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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 mail@leadtokens.org.uk Please note that the old david@powell18041.freeserve.co.uk address advertised on earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.

The Royal Sport, or Not? The Numismatics of Cockfighting

Cockfighting is today generally perceived as being a barbaric pastime, mainly indulged in by the criminal or semi-criminal fraternity for the purpose of gambling. That has not always been the view, however; Google the subject and you will see that cockfighting has been widely practised, throughout many parts of the world and by a wide spectrum of social classes, for several thousand years.



Our purpose here is not to debate the ethics or even recount the history of cockfighting, other than to consider how the use of tokens, and in particular lead tokens, may have featured. Lead tokens with cocks on them are relatively common, and whilst some may be shop signs or relate to the selling of poultry and their produce, it is certainly not impossible that they relate to a practice not previously discussed in these pages; namely, cockfighting.

In Britain, cockfighting was banned by law in England in 1835 and in Scotland in 1895. Before that it was indulged in not only as a form of rustic entertainment but also, if Fig.1 is to be believed, the higher echelons of society as well. On the banner above the two protagonists in Fig.1a are the words “Royal Sport”, and indeed there are numerous online references which link that phrase to the sport. Go into the British Newspaper Archive and you will see in its early pages, particularly in the 18th cent, many adverts for daily cockfights, either in public houses, or in temporary accommodation constructed for the duration of a race meeting.

Fig.1 is in copper and well struck, which is itself an indication of some sort of semi-official blessing; when it was made, probably a little before the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, only the well-heeled would have had access to the necessary manufacturing capacity. It is a little battered round the edges, but that enhances its sense of being a real piece, i.e. one which has seen use. In the back room or cellar of a village pub, the use of lead pieces such as Figs.2-7 below would have been much more likely.



Fig.2, showing two birds walking in opposite directions, is the one which hints most at the idea of a contest, but Figs 3-6 are all potential cockfighting pieces. The larger ones are probably 18th cent, the middle-sized 17th cent, and the diminutive Fig.6 possibly earlier. Fig.7 was found near Colchester and it was suggested by a previous owner that it might be Roman; however, whilst cockfighting was certainly around back in ancient times, I feel that the beaded edge, and general style and quality of execution, argue in favour of the 17th cent.

As to their possible usage in a cockfighting context, I would suggest that these pieces are either entrance tickets to the event or gambling chips used when one got there; possibly even a mixture of the

two. If the event was illegal, or frowned upon, as was the case in later days, the use of entrance passes would be a natural security precaution.

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My late mother-in-law was a very straight-laced Scottish lady, not untypical of her generation, and it is one of my regrets that I did not, by the time of her death, have her family history research sufficiently far advanced to be able to enlighten her that her great-grandfather, Dugald, was a leading light in Glasgow's illegal, underground, bare-knuckle prize-fighting fraternity in the 1860s and 1870s. It would appear from such press reports which exist of his activities that the usual practice was to arrange these fights in remote places and publicise them via a well-organised secret grapevine, and that after the event everybody involved would scarp before the law could catch up with them. That Dugald's career is known to posterity is down to the fact that on one or two occasions he and his accomplices were considerate enough to get caught, which resulted in detailed descriptions of both the fights and the subsequent prosecutions getting recorded in the press.

I would imagine that a very similar situation would have existed in the cockfighting community, and that metal passes such as those shown might have been a very good way of proving to the sporting faithful that you were one of them.

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Readers' Correspondence

Two delightful pieces this month from the Ashford area, kindly sent in by Gill Davies, which I have magnified 3:2 so that readers can better appreciate them. My guess is that Fig.1 is just the issuer's initials JB back to front, but what lovely expression can be worked into very simple things by an engraver with humour and imagination. Considering for a minute the idea that the would-be letters might be interpreted as figures, the stance of the crouching figure is reminiscent of both a skier and Beatrix Potter's Jeremy Fisher, whilst the blob on the upright of the "B" suggests that he is holding on to the upright to support himself. The end of the "J" certainly looks like he is clunking "B" over the back of the neck; perhaps "B" is shackled to a whipping post, and "J" is administering corporal punishment, as was sometimes done at earlier stages in our history? The top of the "J" also looks a bit like a snake's head, but I suspect that that is just coincidence, unless it is intended to convey something of J's attitude towards "B". The letter "J" was not used on tokens until quite late, "I" having always previously sufficed, which hints that the piece is no older than the late 18th cent.



