

The Billy and Charley forgeries

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DURING THE MIDDLE of the 19th century the London archaeological community was disrupted by a controversy over the authenticity of a large number of supposedly medieval leaden objects that appeared for sale. They eventually proved to be forgeries and have since been called “Billys and Charleys” after their manufacturers.

William Smith (Billy) and Charles Eaton (Charley), the eponymous forgers, are shadowy figures. It is even uncertain if Billy’s name really was William Smith. But some biographical information can be found in writings on their forgeries.

Charley was born in about 1834; Billy was probably born a few years earlier. Most of their life was spent in the neighbourhood of Rosemary Lane (now called Royal Mint Street) in Tower Hamlets. They were mudlarks who searched the Thames for items of value. William Edwards, a London antique dealer, made Billy’s acquaintance around about 1845, and he met Charley some years later. He paid them for items of interest that they found, thinking of them as “his boys”¹.

Billy and Charley earned money from this until 1857, when they decided to counterfeit antiquities. They cast objects from lead (or lead alloys such as pewter), cutting dies into plaster of Paris moulds with nails and knives, and bathing the finished items in acid to simulate aging. Their commonest products were medallions, of between two and four inches in diameter, with small loops attached to form hangers (Fig. 1). Because of the primitive casting technique, they were generally thin, with poorly defined edges and pitted, uneven surfaces. Other products included daggers, statuettes, ampullae (Fig. 2) and even small shrines (Fig. 3).

The figures most frequently depicted on these forgeries were knights in body-hugging armour (Fig. 4), kings wearing strange spiked crowns and priests in wide, loosely hanging robes, all with childish expressionless faces.

Billy and Charley were illiterate, and the inscriptions on their forgeries consisted of meaningless jumbles of letters and symbols, while dates in arabic numerals ascribed manufacture to the years between the 11th and 16th centuries, although Arabic

numerals did not come into use in Europe before the 15th century.

Billy and Charley claimed to have found their creations at Shadwell, where a new dock was being built, and they found a ready market. The materials needed to make a medallion cost twopence, but one could be sold for half a crown, and larger items could sell for considerably more².

William Edwards became one of their principal customers, describing the objects as “The most interesting relics I have met with for years and the earliest pilgrims’ signs that have yet been found”³. He showed them to George Eastwood, an antique dealer in the City Road, who bought large quantities, advertising them as “A remarkably curious and unique collection of leaden signs or badges of the time of Richard II”⁴.



Fig. 1: a lead medallion by Billy and Charley.

(Photo: Chris Mycock)

1. *The Times* 6th Aug. 1858 12.
2. *J Brit Archaeol Ass* 25 (1869) 390.
3. Thomas Bateman's Antiquarian Correspondence, Sheffield City Museum, (T.B.A.C.), 1st Feb. 1858.
4. T.B.A.C. 4th Nov. 1857.

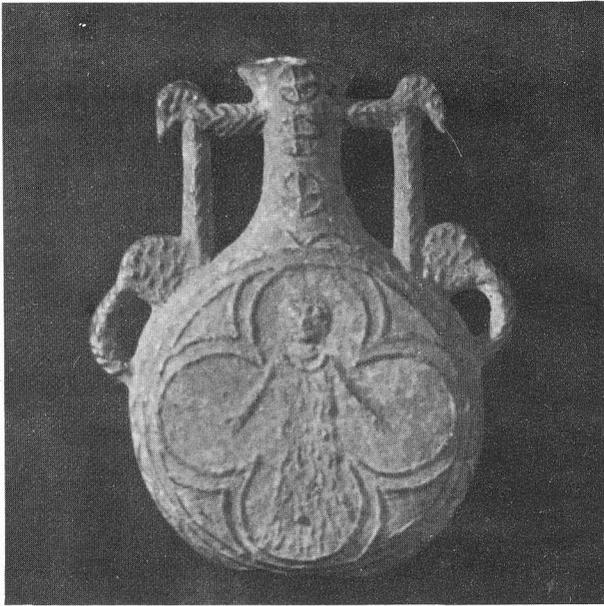


Fig. 2: a more ambitious forgery, which may have been copied from a genuine medieval ampulla.

(Courtesy Cuming Museum)

Not surprisingly, the appearance of so many artefacts of a type hitherto unknown aroused suspicion. Henry Syer Cuming of Southwark, secretary to the British Archaeological Association, and Thomas Bateman, the Peak District archaeologist, were dubious of the examples they saw, and corresponded on exposing the fraud. Their scepticism was shared by the keepers at the British Museum⁵. In March 1858 *The Gentleman's Magazine* compared the objects to children's toys and dismissed them as "almost worthless"⁶.

