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The Penny's Dropped:

Renegotiating the contemporary coin deposit

Introduction

Ritual deposition is not an activity that many people in the Western world would consider themselves frequent – or even infrequent – participants of. However, many of us are. For many of us have peered into the coin-gorged depths of a wishing-well or fountain and felt the inclination to fish in our pockets or purses for some loose change and drop it into the water amidst the growing accumulation. The motivations behind such behaviour vary – to make a wish, for luck, pandering to a child – and whether or not there is any actual belief behind such actions will be dependent upon the individual participant (cf. Houlbrook 2014a). However, a (necessarily brief) consideration of various definitions of ‘ritual’ reveal that such an act can indeed be classed as ritual deposition.

Sociologist Robert Bocock defines ‘ritual’ as ‘*bodily action in relation to symbols*’ (1974: 36) (emphases in original); anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff as ‘an act or actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion’ (1997: 199); while Susanna Rostas identifies ‘corporeal performativity’ as a necessary aspect (1998: 92). Certain features of these definitions are clearly evident in the action outlined above: bodily action, symbolism (of the coin and the place of deposition), intentionality, repetition, performativity. The dropping of a coin into a wishing-well can therefore constitute ritual deposition; and the coins, consequently, ritual deposits – especially when adhering to archaeologist Ralph Merrifield’s definition.

In his seminal work on *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (1987), Merrifield defines the ritual deposit as an object ‘deliberately deposited for no obviously practical purpose, but

rather to the detriment of the depositor, who relinquishes something that is often at least serviceable and perhaps valuable for no apparent reason' (1987: 22). The classification of a coin – *something that is often at least serviceable and perhaps valuable* – which is consciously dropped into a fountain – *deliberately deposited for no obviously practical purpose* – as a ritual deposit is therefore relatively untenuous. Taking this viewpoint, this paper aims to consider how such coins, as contemporary ritual deposits, are perceived and treated.

This is not the first piece of research to make such a consideration. In 1997, Christine Finn examined how Chaco Canyon, a prehistoric complex in the Southwest US, had become a focus for New Age ceremony and deposition. Considering the contemporary objects deposited there, which ranged from crystals and shells to wooden imitations of native American ritual objects, Finn questioned whether these deposits should be considered ‘‘junk’ or archaeological objects of meaning and value’ (1997: 169). LoPiccolo, curator of the site, viewed them as the latter, claiming that these modern-day deposits ‘were of value as signifiers of continued use of the Chaco Canyon site’ (Finn 1997: 169). Believing it to be his responsibility to collect these objects for the future archaeological record, rather than simply disposing of them LoPiccolo catalogued them, entering their details into a database.

Finn clearly approves of LoPiccolo’s actions, and proposes that others should follow his lead. ‘What should be classified as ‘junk’’, she writes, ‘and how we deal with it at a time of broader acceptance of ‘other’ practices are issues that archaeologists and those involved in heritage management should, I suggest, be considering’ (1997: 178). Nearly ten years later, Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis, examining Neo-Pagan uses of prehistoric sites in Britain, also advocate greater academic attention given to contemporary ritual deposits: ‘Whatever form this material culture takes, it is clearly worthy of serious study, not only for issues of site conservation, but also in terms of the construction and performance of identity’ (2006a: 103)

However, despite the recognition that more attention needs to be given to contemporary ritual deposits, they still do not appear to have established themselves as a significant feature on the archaeological agenda. Indeed, in many cases whereby modern-day objects are deposited at sites of historical or religious importance, these objects are viewed as intrusive or damaging, and are subsequently removed and disposed of.

This paper does not aim to locate itself within the debates of site custodianship and accessibility, nor does it propose to address the broader dilemmas of a site's ritual continuity or resurgence. Such issues are far too complex and convoluted for the scope of this paper. Instead, its aim is more specific; to examine how contemporary ritual deposits are perceived and treated by site custodians nearly two decades after Finn's advocacy. Adopting a necessarily narrow focus, this paper will consider the treatment of the coin as a ritual deposit at both historical and contemporary sites in the British Isles, and will conclude with a case-study of an archaeological excavation, the 2013 Ardmaddy Wishing-Tree Project, which recovered a large amount of contemporary coin deposits.

