Issue Fifteen

Leaden Tokens Telegraph

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A free newsletter to all who share our interest in these fascinating and often enigmatic pieces. Please send the editor at least one 300 dpi JPEG *scan, or a sharply focused photo print, of any interesting leaden token or tally in your collection. Send images as email attachments to LTTeditor@aol.com. See page 4 for information on back issues, etc.*

Seals {no, not the type 19 marine variety….}

The title of LTT suggests that seals should have no place within it, in that they are not tokens, and that is strictly true; however, by virtue of the boundary between the two being confused, in that they cannot always be distinguished, they earn their place. How can one say whether a piece is a seal, if one has not seen a few?

I do not propose here to say overmuch about their history, other than to illustrate some of the various types which may be found and to mention to what dates they relate, for purposes of comparison; for anyone who wishes to take it further, Geoff Egan's "Lead Cloth Seals and Related Items in the British Museum", still available as British Museum Occasional Paper 93, is recommended reading.

Seals were primarily a quality control mechanism associated with the cloth trade; they were fixed to the ends of bales and usually have stamped such details as the name or mark of the owner or the length, weight and weave of the cloth. They first appeared on the European mainland c.1275 and arrived in this county about half a century later; initially in wax, but by the late 15th cent usually if not always in lead. With various changes in the associated alnage system they survived in use until 1724, and are often but not always very dark in colour. The Baltic cloth trade continued to use seals until at least the end of the 18th century and a couple of these pieces, always very light in colour, were shown on the front page of LTT_13 {Apr.2006}.

The main type of lead seal appears to have consisted of a string of two or four connected disks which when used were folded over at the midpoint, the first disk usually having a rivet which, when driven through the last by an engraved compression device, would fasten the seal even more tightly but at a cost to the last disk {only} of spoiling the design thus stamped. The sets of paired components usually but not always showed some sign of the joining strip, and if this was removed the end-product might in some cases be mistakable for a token. There are a several variations on the theme, resulting in various shapes, central holes {where the rivet has been knocked out} or the apparent absence of the connecting strip. The undamaged faces can be artistically very attractive, and a selection of examples are illustrated below.

Full surnames or town names sometimes appear, Fig.1 being the piece of an early-mid 17th cent Taunton clothier. Likewise Fig.10, backed up further by its owner's merchant mark; often, the latter alone suffices {Figs 3,11}, and sometimes the merchant's name can be pieced together from their components. Where the mark is accompanied by an object, that may be a further clue; not impossibly Fig.4 was the issue of somebody surnamed Swan. Fig.6 adopts the familiar type 2 "initials only" approach.

Some pieces appear to have been issued on communal rather than individual authority, depicting heraldic symbols {Figs 8,9,11,13,14}; the issues here are similar to those recently discussed for type 16 {LTT_13, Apr.2006}, and depending on the meaning of the device concerned may relate to regal, municipal, guild, company or estate authority. Fig.9, for example, is a town piece of Colchester; whereas another piece of Salisbury {Fig.13} specifically states Wilts on one side and Sarum on the other.

With either two or four stampings per seal, there was room to devote one or two to the issuing authority and the other one or two to the statistics of the material; thus do we get purely numeric sides such as Figs 2,7 which indicate such things as the length in ells, weight in pounds, or the number of threads per inch. Some closenesses of weave may have been codified; if that sounds ridiculous, ask yourself how many people are going to understand the current range of British shoe sizes in AD 2600. Fig.12 shows a piece which asks these statistical questions more overtly.

Look now at two features of these pieces which are very commonly found on what we traditionally call "lead tokens": the predominantly well-fitting but ever-so-slightly misaligned resting of a disk on its opposite number, and the sometimes almost absent hint of a join between the two halves. That we find these characteristics present on both seals and tokens in abundance means one of two things: either that (i) a considerable number of what we think are lead tokens are in fact seals, or (ii) that the use of seal-type strips was a convenient and widespread method of manufacture for tokens, even if not used universally. Please look at the number of pieces in your collections which have these traits, and let us know your views.

A little bit of 17th century humour….