By the end of March Henry Syer Cuming had discovered how the objects were being made. "The game is now almost up, and it is high time it should be" he wrote⁷. On 28th April he lectured on the finds to the British Archaeological Association. He said that 12,000 had appeared. This was an exaggeration, but does suggest the speed with which they had circulated and the interest they had attracted. He pointed out the anachronisms in their designs, described the crude way in which they had been manufactured, and concluded by condemning

5. Southwark Local Studies Library, Ms. 4565; T.B.A.C., 15th Feb. & 2nd April 1858.

6. March 1858 234.

7. T.B.A.C. 29th March 1858.

8. June 1858 649-50.

9. 8th May 1858 595.

10. August 1858 98.

11. T.B.A.C. 4th Aug. 1858.

12. *Proc Soc Ant Lond 1 ser 4* (1858) 209; *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc 1* (1858) 312.

them as a "Gross attempt at deception" and regretting that there were no legal methods of punishing the forgers.

The lecture was not published in the *Journal of the Association*, but it was reported in *The Gentleman's Magazine*⁸ and *Athenaeum*⁹. Sales declined rapidly, and George Eastwood wrote to *The Gentleman's Magazine* assuring the readers of the authenticity of his stock¹⁰.

Meanwhile the eminent archaeologist Charles Roach Smith inspected the finds. By 1858 he had retired from public life, but his reputation was still very high. He was not sure what the objects were, but he felt that they belonged to the 16th century, partly on the logic that no forger would create anything so preposterous. If they were forgeries, he wrote, they would be "The most extraordinary insults that ever were offered to the judgments of collectors this century"¹¹. The Reverend Thomas Hugo, vicar of St. Botolph's Bishopsgate, also took an interest in the finds, believing them to be varieties of pilgrims' signs¹².

But the debate moved away from academic speculation when George Eastwood sued the publishers of *Athenaeum* for libel. He claimed that they had published an article which accused him of selling forgeries, for although he was not named, he



Fig. 3: another ambitious forgery – a small shrine.

Courtesy Cuming Museum

was the principal owner and vendor of the objects described.

The case, which was held at Guildford assizes on 4th August 1858, was unique in English legal history in that it arose from a meeting of an archaeological society. Archaeologists have appeared as expert witnesses in court, but this case sought to determine the implications of an archaeologist's expert opinion.

George Eastwood was first to testify. He said that he had paid William Edwards £296 for 1100 of the objects before taking his custom direct to Billy and Charley, paying them £50 for more finds. He had believed them to be children's toys, but he now thought they were pilgrims' signs.

William Edwards said that Billy and Charley had first brought the objects to him in June 1857, and supplied him with 1100, eight or ten at a time over the next year, for which he had paid them £200. He did not think he would easily let himself be taken in by his own suppliers. When asked what the finds could be he replied that he considered that a matter for the archaeological societies to decide.

Charley Eaton had recently married, and his wife would not let him attend the court. But Billy Smith did appear. Described by a reporter covering the trial as "a rough looking young man", he said that with Charley he had found 2000 of the objects, making £400 from their sale. They bribed dock workers to smuggle them out for free drinks, or searched the docks for them after working hours (both of which, he was forced to admit, were against port authority regulations).

Expert witnesses were then called. Charles Roach Smith attended the court unwillingly, upset that matters had come to such an end, and uncertain that legal action would yield satisfactory results¹³. Nonetheless, he reiterated his belief that the objects were genuine. The Rev. Thomas Hugo said that he too believed them to be late medieval. But when pressed to explain why, they both said that their reasons were purely intuitive. Frederick Fairholt, the archaeological illustrator, and two other antique dealers, also vouched for the authenticity of the finds.

Here the prosecution rested its case. The defence claimed that there was no case to answer, as there was no evidence that George Eastwood had even been alluded to in the article under discussion. The judge agreed, and directed the jury to return a verdict of not guilty, although the defence was asked to affirm its faith in George Eastwood's integrity.

13. T.B.A.C. 4th Aug. 1858; British Library, Additional Mss. 30297, item 270.

14. T.B.A.C. 22nd Dec. 1858.



Fig. 4: a medallion showing two typical Billy and Charley knights. (Courtesy Cuming Museum)

Henry Syer Cuming was delighted. "We gained a glorious victory" he wrote to Thomas Bateman; "How are the mightily fallen!"¹⁴ He had even obtained the admission of an accomplice of Billy and Charley that he had made "scores" of the objects, taking designs from the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* and Charles Roach Smith's *Collectanea Antiqua*. If this confession had been produced in court it might have ended the debate, and it is strange that he made no further use of it. It is also puzzling as to how Billy and Charley could have obtained copies of *Collectanea Antiqua*, which raises the possibility that they had collaborated with more highly placed figures.