The history of the coin as ritual deposit

St. Mary's Well at Culloden was visited on the first Sunday of May; about a dozen years ago or so it was calculated that about two thousand persons made the pilgrimage. Its waters were held to have the power of granting under certain conditions the wish of the devotee...A visitor some years ago wrote regarding the ritual:

"...The procedure to be gone through is this: A draught of the water is taken, the drinker at the same time registering a wish or desire for success in some form or another throughout the coming year. To facilitate the wish a coin of small value is

usually dropped into the water...How small a price to pay for so great a boon...”

(Henderson 1911: 322-323)

The coin is one of history’s most popular ritual deposits. They have been a highly common votive object in Britain since the Roman period, with caches containing hundreds – some even thousands – of coins discovered at numerous sites throughout Roman Britain.¹ Some of the most notable examples include the caches at Lydney, Gloucestershire; Hallaton, southeast Leicestershire; and the sacred spring at Bath.

As an offering at Christian sites, the coin is equalled in popularity only by the candle (Merrifield 1987: 90), and it was an object regularly deposited in springs and lakes, as offerings to deities (Dowden 2000: 51) or as propitiatory ‘sacrifices’ to malignant water spirits (Tuleja 1991: 409). By the post-medieval period, however, coins were most commonly deposited into holy wells as offering or ‘payments’ to the presiding saint.² As George Henderson notes above, pilgrims would drop a coin of small value into a holy well in order to facilitate a wish (1911: 323).

It was in 1911 – and writing of the late 1890s – when Henderson recorded this custom in relation to St. Mary’s Well in the Highlands of Scotland. However, the description of dropping a coin into a well in exchange for a wish or good luck is not dissimilar to scenes we witness today. The British Isles are teeming with wishing-wells and fountains; collection boxes and coin-trees (Houlbrook 2014a), all of which evince the coin’s prevalence as a ritual deposit in contemporary Britain.

In the last year alone, the author has come across a plethora of modern-day coin-deposit accumulations, from the 200+ coin-trees catalogued as part of her doctoral thesis (Houlbrook

¹ Cf. Lewis 1966: 47; Woodward 1992: 66; Dowden 2000: 176; Priest et al. 2003; Williams 2003; Score 2006, 2011; Leins 2007, 2011

² Cf. Brand 1777: 85-86; Hardwick 1872: 277; Walker 1883: 158; Hartland 1893: 463; Rhys and Morris 1893: 58-59; Hull 1928: 111-112; Jones 1954: 92; Lucas 1963: 40; Bord and Bord 1985: 90-91

2014b) (Fig. 1), to the numerous bodies of water, incidentally encountered, containing deposited coins (Fig. 2). Examples include fountains at Lyme Park, Cheshire; Tatton Park, Cheshire; the Trafford Centre, Manchester; St. Anne's Square, Manchester; Queen's Park, Lancashire; the Mall at Cribbs Causeway, Bristol; and the Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff. As outlined above, these coins, dropped into fountains or hammered into coin-trees, constitute ritual deposits by definition. Despite this, however, contemporarily deposited coins are rarely given the same status as historically deposited objects, and tend to be classified under the pejorative category of 'ritual litter'.

The coin as 'ritual litter'

Robert Wallis and Jenny Blain employ the terms 'ritual litter' (2003: 310) and 'sacred litter' (2006a: 100) to encompass objects deposited by Neo-Pagans at historical sites and structures, objects which include 'flowers and other offerings, candlewax and tea-light holders...the insertion of crystals, coins and other materials into cracks' (Wallis and Blain 2003: 310). Phillip Lucas, in his work on contemporary 'nature spirituality' at megalithic sites in Western Europe, similarly lists coins amidst the offerings he terms 'ritual litter that can become piles of trash over time' (2007: 49-50).

Kathryn Rountree, however, notes the derogatory connotations of the term 'ritual litter', opining that those who tend to apply it to contemporary deposits are 'those inclined to disapprove of their deposition' (2006: 100). It is an unambiguously belittling term, 'litter' being defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'rubbish' and 'a disorderly accumulation of things lying about' (2014). As Rountree also points out, a candle or a written prayer may be deposited in a church without being designated 'ritual litter'; a contrast she attributes to the sanctioned status of churches as 'sacred places' (2006: 100) and to the sanctioned status

of officially allocated receptacles for such deposits, such as prayer boxes, collection boxes, and votive candle stands. It is not, therefore, only the contemporaneity of the modern-day coin as deposit which appears to belittle it, but also the unsanctioned nature of the deposit.

