

An Array of counter boxes

by

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As the decade of 'the bumpy teens' was about to transfigure into to what we hope could be the 'roaring 20s', I was struck by three similar offerings at three very different auction houses. The first was in London at Christie's founded in 1766. It was offering *The David Little Collection of early English Silver* on 3rd December 2019. Featuring 126 items of late Tudor and early Stuart silver (Elizabeth I to Charles I) it bristled with choice rarities seldom seen on the market.

The following day, some 330 miles to the northwest as the crow flies, Lyon & Turnbull, was staging one of its regular sales of jewellery, watches and silver in Edinburgh. This auction house was founded in 1826. Meanwhile back in London Dix Noonan Webb was holding a two day sale of coins, tokens and historical medals on the 4th & 5th December. I can remember this auction house opening in 1990. It specialises in numismatics, but recently has added jewellery to its repertoire. The piece that attracted me in each auction was a counter box with counters.

Examples from the reign of Charles I (1625-1649) periodically appear at auction. Typically they are 1¼ inches (3cm) high with a diameter of 1½ inches (3.8cm) and contain up to 36 counters. The counters are also known as jetons or jettons, a French term, and are thin coin-like discs bearing a variety of designs including floral motifs, biblical scenes, the portraits of English monarchs and *The Cries of London* – i.e. images of 17th century street sellers which were a recurring theme in English printmaking for three centuries. The 17th century *Cries of London* counters are very rarely seen. Counter boxes have fascinated me for a number of years, but until recently I had completely misunderstood their use. I had assumed that the counters were used for gaming. Some may have been used by the nobility for this purpose in the 17th century, but this was not their intended, or indeed, main use.

They were in fact a simple but effective 'counting device' for those not skilled in mathematical matters. So, view counter boxes as a form of medieval calculator! The standard work on the subject is *The Casting-Counter and the Counting-Board – Chapter in the History of Numismatics and Early Arithmetic* by Francis Pierrepont Barnard, which was published at the Clarendon Press, Oxford in 1916. Here he quotes an anecdote of Ouville where a bridegroom, 'had tried in vain to sum up his expenses on his fingers, in desperation forgot about the expectant bride awaiting him, and drawing upon his jettons from his pocket, set himself to



cast his account with their aid (1644).¹ Of course, the story is likely to pre-date the publication date of the volume.

While the counters worked alone for simple transactions, more complex ones really required a 'counting board'. This may be simplistically described as a way of speeding up the drudgery of counting by hand. Helen Farquhar (1859-1953) was a doyenne of numismatics last century with a penchant for the Stuart period. Inter alia, she researched 17th century silver counters at the beginning of the last century. In a paper on the subject in 1925 she described the Board of Green Cloth at the Exchequer (treasury) of Henry II (1154-1189).

She wrote: 'It was ten feet (3m) long by five wide (1.5m), and on it were drawn seven vertical lines representing pence, shillings, pounds, tens, hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands. These columns were in turn divided by horizontal lines, cutting the cloth into squares like a chessboard.'² The King's treasury was called Exchequer because of the cloth's 'chequered' squares. All private counting boards were modelled on the Exchequers' Green Cloth on either fabric or a wooden table top, though they would not be so large as Exchequer's counter board as the sums added up would be much less than the nation's calculations.

In the 1925 paper Miss Farquhar goes to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate the popularity of counters as tools of reckoning. In the Wardrobe Accounts for Edward IV (1st Reign 1461-70; 2nd Reign 1471-83), 'the charge for bags of leather immediately followed that for counters, and it seems likely that the exchequer, where large quantities would be needed, they were so kept in the fifteenth century.' She also notes that in the year 1500 George Medley, purchased 40 counters for his niece Margaret Willoughby so she could 'learne to caste' [ie learn to add up].³ Thomas Snelling, the 18th century British numismatist maintained that the French jeton or jetton was derived from the French *jet(t)er*, 'to throw' – i.e. the counter is cast or thrown on to the counter board.

