

London-St. Albans Return

By BRIAN SPENCER

IN THE last scene of "Love's Labour's Lost" some high-spirited courtiers make fun of a schoolmaster, who struggles against their noisy repartee to play Judas Maccabaeus in a masque. The schoolmaster has put on a helmet for the part and the spectators, finding the effect unintentionally comic, liken his head to a variety of insulting and outlandish objects—the head of a bodkin and of a cittern, the death's head in a *memento mori* ring, the pommel of Caesar's falchion, "the face of an old Roman coin, scarce seen." In the end they conclude that it nearest resembles "St. George's half-cheek (profile) in a brooch." "Ay," shouts one of them, "and in a brooch of lead."

It was only some fifty years before Shakespeare wrote the play that Thomas Cromwell's campaign against the cult of images and relics and the suppression of shrines and pilgrimages had discredited the use of such brooches. Until then the practice of wearing brooches that bore representations of saints and other subjects of a popular devotional kind had been, for more than three centuries, widespread among rich and poor alike.

Roughly 600 of these fragile, leaden hat badges, many of them merely small fragments, have been found at London. Generally speaking, their owners had worn them as tokens of allegiance to the great heroes and protectors of this world and of the next. Originally, most of them had been bought as souvenirs at shrines and were afterwards worn or kept for their supposed talismanic properties or were passed on to others in need of saintly help or protection¹.

Badges from the shrines of St. Thomas of Canterbury and Our Lady of Walsingham make up the largest number of identifiable medieval pilgrim souvenirs found at London. Badges from several less important shrines, both local and far-off, are also known. The remainder are difficult or impossible to identify owing to their incompleteness or to their cryptic and now baffling use of popular imagery.

In 1866 there was recovered from the Thames at the site of the Steelyard the upper part of a badge in the form of leafy boughs entwined into a sort of canopy² (Fig. 1). The stylistic treatment of the trees comes closest to mid-13th century drawings of the Matthew Paris school, though too much importance should not, perhaps, be attached to an analogy in a totally different medium. A human head, wearing a somewhat startled expression, hangs by the hair from one of the branches. This head has been identified, very plausibly, as that of Absalom, the rebellious

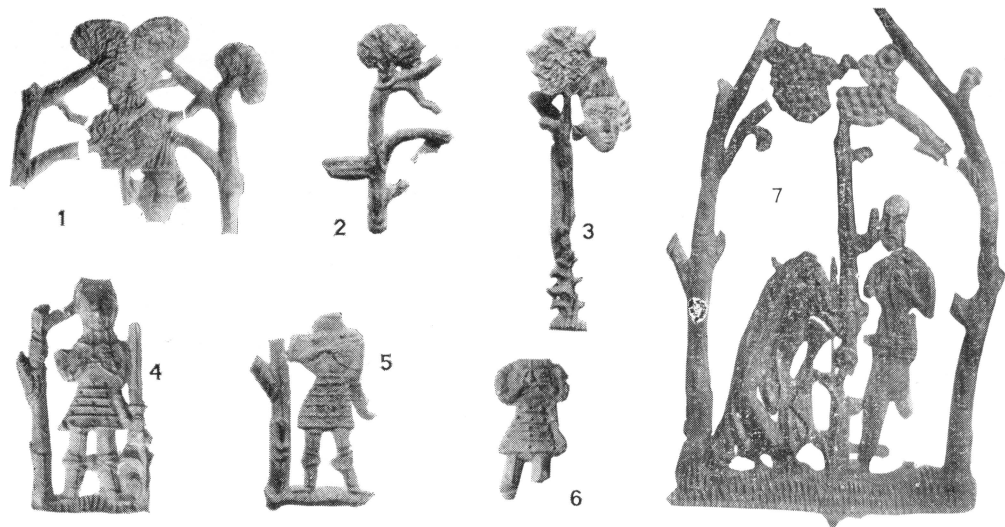
son of King David³. The fragment is indeed reminiscent of a representation, for example, in Queen Mary's Psalter of the accident that led to Absalom's death, when his long hair became entangled with the boughs of an oak tree, dragging him off his mule and leaving him helplessly captive on the field of battle. The main difficulty about this attribution is to account for the whereabouts of Absalom among the sundry, and admittedly often unlikely, attractions available to the London pilgrim.

Two smaller fragments from almost identical badges have also survived. From one of them, a fragment of tree shown in Fig. 2 there still protrudes one of the flimsy clips that were sometimes set around the outer edges of openwork badges, evidently to hold in place a piece of coloured paper or vellum as a gay background to the design. The other (Fig. 3) retains the substantial pin that was almost invariably cast in one piece with the brooch. And in front of this pin there survives another snippet of the original design. Here, to the left of the suspended head, an upright sword is poised between the leaves of the trees above and a conventional flower or shrub sprouting from a tuft of grass below.

