A Small Find of Fourteenth-Century Coins from West Limerick

By R. H. M. DOLLEY

On p. 82 of the Inventory of British Coin Hoards recently published by the Royal Numismatic Society of London there occurs the following entry:

227. KNOCKNASNA, Co. Limerick, 1929.
8 AR English and Scottish. Deposit: After 1351.
Disposition: Unknown.¹

Even as it stands, this entry may be thought to be open to objection on more than one ground. To begin with, Knocknasna is a hill and Knocknasnae no more than a townland, and they are names which do not appear on those maps or in those gazetteers to which the run of numismatists is likely to have access. Indeed there is reason to think that Mr. J. D. A. Thompson himself was unable to identify the locality. Not only do the standard Irish topographical indexes, for example the still critical 1861 Census of Ireland's General Alphabetical Index to the Townlands and Towns, Parishes and Baronies etc., fail to find a place in his Bibliography, but, even more significantly as it seems to the writer, the cipher 227 is quietly omitted from the Distribution Map entitled 'Edwardian Coin Hoards, 1280-1377' which occupies p. xxxix of his Introduction. It is a pity, one feels, that those who sponsored and pressed for the Inventory's premature publication had not made it a rule that the Irish material should be cited by the name of a parish or village of sufficient importance to appear on a road-map, with the name of the townland—where it can be established—added in parenthesis, and, if the hoard in question had really been from Knocknasna or

¹ J.D.A. Thompson, Inventory of British Coin Hoards A.D. 600-1600, London 1958, p. 82.
Knocknasnaa, the Inventory entry might have taken a more acceptable form if framed somewhat as follows:

ABBEYFEALE, Knocknasna(a), Co. Limerick.

In this connection, too, it may be observed that the ordinary English student has very little idea of the size of an Irish parish, and that the very nature of a townland is virtually unknown outside Ireland—indeed the word is one that does not figure in the Oxford Shorter English Dictionary—so that the author of the Inventory would have been rendering scholarship a service if he had indicated briefly the principles of a nomenclature that seems often to be capricious.²

A second ground for objection is furnished by the proposed dating "After 1351." In his summary of the find Mr. Thompson himself has conceded the presence of a groat of David II of Scotland, but he would seem to have forgotten that already in the Introduction it had been argued that these groats "were not current until after "1350, though it is impossible for the serious student to subscribe to the truly extraordinary claim which is made there (p.xliv) that such pieces were absent from the great Montraive hoard of 1877, and especially since in the Inventory's subsequent summary of the Scottish find the presence is admitted of no fewer than 127.³ In a footnote in the Introduction, moreover, we find that there is even quoted from Burns' standard work "the actual date of issue" of the David II groat—"5 February 1357"—and the present writer must confess that he cannot understand why in strict logic and on this basis the Inventory dating of the find under discussion should not have been "After 1357."³⁴

The purpose of the present note, however, is, it is feared, even more fundamentally destructive. It will be argued:

(a) that the hoard was not from Knocknasna mountain nor even Knocknasna townland,

(b) that the hoard contained no halfpennies,

² A good example of an Irish entry which is frankly misleading is afforded by no. 73 which runs "CARRICKFERGUS, Co. Antrim, No. 2, Trooper's Lane, 1903." Justifiably, on the analogy of other entries, e.g. "CHESTER, Eastgate St.", "CHESTER, Pepper St." etc., English readers to whom this passage has been shown without exception have been surprised to learn that Trooper's Lane is not a street in Carrickfergus but a village (and railway station) well outside the town. To complete confusion the coins were found even further away from Carrickfergus and the find should appear under "KNOCKACH, Monkstown, Co. Antrim." Conversely, in the case of one Scottish find the Inventory has listed the hoard under the street and shire omitting the town (no. 46—recte "JEDBURGH, Bongate" and "c. 1025" and NOT "BONGATE, Roxburghshire" and "11th century?").


(c) that the “worn pennies,” in point of fact not particularly worn and six in number and not three, were of Edward I and Edward II and NOT of Edward III, and

(d) that the disposition of the hoard far from being “unknown” has always been capable of being established by the student prepared to address an enquiry to so obvious an institution as the National Museum at Dublin.