An Elizabethan Counter Box

Let's move to firmer ground and look at the counter boxes offered in the UK towards the end of 2019. The *pièce de résistance* is the Christie's offering – an Elizabeth I silver gilt counter box, which as usual is unmarked, but is dated by Christie's as circa 1600. Elizabethan examples are much rarer than the early Stuart

1. p. 88 of *The Casting Counter* citing the source as p. 21 of *Les Contes aux Heures Perdues*, (Volume II of the 1644-52 edition) by Antoine Le Metal D'Ouille.

2. *Additional Notes on Silver Counters of the Seventeenth Century*. This was published in the Royal Numismatic Society's journal *The Numismatic Chronicle*, 1925, pp 78-120. Her description of Henry II's Exchequer Board was taken from *Henry II* by L F Salzman, p206 (London, 1914).

3. *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Accounts of Lord Middleton, Wollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire, Medley's Accounts in 1550*, p400.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3

Fig. 1 An Elizabeth I silver-gilt counter box, circa 1600 together with 23 silver sixpences struck from 1562 to 1568 that have been subsequently gilded. The height of the box is 1¾ in (4.5cm). It weighs just over 1oz (33 grams). It was estimated at £10,000-£15,000 but sold for £7000 hammer, which is £8750 with the Buyer's Premium (exclusive of VAT at 20 per cent).

Fig. 2 Detail of the side of the Elizabethan counter box

Fig. 3 Detail of the tulip engraved on the cover of the Elizabethan counter box

Photos Courtesy Christie's

examples. The pull-off top is engraved with a tulip flower, then an exotic and rare bloom, while the base is engraved with the initials AW, presumably those of the person who commissioned the piece. Its sides are engraved with stylised scrolling foliage. The catalogue refers to 'one other surviving box, which belonged to Sir John Fortescue (who died in 1607) with similar scrolling foliage decoration, [that] can be dated to the late 16th century on account of the coat-of-arms which are engraved on both ends. The arms are in place of the charming flower head and initials found on the present lot.'

The box contains 23 Elizabeth I hammered sixpences (i.e. struck by hand by a moneyer wielding a hammer) dated from 1562 to 1568, which were later gilded. Interestingly, Barnard refers to a conversation between two sea-captains in an early 17th century play (1635) in which sixpences are referred to being used in place of counters for reckoning:

Seawit: 'How thrives your treasure, Cable? When your looks Are heavy, we shall need small magic to Divine your pockets light.'

Cable: 'A few mild-sixpences with which my purser casts accounts is all I have left.'⁴

Barnard regards 'mild-sixpences' as 'milled' ones – i.e. made by a machine powered by a water or horse mill – which makes sense. Whether the playwright was referring to Elizabethan sixpences ones struck with a machine by Eloye Mestrelle from 1561-71, or examples of Nicholas Briot's first milled coinage struck for Charles I from 1631-32 by is not known – and given that this was a play, is of no consequence!

4. Daveant, *Works 1673: News from Plymouth*, I, I, 6-10. The play was licensed on 1st August, 1635.

A 17th Century Counter Box With 'Engraved' Counters and Another

Lyon & Turnbull offered a Charles I counter box containing 12 double-sided counters by Simon van de Passe, though these days it appears customary to leave 'van' from his name. Of plain cylindrical form with slight moulded detail, its pull-off cover is engraved with a Tudor rose. The piece again is not hallmarked, but it does bear the maker's mark of IT, who cannot be identified. The counters are described as 'with Mary and Charles'. King Charles I is depicted on the obverse and Queen Henrietta Maria on the reverse. The taller silver gilt counter box is empty, but of a similar period. It has slight scalloped onset borders and a pull-off cover also bearing a Tudor rose. It has a maker's mark, but this is worn.