The Times devoted a column and a half to the trial¹⁵. *Athenaeum* reprinted this with an introduction deploring George Eastwood's conduct¹⁶, and *The Literary Gazette* did the same, adding an introduction sympathetic to *Athenaeum*¹⁷.

Charles Roach Smith was more sympathetic to George Eastwood. "We proved the genuineness of the finds and we could do no more" he wrote to Thomas Hugo. He even offered to help pay his legal

15. 6th August 1858 12.

16. 7th August 1858 169-70.

17. 7th August 1858 184-5.

costs¹⁸. He dismissed Henry Syer Cuming's findings as "Foolsap tirade" and suggested that the matter be settled by a forum of experts and interested parties¹⁹.

Charles Roach Smith reported on the trial for *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Here he argued that the comparatively late manufacture of the objects in the 16th century could explain their anachronistic design. A forger, he explained, would copy objects known to him, but these bore no resemblance to any product of any period. It would also be impossible for a forger to produce such a wide variety of objects²⁰. He challenged Henry Syer Cuming to prove him wrong, but, inexplicably, Henry Syer Cuming withdrew from the debate.

At the end of 1858 Charles Reed, the head of a London printing company, exhibited some of the finds to the Society of Antiquaries. The ensuing debate was unfavourable to the objects and prompted Augustus Franks, the Director, to read a paper on forgery at the next meeting²¹. But nobody made

18. B.L., Ad. Mss. 30297, item 276.

19. *Ibid.* item 184; (see also 283 & 284).

20. October 1858 400-1.

any new investigations into the matter, and despite the remonstrations of Charles Roach Smith, the debate petered out.

However, the press coverage of the trial gave the objects such publicity that sales revived. It may not have been coincidental that George Eastwood had moved his business to the Haymarket by the start of 1859²². Henry Syer Cuming claimed that the Guildford trial was "A glorious victory"; as with so many supposed victories, it is doubtful that there were any winners.

The matter rested until the start of 1861, when Charles Roach Smith wrote an article on the finds for the fifth volume of his *Collectanea Antiqua*. He feared that it might be litigious to revive the debate, but he believed that the British Archaeological Association owed George Eastwood compensation. He argued that the objects dated from the reign of Queen Mary (from their style of lettering), and had been imported from the Continent to replace those articles of religious devotion that has been destroyed
21. *Proc Soc Ant Lond 1 ser 4* (1858) 241; 246-9.

22. *Gentleman's Magazine* Feb. 1859 173.



Fig. 5: cock metal forgery. In 1869 Henry Syer Cuming bought five medallions of this design and two others for sevenpence.

(Photo: Chris Mycock)



Fig. 6: forgery made by Billy Smith in 1870 with mould. It turned out to have been copied from a butter print.

(Courtesy Cuming Museum)

by the Reformation²³.

As this went to press the fraud was exposed. Charles Reed had been making his own investigations. He visited Shadwell Dock, but he could not find anybody who had uncovered any of the objects. When a sewer hunter (a scavenger who roamed the city sewers) offered to sell him some of the finds he won his confidence and persuaded him to divulge that they were forgeries. Through him he gained an introduction to Billy and Charley. Discovering that they felt that antique dealers had defaulted on payments he offered to buy from them. Having gained their trust he bribed the sewer hunter to break into their workshop and steal their moulds. That March he exhibited the moulds to the Society of Antiquaries. Augustus Franks praised his detective work²⁴.

The reactions of those who had accepted the objects as genuine are not known. Charles Roach Smith made no mention of the affair in his memoirs²⁵. George Eastwood, however, continued in business in the Haymarket until 1866²⁶.

23. C. R. Smith 'The leaden images found at Shadwell' *Collectanea Antiqua* 5 (1861) 252-60.
24. *Proc Soc Ant Lond* 2 ser 1 (1861) 361-5.

It may be wondered how people were duped by these objects, but scientific archaeology was in its infancy. Charles Roach Smith and Thomas Hugo were the first people to make a systematic study of medieval small finds. Beside this, the debate turned into a moral issue, making impartial discussion difficult.

Billy and Charley escaped prosecution (it may have been difficult to prove that they had broken the law). They continued their activities and swindled several members of the British Archaeological Association. This may have caused Henry Syer Cuming to break his silence, for he lectured on their forgeries to the Association in 1864. He observed that they had started to use "Cock metal", an alloy of two parts copper and one part lead²⁷. Billy and Charley's technique evidently improved with experience, as their cock metal forgeries show more delicate workmanship than the leaden ones (Fig. 5).

