret, gathered together a selection of his slides, which have now been presented to the Society on her behalf by long-time friend and Society member, Eric Houlder. Eric brought them down to Suffolk in June when he came for the Sæ Wylfing weekend.

We would like to extend the thanks of the Society to Margaret for her generosity, and to Eric for delivering the slides. Hopefully we shall be able to publish a selection of them in the near future - if any of the 60s contingent out there would like to contribute, we could put together an article on that period in Sutton Hoo's history (Ed.)



Don Lodge (standing) on site at Sutton Hoo c.1968 (Lodge Collection Ref. 5122)



Relaxing at the Sorrell Horse, Shottisham with landlord 'Tich' Markwell (far right with cap). Peter Rooley (centre in 'Yellow Submarine T-shirt) with wife Barbara, behind are Paul and Richmall Ashbee (Lodge Collection Ref 7121)

ABOVE

From *The Independent*, 11th January 1995, and entitled *Disease explains brutish Viking's split personality.*

LEFT.

From *Saxon*, newsletter of the Sutton Hoo Society, Number 2 1994. Mr Lodge may be seen standing in the centre of the left-hand picture, which was taken in 1967. Headless on the ladder is your Editor, with Ken Wilson (then President I think) on the bottom of the ladder and Peggy Wilson standing facing him. In the left background of the other picture may be glimpsed Derek & Ann Thorpe and Fred Morris.

Tree rings confirm a natural cataclysm in the mid 6th century AD

Traces of catastrophe

It has long been known that the decade after 536AD was not a good time to be alive. Historical sources from Europe and Asia tell of extraordinary climatic conditions, widespread famine and plague.

Now, tree-ring evidence provides an insight into the magnitude and longevity of the natural disaster responsible for these conditions. Affecting the entire northern hemisphere, and possibly the world, it appears to have been one of the most far-reaching natural catastrophes ever known.

Its precise nature is not yet understood. But according to Mike Baillie, a leading dendrochronologist from The Queen's University, Belfast, the evidence points either to a series of colossal volcanic eruptions, or to the impact of an asteroid about a mile in diameter on the sea.

Independent and reliable historical sources suggest that in 536-7 a thick cloud of dust blocked out the sun's heat and light. 'The sun gave forth its light without brightness... and seemed exceedingly like the sun in eclipse,' wrote Procopius, a mid 6th century historian in Constantinople.

'The sun appears of a bluish colour,' wrote the mid 6th century Italian Cassiodorus, and added:

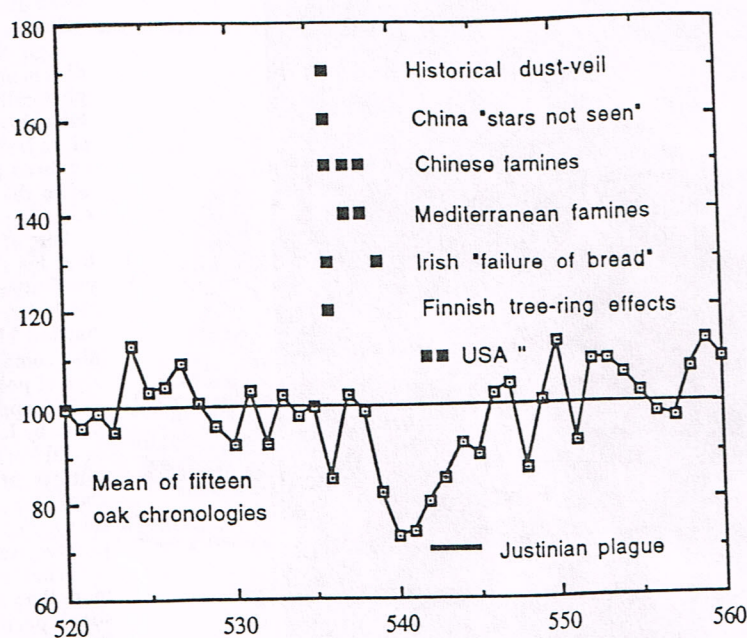
We marvel to see no shadows of our bodies at noon, to feel the mighty vigour of the sun's heat wasted into feebleness, and the phenomena which accompany an eclipse prolonged throughout almost a whole year. We have had a summer without heat... the crops have been chilled by north winds... the rain is denied.

