

Editor: David Powell

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 dmpowell@waitrose.com or david@powell18041.freemove.co.uk. Please note that the old LTTeditor@aol.com address advertised on some earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.

Moving into the Era of Paranumismatic Anarchy, Part 1: Mysteries

Our wander through the chronology of English crude lead has brought us now to the point in the 18th cent where deterioration of standards, in both design and manufacture, has set in seriously. All is not lost, however; there is method in the madness, as they say, and behind the artistic abstractions and monstrosities which we have hitherto dumped in types 9 and 27 {irregular geometric and uncertain objects} there are ideas which probably, dare I say almost certainly, derive from the lead pieces of earlier years. Ideas which workmen struggling with skill and equipment shortages were as desperate to get over to their intended users as their predecessors were; and which, since they didn't manage to achieve it, you have now to help them out with by guessing what they were!

This article is therefore a quiz, with a few comments and ideas thrown in; you might agree with some of them, but I don't necessarily expect you do. However, do please give your imaginations free rein, and then mail in your thoughts; this is unknown territory, and we need the benefit of each others' input to get to the bottom of the mystery. You have as much chance of being right as anyone else. Here goes, and by the way, you might like to turn some of them round 90 or 180 degrees; not knowing for certain what they show, I can't guarantee I've got them the right way up!



A few wild guesses and comments to start off, and for you to shoot down:

1. Radial edge gives hint of 17th cent farthing, even if subject matter indeterminate.
2. Degenerate version of the fish/bishop ambiguity seen in LTT_14 {May 2006}.
3. Shield on its side?
- 4,9, {and perhaps 11 as well} Plough or reaping machine?
6. Window, or grid? Imagine a ship's porthole. Could also be a shield.
7. Lis/trident type 4 which has degenerated into a plant?
8. Fish? Bird in flight? Feels as if it has a hint of space travel about it, but just a tad too early for that. Not the first example of the type I have seen. What happens if you turn it 90 degrees right?
10. Mast of ship, or anchor & rope.



OK, now we are over the page, a few more:

12. Three pipes? a common feature on the 17th cent main series.
15. Chess pawn {unlikely}, nail, candle; take your pick. Tool check for a hammer?
17. Plough or grasshopper.
18. Either a stylistic type 1 petal on which the engraver quickly gave up, or an attempt at the head of a daffodil. I would like to think the latter.
19. Conventional type 3 cartwheel until the engraver got three-quarters of the way round, after which what? did he get bored and want to finish off quickly, or doe "H2" actually mean something?
20. Three-masted ship.
21. Slug's head with antennae? Mousetrap? Bird signing, but with neck omitted? Turn it round and you could have a rabbit head with ears. Would really like to get to the bottom of this one, it is intriguing.
22. Like Fig.7 overleaf, possibly a lis/trident type 4 or a plant. I would favour the plant, of the two.
23. As Fig.10, another ship's mast.

When you get something linear but which is completely unintelligible {e.g. Figs.5 or 11} it is always worthwhile seeing if you can read a ship into them, be it a large sailing vessel or just something small and yacht-like. Note also that a few of these pieces have a hint of the exergue in them {Figs.11,16,17}, a specifically 18th cent feature which we discussed recently in LTT_76 {Aug 2011}. Whether this is the line of ground on which an object stands, e.g. a plough, or is an initial line around which ornamentation is built, is sometimes a matter for debate.

It will be noticed that most of these pieces are of only moderate size, indicating that they are not necessarily likely to be from the last days of crude lead; i.e. many of them are quite likely early or mid-18th cent, rather than late 18th cent or early 19th. Fig.24 is an example of a later "Mystery"; it is probably a type 13 stretcher, as used by carriers, but if turned round 90 degrees one suddenly perceives a modern robot, all arms and legs! Or another grasshopper; the legs are about right, but it is a bit too square for that. Ted Fletcher suggests: early IKEA instructions for the assembly of knock-down furniture. At which point we shall leave it to the remainder of your fertile imaginations.



In the next article in our chronology {LTT_89, Feb 2013}, we will deal with the concept of the "Late Degenerate" as opposed to the "Mystery": differing in that their design and inheritance are more recognisable as conforming with established types, but that the artwork is far debased from its equivalents of earlier years. These tend on average to be of slightly later date than the pieces shown above.