Removing deposits

It is not, however, only how contemporary coin-deposits are *termed* which evinces the dismissive attitude expressed towards them, but also how they are *treated*. As Wallis and Blain note: ‘So-called “ritual litter” is an increasing problem at many sacred sites’ (2003: 309). This ‘problem’ stems from the perceived negative effects of deposits on the physical and aesthetic nature of the sites. Certain offerings, such as flowers and liquid libations, are viewed as less ‘intrusive’ because they are biodegradable or transient. Diuturnal material deposits, however, such as coins, are more controversial because they can often prove detrimental to the physical preservation of the site (Blain and Wallis 2006a: 103).

In many cases, therefore, coin deposits are often removed from sites with religious or historical significance, often due to the physical damage they can cause. At Wayland’s Smithy, Oxfordshire, for example, this Neolithic chambered long barrow has been subject to coin deposition for the last fifty years at least (Grinsell 1979: 68). Coins are lodged into the rocks of this monument by modern visitors, a custom which is believed to stem from a much earlier tradition, recounted in a letter by the wife of a local clergyman in 1738 and reproduced by Ellis Davidson:

At this place lived formerly an invisible Smith, and if a traveller’s Horse had lost a Shoe upon the road, he had no more to do than to bring the Horse to this place with a piece of money, and leaving both there for some little time, he might come again and find the money gone, but the Horse new shod (1958: 147)

Modern-day visitors may similarly deposit coins at Wayland's Smithy only to 'come again and find the money gone'; however, they were not taken by an invisible Smith, but by the *National Trust* rangers who are tasked with the removal of deposits. Andy Foley, the on-site ranger, regularly checks and removes coins, and informs me that *English Heritage* have recently altered the site's interpretation panel, deliberately excluding information about the traditional custom of coin deposition (Foley 2013).

Discouraging deposition

In other cases, coins are not only removed from a site but measures are implemented actively discouraging their deposition. For example, at the site of St. Colmcille's birthplace in Gartan, Co. Donegal, accompanying a modern cross is a flagstone, originally part of a prehistoric burial mound. St. Colmcille is believed to have been born on this particular flagstone in the 6th century, which is said to cure loneliness (Ó Muirghease 1963: 153). Since the early 2000s, pilgrims who visited the site would deposit a coin in the cup-marks of the flagstone. However, the coins were perceived as negative additions to the site; as Martin Egan of the Colmcille Heritage Trust, based in nearby Gartan, explained: 'when it rained they discoloured the stone as well as making it unsightly. The Gartan Development Association and the Colmcille Heritage Trust decided to discourage this practice and have cleaned up the stone' (Egan 2014). The coins were therefore removed and a sign was erected, requesting: 'PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE COINS ON STONE AS IT IS DAMAGING THE STONE' (Fig. 3)

A similar attempt to discourage coin deposition is ongoing on the island of Gougane Barra, Co. Cork. Gougane Barra, a site dedicated to St. Finbarr, is a popular pilgrimage destination, and has been for at least the past 200 years. In the 18th and 19th centuries the island's remote

location, in Gougane Lake, made it a prominent site for rituals which combined Christianity with pagan practices (McCarthy 2006: 21). On 23rd June, several hundred pilgrims flocked annually to the island for the Eve of St. John's feast, to bathe in the island's holy well in the hope of cures to certain ailments. This pilgrimage is described by Thomas Crofton Croker, who partook in the celebrations there in 1813 (1824: 277ff).

Croker describes the popular custom of attaching votive rags and bandages to a wooden pole standing in the centre of the Pilgrim's Terrace, which was apparently all that remained of a large cross. These rags and bandages were 'intended as acknowledgments of their cure' (1824: 276). These 'pagan rituals' were banned in 1818 by the Catholic Bishop of Cork, John Murphy (McCarthy 2006: 21). However, this does not appear to have deterred pilgrims from attaching their offerings to the wooden post in the Pilgrim's Terrace, and then to the replacement wooden cross which was commissioned by Fr. Patrick Hurley, the Parish Priest, in the early 1900s (McCarthy 2011a). By this time, the rags and bandages seem to have been replaced by coins, which were embedded into the cross (McCarthy 2011b).