On another fragmentary badge (Fig. 4) a combination of similar features—the upright sword, a flower, grass and a tree-trunk—frame a stiff little figure in full armour of a type belonging to the first half of the 15th century. Thin bands of lead between his knee-caps and between his bascinet and the tree, accidentally left by runners in the mould, led Roach Smith to describe the figure as "a warrior bound and tied to a tree⁴." Again, two smaller fragments of almost identical badges have been found (Figs. 5, 6) and in all three cases the warrior bends his arms awkwardly against his chest, rather in the attitude of a child learning to catch a ball.

Finally, we come to a much more complete badge (Fig. 7) which, though stylistically different from the preceding fragments, seems to be related to them, since it, too, makes decorative use of a grassy bower and of the upright sword and flower. Roach Smith described the scene as a "lady kneeling before a male personage, who is dressed in a close vest, temp. Edward III; the scene appears to be a wood; but what the subject may be is uncertain⁵."

The figure on the right is indeed dressed in the fashion of the third quarter of the 14th century, with a close-fitting, belted doublet, apparently padded at the chest, and with hose gartered at the knee. His left arm, however, is held in the curious attitude of the figures in armour. But, in this case, his right hand is seen to be grasping the sword-grip. We can, there-



These pilgrim badges from the British Museum are shown actual size

fore, begin to consider him in the possible role of executioner, if we allow for the fact that the sword is held unnaturally upright and is apparently balanced on top of a flower to enable the pin and clasp of the badge to be fixed vertically at the back. If we also make the assumption that the head of the decapitated figure on the left has been lost from the badge, and that his head would have been suspended, as in the first fragment, from a lower branch of the tree, we shall then have all the essential elements of the story of the death of Britain's first martyr, St. Alban.

The loose robe, which led Roach Smith to describe the kneeling figure as a female, is the hairy mantle that Alban had received from the man who converted him to Christianity, a priest later known as St. Amphibalus (the medieval Latin for cloak). Alban, who was a legionary at Verulamium, had given his own garments to the priest so that the latter might more easily escape the persecution of Christians begun by Emperor Diocletian in 303. Alban was captured instead, and, after refusing to renounce his faith, was taken across the River Ver to the top of the hill on which St. Albans abbey church now stands. There his head was tied by the hair to the branch of a tree and then cut off, the body falling to the ground and the head left hanging.

Of all the miracles that accompanied these events, only the most spectacular one need concern us here. At the instant the executioner delivered his sword-stroke his eyes fell out to prevent him from seeing the virtues that were to arise from the martyrdom. With this vital information it now becomes possible to discern that the eyes of the executioner in the leaden badges are falling in front of his chest and are linked to their sockets by lines, perhaps to indicate motion. In the course of accomplishing his task, the executioner, possessing all the coolness and quick-

ness of reaction of a slip-felder, has whipped up his free hand (or in the later and more formal versions both his hands) to catch his ejected eye-balls.

There is evidence that at the great pilgrim centres leaden souvenirs were mass-produced and sold by the thousand every year. Pilgrim badges were essentially popular art. Yet the composite picture that emerges from the above fragments closely resembles in its design some of the grander representations of St. Alban's martyrdom, ranging from the drawing by Matthew Paris in "The Lives of Saints Alban and Amphibalus"⁶ to the carvings on the shrine-keeper's watching-chamber, built in a bay of St. Alban's chapel in the early 15th century, and on the chantry chapel erected by Thomas Ramryge, the last resident abbot of St. Albans⁷. Bearing in mind the abbey's long tradition of craftsmanship in precious metal,⁸ there is some likelihood that the stone moulds in which the badges would have been cast were carved in the abbey, while the souvenirs themselves may well have been doled out to pilgrims from one of the relic cupboards that form the lower part of the watching chamber.

All these leaden fragments, then, are in a sense the return tickets of Londoners who undertook pious journeys to St. Albans between 1350 (perhaps even 1250) and 1450. The discovery of them, or rather rediscovery, for they were all found in London over a century ago, solves a mystery often expressed that badges commemorating this famous shrine had never come to light. They may also serve as a reminder in a journal concerned mainly with current excavations and fieldwork that the reappraisal of past finds is a necessary, if usually unspectacular, branch of back-room archaeology.

(References—see page 45)

London's Archaeological Societies — 2

THE MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE FOUNDING of Merton and Morden Historical Society in March 1951 coincided with, and in fact owed much to, the growth of interest in local history stimulated by the publication of Miss E. M. Jowett's "History of Merton and Morden" by the Festival of Britain local committee. Probably for the first time in its brief existence, residents of the Urban District became fully aware of the richness of a heritage predating by some two millennia the establishment of local government boundaries of the twentieth century.