In China in 536-8, the generally credible, contemporary Chinese dynastic histories recorded frost and snow in summer, followed by drought and severe famine.

Then came plague. The Justinian Plague, which perhaps originated in central Asia, is first recorded in Egypt in 542. It was to sweep through Europe over the next four years, its virulence unchecked among a population weakened by famine.

The cataclysm of 536, whatever it was, had clearly been momentous. Yet the new evidence suggests that the climatic disruption lasted not just one or two years, but *ten*, with its nadir in 541.

In an analysis of all 15 oak tree-ring chronologies spanning Britain and north west Europe in the 6th century, Prof Baillie



The trees speak: matching disasters in the historical record with European oak tree-ring evidence. The horizontal index represents the date, the vertical index tree-ring growth, where 100 is average

has found a sudden and marked reduction in tree growth in 536, followed by a slight improvement in 537, and thereafter continued reduction, leading to an almost complete stunting in 541. Ring widths do not indicate a return to normal growth until 546.

The evidence is consistent with tree-ring data from Scandinavian pines, which has been taken to indicate that the summer of 536 was the second coldest in the past 1,500 years.

It is also consistent with tree-ring evidence from America, which shows reduced growth in western American chronologies in 536, and in the 540s in pine chronologies from Nevada.

Analysis of the pine rings has suggested reduced temperatures throughout the period, indicating that 536, 535 and 541 were the second, third and fourth coldest years in the last 2,000 years. Average temperatures are estimated to have fallen by 3.13°C, 3.07°C and 2.93°C respectively.

According to Prof Baillie, whose research will be published in the journal *The Holocene* later this year, the tree-ring evidence for a hemispheric natural catastrophe in these years is matched by a marked change in activity in the archaeological record.

In England and Germany, almost no evidence has been found of trees felled between 400 and 536, and in Ireland no evidence between 95BC and the mid 6th century AD. But large numbers of sites have been found with timbers dating from immediately after the disaster. Similar evidence has been found in America.

What it signifies is open to question. Why people across the northern

hemisphere began to fell trees in large numbers in the 540s, after a long gap, is unclear.

But it certainly signifies *something*, according to Prof Baillie. 'At exactly the time of a major historically recorded dust-veil event, we see change in the only aspect of the archaeological record - tree-rings - which can be accurately dated,' he said.

The sudden nature of the catastrophe and its reported effects are consistent with an enormous volcanic eruption, Prof Baillie said. But its effects seem to have been greater than those of any known recent eruption.

The eruption of Tambora in 1815, for instance, regarded by vulcanologists as one of the most powerful in the past 10,000 years, caused far less disruption over a much smaller area than that experienced in 536-46. 1816 is sometimes referred to as 'the year without a summer,' but Tambora's effects were over in two or three years. Moreover, the 19th century tree-ring record is far less affected than the 6th century record.

No volcano has been identified with certainty as the cause. The massive eruption of Rabaul in New Britain, however, remains a possibility.

Analysis of ice cores from Greenland, which record high atmospheric acidity levels related to volcanic eruptions, has not yet produced a definite acid signal for the period.

Prof Baillie said that if the new Danish GRIP ice core, currently undergoing tests, showed no acidity between 536 and 545, an alternative cause for the disaster would have to be considered - such as the impact of a medium-sized asteroid in the sea. ■

COINS

Numismatics is the name given to the branch of archaeology which deals in coins.

Coins are of great historical significance because they are produced officially and the fact that coinage is usually made from durable material and is also valuable ensures their survival to a larger degree than some other forms of documentation. Many coins bear dates and inscriptions and often depict the likeness of the ruler of the period.

