

# Could conqueror's cruel revenge have cast Ipswich in Norwich's shadow?

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The Domesday Book records that much of Ipswich was destroyed after William the Conqueror's invasion. Buy why? Picture: Archant.

What coin expert John Sadler doesn't know about medieval silver pennies struck in his home town probably isn't worth knowing. He tells Sheena Grant about his latest book, chronicling 50 years of painstaking research, and puts forward a shocking theory about the Norman invasion.

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*Medieval coin expert John Sadler and The Ipswich Mint, Volume III, his newly-published complete study of all coins of Ipswich, that also advances some fascinating theories about the history of his home town.*

Coin expert John Sadler's latest book is a weighty volume. And that's as it should be, considering what it represents.

Volume III of The Ipswich Mint is a 50-year study of medieval coins struck in the town between about 973 and 1207. It is John's life's work, begun when he was in his early 20s and developing a life-long fascination with the history of his home town, particularly its coins.

He is now aged 75 but his passion for his subject is undimmed and his knowledge probably unrivalled.

John, ancient coin expert at Martlesham auction house Lockdales, has traced the provenances of 1800 known coins and catalogued them in his privately-published book, the third - and last - in a series which represents a complete study of the coins of Ipswich. He says around 2000 coins struck in the town during the medieval period survive - but more undoubtedly remain in the ground, waiting to perhaps be discovered one day.

The Ipswich mint, which closed in 1207, was one of several in the area, with others at Norwich, Bury St Edmunds, Eye, Sudbury, Thetford and Dunwich. But thanks to John's efforts, more is known about its coins than many of the those struck elsewhere.

"No-one knows for sure where the Ipswich mint was but the only place in the town metal dross has been found is St Stephen's Lane and I believe the mint was probably in that area," he says. "The coins were all silver pennies, some of which were then cut up to make half pennies and quartered for fourthlings, or farthings."

English coins of that period were more valuable than others across Europe, which were often debased with cheaper metals. The English king, Eadgar, reformed the coinage in southern England during the 970s, ensuring that no town or village was further than a day's walking distance from a royal mint and that all coins were pure silver.

"When he reformed the coinage he made sure the standard was kept high. If anyone put base metal in a coin their hand would be cut off and hung up above the smithy door as a warning to others," says John. "But the purity and value of these coins also made us a target for Viking invaders."

"Ipswich coins were traded all over Europe and have been found in Stockholm and Copenhagen, because the Vikings took vast amounts of them. They also went down rivers into Russia and some are in Russian museums."

John's interest in the town's medieval coins began when he learned about the ancient mint at the age of just 17. "By the time I was 22 I had decided to list every Ipswich penny I could find," he says. "I'm now 75. It's taken me 50 years to get all this information together. I have traced 1800 of around 2000 surviving coins. "You've got to be fanatical about it in order to do what I've done, spending my own money and spare time tracing all these coins to list them in this way."

The silver pennies, each marked with the maker's name, can sell for thousands of pounds and are collected by enthusiasts the world over and it is these people John's book, of which just 250 copies have been printed, is primarily aimed at.

"It's also for people who like history," says John, who worked as an artist for much of his life and is also life president of Ipswich Numismatic Society. "There is also a lot in there too about the town's history."

He has theories about other aspects of Ipswich's past, for instance, such as why no trace of its castle has ever been found (could it be that it was built on a man-made mound that would contain no archaeology, rather than a natural one?) and why Ipswich and Norwich have had such divergent fortunes.

"In the Domesday Book it was recorded that two thirds of the people of Ipswich and of the town itself had disappeared - burnt down," he says. "My theory is that it was William the Conqueror's revenge after one of his housecarls (or soldiers) who was riding on ahead to clear the way for William's arrival, was killed in the town. As a result, the power in this part of the country went to Norwich Castle."

:: Volume III The Ipswich Mint c973-1207 The End of Edward the Confessor to its Closure Under John 1066-1207 and Other Ipswich Paranumismatics costs £65 and is available from Lockdales, 52 Barrack Square, Martlesham Heath, Ipswich, IP5 3RF. For more information, phone Chris Elmy at Lockdales on 01473 627110.