It was not, however, only the cross which was subject to this custom. The trees of Gougane Barra were, like the original wooden pole from the 19th century, also affixed with rags, and Kieran McCarthy – a local resident and historian – remembers this custom of rag-trees surviving until the 1990s. From the early 20th century, however, the trees also began to be embedded with coins, the custom having spread from the wooden cross (McCarthy 2011b).

Local resident and custodian of Gougane Barra, Finbarr Lucey, describes a 'magnificent ash tree' in the main cells enclosure, which was embedded with so many coins that it eventually died. It stood beside the cross already described as being similarly encrusted with coins, but it fell in a storm in 1973 (Lucey 2011). Both the remains of the coin-tree and the cross have

since been removed, and in the early 2000s, the present cross was erected in the Pilgrim's Terrace, but no coins appear to have been inserted into it.

The custom of coin insertion has been discouraged by the custodians of the island who, considering the fate of the original coin-tree, have been attempting to protect other trees from similar copper poisoning (Lucey 2012). McCarthy informs me that this decision to discourage the custom was made by the local church committee, who 'wished to clean up the site's appearance' (McCarthy 2011b); they subsequently attached a sign to the current primary coin-tree, stating: 'I AM A TREE; PLEASE DO NOT PUT COINS INTO ME'.

The site managers are similarly hoping to discourage the deposition of coins into the holy well of St. Finbarr, situated at the causeway to the island. Above the holy well is a sign requesting: 'NO MONEY IN HOLY WELL PLEASE. BOX IN PILLAR FOR SAME' (Fig. 4). Visitors are thus referred to a donation box in a stone pillar a few feet away, and are encouraged to deposit their coins into that instead.

A similar strategy has been implemented at the Roman Baths and Pump Room in Bath, Somerset. According to Verity Anthony, Collections Assistant, visitors to the site have been depositing coins into the spring there since the 1970s. However, she informs me that deposition in the spring is discouraged: 'In order to preserve the site, we request that people deposit coins in a designated bath, the circular bath, as this is a manageable space which can be monitored and coins removed from it with relative ease' (Anthony 2013). She went on to say that they 'regularly remove coins from areas of the site where we don't actively encourage deposition, in order to dissuade people from following suit, but we do find on the whole that the use of a designated place to deposit coins works very well (and is easy to remove coins from).' (2013).

The Glastonbury Thorn

Another historical site within the British Isles has been subject to similar levels of contemporary deposition: the Glastonbury Thorn. This is a hawthorn (*Crataegus*) growing atop Wearyall Hill, Somerset, which is believed to be the offspring of the original Holy Thorn. This tree is said to have sprung from St. Joseph of Arimathea's staff, which he thrust into the ground on his visit to Britain in the 1st century AD. Together with its offspring, this tree purportedly blossomed annually at Christmas in commemoration of Christ's nativity (Walsham 2011: 492). It is, according to Milner, England's 'most celebrated sacred tree' (1992: 141).

There are currently several 'Holy Thorn' offshoots within the town. One, however, is most widely associated with the original because it is said to stand where St. Joseph thrust his staff into the ground. This tree (known hereafter as the Glastonbury Thorn) was planted in 1951 by members of Glastonbury Town Council but was vandalised in 2010, with unknown vandals cutting down its branches. New shoots began to grow and tourists continued to visit it, but its popularity is believed to put this fragile tree at risk; I first became aware of the site following an articles on *BBC News* (Jenkins 2012), which describes how visitors threaten the vandalised tree's recovery by inserting coins into its bark.

On my visit to the site, John Coles, former mayor of Glastonbury, accompanied me to Wearyall Hill where the current, vandalised Glastonbury Thorn stands, together with a young sapling, also said to be the offspring of the original Thorn. Both are protected within metal enclosures. Although there were no coins inserted into the Glastonbury Thorn on the day of my visit, there were numerous ribbons, some adorned with names or personal messages, affixed to the railings of the protective fence (Fig. 5). Several of these messages refer to the 'solstice', indicating that their depositors were at the site during the summer and winter

solstices (one at least in 2012, according to the message), which is a particularly popular time for Neo-Pagan pilgrimage to the site, according to John Coles.

John Coles explains that the ribbons, when densely clustered, prevent sunlight from reaching the trees, and so he visits Wearyall Hill at least once a month in order to remove them. He also comes equipped with a knife to dislodge any coins he finds inserted, asserting that the copper will kill the trees. There have been other deposits which he has felt inclined to remove: pieces of paper with what he terms ‘pagan or atheist obscenities’ written on, as well as a number of rather obscene items, such as condoms. He estimates that this custom of depositing objects at the Glastonbury Thorn began in the early 2000s.