The counters are described as being engraved, which is not actually the case, though this was the view for many years. Mark Jones reconsidered the technique of Simon van de Passe's workshop in 1983. He started by saying that these 'have long been the subject of controversy'. This is a superb example of British understatement as it was a war zone in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Indeed, his note in the *Numismatic Chronicle* in 1983⁵ over-turned the beliefs of generations of views on the techniques Simon van de Passe used to produce his portrait plaques and counters.

According to Leonard Forrer,⁶ Simon's Dutch father Crispin, was 'a clever Line-engraver'. In the 17th century, Simon (born circa 1593/4) and his youngest brother Willem (born circa 1598), initially followed in their father's footsteps as engravers of front pieces and plates for books. However, in 1613 Simon started producing thin plaques bearing portraits. In 1885 Herbert Grueber wrote in the introduction to *Medallic Illustrations of*



Fig. 4 Right: A Charles I (1625-1649) silver counter box with the 12 Simon van de Passe counters it contains stacked to the left and right of the picture. Left: A silver gilt counter box of a similar period with no contents. Height of the taller box 2.2 in (5.6 cm). Estimated at £600-800 it sold for a hammer price of £1700, which is £2125 with the Buyer's Premium (inclusive of Value Added Tax at 20 per cent)

Photos Courtesy Lyon & Turnbull

Fig. 4

5. Mark Jones spent 18 years in the Department of Coins & Medals at the British Museum where he specialised in art medals. In 1992 he was appointed Director of the National Museums of Scotland and in May 2001 Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum. He was elected Master of St Cross College, Oxford. He retired in 2016. His Note, *The technique of Simon van de Passe reconsidered* appeared in the Royal Numismatic Society's journal, *The Numismatic Chronicle* 1983.

6. *Biographical Dictionary of Medallists 500BC – 1900AD* - compiled by L Forrer and published by Spink 1904 - 1930 in eight volumes.

Fig, 5



Fig. 5 A group shot of the 12 counters by Simon van de Passe contained in the smaller counter box. They were cast, but in such a way that for many years they were regarded as being either stamped or hand-engraved. The obverse features King Charles I, the reverse his Queen Henrietta Maria, the daughter of Henry IV of France whom he married in 1625.

Photo Courtesy Lyon & Turnbull

7. *Medallic Illustrations of the History of Great Britain and Ireland to the Death of George II* known as *Medallic Illustrations of British History* (MIBH), was compiled by the late Edward Hawkins and edited by Augustus Franks and Herbert Grueber and first published by The Trustees of the British Museum in 1885.

8. GF Hill, *The technique of Simon van de Passe*, *The Numismatic Chronicle* 1915, pp230-42

9. *Proceedings of The Numismatic Society Session 1901-1902*

10. *Early Engraving and Engravers in England*, 1905, p103

11. Helen Farquhar, *Silver Counters of the Seventeenth Century* *The Numismatic Chronicle*, pp133-193

*British History*⁷ (MIBH) that these were generally considered to have been engraved. He added, 'Were this so, we might expect to meet with one specimen only of a portrait. As many examples of the same portrait are known, it is evident, as they do not vary in a single line, that they were not engraved, but struck from metal dies produced from very finely line-engraved punches. This is confirmed by the existence of many counters in use at the time, which were executed in the same manner.' In the description of Passe's work, *Medallic Illustrations* includes the phrase 'stamped in imitation of engraving'. The phrase was also in the lavish plates published to accompany the volume from 1904-11.