To anyone with the least experience of the vagaries of journalism it must seem almost incredible that the sole basis of an entry in a work of scholarship should be an unchecked transcript of a newspaper cutting, though in fairness to the Irish Times one hastens to add that the factual errors in its account cannot be laid at the door of its reporter. It has been asserted too that the Inventory represents the labour of seventeen years, so that one wonders that the author could not have found the time just once to visit the National Museum of Ireland, or at least have taken the trouble to enter into correspondence with his colleagues in Dublin. There is in fact almost no record of an Irish find in the Inventory which does not stand in need of urgent and often obvious emendation, and the student should further be warned that the hoards which are there cited represent certainly not as much as two-thirds and perhaps no more than half the material which is readily available.

As it happens, though, it is convenient to begin this new appreciation of the alleged find from Knocknasna with a word-for-word transcript of the Inventory’s sole authority, the paragraphs in the Irish Times as they appeared in Spink’s Numismatic Circular just over a month later. The passage is as follows:

OLD COINS IN A SOD OF TURF
LINKS WITH HISTORY

The eight coins found in the interior of a sod of turf broken for the fire by Mrs. P. Enright, of Abbeyfeale, according to Mr. L. S. Gogan, M.A., the Assistant Curator of the National Museum, Dublin, consist of a silver groat (the largest of the series), minted in the reign of David II of Scotland (1229-1371) in the Edinburgh mint; the next in size, a silver half-groat of Edward III (1327-1371), out of the London mint; and the remainder, three pennies and three half-pennies, probably of the same reign as the last-mentioned, but too blurred to be certain.

The group is a very interesting one, as are the circumstances of the “find.” The sod of “Borod” turf from which the coins fell was cut on Knocknasna Mountain, adjoining Knocknaboul. About half a mile from the spot some Scandinavian amber

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5 Correspondence from the NMI in private possession in Abbeyfeale makes it clear that the identifications as printed tally exactly with those communicated by Mr. Gogan to the finders.

6 For example there are at least 54 Viking Age coin-hoards from Ireland but the Inventory lists only 9 of which 2 are the same hoard under different names.
beads, fibulae and pennanular rings were found some time ago. These objects date back to about 500 B.C.\(^7\)

Knocknasna is a townland adjoining Purte, where the old castle of the Desmonds stood. The following excerpt, therefore, taken from "Haverty's History of Ireland" (page 294) gives a very likely explanation for the presence of the coins at the period mentioned, viz., 1329-1371: "Reverting to the affairs of the Pale we find that Desmond, who had been released from prison on bail in 1333, after eighteen months' captivity, repaired to Scotland with some troops, in obedience to a summons from the King, and was probably present at the decisive battle gained by Edward over the Scots at Halidon Hill, the famous expedition of Edward III into Scotland on this occasion having been cloaked up to the last moment by a pretence that the preparations he was making were for a visit to Ireland. Subsequently the Earl of Desmond was actively engaged against the Irish in Kerry, as the Earl of Kildare was against the O'Dempseys and other septs in Leinster. Twelve hundred of the men of Kerry were slain in one battle in 1339, and Maurice FitzNicholas, Lord of Kerry, who had been fighting in their ranks, was taken and confined in prison, where he died. This English Knight had many years before rushed into the Assize Court at Tralee and killed Dermot, heir to the McCarthy More, while with the judge on the Bench; yet the law suffered this crime to go unexplicated."

The coins found in Knocknasna were evidently belonging to one of the retainer soldiers who accompanied the Earl of Desmond on this expedition to Scotland, and was very probably slain in one of the subsequent battles against the Irish in Kerry.

*Irish Times* 20 Feb.1929

Knocknasna, as we have seen, is in Abbeyfeale parish at the extreme south-west corner of the County of Limerick, and hence it must be confessed the present writer's original interest in the hoard, it being from Abbeyfeale that his maternal grandfather was driven to emigrate in the years immediately following the Great Famine. When, however, he had once begun to unravel the tangled threads of its finding and composition, it very soon became clear that this was a hoard which cried out for proper publication and reassessment on its own merits.

