



# THE BRISTOL FORGER

by Chris Rudd

The Bristol Forger has died. He wasn't a great forger. He wasn't half as nimble fingered as the elusive Haslemere Forger. He was a clumsy, small-time swindler who may have faked dozens of British Celtic coins over the last fifteen or twenty years and who, with the help of his unscrupulous accomplices, could have diddled countless collectors and dealers. He forged for profit, not for pleasure.

Born in the late 1920s, about 5ft 8in tall, heavily built, with sandy hair turning grey and a Midlands accent, the Bristol Forger was a professional engraver who probably received his training in the jewellery trade.

At one time the Bristol Forger was in partnership in a Bristol antiques market, later he operated from the back room of a little shop in East Bristol. He made the coins. Other people, including a metal detectorist and possibly a coin dealer too, helped him to distribute them.

The workmanship of the Bristol Forger was so poor that he should have been discovered and discouraged over a decade ago. But most Celtic collectors and ancient coin dealers seem to have been unaware of his existence. In fact, I only heard of him a week after his death earlier this year. I suspect that many knowledgeable collectors and dealers have been offered the fruits of this deceiver's labours, especially his Durotrigan staters, but cast them contemptuously aside because they were so clearly fakes, yet didn't bother to enquire from the vendor where they came from or who made them. I suspect too that many inexperienced collectors may have been duped.

I confess that I've been less than diligent myself in investigating the Bristol Forger since I got wind of him in April. I've spent only an hour this month (July) in trying to put together the story of his activities.

Rather than wait until the picture is completed, I've decided to stick my neck out by revealing what little I know of his work, in the hope that the keen-eyed readers of COIN NEWS will quickly supply the missing pieces.

*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, advises Diogenes Laertius; and I agree. However, the Bristol Forger has left me no choice by dying before I could open my mouth. I must stress that what I'm reporting here is founded entirely on soft, secondhand gossip — a couple of brief letters and a few phone calls — and not on hard, numismatic evidence. Despite the paucity of reliable information, I feel it should be circulated as widely and as swiftly as possible, in order to minimise future duplicity.

## Four forgeries

I believe that the Bristol Forger copied four British Celtic types (maybe more) and that they appeared on the coin market in the following sequence:

1. Cranborne Chase debased silver stater (Abstract Type), Van Arsdell 1235-1F, Seaby 60, Mack 317.



Two Cranborne Chase debased silver staters by the Bristol Forger, VA 1235-1F, from Van Arsdell's *Celtic Coinage of Britain*, p. 555. Note short lines of horse's tail are parallel with exergual line below

I have not seen one that has definitely been attributed to the Bristol Forger, but I have heard that he churned out numerous copies of this type (possibly hundreds) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I am told they were cast, not struck, in very debased silver and can be identified by this tell-tale characteristic on the reverse: the three short lines of the horse's tail are parallel with the exergual line below. The two cast Durotrigan copies featured by Van Arsdell in *Celtic Coinage of Britain* (page 555) probably came from the hand of the Bristol Forger.

A collector tells me that he actually witnessed an ancient coin dealer purchasing about 20 of these Cranborne Chase fakes at a Bristol coin fair (albeit unsuspectingly). The collector voiced his doubts, but the dealer was convinced the staters were genuine. When the collector saw him about to sell some to a second dealer, he again expressed his misgivings and managed to dissuade the latter from buying them. That was over ten

years ago. I congratulate the collector for his courage in speaking up, then and now.

On July 6, 1992 I phoned the first dealer and asked him about the false Durotrigan staters. Knowing him to be a man of unimpeachable integrity, I expected a frank reply, and I got one. He said: "Yes, I bought a group of them from a dealer in Bristol. No, I didn't realise they were forgeries at the time and unfortunately I sold most of them. It wasn't until I met Van Arsdell in New York years later that I knew they were false. He bought two for his book. I've still got two or three left. I'll send them to you when I can find them".

2. Boduoc gold stater, Van Arsdell 1052-1, Seaby 269, Mack 395.



Boduoc gold stater by the Bristol Forger, VA1052-1 type. Flat flan, crudely engraved, scatched to look old, weighs only 4.858g.



Boduoc gold stater by the Haslemere Forger, VA 1052-1F. Van Arsdell says there are tell-tale steps on the D of BODVOC and on many parts of the reverse.

Several of these started surfacing in the early 1980s; they were spotted and rejected by knowing dealers and collectors. I think some may have gone to a shop in Glastonbury. I bought one in April this year. "With regard to the forgery", the vendor wrote, "I paid £25 for it years ago, and it is made of gold. I did a deal with the villain who tried to sell it to me as genuine and to give him around scrap value for it seemed

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the best way of taking it out of circulation". I am unsure whether this Boduoc fake was cast or struck (probably struck). Certainly, the flan is atypically flat, the weight is unusually low and the engraving is uncommonly crude. The coin has also been deliberately scratched to foster the illusion of antiquity. It looks a different fake from the two Boduoc forgeries cited by Van Arsdell, both of which demonstrate more finesse.

### 3. Corio gold stater, Van Arsdell 1035-1, Seaby 267, Mack 393.



Corio gold stater, VA 1035-1F, supposedly by the Haslemere Forger. But was it really the work of the Bristol Forger? His weighs 6.48g, about a gram heavier than normal.