Silver coins were first struck in Aegina, a town in south east Greece, c 700 B.C. These coins are thick and depict, on one side, a turtle, the emblem of the city. At a later date the Lydians, who lived in western Asia Minor, produced coins made of electrum, which is a natural mix of silver and gold. During a later period bronze and copper coins were issued. All coins struck in this area are rare.

In the British Isles the earliest coins were made towards the end of the C2 B.C. These coins were made of gold and were struck by tribes in the south and east of England.

In the C4 B.C. there was a Roman mint in London. Dating from the departure of the Romans until the C7 A.D. Roman coins and imitations of them appear to have been the main currency of Britain.

During the reign of Offa, king of Mercia in the C8 A.D. silver pennies were produced. A high quality of silver was used in the production of coinage during the Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods. Edward III introduced the groat, which was worth four pence, Henry VIII the gold crown, which was worth five shillings, and Edward III the popular silver crown.

During the Civil War coins were struck on an emergency basis. Modern coinage dates from the second coinage of Charles II in 1662 A.D. which is based on the gold twenty shilling piece.

On 18 March 1994 Mr Don Prince brought a fascinating collection of old coins to our meeting and told us many interesting things about this exciting subject. Mr Prince started collecting coins whilst a schoolboy during the Second World War and now owns 2300 coins. He showed slides of various early coins. Lumps of metal, some round, some oval, and mostly made from copper. It was deemed necessary, eventually, to regulate the issue of coins under one authority.

The oldest coin which Mr Prince owns is of the reign of Alexander III, also known as 'The Great'. Zeus and Heracles are featured on some Greek coins. A coin struck in Jersey c 75-50 B.C. has a crude head on one side with an 'anchor' for a nose. Roman coins circulating amongst the tribes of southern Britain prompted the Celts to mint their own. Some of these coins showed a Celtic horse on the obverse side. After the rising of Boudicca, the ruler of the Iceni tribe who died in 62 A.D., the Romans stopped tribes from minting their own coins. In 61 A.D. the last Celtic coin was minted.

The Romans gave us the name for money. Juno Monitor, which means 'Juno, she who warns' was the Goddess whose name, after various changes, became synonymous with the word 'mint', and from thence to our word 'money'. The first Roman coin was struck in 289 B.C. It was a crude copper coin with the head of a deity on the obverse and various symbols on the reverse. Some Roman coins depict a quadriga, a two-wheeled chariot drawn by a team of four horses abreast. These are very decorative pieces. Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony, were just a few of the Emperors' names. Most Roman coins were struck in Rome but on occasion a mobile mint was used. One was used in Britain, the coins being made of copper, silver, and a base form of silver. Amongst these were coins depicting the infant Jupiter seated on a goat and others of a Roman galley in full sail. These latter samples were struck in London using copper. Some of the examples we were shown were of fine quality and must have been kept in collections for most of their existence.

Mr Prince owns a coin which was struck in the Isle of Man for James I, an Oliver Cromwell medal dated 1658 and a 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' medal, the only one ever struck. A unique half-crown with punchings made illicitly by an apprentice who had been given the dies to destroy, throws an interesting insight onto the personality of the minters. Another coin, a halfpenny struck in 1722 during the reign of George I, had been 'bodged'. The apprentice must have broken the die and repaired it by using a letter 'A' upside down. Only a few of these 'A' coins were struck before the mistake was discovered which makes it a very rare coin. A golden florin known as 'the Godless florin' because the inscription 'D.G.' which stands for 'dei gratia' was omitted from the printing.

Trade dollars from the C19, Irish groats from the C16 and a York halfpenny struck in 1795 A.D. were only a few of the many interesting examples of coinage on display. A Leeds shilling which was struck for use in the workhouse and a mine-owner's token from Great Preston inscribed with the name 'Walter Widdope' were amongst some of the coins of local interest.

There can be no doubt that coin collecting provides a window on the past.