Enquiry was made in the first place at the National Museum of Ireland, and the Keepers of the two Departments concerned, Dr. William O'Sullivan and Dr. Joseph Raftery, could not have been more helpful. A search through their archives established that the coins were submitted to the Museum in February 1929, and significantly the identification of the find-spot was considerably less precise than that suggested in the newspaper report, the file being marked "8 Silver Coins XIVth century | bog | near Knocknaboul, | al. Knocknasnaa, | Co. Limerick." Knocknaboul, it should be

\(^7\) *Report of the Department of Education* 1925-26-27, p. 186. The objects, found in 1927, comprised 108 beads and 10 rings.
remarked, is a locality situated in Tooradood townland in the parish of Rathronan in
the barony of Shanid, and lies some 2½ miles north-east of Knocknasna mountain and
more than four miles as the crow flies north-north-east of Abbeyfeale. Knocknasnaa
townland on the other hand lies in Abbeyfeale parish in the barony of Glenquin, and
Knocknasna mountain is almost exactly 2½ miles due north of the centre of Abbeyfeale
village. Already, therefore, it is clear that there was some dispute about the exact
findspot, and for the English student of today the situation cannot be made any the
easier by the fact that Rathronan does not appear on the great majority of maps. A
note in the National Museum file adds that "the bog where they found is one mile
from Knocknaboul on the same stretch of land where a lot of coins and other articles
were recently found," an allusion it would seem to the Bronze Age—not Scandinavian
—hoard of objects—not coins—touched on in the newspaper report. That "same
stretch of land" is not to be interpreted too narrowly, however, emerges from the
same note which distinguishes the "high bog" at Knocknaboul from the bog
allegedly at Knocknasna whence was cut the "bárdóid" turf which gave up the medi-
aval coins. It seems a reasonable inference, though, that the two find-spots were not
divided off from one another by any major physical feature, and it would be no less
reasonable to suppose that both lay to the north of the watershed between the Galey
and Ooleagh Rivers. In other words the find-spot of the coins must be more obviously
related to Athea than to Abbeyfeale, and presumably should be so oriented in any
future edition of the Inventory.

Here the matter might very well have had to rest had it not been for the personal
kindness of Mr. James O'Kelly, the headmaster of St. Ita's College at Abbeyfeale.
He and one of his assistants Mr. Patrick O'Connor spared no trouble to delve back
more than thirty years in local memories, and the result is that it can now be stated
with confidence that the turf in question was cut by a Knocknasnaa man but not on
Knocknasna mountain. The turbarv was the Park bog in Templeathea West Townland
in the parish of Rathronan in the barony of Shanid. This bog lies well over five miles
as the crow flies from Abbeyfeale, somewhat over the mile from Knocknaboul and only
a mile due east of Athea. Consequently there is now no question but that in any
future edition of the Inventory the so-called Knocknasna hoard should be cited under
Athea. The Abbeyfeale connection is simply that the turf cut in that bog happened
to be sold to an Abbeyfeale resident. From the National Museum file it is clear that the
turf was cut in May 1928, and both the official account and local traditions explored
by Mr. O'Kelly and Mr. O'Connor agree that the coins came to light only when the sod
was broken at the hearth early in the following February. Of a container there was
absolutely no trace, but it is perhaps reasonable to suppose that the coins had been
concealed in a piece of rag or soft leather or even a purse. Surface peat, of course,
would not have the preservative properties of the "high bog," but even so con-
temporary descriptions of the finding of the coins makes it clear that there can have
been nothing substantial in the way of a box or crock.