It is unclear who has been depositing the coins – and why – for no participants were present on the day of my visit. However, John Coles views this as a pagan custom also and perceives it as a negative, destructive practice, hoping to prevent damage to the tree by removing coins whenever he sees them.

Following removal

This paper is not intended to criticise or question the removal of deposited coins, especially where material deposits threaten the physical preservation of a site. However, it does aim to question what happens to these deposits following their removal. Once the coins are taken from a site, what is done with them?

In most cases, they are put to philanthropic use. The coins removed from Wayland’s Smithy are donated to local charities (Foley 2013), whilst at Bath, they are donated to projects related to the conservation of the site, such as the Bath Archaeological Trust (Anthony 2013). Likewise at St. Colmcille’s flagstone, Gartan, any removed coins are put towards the

maintenance of the site (Egan 2014). This is very much in keeping with the uses of coins removed from contemporary sites; the wishing-wells and fountains encountered in parks, shopping centres, and tourist attractions.

In fact, wishing-wells and fountains are sometimes installed with the express purpose of encouraging coin deposits. In the 1961, Edward Block patented the ‘Wishing-Well Type Coin Collector’, which he describes as:

a device representing a “wishing-well,” the “wishing-well” bearing a religious, or other inscription thereon which creates interest in the aspect of the simulated well and the inscription thereon whereby the observer will have a distinct mental inclination toward the doing, obtaining, attaining of something, or an expression of a wish, often one of a kindly or courteous nature, and to obtain the same the observer will drop a coin, or the like, into the simulated well, the observer knowing the coin will be used for charity, or other almsgiving or public relief or unfortunate or needy persons, the observer leaving the well with a feeling of benevolence. (1961: 1)

This ‘Wishing-Well Type Coin Collector’ was intended to be installed in public places, and folklorist Alan Dundes, writing a year later, attests to the success of this type of structure: ‘Despite the supposed present-day scientific mindedness, the fact that some charity fund raisers have constructed wishing wells in order to collect contributions attests to the extraordinary appeal of the custom’ (1962: 28).

This practice of utilising wishing-wells or fountains to collect contributions is widespread today. The Trafford Centre, a shopping centre in Greater Manchester, for example, established the ‘intu Trafford Centre Fountain Fund’ in 1999, donating all money deposited by shoppers in the centre’s fountains to charities in the North West of England (Reid 2013). Likewise, The Mall at Cribbs Causeway, Bristol, established The Fountain Charity Fund in

March 2003. Using the coins deposited in The Mall's fountain – which they estimate can total around £10,000 a year – the Fountain Fund provides grants to local charitable organisations.

This process is described on The Mall's website:

Once a month, on a Sunday evening when The Mall has closed the Mall team set to work collecting the thousands of coins from the fountain. After draining the water from the fountain, they use heavy-duty wet vacuum cleaners to suck up the coins and transfer them into big black wheelie bins. The team then lay out the coins on large dust sheets to dry for up to a week before they are counted up into money bags ready for banking.

For the first five years of The Mall's life, local scout groups helped Mall staff empty the coins from the fountain, drying, bagging and then banking the proceeds to help pay for the new equipment they needed. It was hard work and they earned every penny!

Similarly at the *National Trust* estate of Lyme Park, Cheshire, coins have been deposited into the park's three fountains for over 30 years, and as Jeanette Connolly, Business Support Co-ordinator of the park explains: 'Any money received we treat as a donation and goes towards restoration of the House and Gardens' (Connolly 2013).

Renegotiating the coin deposit

When coins are removed from their places of deposition by site custodians, they are often used for philanthropic purposes: as donations to local charities or contributions towards the preservation of the site, and this paper is certainly not criticising such uses. However, it is notable that none of the organisations examined so far – from the *National Trust* at Wayland's Smithy to Bristol's Mall – catalogue the deposits before donating them. This does not reflect negatively on the organisations; they are not archaeologists or anthropologists, and

many have neither the time nor the resources to record the large volumes of coins they process.

