

SWIFTS AND JETTONS

Unfortunately for the writer the fly fishing season always manages to coincide with maximum activity required in the garden. This year was no exception, and the month of May found my small vegetable plot knee deep in weeds. The hot spell had just started but nevertheless it had to be done. I was half way through weeding the onion patch when I stopped to contemplate the incomparable flight of the swifts over the village. I believe that their history in Brigstock is changing and their numbers are getting less in the last few years. Swifts, like all good production units in human society, find it economic to base their activities close to the source of raw materials i.e., in their case, flies. If, as happened in the centre of the village, the flies have diminished in quantity, then the number of birds nesting will also diminish. Looking for the reason for the fly shortage leads us to the closure of Mr T. Ellis's cowsheds in 1978. I am not suggesting that the swifts will disappear but that numbers I estimate at thirty now remain about static. Their breeding success, according to experts, is about one point three per pair, giving an end of season flock of about 50. This is bird history in the making. Unless, of course, as a very irreverent friend of mine suggested, the new inhabitants of the flats and buildings they are erecting generate more flies.

I was brought rudely back to the task in hand by a loud humming from my wife of the old music hall number 'I am a lonely little Petunia in the Onion Patch' and it was as I pulled the next weed it happened; for there, nestling underneath, half-buried, but its surface washed clean by rain, was a coin.

In years and years of gardening I have always imagined this happening but at last I had found something. In any case it was an admirable opportunity to pause and go indoors to study my find. After the first cursory wash off and inspection, I was disappointed, there was no date to be seen, and the letters on one side read HANNSKRAVWINCKELINNVR, and on the reverse, GOTESSECENMACHTREICH. The centre of one side had three crowns, interspaced with a type of fleur-de-lys, and the other, a cross over a circle. It seemed to me it was some button or advertising gimmick from, presumed, Germany. I returned to weeding.

Next morning I felt inclined to have another look at the object which was, incidentally, about the size of a penny. I obtained a bigger magnifying glass, rubbed and scraped it a bit. I discovered there were some other small marks which made the lettering now read HANS + KRAVWINCKEL + IN + NVR + and GOTES + SECEN + MACHT + REICH on the reverse. Hopes were now running higher but the lack of a date was, I felt, a body blow to it being of interest. Discussing the matter with my wife, we decided that it was worth taking it a little further, so, as we were going to Kettering the next day, we would take it to the museum there.

Having rung the curator to make sure there was someone there to see, we sallied forth. I must say that, as I rang the bell at the museum door and looked at the small object in my hand, I once again thought that it was all nonsense. You can imagine my surprise, therefore, when Mr Lyall, the curator, took one look at it and said 'That's a jetton'.

He took down a most impressive coin book and showed me, under the makers of jettons, the following:

Hans Krauwinckel 1586-1635 Nuremburg Germany.

I thanked him most profusely and, depending on the breadth of your general knowledge, you can guess what my next question was.

“What is a jetton?”

He then explained that in the sixteenth century people were having difficulty in doing arithmetic in the old Roman figures and, in order to simplify things, counters were struck which enabled people to physically do their sums. Hans Krauwinckel was one such manufacturer of jettons and he sent them all over Europe. They were counters used for keeping accounts. The curator said that many of these came to this country and it was thought that at times they were given a value in the same way some counters are given a value in gambling, only they would be confined to, say, an estate with, perhaps, a village included. They were not recognised nationally as having any value. The translation on the reverse side of the jetton, as nearly possible, means ‘God’s blessings make rich’.

The find gave me a great deal of pleasure. IT taught me something, but how I wish it could tell me its three hundred year history ending in my onion patch.

Donald C. Skey

June 1982

Bygone Brigstock Issue 4