* The Fox classification originally published in a series of fundamental papers in the British
Numismatical Journal between 1909 and 1913 can most conveniently be obtained from the two
brothers' own summary, H. B. Earle Fox & J. S. Shirley-Fox, "The Pennies of Edward I,
Technically gold or silver coins found in this way constitute treasure trove, but, wisely in the then constitutional position and having regard to the comparatively small intrinsic value of the coins, the National Museum chose not to invoke the powers vested in the Royal Irish Academy, and, a very fair offer for their purchase having been made and declined, the coins were returned to the finder. It is not without interest that the lady of the house considered them “lucky,” and Abbeyfeale residents will doubtless relish her husband’s excusatory remark in a letter to the National Museum dated 19: i: 1929 “Piseoghe imeag na ndoinne annso.” One fortunate consequence is that the coins have been preserved as an entity, and numismatists are under a further obligation to Mr. O’Kelly and Mr. O’Connor who discovered their whereabouts and persuaded the present owner to make them available for study once again. They are here illustrated (PLATE 3) by enlarged direct photographs, and at the same time it has been considered opportune to make a set of plaster-casts which have been deposited with the National Museum of Ireland. On the basis of a scrutiny of the actual coins it has proved possible to identify the individual pieces with a considerably greater degree of accuracy than was feasible in 1929 when Mr. Gogan had hastily to examine them in their uncleaned state and without the possibility of reference to much of the specialist literature.

The eight coins may be described as follows:

**ENGLAND**

**Edward I (1272-1307)**

*Mint of London*

1, 2) Corroded and fragmentary pennies probably of Fox Class III\(^8\) (1280-1281) and weighing 8.9 and 8.7 grains respectively.

3) Penny of Fox Class III—variety III\(\text{g}\) ?—(1280-1281), chipped and corroded but weighing 14.6 grains.

**Edward I (1272-1307) or Edward II (1307-1327)\(^9\)**

*Episcopal Mint of Durham (King’s Receiver)*

4) Penny of Fox Class X c-f (1302-c. 1310)\(^10\) omitting the cross moline privy mark of Bishop Anthony Bek (1283-1311) and presumably struck during his second suspension from the temporalities of the see (summer 1305—autumn 1306), chipped and corroded—but weighing 13.5 grains.

\(^8\) The recent (1938) hoard of more than 1200 coins from Whittonstall in Northumberland must be decisive that the Fox brothers were correct in their original suspicion that coins of Class X belong both to Edward I and II, cf. a forthcoming publication of the hoard by G. V. Tatler and the present writer.

\(^9\) Cf., Supra, p. 182 n. 9.
Mint of London

5) Penny of Fox Class X c-f (1302-1310), chipped and corroded and weighing only 11.1 grains.

EDWARD II (1307-1327)

Episcopal Mint of Durham

6) Penny of Fox Class XI (c. 1310-1313?) with the crozier privy mark of Bishop Richard Kellaw (1311-1316), corroded but weighing 14.9 grains.

EDWARD III (1327-1377)

Mint of London

7) Half-groat of Lawrence Class II¹¹ (=Brooke Class B¹²) of the so-called Treaty period (1361-1369) when the French title is omitted from the coins. This particular variety should be dated c. 1363-1365. The coin is corroded and weighs no more than 25.8 grains.

SCOTLAND

DAVID II (1329-1371)

Mint of Edinburgh

8) Groat of Stewart Class A 5⁴ (cf. Burns fig. 256⁴) with an apparently unpublished minor variety of reverse and to be dated c. 1359 (see discussion below). Weight 58.7 grains.

The degree of corrosion of the coins can be gauged from the fact that the penny of Edward I and II had a theoretical weight of 22.25 grains, while the halfgroat of Edward III and the groat of David II should have weighed 36 and 72 grains respectively. Even though some allowance must be made for wear and the moneyer's remedy, it is rare in English hoards for a penny to be more than a grain or two light, and the groat and half-groat in proportion.

Only one of the coins is at all out of the ordinary, and this is the Scots groat. The obverse is perfectly normal, but on the reverse there is a saltire stop in the outer legend between the words LIB(er)ATOR and M(ercy). Noticing this the writer sent casts of the coin to his friend Mr. Ian Stewart who confirms that the variety is unpublished. His comment is that the position of the coin in the series makes it unlikely

¹¹ L. A. Lawrence, The Coinage of Edward III from 1351, Oxford, 1937 (reprint, with additions, of papers in the Numismatic Chronicle 1926-1933
that any deliberate significance attaches to the stop in this position, and in this connection it is interesting that Mr. Stewart should have in his cabinet a coin with normal reverse from the same obverse die. The David II groat of this issue was struck over a period of almost exactly ten years, and the coin from the Athea hoard is neither among the earliest nor the latest. Although not susceptible of absolute proof, Mr. Stewart's suggestion that the coin in question was struck c. 1359–1 seems eminently plausible, and leaves as the latest coin in the hoard the Edward III half-groat which Brooke has dated no less convincingly c. 1364 +1.