This does, however, reflect negatively on us. Any researcher interested in material culture and ritual deposition should take responsibility for the cataloguing of any removed objects; not just for the benefit of future archaeologists and ethnographers, but in attaining a greater understanding of the social relations of the sites today. Understandably, some pragmatic decisions may need to be made regarding the use of resources in the recording of these deposits. Where not enough time is available for the cataloguing of all coins, quantities should still be recorded, and certain notable deposits could be given greater attention: those of high denomination; those which evince signs of percussion; and foreign currency.

All deposited material, whether old or new, contributes to the ritual narrative of a site. Andy Foley, *National Trust* ranger at Wayland's Smithy, recognises this: the collection of the deposited coins 'forms a large part of the backbone of interpretation over what Wayland's actually is and what is myth/legend' (Foley 2013). Contemporary deposits are integral to the contextualisation of a site, and it is our responsibility to ensure that whatever can be done to catalogue these deposits before they are donated or disposed of, *should* be done.

LoPiccolo, curator of the Chaco Canyon site (discussed above), ensured that the objects deposited at the site by modern-day visitors were not simply disposed of. Seeing it as his responsibility to collect them for the future archaeological record, LoPiccolo catalogued them, entering their details into a database and demonstrating that such endeavours are feasible (Finn 1997). Another example of a project which has involved the gathering and cataloguing of contemporary ritual deposits is the 2013 Ardmaddy Excavation.

The Ardmaddy Excavation

The Ardmaddy Wishing-Tree Project involved a small-scale archaeological excavation at the site of the Ardmaddy ‘wishing-tree’ in Argyll, Scotland (Fig. 6). This tree is a dead hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and is located half a mile south of Ardmaddy Castle, in a pass known as Bealach na Gaoithe: the ‘pass of the winds’. It is uprooted and lies prone within a wooden enclosure, 1.2m east of a rough track. The enclosure was erected during the 1990s, following the tree’s fall, and is designed to deter livestock rather than people; on the enclosure’s eastern side, there is a stile providing access.

Rodger et al.’s *Heritage Trees of Scotland* (2003) describes the wishing-tree as follows:

This lone, wind-blasted hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) growing in the wilds of Argyll is one of the few known ‘wishing trees’ in Scotland. It is encrusted with coins that have been pressed into the thin bark by generations of superstition travellers over the centuries, each coin representing a wish. Every available space on the main trunk bristles with money, even the smaller branches and exposed roots. This magical tree provides a living connection with the ancient folklore and customs of Scotland... (2003: 25)

Despite claiming that coins have been deposited at this site ‘by *generations* of superstition travellers *over the centuries*’ (2003: 25, emphases added), Rodger et al. reference no sources, providing no insight into how they came to the conclusion that the site is ‘centuries’ old. Mairi MacDonald’s 1983 hiker’s guide, *Walking in South Lorn*, makes a similarly vague reference to the coin-tree’s antiquity, stating that it is ‘of considerable age’ (1983: 9). Likewise, MacDonald offers no further information on how she has determined its maturity,

and, despite both claims that the Ardmaddy coin-tree is of significant age, MacDonald is the earliest identified source which refers to the site.

MacDonald's description of the coin-tree and the 'traditional' practice of coin-insertion suggests that this custom was well-established at the time she was writing in the 1980s. Another source proves that it was earlier: an Ordnance Survey map from the 1970s pinpoints the coin-tree's location and labels it 'Wishing Tree', while the coin-tree's custodian, Charles Struthers of Ardmaddy Estate, believes that the custom dates to the 1920/30s: 'When I was a boy here in the 50's [*sic.*] the tree was prolific and could well have been 20-30 years old then' (Struthers 2011).

Regardless of how old the wishing-tree is, it will likely not last much longer. Since its fall in the 1990s, it has become heavily decayed and fragmented, a process no doubt accelerated by the number of coins hammered into its bark. It is estimated that within ten years there will be little remaining of the tree. The coins, once embedded in its bark, will scatter; visitors to the site may take some and the rest will become buried over time. As little evidence for the wishing-tree lies beyond its material culture, it was agreed by Ardmaddy Estate and the Heritage Lottery Fund that a salvage operation was needed. However, the tree itself could not be conserved without removing it from its natural environment, which would prevent the continuation of the custom. It was recognised, therefore, that the practice should be conserved in a different way: by conducting an excavation of the site in order to uncover and catalogue as many coins as possible, subsequently using the material culture of the deposits to produce a ritual narrative of the site.

