

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 Please note that the old LTTeditor@aol.com address advertised on some earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.

Readers' Correspondence



Happy New Year, everyone, and thank you for all your photographic contributions during the one just gone. We will spend the first couple of pages displaying a few of the 16th-18th cent examples. First up is a tiny dated piece from Robert Mitchell, {Fig.1} which for obvious reasons I have magnified 3:2 in order that you can appreciate the level of detail which has been squeezed onto its 12mm flan. The date, on the obverse below the initials, is arguably 1608, although any of 1600/3/6/9 are also possible.

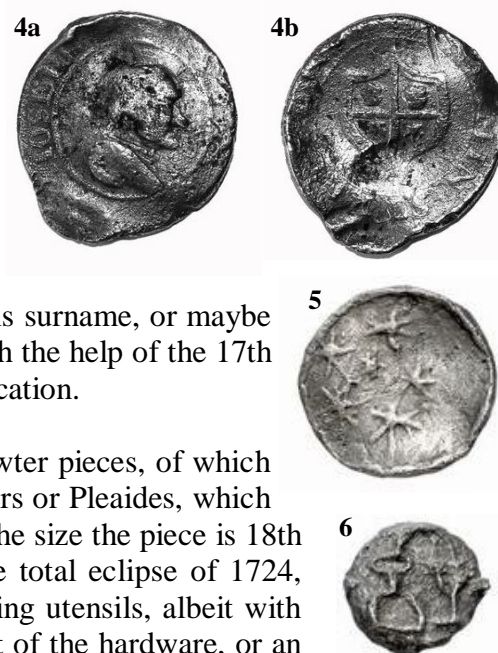


Similarly magnified is Fig.2, a pleasant little 16mm Thames-side find from Lara Maiklem. It probably dates from Q3/17th cent, i.e. contemporary with the Williamson main series tokens. The crown is simple enough, and almost certainly the shop-sign of the person who issued it, but heads on private lead before the 18th cent are scarce. One may conjecture whether that of the issuer, or Charles II, imitating the new milled coinage, is intended.



Back to life-size pieces now, and briefly to earlier in time, as we consider another of Robert Mitchell's pieces, a fine specimen of the late-issue successor of the Boy Bishop groat. These are discussed in BNJ54, where they are designated type R(iii).. These open crown issues date from about 1570-90, after the use of obverses depicting the Boy Bishop wearing a mitre had been suppressed. The reverse retains its earlier style, even if the lettering is not quite so meaningful; going through the motions, but total gibberish.

Fig.4 comes from Stuart Wyatt and is a Thames foreshore find from Cannon Street, presumed to be a seal, but worth investigating on the offchance. The obverse depicts the bust of a man, facing right, plus an inscription which begins with the name "IOSEPH"; on the reverse, some arms which look municipal or civic in style, rather than personal, and another fragment of inscription which appears to read "...AMIN SC...". Possibly this is another name, {BENJ}AMIN, followed by the beginning of his surname, or maybe it is part of an address, but either way we were not able, even with the help of the 17th cent main series experts, to pin it down to any known issuer or location.



Stuart also sent in pictures of several 17th-18th cent London pewter pieces, of which the pick are Fig.5-7. Fig.5 is a nice rendering of the Seven Sisters or Pleiades, which was a fairly frequently used shop or pub sign at the time. From the size the piece is 18th cent, which may or may not indicate some connection with the total eclipse of 1724, concerning which see LTT_17 {Aug 2006}. Fig.6 shows drinking utensils, albeit with an interesting curved line connecting them at the top; is that part of the hardware, or an indication of the direction of flow? If the items are too up-market for a common tavern, then maybe a wine and spirit merchant, rather than a mere drinking house, is indicated.



Fig.7 is early 17c, maybe 1630-50; the object depicted being either a frying pan or a baker's peel {oven shovel}, indicating the issuer's occupation. Both objects appear regularly on main series 17c pieces.

My thanks to Tony Williams and his colleagues from the Dinnington area of South Yorks for the next little batch. Figs.8-9 are delightful little pieces, in terms of both style and condition, from Q2/17th cent as discussed previously in LTT_62/63 {May/June 2010}; they are very neat and, whoever their issuer, may well be of some central London manufacturer. Fig.8 is almost unique in lead token terms in that it gives the date in Roman numerals: DCMXL = 1640. The type appears for a variety of issuers in all the four years 1640/1/2/3, albeit with a different distribution where necessary; e.g. DC/MXL/III. HI or OH is the issuer, and there is a neat pseudo-inscription of wedges, aping letters, around.



Fig.9 is of very similar date, with standard issuer's initial-triad, but an intriguing depiction on the reverse. What is it, a cart? Is TI a porter, or does he make carts? Or is it something entirely different, like a mounted cannon, after all? Cannon are not unknown on the main 17th cent Williamson series of a few years later. Equally, what might be a wheel arch could also be a pipe, and the would-be cannon barrel could be a tobacco-roll. Or a knife; either way, suggesting an inn. There is much for the imagination in this piece, at the cost of very little certainty.