Correspondence, and some thoughts on Recessing

Fig.1 was found by Gary Smith in Whiston, Merseyside, some seven inches beneath the surface and a stone's throw from what some claim to be a hunting lodge used by Cromwell. The diameter is about 18mm, which would make it most likely around mid-late 17th cent; conveniently fitting in rather well alongside the middle-later main-series {Williamson} pieces and with the possible Cromwellian attribution.



In terms of design and condition it isn't very spectacular; however, it comes from a part of the country which isn't exactly renowned for lead and is of a definite recessed construction which, whilst certainly not unknown, is not all that common. Which begs the question: is such recessing associated with a particular time period or part of the country, and is its selection a matter of random choice or with specific purpose? Clearly recessing, which has been done since ancient times, protects the central design; although it cannot be reasonably incorporated into the carving of the mould, since the mould would almost certainly be destroyed in the course of getting the casting out.



Fig.2, found by Clive Rawle at a site on the outskirts of Totnes, provokes further thought on this subject. It also hints at some element of recessing; or is it just a question of a punch jammed down into the metal, and spoil flowing up round the side? or deliberately hammering on the edge a bit, as is occasionally done with main series 17th cent tokens? I have never quite understood the phenomenon on main series pieces, although some people have suggested that perhaps one or two of them were used as weights.

The latter piece is not quite of the same construction as the other. Ted Fletcher suggests that the rim on Fig.1 has almost certainly been achieved by rolling against a flat surface. For the record, both Figs.1 and 2 are uniface. The Totnes piece, again from an uncommon county, came from a site which has yielded a variety of material from Elizabethan to Georgian. At 22mm, it is quite likely late 17th cent.

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My thanks to Stuart Elton for resolving the piece displayed in page 3, Fig.12 of LTT_86 {Nov 2012}; he identifies the heraldry depicted as the Boyd coat of arms, and says that the legend across the top is "Confido", which translate "I trust". There is some excellent background information on Stuart's website at http://www.bagseals.org/gallery/main.php?g2_itemId=842 plus, if you scroll down, an enlarged photograph of another, but slightly better, specimen. Although the family background looks Scottish, I am informed by the finder that there are one or two branches in Kent.

So, we do between us resolve problems occasionally, as well as pose them! Stuart also thinks that the seal shown as Fig.9 on the same page is Hanseatic.

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Soft Whites

An interesting phenomenon, not very common, which I should welcome any further sightings of, please. Every now and again one finds a piece which is very light {nearly white} in colour and rather soft in texture, almost chalky to the touch. It may be, of course, that this is due to the particular means of manufacture, and certainly it would seem that the degree of detail achievable is not very high. The piece most frequently seen in this style depicts a rabbit {Fig.2}, which if turned on its nose suddenly looks rather like a human head; moreover, I have seen it in two different sizes.



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Boy Bishops: A Recap

This month's "Survey the Scene" subject is Boy Bishops; not a subject I have touched on very much in these pages because I know that detailed work is being done by others, whose toes I do not wish to tread on {hint, Gary, we are all looking forward to that book}; yet, they are an important part of the British lead token tale, for a hundred years commencing about 1490, and I shall put together here a collection of a number I have seen. Chronology is determined, approximately, by descending order of crudity. Firstly the ones in tolerably good style....



....to be followed, in due course, to the late 16th cent degenerates, and finally a number which "might be". Amongst those whose artwork is most far removed from the design which spawned them, one might question whether Fig.12 is attempting to ape a Boy Bishop or a 17th cent token. The uniface pieces {Figs.11-13.16} are, presumably very late; which, in Boy Bishop terms, means about 1570-90.



Finally, do Figs.1,8 and 17 taken in sequence hint at the evolution of the cartwheel type 3, so common in the later centuries? Fig.17 is the less common "limpet" variety, so called because of its likeness to an aerial view of a limpet shell when viewed from above {we have all seen those on the rocks when we were kids}; it has some webbing, in the form of vague inner rings, which could well be the last remnant of the circular inscriptions on a mediaeval Boy Bishop groat. A few years later and the webbing might go completely, to leave the common, unadorned cartwheel. The cross and pellets survived on lead beyond 1600, why cannot the Boy Bishop? How late are Figs.11 and 17?