Readers will have noticed, and hopefully forgiven, that I am not averse to the odd pun. I hope also that they will not mind my frequent references to the main 17th century token series, but being as large and well-documented as it is, it makes an excellent reference to measure our lead pieces against, especially in the type range 16-27 which I am at present discussing and which features such a large amount of pictorial material.

They may have lived in hard times, even without the excessive political and religious controversies of their day, but those far-off merchants were not without a capacity for humour, occasionally expressed on their tokens; no prizes for guessing what Edward Burd of Colyton chose to put on his reverse {Fig.1}. Stephen Lock of Gosport had a wider choice {Fig.2}; he went for the keys rather than the lock. Benjamin Sampson of Coggeshall pictured his biblical namesake, a burly man wielding a club to illustrate his strength {Fig.3}, but my favourite is James Partridge of Royston {Fig.4}. Presumably the landlord of a pub called the Mitre, he cleverly uses the five-pointed star which appears as a maker's mark on so many 17th century pieces and, by merging it into one point of the mitre produces the effect of a bird's head. Hang a couple of carefully placed cords down from the mitre to look like birds' legs and you have presumably, if I guess right…… a partridge!

Not many issuers had surnames which offered this scope for entertainment, but the use of pictorial language was more general in these days before most could write; we will see for example, as we discuss these various types, that the name of inns and taverns were very often thus rendered. So, if it could happen on copper and brass tokens, why not on the lead pieces of the same era? We need to consider this, when we look at possible interpretation. That type 19 could well come from John Pigg the merchant, rather than the expected farmer.

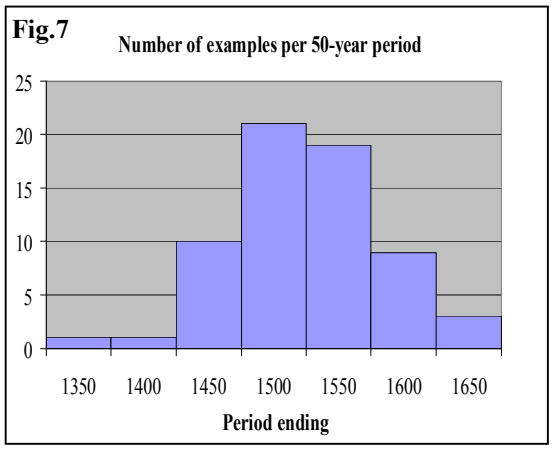
David Powell On His Classification System

Type 20: Merchant Marks

These fit naturally alongside type 16, since merchant marks are the commercial equivalent of the gentry's coat of arms. Most of their specifics are long lost in the mists of time, but they were widely used throughout Northern and Central Europe and possibly beyond; to distinguish one trader's goods from another's before either had acquired sufficient literacy to identify them by writing, painting, printing or otherwise marking his name upon them. Some are clearly monograms, but as to the unrecognisable amongst their number there has been long debate, regarded as yet unresolved by most authors, as to whether they were put together randomly according to taste or whether they have some specific, probably ecclesiastical, meaning. It has been suggested that the practice dates back to the fourth century Roman Empire and that the Chi-Rho symbol beloved of the Romans when they adopted Christianity {Fig.1} was the basis of many of the earliest marks.

Merchant marks were widely used in trade, and appear on metal, stone and wood; they are not specifically numismatic, and we have to some extent to enquire into other disciplines to understand them. Few have endeavoured to venture into the intricacies of this obscure area, the most recent three books that I can find by British authors being H.W.Davies {1935}, E.M.Elmhirst {1959} and F.A.Girling {1964}. Davies' title hints at the peak period of activity: "Devices of the Early Printers 1457-1560", and this is confirmed by the illustrated date distribution of 64 monumental brasses listed by Girling {Fig.7}. Certainly, by the time of the main 17th century token series, merchant marks were still in use to some extent but well past their heyday. Williamson lists only about 75 occurrences, plus a further 22 simple monograms, out of over 12,000 pieces; i.e. less than 1% {Ex: Figs.2-4}. There is a higher proportion on seals, which tend on average to come from an earlier date, and indeed there are no less than three illustrated in my article on the subject earlier.