Fig.10 looks somewhat older, maybe even late mediaeval. The rather pleasant little cockerel on the obverse, somewhat worn, could just be at home in the 17th cent, but the eight touching petals of the reverse are more like the late pictorials of BNJ53 type F, which are 14th cent. The size of this piece is unknown, and if of the latter date may well be smaller than shown.

More on Lead Tokens in Dalton and Hamer



The piece shown on the left is another of the "Not Local" Scottish leads shown in Dalton & Hamer's work {D+H} on 18th cent provincial tokens; specifically, no.11 on page 454. It is uniface, but in the description they see only the "MD/1814" and not the figures below, which they presumably dismiss as mere decoration. They look like being the top half of "24". Compare this with one of the photos from Alex Kusendragers' article on Dutch beacon tokens in LTT_100, and they look remarkably similar. One will recall that the normal denominations for beacon leads are 6,12 and 24 stuivers, and I am sure that Scottish and Dutch seamen would have been visiting each others' shores very frequently. {Alex confirms: see <http://www.loodjes.nl/CZH.html>}

The slightly unusual piece on the right was shown in LTT_105 as Fig.11 on page 6, with the conjecture that it might be a sack token. Forget that; it comes from Barrack Street, in Dublin, and appears in D+H's Irish leads as no.417 on page 513. D+H give the explanation that it was issued by John Drinen, a grocer, c.1808. The article depicted is a sugar-loaf, indicating his trade, and the flanking letters are an abbreviated form of his address. The sugar loaf was a common symbol used to indicate the grocery trade, and frequently appears on tokens back to the 17th cent.



Lead Tokens in the Media

Continuing on from last month's article, old newspapers are a fascinating source of information about all manner of subjects as viewed by the people of the time. Coins get a fair mention, tokens rather less, and lead tokens less still... but they do occasionally make it! A few examples follow, accompanied occasionally by what might have been the type of token spoken of.... One can but guess, but it will suffice. There are no communion tokens mentioned in this selection, as I am keeping those for a separate series of articles.

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The Dorset County Chronicle of 12 October 1837, in attempting to sum up the English coinage in a single paragraph, volunteers:

“Copper was not coined in England until the year 1609, and then the small lead tokens previously issued by private individuals were suppressed.”



Typical small private issuer tokens of the Elizabethan period



Elizabethan town token, anonymous but possibly Thetford, 1579

Not quite correct in either case. The Dundee Evening Telegraph of 10 October 1928 puts it rather more accurately:

“Lead tokens began to circulate in England as early as the fifteenth century, and Elizabeth permitted the cities of Bristol, Oxford and Worcester to strike their own tokens. James VI of Scotland, going South to become James I of England, saw in these private and municipal issues an infringement of the Royal prerogative, but the measures he took did not diminish their numbers. In Scotland, however, they were not needed then, for there was an adequate supply of legal coins of even small values.”

Very interesting; the Bristol pieces are known and in Williamson, but which of our known tokens, if any, are those of the other two cities? Other sources, including the Falkirk Herald, in a more lengthy article on 10 November 1870, mention only Bristol, as is more commonly the case. I guess that we can forgive a journalist of that era not knowing too much about lead and pewter going back to the 13th or 14th cents, but herewith one reference to those early days, from the Shields Daily Gazette of 4 May 1859:

“A pilgrim's lead token was found a short time ago in Rotten-row, Alnwick, by some workmen. It has been sent by his Grace the Duke of Northumberland to the Society of Antiquaries at Newcastle-on-Tyne. On one side is the figure of a female. It is considered a great curiosity. These leads were used in former times to denote that a pilgrim had arrived at a certain place.”

Glad to know that there was some token interest around! Another example from the Norfolk News of 14 July 1849:



Bristol's tokens, c.1591, were in copper.



Female pilgrim {left}, male pilgrim {right}, both slightly magnified.

“ Norfolk and Norwich Museum.—The following donations have been made to this Institution during the past month:—.....Three rare lead tokens of the time of Queen Elizabeth, found near Jesus' College, Cambridge, E. S. Taylor, Esq.“

It would be interesting to know how they were identified as Elizabethan. The odds must be that, to be recognisable, they were the larger pieces with royal initials or symbols on, rather than merchant A.N.Other's 11mm commercial pieces.

From this article in the Edinburgh Evening News of 9 August 1877, Dundee Museum also had a lead token collection. Unfortunately we have no idea what the pieces were. If they had been CTs I expect that it would have been stated, so my guess is that they were quite likely the Dalton & Hamer pieces, mainly from Edinburgh, mentioned in the article in last month's issue.



“THE DUNDEE MUSEUM ROBBERY. At the Edinburgh Sheriff Criminal Court to-day, before Sheriff Davidson and jury, John McNeil, from the prison of Edinburgh, was charged with reset of theft - {receiving stolen goods}, - so far as on one or more occasions between the 9th and 19th days of May last he received a number of silver and bronze coins, lead tokens, and a dagger pistol which were stolen from the Dundee Museum on the 9th of May last, knowing the same to have been stolen. The prisoner pleaded not guilty, but was convicted, and the Sheriff sent him to prison for eight months with hard labour.”