Thirty years elapsed and G F Hill's paper on Simon van de Passe appeared in the *Royal Numismatic Society's Journal*.⁸ He basically dismissed the 'stamped in imitation of engraving' approach as the fine lines of the die would have been damaged during the striking process. This was despite the fact that Sir John Evans, the eminent British antiquarian, numismatist and archaeologist, explained how he thought this was done at a meeting of the Numismatic Society in 1902 (its Royal Charter was not granted until 1904).⁹ Instead Hill favoured the view of Sir Sidney Colvin in his book on English engraving and engravers.¹⁰ Sir Sidney maintained that the repetition of the silver plaques was, 'by the everyday method of rubbing a paper impression from a first engraved plaque on the face of a fresh one, and then following closely with a graver the lines so transferred and so on again till the requisite number of copies has been turned out.'⁸

After Mr Hill had read his paper in to the Society in January, Miss Farquhar offered remarks on her corroborative evidence, particularly with regard to the counters. Her resultant paper was printed in the *Numismatic Chronicle* 1916.¹¹ She dismissed any other means for producing the plaques than, 'that each piece was separately cut by the artist'. Her corroborators were the heads of the two leading firms of coin dealers – Baldwin and Spink – she added, 'it has been proved with some of plaques being examined 'under the microscope'. With a flourish of, 'But enough of the beautiful plaques; their case has been proved; let us turn to the counters.' The only definite fact she provides is 'There is, however, no sug-

gestion that the greater proportion of these counters were made by, or even under the personal superintendence of Simon himself.'

However, she hedged all bets as to how the counters were actually made:

P. 136 'I would rather suggest that to Simon van de Passe and his brother William certain small portraits of the better types are due, and that the work was continued by their school.' I take the latter to mean apprentices. Simon was working in London from 1616-21 or 1622, while his brother carried on his work from 1620-1 'into the century'.

P. 136-7 'Whilst considering, therefore, the evidence that dies were in some cases used, I would also suggest that hand-engraved examples of most types exist, and that the very commonness and the uneven quality of these would point to the training of pupils; for what better exercise could be found for the apprentice than the absolute reproduction of his master's work?'

P. 153 'Cast counters, prepared and tooled by the pupils, would be valuable, although rather expensive, as a means of instruction in more than one branch of the silversmith's art. It is obvious that the fine upstanding lines of the moulds would and did crumble', which resulted in the need for the counters to be heavily tooled.

P. 157-158 Die stamping was not ruled out, but as opposed to a coin press which uses a falling weight, a hand operated press was favoured as it the impact was gentler. However, it was only used for the reverse when there was an elaborate obverse. In this case, obverse would be hand-engraved.

Around 65 years after Helen Farquhar's paper was published, Mark Jones was given the opportunity by Asprey & Co of London's Bond Street to examine a gold plaque of Elizabeth I by



Fig. 6

Fig. 6 An Elizabeth I engraved medallion portrait in an ornate glazed mount with integral loop for suspension, circa 1616 by Simon van de Passe. He worked at the court of James I (1603–25), and was commissioned to produce a series of engraved portrait medallions of members of the King's family, which may have included this portrait of his cousin Elizabeth I. The plaque is based on a portrait miniature of the Queen by Isaac Oliver. Usually made from silver, portrait plaques could be worn as pendants, and were often presented as gifts to loyal courtiers. This is the portrait plaque Mark Jones examined in the early 1980s.

Photo Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020



Fig. 7

Fig. 7 The silver Simon van de Passe portrait plaque of Elizabeth I in the British Museum Collection. Mark Jones discovered it was cast, but it was not a cast of the gold version in the Royal Collection. The image is a scan from the plates of *Medallic Illustrations of British History*.

Image Courtesy The Trustees of The British Museum

12. The piece was from the highly important collection of mainly 17th century English medals formed by Greta S Heckett. The Collection was sold by Sotheby's on 25th May 1977. The plaque was offered in an ornate glazed mount with integral loop for suspension with an estimate of £7000-£10,000. The piece sold for a hammer price of £22,000. A Buyer's Premium of 10% was payable on the hammer price. Value Added Tax was levied on the Premium at the then rate of 8%. Five years later it was presented to HM Queen Elizabeth II by Sultan Qaboos Bin Said of Oman, on the occasion of his state visit to Britain in March 1982