Increasing awareness of Billy and Charley's activities may have caused them to seek new
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25. *Retrospections* (1883-91).

26. *The Post Office London Directory* (1866) 422.

The book is printed in double column with a sub-theme dealt with in every two-page spread; no topic is too long, and the book is easy to read. Because of this structure, each subject holds the reader's interest and is then followed by a different but linked subject, so that the book can be "dipped into" or read at length with equal ease. The illustrations and overall design are excellent, with many colour plates and colour drawings, most with extended explanatory captions.

Part 6 is 'The Diary of Billingsgate' by John Schofield, which gives a fascinating glimpse of that site, and adds another dimension to the book.

There are a few errors – mostly typographical – which could have been eradicated by more vigorous proof-reading, but the major disappointment is the short bibliography. There are only 31 entries, and they are not directly linked to the text. The topics are handles in such a way that they generally leave one wanting to read more about them, and so in would have been invaluable to have had further reading references linked to each section.

Overall, though, the book is an excellent introduction to archaeology, and more than an introduction: it covers such a wide range in such a readable way that even those who think they know a lot about archaeology will find it worth reading. It is a must for any bookshelf or reading list.

LESLEY ADKINS & ROY A. ADKINS

Landscape with Lake Dwellings, the Crannogs of Scotland by Ian Morrison. *Edinburgh University Press*, 1985. 128pp + 16pp plates (8 in colour), 44 figs., bibliog., index. £10 (h'back), £6 (p'back).

ALTHOUGH SMALL, this is a delightful and fascinating book and gives crannogs the importance in Scottish archaeology that they deserve. Scotland has one of the largest concentrations of built-up island sites known, and it is to be hoped that the present world-wide interest in every aspect of wetland archaeology and ecology, and the use of diving as an archaeological tool, will enable an increasing amount of information to be gleaned from these very exciting sites.

Dr. Morrison reviews the history of crannog investigation, gives a fascinating account of their structure and form and of their necessity (was it defence or a reflection of the amount of standing water?). Their use extended over two and a half millennia up to the 17th century, and they have always been a source of folklore and legend. He gives a short account of the techniques of investigation and finishes with a plea for the crannog to be studied, not in isolation, but as an integral part of the archaeology of the landscape as a whole.

The plates are excellent, the drawings and diagrams clear and informative, and there is a useful bibliography for those whose appetite has been whetted. It is, in all, a book to be enjoyed.

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markets. In 1867 they toured the Windsor area selling their creations until a clergyman recognised the objects and alerted the police. Billy and Charley were taken to court, but there were insufficient grounds for prosecution and they fled back to London²⁸ (strangely Billy gave his name as George Henry Smith in court).

By 1869 Billy and Charley were finding it so difficult to sell their forgeries that Henry Syer Cuming could buy them for a penny²⁹. Charley Eaton died on January 4th 1870, aged 35. His death certificate gave the cause of his death as consumption and the place of his death as a tenement in Tower Hamlets. There is no evidence that he died a wealthy man.

Later that year Billy Smith (who had taken the name William Monk) tried to sell a badge bearing a picture of the Lamb of God (Fig. 6). He was unable to find a buyer and eventually confessed to having

copied the design from a butter mould³⁰. In 1871 he met with a similar lack of success when he tried to sell a lead copy of a 13th century jug³¹. After this he disappears from history and his fate is unknown.

There is no record of Billy and Charley's output, but evidence presented in court at Guildford in 1858 suggested that they manufactured between 1000 and 2000 objects in a year. This indicates that they produced four or five a day (which sounds reasonable considering their working conditions). Between then and 1861 they could have produced three or four times as many forgeries. Even if they reduced production after 1861 they could have manufactured between 5000 and 10,000 items during their careers.

Billy and Charley forgeries continue to circulate. One was mistaken for a Vampire Talisman and featured prominently in a work on the paranormal!³² Examples can be seen in several London museums, and there is a particularly interesting display in the Cuming Museum.

27. *J Brit Archaeol Ass* 18 (1862) 371-2; 20 (1864) 83; 355.

28. *The Bucks. Herald* 20th & 27th July 1867.

29. *J Brit Archaeol Ass* 25 (1869) 389-90.

30. *J Brit Archaeol Ass* 26 (1870) 70; 377-8.

31. *J Brit Archaeol Ass* 27 (1871) 255-6.

32. P. Underwood *The Vampire's Bedside Companion* (1975). The author admitted his error in his autobiography *No Common Task* (1983).