The aspirations of the new society reflected the breadth of interest of its founders; it sought "to institute, promote and encourage the study of local history, topography, architecture, archaeology, natural history, dialect, manners and customs, folklore and other similar objects relating to Merton and Morden and surrounding districts; to search for, record and preserve historical records and other material; to arrange lectures, debates, exhibitions and tours, to engage in field work and diggings for local remains, and to purchase or otherwise acquire any object or article which may be of historical interest."

A real interest in the district was, and still is, the only necessary qualification for membership, although specialised knowledge is of course doubly welcome. The society has always endeavoured to help those with little or no special knowledge of the locality to improve or acquire it, and has become a focal point for all who appreciate or feel curious about their surroundings and are interested in maintaining the historical associations of a district which since April 1965 has been known as the London Borough of Merton.

With the good fortune to have within its territory a three mile stretch of Stane Street, Merton Historical Society, like many similar societies, cut its archaeological teeth on the local Roman road. Under the directorship of Dennis Turner, and in collaboration with the London Natural History Society, five sections were dug in 1958/59 across the assumed course of the road through Morden Park, four of which provided confirmation of the route of the

road northwards from Stonecot Hill towards Morden Church. (*The London Naturalist* No. 39, 130-2).

Three years later members of the society joined forces once again with the London Natural History Society under the directorship of Dennis Turner to undertake what was to be two seasons' work near the site of Merton Priory, recently reported in *Surrey Archaeological Collections* Vol. 64 (1967) 35-70.

The discovery of two inhumation burials at Short Batsworth, Mitcham, during the preliminary stages of the erection of the Phipps Bridge Primary School in October 1966, provided the next challenge to the society's limited force of trained diggers. Fortunately invaluable help was provided by members of the Surrey Archaeological Society and the Beddington, Carshalton and Wallington Archaeological Society, and under the guidance of Dennis Turner one further inhumation of undetermined date, two ditches and a quantity of occupational debris, including Romano-British pottery of the late 1st/early 2nd century, was recovered before the site was overtaken by building operations.

The society's most recent archaeological venture, a small scale excavation on the site of the medieval manor house of "Hall Place" Mitcham, conducted under the direction of the writer in the summer of 1968, has provided evidence of continuous occupation since the early 13th century, and a range of ceramic material having close affinities with that recovered from the Merton Priory site. It is hoped to continue work at "Hall Place" during the coming Spring.

The experience of Merton Historical Society's small archaeological group has shown the difficulties of undertaking even a small excavation with limited skilled labour, and the necessity for close collaboration between neighbouring societies if worthwhile results are to be achieved.

(Inquiries to Miss E. M. Jowett, Hon. Secretary, 12 Cranleigh Road, S.W.19).

E. N. MONTAGUE

London St. Albans Return

(Continued from p.35)

REFERENCES

1. For an account of the subject see "Medieval Pilgrim Badges" by B. W. Spencer in *Rotterdam Papers: A Contribution to Medieval Archaeology*. Rotterdam (1968), 137-153.
2. All the specimens illustrated are in the British Museum (Dept. of Brit. & Med. Antiquities) and are here reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees. The illustrations are actual size.
3. *J. Brit. Archaeol. Assoc.*, xxiv (1868), 223.
4. *Collectanea Antiqua* i (1848), 90.
5. *Catalogue of the Museum of London Antiquities* (1854), 140.
6. Trinity College, Dublin MS.E. i 40, f 38.
7. *Trans. St. Albans & Herts. Archit. & Arch. Soc.*, 1929 (1930), pls. iv, 2; v.1; xi, 1. *Ibid.*, 1930 (1931), pl. iii, 3.
8. C. C. Oman, "The Goldsmiths at St. Albans Abbey during the 12th and 13th Centuries" in *ibid.*, 1932 (1933), 215-33.

Current Excavations

City, Lower Thames St., opposite Billingsgate Market by Guildhall Museum and City of London Archaeological Society. Site of Roman town-house and baths (see *The London Archaeologist*, Winter, 1968) on alternate week-ends, the next one is March 15/16. Due to site limitations no further volunteers can be accommodated at present. Inquiries to Mrs. M. Smith, 26A Noel Road, N.1. (01-359 2078).

Carshalton, High Street by Beddington, Carshalton and Wallington Archaeological Society. Traces of Medieval foundations have been noted in a vacant site behind the car park in the High Street. Inquiries to Miss E. Fox, 156 Park Lane, Carshalton, Surrey (01-647 1847).

Mucking by the Ministry of Public Building and Works. Ranges from a ditch of the late Bronze Age to Saxon graves (see *The London Archaeologist*, Winter, 1968). Excavation takes place seven days a week. Inquiries to Excavation Supervisor for M.P.B.W., Mucking Excavation, Mucking, Stanford le Hope, Essex.