

A modest gentleman dealer

One of the leading specialists in English hammered coins, talks to JOHN ANDREW

ALTHOUGH it is not apparent, Stephen Mitchell is a true Cockney. "Although I was born within the sounds of Bow Bells", he told me, "I was mostly brought up in Kent". Always keen on history, he also had a strong collecting instinct. "I started collecting coins at school and, like many of my contemporaries, kept an eye out for coins in change. At weekends I helped out one of the local milkmen with his round so I had a superb opportunity of checking a quantity of change each week. It is still hard to credit that in the 1960s, coins that were a hundred or more years of age were in circulation in this country", he added.

"The pre-decimal boom was incredible", Stephen remarked. "Dealers set up overnight to specialise in 20th century coins. Amazingly 1959 halfcrowns were selling for £20 or £30, which is equivalent to £200-£300 in today's money". However, Stephen was not just selecting coins from change, he also started to fill in gaps and improve coins in his collection.

Although he could have continued his education, he decided to leave after GCEs. "The lure of London was too much in the late 1960s", he confessed. Having secured a clerical post he certainly had more money to spend on coins. Nevertheless he felt he had not found his niche. So, he wrote to B. A. Seaby Limited, which at that time was one of the UK's leading dealers and also a household name.

"My luck was in as they wanted someone interested in more recent coinage. So, on March 4, 1968—which happened to be my 17th birthday—I started work at Seaby's English Silver Department. It was bliss. I was working with my great love—coins—and with people of my own age who soon became good friends and indeed, still are". He then reeled off the names of Seaby's senior management who he also worked alongside. It sounded like a Who's Who of professional numismatists from another era—Peter Seaby, Laurence Brown, Frank Purvey, Alan Rayner and Margaret Amstell.

"In the early 1970s, Mrs Amstell poached me for the Gold Department. Seaby was unusual that it had a department devoted to the metal. It embraced all fields: ancient, world and British coins as well as medals. I was enjoying all the dynamics of dealing with a broad cross-section of people".

"My overseas travel began as early as 1971 when, at only 20 years of age, I went to New York with Alan Rayner. I remained in the city with the stock for a couple of days after Alan returned to London. On my own initiative, following up a chance phone call, I rang the president of a large international film company, got an appointment at his Park Avenue penthouse and concluded a profitable transaction".

"Of all the people at Seaby, I would particularly mention Frank Purvey. We got on very well, argued over politics and he taught me perhaps too much about Australian red wine", Stephen said with a smile. He continued, "It is difficult to pick highlights from those Seaby years. The most important was on-the-job training. I lectured to coin societies and also met many very well-known collectors and viewed their collections in their homes".

He particularly recalls visiting Fred Willis. "Walking into the vault at his home was like entering Tutankhamen's tomb. There were ivories, paintings, silver porcelain and of course the coins. Even after the dreadful robbery in 1976, there were still sufficient coins left for a two-day sale in 1991".

After leaving Seaby's, Stephen started his solo career in 1987, although he continued as co-editor of Seaby's *Standard Catalogue* until 1998. He then became responsible for the English hammered price guide in our COIN YEARBOOK. As he had been dealing for a few years in English hammered coins at Seaby, he decided to make this the nucleus of his new business, though he also deals in all British coins.

Upon my commenting that the trading name Studio Coins was a very arty, almost studious name, Stephen laughed. "No, my wife Janet and I were living near the Ealing Studios in West London at the time and it seemed a good idea to name our new enterprise Studio Coins. Luckily Janet is also interested in history and coins and she works with me in the business making sure the administration runs smoothly. Now we're based in England's first capital—Winchester. We attend all the major shows in the UK and I attend all the major sales."

With almost 40 years in the business—divided equally between Seaby and Studio Coins—Stephen draws on a rich vein of knowledge. He describes himself as a "collector-based dealer". When I asked him to explain the term, he replied, "I draw on a wealth of experience. I think my strength is being able to understand collectors' requirements and provide not only advice, but also good value quality coins for collections".

Stephen is regarded as a very modest gentleman dealer whose grading is considered second to none and who is known for providing personal attention to his collectors.

