

## Manuscript of the Month January 2012

### Gold touch-piece from reign of Queen Anne, 1702-14



The origins of the touch-piece date back nearly a thousand years to the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-66). Edward was widely believed to possess the gift of healing, with numerous seemingly miraculous recoveries being attributed to him. For the next 700 years, English monarchs continued the custom established by Edward, holding regular healing services and distributing coins similar to the one shown here.

At first the monarchs' healing powers were regarded as a general cure-all. But over time they came to be associated with one disease in particular: scrofula. Scrofula, otherwise known as the 'King's Evil', was a form of tuberculosis that attacked the lymph nodes, producing swellings and suppurating ulcers on the neck. Although few people died from scrofula, it caused considerable distress amongst sufferers, many of whom were young children.

As those being put forward for healing were habitually from the poorest classes of society, it became customary to give them alms. Originally this was just a penny, but from the mid-fifteenth century recipients were presented with a new style of Noble worth 6s 8d to 11s, depending on the price of gold. First minted in 1465, these new coins were hugely popular and soon acquired a nickname – Angels. The Angel's obverse portrayed the Archangel Michael, another noted healer, slaying the Devil (depicted as a dragon), while the reverse was illustrated with a ship, its mast in the form of a cross, and an inscription, *By thy Cross, save us Redeemer Christ*. So popular did the Angel become that inns and public houses all over the country, including The Angel, Islington, were named after it.

By Tudor times the healing ceremony had acquired much greater significance and even its own liturgy. After an opening prayer and readings from the Gospels of St Mark and St John, the sick would be brought forward one by one for the monarch to touch and bless. Most Tudor and Stuart monarchs were keen to encourage the custom, regarding it as an ideal way of reinforcing their theories on the divine right of kings. Contemporary literature also referred to the practice. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Malcolm described the healing powers of a king: *How he solicits heaven, Himself knows best, but strangely-visited people, All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eyes, The mere despair of surgery, he cures; Hanging a golden stamp about their necks, Put on with holy prayers...* The Angels too assumed a new significance. No longer merely alms, they became talismans or amulets, imbued with the power to cure. Many were pierced and threaded with white silk, allowing them to be worn next to the skin.

Although healing ceremonies were abolished during the Interregnum – Cromwell denounced the practice as papish superstition – Charles II was quick to re-introduce them after the Restoration in 1660. Diarist Samuel Pepys recorded that on 13 April 1661 he went: *To Whitehall to the Banquet House and there saw the King Heal, the first time that ever I saw him do it – which he did with great gravity; and it seemed to me to be an ugly office and a simple one*. New rules on eligibility had to be introduced, however, in a bid to outwit fraudsters. Anyone hoping to be touched first had to secure a reference from their local vicar or churchwarden. Then, once the date of a healing ceremony was published in the newspapers, they underwent an examination by the king's physicians before being issued with an admission ticket. John Evelyn's diary for 28 March 1684

noted that: *There was so great a concourse of people with their children to be touched for the evil, that six or seven were crushed to death by pressing at the surgeon's door for tickets.* In all, Charles II was estimated to have touched about 24,000 people during his twenty-five year reign.

While the ceremony was revived, however, the Angel was not. Instead, specially minted medals known as touch-pieces were introduced. Somewhat larger than Angels, touch-pieces still featured Michael slaying the dragon, but were engraved with a new inscription, *Soli Deo Gloria* (To God alone the Glory). Recipients were urged to wear their touch-pieces at all times, ostensibly to stop the disease returning, but in reality to try and prevent people selling them. There was a brisk trade in both Angels and touch-pieces over the centuries as recipients looked to cash in by selling them on to others desperate to share in their perceived benefits.

Healing ceremonies finally came to an end with Queen Anne's death in 1714. One of the last people to be touched, in 1712, was two year old Samuel Johnson, later an eminent author and lexicographer, who recalled being presented with his medal by a lady dressed in diamonds and a long black hood. Despite it having no discernable effect on his scrofula, Johnson wore his touch-piece throughout his life.

Today the association between money and good luck lingers on. Coin-speckled wishing wells and fountains can be found all over the world and few people would contemplate giving a purse as a present without adding a coin for luck. Gamblers have long regarded American 'Mercury' dimes, particularly those minted in a leap year, as lucky charms, while the Victorians routinely mixed sixpences into their Christmas puddings in a bid to summon up wealth and good fortune for the year ahead and exhorted brides to wear *something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, and a silver sixpence in her shoe.*