13. MIBH, Vol1, p183, No187

14. Hill, loc. cit., pp239-40

Simon van de Passe.¹² Possibly unique, the obverse was after the miniature by Isaac Oliver. He decided to examine it with the silver version of the Elizabeth I plaque in the British Museum under a microscope. It transpired that the gold version had been hand-engraved, but the silver version was a cast. However, it was not a cast of the gold plaque, but of another possibly silver one that had been hand-engraved. More interestingly this very plaque had been classified by Grueber as being 'stamped in imitation of engraving'¹³ and by Hill as being engraved.¹⁴

The British Museum also has de Passe's gold and silver plaques of James I. Under the microscope it was evident that these were not only both casts, but had been cast from the same engraved plaque. Jones examined all of de Passe's plaques in the British Museum and in almost every case they were found to be cast. All of the counters at the Museum's Department of Coins and Medals were also examined. All of these were also found to be cast with the exception of a unique hand-engraved example featuring the portrait of an unknown man. Mark Jones concluded that at the time no demand for a reproduction of the piece was anticipated owing to the person being an obscure individual.

Today, we can safely say that any Simon van de Passe counter you may be shown is cast as opposed to engraved. But, how expertly cast! In more modern times, we forget how adept medallists were at casting medals in the early 17th century. This is possibly because they 'hand finished' with the cast product being 'tooled' (i.e. engraved where the quality if the cast design was below standard]) as well as polished. However, the counters in this lot were so worn, it is impossible to really ascertain how they were made – but they were certainly not hand-engraved!

COUNTER BOX WITH CHARLES I SILVER MEDALETTS

From Dix Noonan Webb on 5th December, we have a very unusual offering dating from 1625. It strictly does not contain counters, but 36 silver medalets commemorating the marriage of Charles I to Henrietta Maria, the daughter of Henry IV of France. Although unsigned we know that the engraver of the dies was Pierre Regnier of the Paris mint. He was instructed to make the small medals by Henri Auguste de Loménie, the King's private secretary who described them as 'pièces de plaisir pour faire largesse', which Google translates as 'pieces of pleasure to be generous', but which probably indicates that they were to be given liberally. MIBH states that the medals 'were probably distributed in great profusion'.

The obverse of the medalets features the busts of Charles I and his Queen face to face. On one piece, the King is wearing a lace collar, while on the others he wears a ruff. He is wearing a buttoned doublet with a George of a Garter suspended from a riband. Henrietta Maria has her hair jewelled, she wears ear-rings, a necklace and a dress with a stiff ruff. Above the couple, rays are shown shining from heaven. The reverse depicts a cupid walking under rays from heaven above distributing lilies and roses on the ground. This is an elegant allusion to the union of the lilies of France with the roses of England. The reverse legend in Latin reads, FVNDIT ' AMOR . LILIA . MIXTA which translated is, 'Love pours out lilies mingled with roses'. This is an adaption from Virgil, Aenid, xii. 68.



A Charles I counter box containing 36 silver medalets by Pierre Regnier that were issued by Henry IV of France to commemorate his daughter's marriage in 1625 to King Charles I of England. The medalets were distributed in great numbers. This is a very rare and desirable counter box together with its complete contents, which have been kept together over time. The height of the counter box is just over 1 in high (2.9 cm). Estimated at £2000-£3000, it sold for a hammer price of £3200, which is £3968 (exclusive of VAT on the Premium at 20 per cent).

Photo Courtesy Dix Noonan Webb

The medalets, which are in very fine or better condition, are quite charming. However, the box in which they are contained, by comparison, is very mundane. It is cylindrical with no decoration whatsoever, but one of the medalets is set in pull-off cover. As is quite often found, the box does not ever bear the mark of its maker. However, the cataloguers final comment says it all, 'Very fine and better, a most attractive and original group that has obviously been kept together over time, very rare'.

oooOooo

When I spotted three lots of antique counter boxes being offered in a matter of days at three UK auction houses I did not realise it was the start of a voyage of discovery. When I was seven my father remarked that you never stop learning. This year I enter my 70th year and his observation still holds good!

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