In September 2013 the author and a team of archaeologists from the University of Manchester conducted a small-scale excavation at the Ardmaddy wishing-tree. The methods employed were relatively simple: without interfering with the tree itself, 6 small test pits were

opened and examined in 10cm spits. Following 5 days of excavation, 703 small-finds were recovered; of these, 691 were coins. Each find was assigned a small-finds number in the field using a paper record which was later transferred to a digital EXCEL spreadsheet. All artefacts were stored appropriately according to their type and condition, and then transported to the University of Manchester, where they were cleaned, weighed, measured, and photographed to provide a visual record. The details of the artefacts were later added to the spreadsheet: their denominations, years of issue, and their conditions, which included noting whether they showed signs of damage through percussion and assigning them a corrosion level from 1-4.

The highest denomination group was the decimal 1 penny (36%), closely followed by the decimal 2p (35%); there are significantly fewer high denomination coins. Although the majority were British, there were 14 examples of foreign currency, suggesting that foreign tourists have been participating in the custom also. 33% of the coins exhibited signs of damage through percussion – crooked forms or abraded edges – suggesting that at least one third of them had been hammered into the tree.

The earliest datable coin was a 1 penny issued in 1914. 16 more coins were datable as pre-decimal (pre-1971), ranging from 1921 to 1970, whilst a further 7 were identified as pre-decimal based on their size and design. The vast majority of the coins, however, were decimal; the decade which produced the highest quantity of deposited coins was the 1990s. A large volume was also issued in the 2000s, demonstrating that the practice did not cease with the fall of the tree, whilst the presence of coins from the 2010s reveals that the custom is still active today.

This data was then collated and presented in an appendix for the author's doctoral thesis (Houlbrook 2014b), and excavation reports were produced and distributed to Archaeology Scotland and the West of Scotland Archaeology Service. All coins were then returned to

Ardmaddy Estate where they are currently being stored in Ardmaddy Castle, and questions still surround their next destination: some are earmarked for local museums, whilst the majority may be donated to charity, displayed at the castle, or returned to their original place of deposition: the site of the wishing-tree. Whilst the next stage in the biographies of these coins is certainly significant, the purpose of this case-study was to demonstrate the value of examining and recording contemporary coin deposits.

The catalogue produced of the coin deposits from the Ardmaddy wishing-tree, available through Archaeology Scotland and the West of Scotland Archaeology Service, will not only be valuable to any future researcher attempting to contextualise the site, but also for the present researcher, providing opportunity for a much deeper insight into the ritual narrative of this site. There are a variety of questions that this data can address: What coins did the depositors choose to deposit? Were there significant denomination ratios and, if so, what do they suggest? How did the depositors choose to deposit their coins? In what time-frame has deposition been occurring?

Such data also has the capacity to address broader questions. For example, in what ways do contemporary deposits compare to deposits from earlier periods, and what might be inferred about the consistency and/or malleability of the practice over time? What can such contemporary data reveal about ritual practices and – perhaps more importantly – about archaeological assumptions concerning ritual practices, ie. what can it tell us about the relationship (or lack of) between physical adherence to a ritual and notions of belief (cf. Houlbrook 2014b)?

Detailed answers to these questions are not the purpose of this paper. Its purpose has been to demonstrate how little is currently being done with the wealth of information contemporary deposits can proffer; to illustrate how much can be gleaned about a site's ritual narrative by

considering them; and to spark a renegotiation of how modern-day coin deposits are perceived and treated. It is hoped that this paper has gone even a little way in addressing the comments of Finn (1997) and Blain and Wallis (2006), and in demonstrating that contemporary deposits can – and in the author’s opinion, should – be viewed as ‘archaeological objects of meaning and value’ (1997: 169).

