

## Chaloner the Coiner

Whenever they compile one of those lists of Great Britons, Sir Isaac Newton always appears near the top. The man from Lincolnshire, who revolutionised the laws of physics and optics, remains a household name today, almost 400 years after he published his *Principia Mathematica*.

What is generally not known, or not considered as important, are Newton's 25 years as warden, and then master, of the Royal Mint. It was during this time that Newton encountered a man from Birmingham, who proved to be just as fierce an adversary as any contemporary mathematician or physicist.

It is believed that, around 1693, Isaac Newton suffered some kind of nervous breakdown. It was serious enough to bring his scientific studies to a shuddering halt, and to lead to him resigning his fellowship at Cambridge University.

Running the Royal Mint, as it turned out, was just the change Newton needed, and, as it happened, the Mint was in dire need of someone with Newton's energy and commitment, for it faced serious challenges. First there were the wars of the late 17th and early 18th Century which put severe pressure on the British economy. Then there was the threat to the monetary system itself, caused by a whole army of clippers and coiners.

Whether they simply counterfeited the coins and banknotes, or reduced their value by clipping round the edge and selling the excess silver, the coiners were undermining the value and integrity of the British currency. Isaac Newton took it upon himself to chase the coiners, and he personally prosecuted 28 of them.

Coining had a long history in England, and no more so than in Birmingham, already becoming the capital of the country's metal trades, and it is to there that we must now turn our attention and meet one William Chaloner.

From an anonymous biography published soon after his execution - *Guzman Redivivus* - we know that Chaloner was born somewhere in Warwickshire in the 1660s, the son of a weaver. He was a troublesome child, and Chaloner's father off-loaded his son onto a nailer in Birmingham to learn a trade.

We may guess that young William learnt more than one profession in Birmingham, a poorly paid legal one and an illegal one - coining - that promised considerably better returns. Sometime around 1680 Chaloner abandoned his apprenticeship and made for London to put those skills into practice.

Initially Chaloner appears to have made a living by selling sex aids (I kid you not) and fake watches, and then as a quack doctor and japanner. But he had greater ambitions than this, and by 1680 he was in the counterfeiting business, gilding silver coins to make them look like guineas.

This was just for starters. By the end of that decade Chaloner had experimented with ways of counterfeiting every form of available credit. He struck counterfeit guineas crowns and half-crowns, and developed a liquid that removed the denominations on Exchequer bills and then added his own amounts over the top. Chaloner even set up presses to print banknotes and lottery tickets.

That Chaloner prospered so long was due to his peculiar and cunning way of working the system, and in this he had much in common with another Midlands crook of the time, Jonathan Wild, “Thief-taker General” of Wolverhampton. In essence, like Wild, Chaloner had two sides to his operation, just like his coins.

On the one part Chaloner was pursuing his nefarious activities; on the other he was offering to cooperate with the Royal Mint in order to counter the counterfeiters. Numerous proposals came from his pen, addressed to Newton, suggesting ways to make the copying of notes and coins impossible.

And if ever Chaloner was arrested, he quickly turned King’s Evidence and shopped his assistants and fellow coiners. The anonymous biographer says that Chaloner brought more pupils to the gallows than all of his predecessors.

If that was not enough, William Chaloner was also acting as a government informant on London’s Jacobite intriguers, and promising ( or threatening) to pass to Newton the names of men working at the Mint who were making their own coin or passing blanks and equipment out to the criminal fraternity. The Royal Mint might have been located in the Tower of London, but its walls were no more secure than a paper-bag.

Chaloner’s modus vivendi came with risks. He inevitably made a lot of enemies, who might (given the opportunity) bite back, and the gratitude he received from the government was always grudging and suspicious. And in Newton he had met a very dogged pursuer indeed.

By the middle of 1697 Isaac Newton had assembled sufficient evidence and enough witnesses to move decisively against his greatest foe. Chaloner was arrested and thrown into Newgate prison on a charge of high treason. Such was the offence for counterfeiting coin of the realm.

Once inside, Chaloner sang like a bird, accusing all and sundry of bribery and corruption, including the master of the Mint himself. He continued to cry, all the way to the gallows. As Chaloner’s biographer wrote: “He struggled and flounced about for life, like a whale struck with a harping-iron.”

There was one last letter to Newton, begging for mercy, and a final speech from the scaffold which was, apparently, too libellous for publication. And so, on March 22 1699 the Warwickshire coiner met his fate on the Tyburn Tree.

When the trap-door was released, it was gravity that took him down.