The Athea find, then, cannot well be dated before 1385, and how much after that date depends on the extent to which we may suppose that the two largest coins had circulated before their concealment. On any telling the eight coins span a period of between eighty and ninety years, while the two latest coins are separated by close on fifty years from the balance of the hoard, so that formally there is no reason why a decade or more should not have elapsed between the striking of the English half-groat and the hoard's being hidden. On the other hand neither the Scots groat nor the English half-groat appear to evidence any very great degree of wear, and a date substantially later than c. 1375 may be thought rather improbable. For our present purpose it is perhaps sufficient to suggest that the coins may have been concealed c. 1370, and it will be seen that this dating is completely destructive of the hypothesis that they may have belonged "to one of the retainer soldiers who accompanied the Earl of Desmond on this [the 1333] expedition to Scotland, and was very probably slain in one of the subsequent [i.e. 1339] battles against the Irish in Kerry." Incidentally it may be noted that the coins were found not in "a townland adjoining Purt, where the old castle of the Desmonds stood," but at a point some five miles as the crow flies from the ruins of Purt Castle. In this connection it should also be remarked that the find-spot lies in the basin of the Galey River and not in that of the Feale proper and of its Limerick tributaries the Oolagh and the Allaghaun, so that any geographical association between Park Bog and Purt Castle seems tenuous in the extreme. When, too, the date of deposit is of necessity so imprecise, it is foolish to speculate in any detail concerning the circumstances of the concealment. If, however, the coins were hidden in haste c. 1370—and the absence of a container would suggest a personal emergency—it might be suggested with some plausibility that there could be an association either with the series of English reverses which culminated in the establishment of the MacCarthy lordship in Muskerry

That the Athea find should contain none of the pennies and halfpennies struck in considerable quantity by Edward I at his Irish mints will come as no surprise to the numismatist. On the map opposite p. xxxix of the Inventory there figure a total of seventeen Irish finds alleged to belong to the period 1280-1377. Obviously this material will have to be worked through again by a competent Irish student, but a first glance suggests that no fewer than four of the hoards should be excluded as falling outside the chronological limits specified, the 1820 find from Killala, the "Connacht" find of 1840—and it may here be remarked that pace the Inventory Connaught is not a

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16 Ibid., p. 287.
county—the 1814 find from Castle Enigan (not Lenigan) between Newry and Rathfriland, and the Mullaghboden (Co. Kildare) find of 1871. Of these the first is assigned by the Inventory to the decade "c. 1280-90?" though all the evidence is that the new penny of 1279 very rapidly displaced its predecessors, and there seems no good reason why the hoard should not be dated as early as c. 1270 if not indeed c. 1260. The second is dated by Mr. Thompson "After 1370" though the presence of even one coin of Robert II, and there were many more, must give an absolute terminus post quem of 1371, and there is reason to think that the find was deposited nearer 1390 than 1370. There is good reason to think, too, that the "Robert" and "David" coins at Castle Enigan were not of the Bruce and David II, but of the latter and Robert II and (?) Robert III, cf. the 1855 find from Carrickfergus (Inventory—), the 1903 find from Knockagh (Inventory 73), the 1843 find from near Newtownards (Inventory—and probably—the 1845 find from Ardinquin (Inventory 11). The Mullaghboden find of 1871, moreover, proves to have been composed entirely of Carolingian coins, and in a recent note the present writer has suggested that the Inventory dating "IXth-Xth century" is quite unnecessarily vague, the find patently reflecting the advent of Westfaling reinforcements c. 847.17 How it has found its way onto a map of Edwardian Coin Hoards is to say the least mysterious. If we add to the thirteen hoards that remain the new find from Athve we have a total of fourteen Irish hoards from the period c. 1275-1375, and, although the tally is very far from being complete, this number can perhaps be accepted as furnishing a representative sample18. Only in the case of four of these fourteen hoards are Irish coins described as having been present, and it is likely that all these were concealed in the first half of the period in question.