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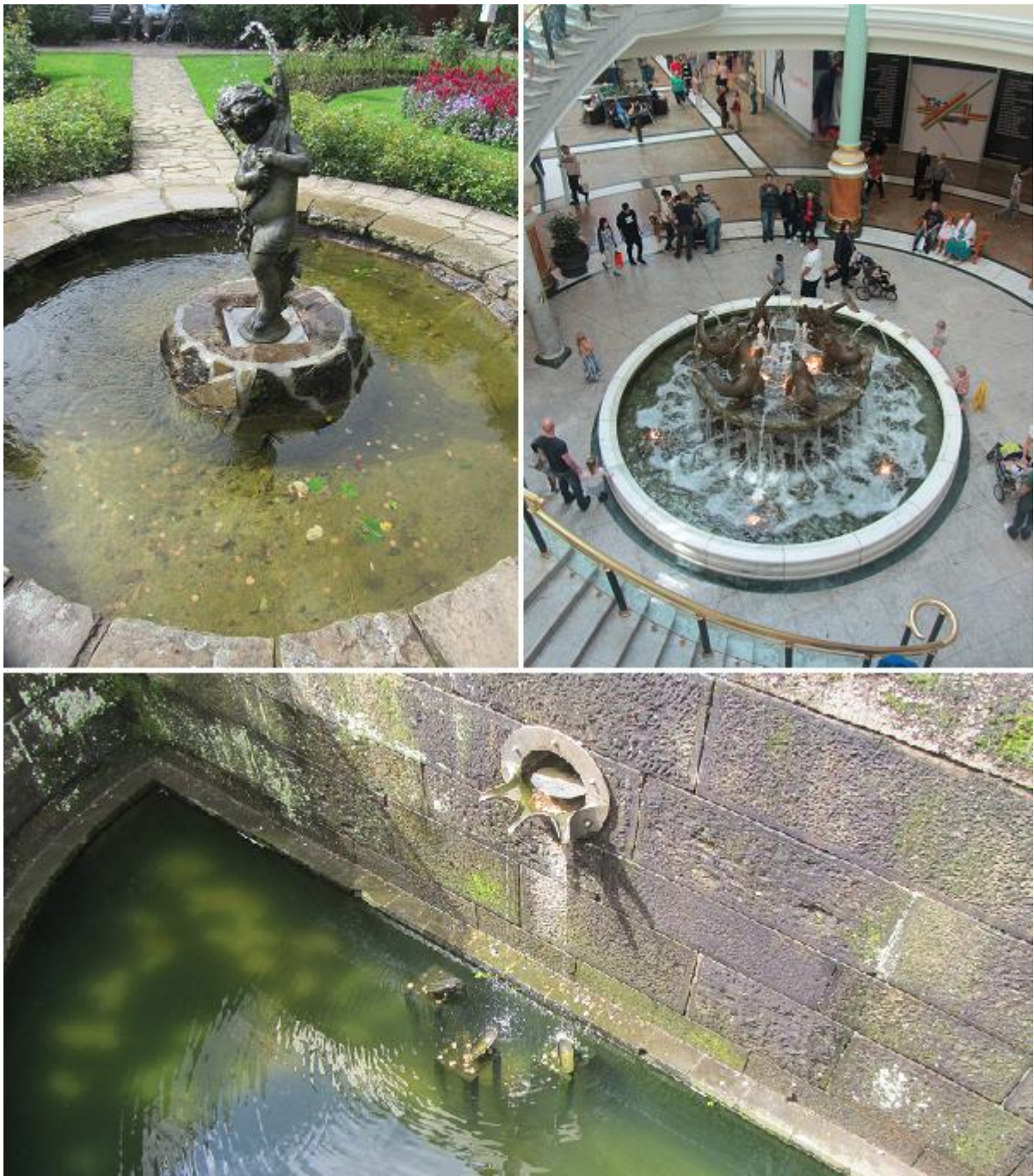
Figures

Figure 1



Examples of contemporary British coin-trees. Top left: Ingleton, Yorkshire. Top right: St. Nectan's Glen, Cornwall. Bottom: Bolton Abbey, Yorkshire (Photograph by author)

Figure 2



Examples of contemporary British wishing-wells. Top left: Lyme Park, Cheshire. Top right: Trafford Centre, Greater Manchester. Bottom: Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff (Photograph by author)

Figure 3



Sign discouraging the deposition of coins at St. Colmcille's birthplace, Gartan, Co. Donegal (Photograph by author)

Figure 4



Sign discouraging the deposition of coins at St. Finbarr's holy well, Gougane Barra, Co. Cork (Photograph by author)

Figure 5



The Glastonbury Thorn surrounded by contemporary deposits (Photograph by author)

Figure 6



The Ardmaddy Wishing-Tree Excavation. Top left: the Ardmaddy wishing-tree. Bottom left: Coins excavated in test pit. Right: Excavated coins placed in finds-bags and surveyed in situ (Photograph by author)

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