

# CONTINENTAL STERLING IMITATIONS

In May 1299 the Statute of Stepney (*Statutum de falsa moneta*) was issued. This legislation reiterated earlier bans on the import of foreign coin and prohibited the export of all silver coins, plate and bullion. Additionally each port would have two wardens authorised to search for ‘pollards’ and ‘crockards’. But what were these clearly undesirable coins and why were they of such concern to

Edward I’s government? By Richard Kelleher, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

**F**rom about 1200 English silver coins, which were made of good quality silver, compared with most other continental coins, began to find favour as a trusted ‘international’ currency. That they travelled is evidenced by their occurrence in hoards and as single finds in many parts of Europe. They are found in nearby France and the Low Countries, but also in Germany, Italy, the Balkans, Romania, Greece, Turkey, and the Holy Land. Some of these finds were undoubtedly the property of travellers or pilgrims, but the majority of them moved as a relatively high-value silver currency that was well suited for transactions on an international stage. However, the popularity of the English sterlings abroad had a negative effect at home, and led inevitably to government intervention. There had been earlier episodes of imitation of the English Short Cross (1180-1247) and Long Cross (1247-79) pennies, particularly in Westphalia and the Rhineland. These resulted in government intervention, but it was the sterling silver pennies of Edward I (1272-1307) and Edward II (1307-27) that would be most abused by imitation (figure 1).

## Why and where were the imitations produced?

The imitative sterlings can be divided into two broad periods. The first phase



1 Edward I silver penny, London mint



Sterling imitation ‘crockard’ of John II of Avesnes



(c.1280-99) comprised the coins known to contemporaries as crockards and pollards. In appearance they broadly resembled Edward

I’s English pennies. The key differences lay in the treatment of the bust and the inscription. The bust on the crockards was devoid of a crown (not being the issue of a king) and instead bore a circlet of roses. The inscriptions name the issuer, so in some ways these were not strictly counterfeit coins. They give us the names of minor issuers like John of Avesnes, count of Hainaut, Holland and Zeeland (figure 2), Gui of Collemède, Bishop of Cambrai, or Arnold V of Looz. The other early group were the pollards, so named because the bust was free of any headwear. One of the more prolific of issuers of these was Gui of Dampierre (figure 3). While the vast majority of the early types were struck in the Low Countries others are known from further afield in Norway and Germany.



Sterling imitation ‘pollard’ of Gui of Dampierre





The problem was recognised soon after Edward I's new style pennies appeared in 1279. In 1283 the first of a series of remedial measures was taken when John de Bourne was appointed with custody of the seaboard at Dover, Sandwich and neighbouring ports to confiscate foreign, clipped and counterfeit coins. Problems in English currency had been exacerbated by the export of good weight and fineness English coins, plate and jewels. Edward I's heavy expenditure abroad also probably led to a scarcity of money in England and led non-English coins to become more acceptable. The end of war with France and the coins brought back by returning troops as well as the resumption of the wool trade might all account for large quantities of imitative sterlings in circulation at the end of the 1290s. Estimates suggest that between £300,000-£350,000 crockards and pollards were converted into £240,000 English pennies following the Statue of Stepney. At Christmas 1299 any surviving coins were to pass at a halfpenny, before they were demonetised the following Easter. From April 1300 pollards and crockards were demonetised in England, and continental mints ceased their production, although this was not the end of the problem.



Gaucher of Châtillon, sterling imitation struck at Yves (1313-22)



Louis IV of Bavaria, Holy Roman Emperor, sterling imitation struck at Aachen (late 1320s)

**The second wave of imitations**

A second wave of imitations appeared from the 1310s, these were less obviously different to the English coins, copying the crowned bust of the English king, and in some cases the legend too (figures 4 and 5). Measures were implemented to scrutinise the coinage on at least six occasions between 1305 and 1319, most being concerned with the export of English silver and prohibitions against the use of foreign coins. Metal analyses show that at least until 1320 the continental types maintained a good standard, not falling below the English, however after this date standards did deteriorate. The most notorious – at least

in popular opinion – were the coins of John the Blind of Luxemburg (1310-46) known at the time as 'lusshebornes' (figure 6). Near-contemporary accounts derided them; Piers Plowman wrote 'as in Lusseborwes is a lyther alay, and yet loketh he lyke a sterlynge; the mark of that mone is good, ac the metal is fieble' a similar sentiment is expressed in the Prologue to Chaucer's Monk's Tale. These coins were thought to contain only one-third of the silver of the genuine article, although only John's very latest issues seem to dip to such a low standard.

In 1983 Nick Mayhew surveyed the European hoard evidence and provided a

comprehensive modern classification which is the foundation for the study of these coins. The popularity of metal-detecting over the past thirty years has resulted in many thousands of these coins being recovered, in hoards and also as single finds, making them a fairly common object for acquisition. This surge in new finds also means that new varieties to Mayhew's classification are coming to light regularly.

*All coins are © Portable Antiquities Scheme*



John the Blind, sterling imitation, Luxemburg



**FURTHER READING**

M Allen, *Mints and Money in Medieval England*, Cambridge 2012

BJ Cook, 'Foreign Coins in Medieval England', in L. Travaini (ed.), *Local Coins, Foreign Coins: Italy and Europe 11th-15th centuries*, Milan 1999

NJ Mayhew, *Sterling Imitations of Edwardian Type*, London 1983