Private collecting had until the late 19th cent been mainly a preserve of the rich, who often favoured the ancients, but the frequency of articles in the 1890s and 1900s suggests both that the practice was becoming more widespread and that it was extending to more modest material. On 25 October 1890 a collector's wants list found its way into this small ad in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph, not a practice to be recommended today.

“WANTED, SHEFFIELD, 1s 6d silver token, 1812; Sheffield Constitutional Society token, with view of Hendon Church; T. Marsden's Lead token, Fox, Tally Ho; Robert King's token; O. T. Brights' token ; H.Wragg's token; Sanderson's token.—Watts, 88, Industry Road, Darnall.”

Pub tokens were usually in brass by 1890 and had usually been for at least three decades before, so it would be interesting to know what exactly Mr.Marsden's token referred to. Anyway, good to know that there were lead enthusiasts even back in the 19th cent.

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Lead tokens being, if not always money, at least money-like, they invariably feature in crimes of various types. Doubtless there were a number of incidents of petty crimes such as this one reported in the Fife Herald of 26 December 1888:

“ In the Small Debt Court at Cupar on Thursday, proof was led in the action which was called the previous week at the instance of Charles Macdonald, lately porter at Cupar Railway Station, against Thomas Rutherford Nichol, the station agent there. The sum sued for was £10, being the amount of reward paid by the Sweetmeat Automatic Supply Company to the defender for information which led to the conviction, 23rd April last, of a boy named James Wallace, clerk at Seggie, who was sentenced to seven days' imprisonment for putting a lead token instead of a penny into the drawer of the automatic machine at Cupar Station, and taking out a cake of chocolate.”

The Tamworth Herald of 22 June 1929 gives a long account of another such case in which two men appeared in court for using lead tokens in lieu of money to try and extract goods from a cigarette machine. It is likely, of course, that these “tokens” would usually have been blank disks rather than

anything manufactured for more lawful purpose., although in a case reported by the Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette on 7 April 1937 the lead tokens are specifically named:

“Two Haswell Plough boys aged 15 and one Shotton Colliery boy aged 14 admitted at Castle Eden Juvenile Court to-day the theft of 33 lead tokens, valued at 1s. the property of Horden Collieries. Ltd., at Shotton Colliery. They further admitted the theft of two bars of chocolate, valued at 2d, the property of the British Automatic Co- Ltd., from an automatic machine at Shotton Bridge Station by inserting tokens instead of money. One of the 15-year-old boys, who was already on probation, was bound over in the sum of £2 and put on probation for two years, and the two other boys were bound over in the sum of £1 and put on probation for one year. It was stated by John Blenkinsop, Stationmaster at Shotton Bridge, that during the past two months 50 tokens had been found in an automatic machine at the station.”

Fraud was forever in the minds of those engaged in the early development of the gas meter, as witness this description in the Western Times on 3 January 1903 of an Exeter manufacturer of such machines taking the local mayor for a guided tour of his works:

“They turn out hundreds of these meters every week down at Willey's works, and so careful is the testing that there is seldom any complaint. One visitor asked what would happen if he put a disc of cardboard instead of a penny into the slot. "The cardboard would buckle and the meter be thrown out of gear," was the reply. "Yes, but what would happen if a householder put in French coins or lead tokens ?" "Oh! ask the man who collects the pennies!" came the significant reply.”

On 26 May 1900 the North Wales Chronicle reported a slightly different type of court case where there was debate as to whether a machine was in breach of the Gaming Act or not:

“the machine in question is a kind of automatic bagatelle board, worked with handles, which can be set in motion on dropping a penny into a slot. A penny is charged for playing three billiard balls. If these roll into certain positions, lead tokens are liberated, for which cigars or other prizes are given.”

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In the Yorkshire Evening Post of 9 May 1924, a reporter interviewed Leeds octogenarian Charles Walton, encouraging him to reminisce about his younger days when he was in London. Mr. Walton was a keen frequenter of theatres and music halls, and the article contains the following:

“Mr. Walton described how in each {music hall} there was a chairman, who encouraged the patrons to consume as much beer and other liquid refreshment as possible. One paid a few coppers and received a lead token for that amount. The token was exchanged inside for a drink of beer which, says Mr. Walton, was so salted that you had to have some more (this time paid for), and still more, and you never quenched your thirst. You came out like a salted fish.”

From a letter to the Portsmouth Evening News on 12 January 1926:

“RESTORE OUR SILVER COINAGE:the Treasury either took fright at the prospect of losing their cent per cent, profit on the coinage of silver, or they obeyed the dictates of the holders of gold, and debased the silver coinage to the present lead tokens.”

In case you were wondering what that was about, it refers to the well-known decision by the British Government to reduce our silver coinage from 0.925 fine to 0.500 fine in 1920. They went even further in 1947, replacing it by cupro-nickel. Such moves did not go down well with everybody, and in looking for a derogatory term of abuse to describe the resulting product, some members of the public settled on the phrase:..... LEAD TOKEN !!!