This is, of course, by far the most westerly point that mediaeval coins of any description are recorded as having been found in the county of Limerick, and there would seem to be only one find of mediaeval coins from further west in the whole of Munster, the great hoard of Long Cross pennies of Henry III from Bantry (Inventory 33) the non-recovery of which was almost certainly occasioned by the MacCarthy rising in Kerry in 1260/1261.19 From Kerry there seems to be no mediaeval coin-hoard, and for third place there is close competition between the fourteenth-century hoards from Muckinish (Inventory 275) and Kilfenora (Inventory 296—? the find from Ballykinvarga cf. JRSAI, XXVII (1897), p. 124), both in Co. Clare, and the tenth-

18 The incompleteness of the Inventory tally for the period is well exemplified by its coverage of Ulster. Thompson cites five authentic Edwardian hoards cf. supra, p. 157, but in an excellent paper Mr. Seaby of Belfast has doubled this number with the 1840 find from Mullahan-sandal near Larne, an 1845 find also from near Larne but apparently of later date, the 1011 find of several thousand coins—from Ballyclare, the 1843 find from Salthill and the 1856 find from near Newcastle (Co. Down), cf. W. A. Seaby, "Medieval Coin Hoards in North-East Ireland," Numismatic Chronicle, 1955, pp. 161-171. To these should be added another, the 1779 hoard from Gilford near Loughbrickland, cf. D. M. Metcalfe, "Eighteenth-century Finds of Medieval Coins from the Records of the Society of Antiquaries," Numismatic Chronicle, 1958, pp. 82. Of the resulting eleven finds no more than three are recorded as containing Irish coins.
19 Cf. Curtis, op. cit., p. 156. In a recent paper it has been suggested that the latest coins antedated this event by two or three years (R. H. M. Dolley, "The 1658 Coventry Treasure Trove of Long Cross Pennies of Henry III," Numismatic Chronicle, 1968, pp. 120 & 121), a reminder that deposit and non-recovery may not always be occasioned by the same crisis.
century Viking hoard from somewhere near Macroom (Inventory—20) in Co. Cork. It is suspected though that there may have been other coin-hoards from Munster which have not come to the notice of students, and the paucity of Irish records is so pronounced that all such evidence is significant. It is hoped, therefore, that all readers of this Journal who know of finds of mediaeval coins in particular, however insignificant they may seem will communicate them to the Editor. In numismatics all evidence is cumulative, and the picture given by a dozen small finds is often more impressive for being representative than the distorted testimony of a single great treasure.

It remains to suggest an acceptable summary of the Athea hoard for the purposes of any future edition of the Inventory, and it is hoped that the following will be deemed at once adequate and an improvement on what has gone before:

ATHEA, Park turbary, Templeathea W., May 1928/Feb. 1929.
8 •R English and Scottish. Deposit: c. 1370.


The coins came to light when a turf was broken at the hearth and would seem to have been hidden without a container. They are now in private ownership.

Finally it is the author's pleasant duty to express his thanks to those who have made possible this little contribution to the history of our country. Already mentioned by name have been Mr. J. C. O'Kelly, B.A., H.D.E. and Mr. P. O'Connor, B.A., H.D.E. of Abbeyfeale, Dr. W. O'Sullivan, M.A., D. Econ., Sc. and Dr. J. Raftery, M.A., Dr. Phil., M.R.I.A., both of Dublin, and Mr. B.H.H. Stewart, B.A., F.S.A. Scot., of London. No less generous have been Mr. M. J. Enright of Abbeyfeale, the present owner of the coins, Mr. F. Elmore Jones of London, Mr. S. N. Lane, B.A., of Dunboyne, Mr. A. B. Ó Riordáin, B.A., of the National Museum at Dublin, and Mr. W. A. Seaby B.A., F.S.A. of Belfast, and the generous co-operation he has received has served only to strengthen the author's determination to undertake a listing of Irish coin-hoards that he ventures to hope might in time replace John Lindsay's still workman-like though pioneer accounts of more than a century ago which the English Inventory has failed so disappointingly to supersede.


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