The Bristol Forger produced his copies of this around 1983-84. A friend of mine bought one in 1984, believing it to be genuine. He became increasingly suspicious of its authenticity and submitted it to the Institute of Archaeology at Oxford in December 1984. Lyn Sellwood, who helped Van Arsdell to expose the Haslemere forgeries and who was originally to be his co-author of *Celtic Coinage of Britain*, examined this spurious Corio stater and replied: "Stylistically and with regard to metal colour it looks quite wrong. I weighed it, result: 6.48 gm, about a gram heavier than normal".

My friend no longer has this fake. As soon as its falseness was confirmed by the Institute of Archaeology he returned it to the detectorist who had sold it to him and got his money back. He says it was the same as the modern Corio forgery illustrated by Van Arsdell and he is convinced it was manufactured by the Bristol Forger.

At this stage I am unable to ascertain the truth of my friend's allegation. As far as possible, working solely with a few published photographs, I have compared the die cutting of my Boduoc fake with the die cutting of Van Arsdell's Corio fake and Cranborne Chase cast fakes. I detect a similarly uniform flatness in the designs; the engraving in each case looks shallow in depth.

But this could be utter fantasy on my part. I am not equipped to make such fine stylistic comparisons or technical distinctions.

### 4. Addeddomaros silver unit, Van Arsdell 1611-1, Seaby 56, Mack 440.

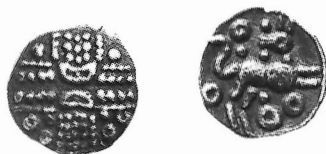
According to a West Country collector, the Bristol Forger made fakes of this Trinovantian S-Tailed Horse Type around 1986-87; how many or how few is anyone's guess at this point. I don't think many can have been distributed, because this fake has

not been recorded by Van Arsdell in his comprehensive catalogue of modern Celtic forgeries.

I have acquired a specimen from the West Country collector, who told me he bought it from a Bristol coin dealer, knowing it was a fake. In October 1987 it was checked by the British Museum, who confirmed that it was spurious.

Once someone tells you a coin is a forgery it is easy to see that it is and you wonder how anyone could possibly have been fooled. The falseness of this Addeddomaros unit is transparently apparent to the practised eye.

The flan is two millimetres too big; the weight is half a gram over what one might expect; the crossed-wreath design is too loose; the horse's rear legs are broken; and there's a distinct rim around the reverse, which indicates that the engraved image was smaller than the flan—an extremely rare occurrence in Iron Age minting.



Addeddomaros silver unit by the Bristol Forger, VA 1611-1 type. 13mm, which is 2mm too big. 1.6g, which is half a gram too heavy. Reverse image smaller than flan.

### Willing hands

For a coin forger to ply his trade profitably he requires willing hands to spread his work around. I believe the Bristol Forger had such assistance, though I can't prove it. I have heard of only two examples of people helping him—a dealer who may have done so innocently and a Bristol metal detectorist who did so deliberately.

In September 1987 the dealer, who is not a member of the British Numismatic Trade Association, had four of the Bristol Forger's Addeddomaros fakes for sale in his shop window. A collector of Celtic coins saw these four fakes, challenged the dealer and bought one of them.

A few days later a detectorist visited the dealer, and purchased the remaining three fakes. He then sent them to a local museum, supposedly to be identified, but hopefully to be authenticated as well. The museum wasn't sure about them and said they could be modern fakes.

Despite this warning, the detectorist next phoned the police and reported that he had found three Celtic coins while metal detecting on the beach at Weston-super-Mare. He said that he had found them on September 29, which was the day after he had actually bought them from the dealer.

He deposited the three coins with the police and a man from the coroner's office picked them up. By a strange coincidence

the coroner's man met a coin collector—the same collector who had purchased one of the fakes a few days earlier. Amazingly he had it with him in his wallet. It was identical to the other three which he confirmed were fakes—the same fakes he had seen in the dealer's shop window.

I am told the detectorist was later cautioned, but no inquest was held on the three Addeddomaros fakes; firstly because they were not thought to be silver, but white metal; secondly because they clearly were not genuine; and thirdly because they had not been "found". I don't think any action was taken against the dealer either, perhaps because he was deemed to be innocently stupid or, at worst, stupidly misled and misleading.

I must admit my story is a thin one. Putting speculation aside, all I can say is I think there was a coin forger in Bristol, I think he was forging Celtic coins in the late 1970s and early 1980s and I think he may have been assisted by a local detectorist and a dealer. So why am I bothering to relate these theories? Quite simply because the Bristol Forger's forgeries are still in circulation and collectors could still be duped by them.

You may consider that odd Durotrigan fake being sold for £30 is not a serious matter. "Let the buyer beware!" you may smile. Fair enough. But, remember that Celtic gold staters can fetch hundreds of pounds. For example, the genuine Boduoc stater on the front cover of COIN NEWS (the one on the right) recently changed hands for £750.

### Want to help?

If you wish to help me complete the story (I realise there may be nothing more to add), please scrutinise your Celtic trays and see if you are holding any of the fakes I have shown here, or other fakes which you guess might have come from the same source. Then post them to me—or photos of them—to be recorded.

Hopefully, you will also permit me to deposit them with the British Museum, where all British forgeries should be kept for reference.

Being a collector, not a detective, I have little interest in the identity of the Bristol Forger or his helpers. My sole aim is to publicise his fakes and prevent them being peddled for profit.

If you think you may have one of the Bristol Forger's fakes or know about his work, please contact me, Chris Rudd, PO Box 181, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA14 2QE, telephone 061-928 6753. Any confidential information you give me will remain confidential.

*All coins are illustrated actual size. Front cover photos by Jeffrey May, Archaeology Department, Nottingham University. Others by Institute of Archaeology, Oxford University, and Robert D. Van Arsdell.*