

William F. Stevens (1933–2018). (Image courtesy Joan Stevens.)

CHRIS RUDD

CELTIC BILL

and his Celtic coin stories



SOME collectors are born story tellers. William F. Stevens certainly was. Between 1999 and 2004 he wrote no fewer than 11 articles about Celtic coins for COIN NEWS. Some were illustrated by coins from his own collection. Born in West Ham, London, in 1933, Bill lectured in English and linguistics at Roehampton College and was encouraged in his Celtic coin research by Dr Philip de Jersey of the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford. Bill was particularly fascinated by the symbolism of Celtic coins and three of his COIN NEWS articles were titled "Every picture coins a story". Here are some of the coins that inspired Bill's stories.

Once upon a time Celtic mercenaries were paid in gold staters of Philip II of Macedon. Over the next three centuries these Greek staters were repeatedly copied in Gaul, and later Britain. The designs became more Celtic and less realistic each time they were copied. The head of Apollo on Philip II gold and bronze coins was the face that launched a thousand Celtic coins. You'll find the same face, albeit very Celticised, on the first coins made in Britain. These were cast bronze coins, later cast in tin-rich potin, copied from cast bronze coins imported from Massalia (Marseilles) in southern Gaul. Did you know that the first written record of Britain was made by Pytheas, an explorer from Massalia who sailed around Britain in circa 330 BC?

Bill was captivated by the colossal variety of different styles of heads on Celtic coins, including double heads, triple heads and severed heads, and by the amazing menagerie of beasts and birds on Celtic coins. He was particularly impressed by the staggering stable of different horse styles featured on Ancient British coins, perhaps because his weekend thatched cottage was only a dozen miles from the White Horse of Uffington, which looks uncannily like some of the horses on Celtic coins. Bill wrote:

"The horse was a very important animal to the Celts, an essential part of their everyday life and well-being. The horse pulled the ard (a simple single-shafted wooden plough, also frequently pulled by oxen), it carried loads in wicker panniers strapped on either side of its body, it was ridden in work and play by its owner, it pulled the farm-cart, it bore the hunter, it carried the warrior and pulled the war-chariot in battle, and it was sacrificed and eaten at ritual festivals. Little wonder, then, that, playing such a pivotal role in the day-to-day life of the Celtic tribesman and at the same time being invested, as it was, with ancient religious symbolism, the horse should figure so prominently on the coinage of the early Britons. Animals feature on the coins of every British tribe and the horse is overwhelmingly the most regularly represented, a fittingly constant reminder of its central agrarian and military importance". ("Uffington and all that". Horse symbolism and other animal imagery on the Celtic coinage of late Iron Age Britain", COIN NEWS, August 2002).

Bill was also intrigued by the influence that Rome had on the later dynastic coins of the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes north of the Thames and the Regni and Atrebatas south of the Thames. One of the coins he illustrates to exemplify Rome's impact on late Iron Age Britain is a silver minim of Verica ("The High One", as in "His Highness") who was king of the Regni and Atrebatas c. AD 10–40. Though only 8mm in diameter and under a third of a gram in weight, this minuscule minim manages to say a lot about the ruler it celebrates, thanks to the incredible dexterity of the engraver who cut the two tiny dies from which it was struck. As Bill observes:

"It has a Roman two-handled wine-krater or wine-cup on its obverse, REX above it, within a beaded border, while the reverse



The face that launched 1,000 Celtic coins. Philip II of Macedon gold stater (Le Rider 243). The "burger" mintmark says it was struck posthumously at Amphipolis, c.325–315 BC.



ABC 1719 ABC 2157 ABC 2199 ABC 16 ABC 1190 ABC 2786
Repeated copying by different tribes over 300 years resulted in Apollo's head taking many surreal forms on Celtic staters and later being abandoned or replaced.



ABC 115—ABC 120
ABC 150

The first coins made in Britain (ABC 120, 150) were copied from bronze coins cast in Marseilles (ABC 115).



Pytheas sailed around Britain c. 330 BC. (Image courtesy Sir Barry Cunliffe.)



ABC 79

LT 8040

ABC 1495

ABC 2015

Most heads on Celtic coins are of gods, with the occasional goddess (ABC 1495).