Fig.7



Also interesting is the geographical distribution of Girling's sample. Norfolk is the leading county with 18, followed by Gloucs {11}, Suffolk {7}, Essex {5}, Oxon, Herts, Wilts, Kent {3 each}, Lincs and Somerset {2 each}. Berks, Notts, Beds, Yorks, Shropshire, Northants and Lancs are represented by a single example. First and foremost, this points to the importance of Norwich, Ipswich and Bristol, and East Anglia generally, in the late mediaeval economy. There is little or no mention of Northern England, much of the Midlands, or the extreme southern counties of England; including, indeed, London. The sample may be small, but the latter omission is surprising. Cromwellian destruction could be conjectured as a possible factor, but some of the areas which feature above were also significant supporters of the Roundhead cause.

Possibly because lead tokens tend to pertain to those of more humble origins than merchant traders, merchant marks on lead are even scarcer than on copper 17th century pieces; when found, however, they are attractive. A 4-like figure is amongst the most popular devices, as shown in Figs 3-5, and survives to as late as the 1790s on the coinage of the East India Company in Sumatra. Fig.5, from the 14th or 15th cent, is quite a common piece, always very dark.

Fig.6 is an example of a more complicated mark, and you are invited to make what anagram of its components you will; Mitchiner & Skinner {BNJ 54}, faced with a fairly similar piece, decide that it is Elizabethan and reads "St Thomas", presumably indicating an ecclesiastical establishment of that name.

Please write in with any further examples you find, for lead type 20s are rather thin on the ground at the moment.

Postscript:

Davies cites in his book {p.19} a quote from an obscure author of 1875 which is of interest: "A house known by any particular sign retained it, under a succession of occupants, without regard to the avocation, calling or trade of the new owner. After 1764 signs abutting the street were no longer tolerated, but were in some cases affixed to the walls of houses, and finally were abolished. It is said that….these signs existed as late as 1773." He remarks also that the same sign might occur two or three times in the same street. Today we think of very few businesses other than pubs and inns having distinctive signs outside them, but in the days of 17th century tokens and many of our leads they would have been commonplace for other professions as well. We look at "John Smith at ye whatever" on a piece, and instinctively think in terms of a place of refreshment before realising, in a lot of cases that the "whatever" pictured represents another trade. Did the publican double up with a second profession, we think next? probably not; the premises just may not have been a pub in the first place. If that happened with the 17th century series, it also happened with lead {much of which was struck before 1764}; except that we only have the pictorial depiction of the "whatever", without the textual help.

This being the case, we must ask whether pieces of other classes represent signs in the same way that type 20 does. Some might use a merchant mark, some a picture; others a picture or a shield which includes a merchant mark. Some of those pictures might coincide with one of our other types, e.g. you could imagine a pub called "The Prince of Wales" {feathers, type 4}, "The Ship" {type 6}, or "The Cock" {type 18}. Except that it could be a mercer of that sign, or a grocer, or an ironmonger. We need to be open-minded!

Davies also has something to say about the origins and meanings of some of the symbols on our commonest types, e.g. the petals and the spoked wheels, but that is for another time.

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This Month's Gallery

One of the things which it is easy to forget about eBay is the size of a piece. The beastie on the right is attractive, and it is easy to think it is going to be about the size of a standard communion token when it arrives. The vendor said it was 1¾" across, fair enough, but you don't always pay that much notice. Anyway, it has turned up, and it is a massive 88gm {over 3oz in old money}, the first piece that I have had to resort to my wife's kitchen scales to weigh. It looks like a market piece, and probably it is; but instead of a token, I will conjecture that it is the weight which the trader used to hold down the paper in which he wrapped up his wares, to stop it blowing away. Note the finger holes in the bottom corners, to facilitate movement. You wouldn't want too many of those in your bag at once!

A couple of attractive mediaeval pseudo-pennies amongst the other pieces, including a cut quarter; pellets were the order of the day in Edwardian times, but crosses appear in the angles of Henry II's Tealby coinage and mullets {stars} in the Scottish coinage of the 13th/14th centuries. All of which may be irrelevant, but it is interesting to compare. The flower on the irregularly shaped piece is precisely the design which the Romans used when they wanted petals on their tesserae {i.e. their equivalent of type 1}, but that also may be coincidence; I am not convinced that the piece is of that age.

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