LT 2126

ABC 1235

ABC 1346

ABC 1779

ABC 2015

ABC 2846

All kinds of creatures from scorpion-lion (LT 2126) to hunting hound (ABC 2846).

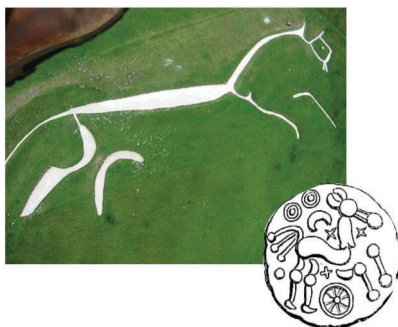


K 997 v.

VB 1419

LT 9734

Celtic cavalrymen of Paeonia, Iberia and Pannonia (LT 9734).



Some Celtic horses look like the White Horse of Uffington. (Images courtesy of (photo) David Price, www.hows.org.uk (coin) F. W. Fairholt.)



Silver minim of King Verica with wine cup and falcon (ABC 1331).

shows a falcon (possibly a hawk) with the legend VERCA COMMI F surrounding it. This coin tells a story of different levels. The bold Roman wine-vessel (intentionally?) reminiscent of a regal bust in the manner in which it fills and dominates the flan, together with the equally boldly displayed and imperious REX, confirms for us the picture of Roman influence. But the coin goes further, suggesting with the easy use of Latin that the influence, at least here in Verica's south Thames area, was fairly deeply entrenched. Need one say more than that the whole coin consists of Roman and regal images accompanied by Roman language? Moreover, the coin supplies valuable information about the political situation within the Atrebates at the turn of the millennium: Verica tells his own people and us insistently on the coin not only that he is KING but also gives us his lineage and his credentials, that he is SON (F for "filius") of COMMIUS, who ruled previously. By having himself depicted with the wine-vessel and the hunting-falcon, Verica may be deliberately associating himself with fine imported wine and the regal sport of falconry, thus underlining to his subjects his importance and prestige. It can be truly said that this coin speaks volumes. ("Every picture coins a story. Part II. A numismatic perspective on the life and culture of the early Britons", COIN NEWS, June 2002).

Bill was also aware that imported Roman coins sometimes influenced the coin designs of the so called "peripheral" British tribes who didn't do as much business with Rome as the "core" tribes north and south of the Thames. One of the coins in his collection is a Roman Republican silver denarius struck circa 64 BC by L. Roscius Fabatus, which came out of the Mesagne hoard found in the Brindisi province, Apulia, southeast Italy, c. 1980. The head on Bill's coin—Juno Sospita wearing a goatskin headdress—must surely have been seen by the man who engraved the boarskin clad head on the Norfolk God silver unit (*Ancient British Coins* ABC 1567), issued by a ruler of the Iceni tribe c. AD 25–43. Dr John Talbot, author of *Made for Trade. A new view of Icenian coinage* (Oxbow 2017), disagrees. But Dr Philip de Jersey, author of *Celtic Coinage in Britain* (Shire 1996) and co-author of *Ancient British Coins* (Chris Rudd, 2010), says that Bill's Roman denarius "is almost certainly the inspiration for the obverse of the Norfolk God silver unit". Chris Rudd List 67, January 2003, p.13).

Bill was an original thinker, never short of new and often unusual ideas. For example, he wondered if the back-to-back crescents on coins of the Iceni represented oyster shells (COIN NEWS, November 2002) and, when commenting on a gold stater of the Corieltavi (ABC 1854), he speculated that "the pellets engraved between the raised tail of the horse and its buttocks" were dung, "perhaps fertilising and preparing the soil for future crops" (COIN NEWS, January 2001).

William F. Stevens (although he'll always be "Celtic Bill" to me) was a graduate of King's College, Cambridge; a scholar; a bibliophile; a lifelong Chelsea football fan; and a collector of classic cars, as well as Celtic coins and all things Chelsea—books, programmes and memorabilia. Bill died in June last year and a selection of his Celtic coins will be sold by auction in Aylsham, Norfolk, on Sunday, July 14.



RCV 363

ABC 1567

Juno Sospita in goatskin and Norfolk God in boarskin.



ABC 1657

ABC 1854

Two oyster shells and a horse with dung?