Fig.2 is a rare example of a heart shaped token, encountered in the Scottish communion token series but not very often on ordinary crude lead. I am not sure what it is trying to depict, but it is attractive nevertheless, and almost certainly 18th cent. There is a hint of the initial-in-each-quarter almshouse token about it {see the back page of LTT_83}, but that is hardly consistent with it being a love token!



Love tokens were popular in the 18th cent and were usually made by commissioning someone to engrave a worn-out old coin; silver or copper, according to your means. Many people of quite modest means had Georgian halfpennies thus inscribed for their purpose, and initials and hearts were among the items most frequently depicted; initials rather than full names being, obviously, one way to keep the cost down {Fig.3}. Would anyone ever have made a love token in lead? Why not, if your means ran to nothing more elaborate? So, a happier and more charitable view of our lead piece might therefore be that there are four initials in the quarters, but that the piece is a love token and that the initials are those of the forenames and surnames of the relevant parties.

Water, Water, Everywhere {and barely a token to show for it}

One of the commodities which we do not hear much about in connection with tokens, and yet which everyone needed, was water.

The following interesting extracts come from a book review, published in the newsletter of the London Topographical Society {Nov.2017}, regarding the recently published “History of the London Water Industry, 1580-1820”, by Leslie Tomory:

“...conduits of lead and stone for bringing water to London population centres from the beginning of the 13th century. Initially only trade users had to pay, private individuals getting a free supply, but soon all were charged. Conduits like almshouses could be endowed by benefactors but the cost of the infrastructure soon demanded a more organised industry.”

“Many jobs were created, including water carriers to bring water from conduit heads to people’s homes, turncocks for controlling valves in the pipe network to allow a water supply to certain areas only at certain hours, and payment collectors {working on commission}.”

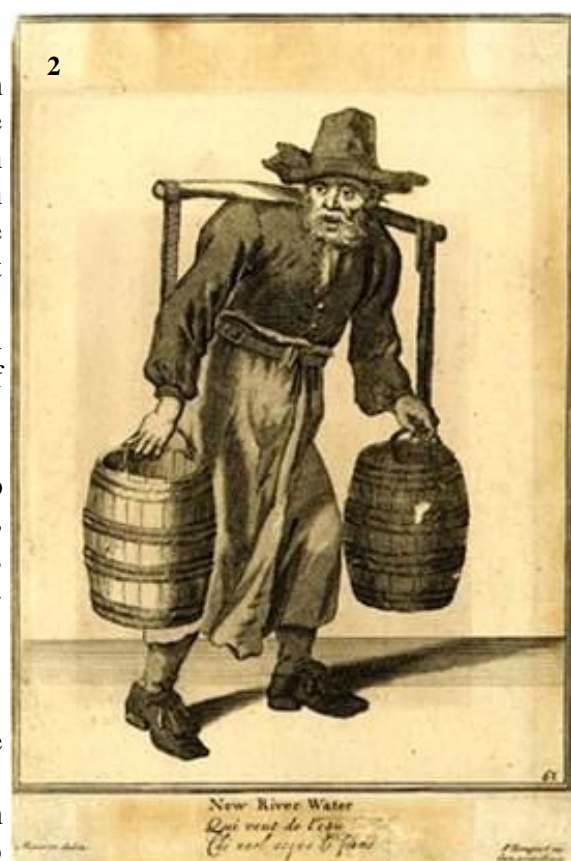
“The Corporation {of London} changed from water provider to facilitator, allowing pipes to be laid in streets and providing loans to entrepreneurs. The latter soon formed companies in which investors sought profits rather than providing philanthropy.”

Did tokens feature in the administration of any of this? The middle of the three paragraphs above hints at the areas where usage was most likely, although water could also have featured in charitable distribution mechanisms alongside bread, fuel and the various other basic commodities listed at the top of LTT_78, page 4. However, maybe water was seen as a super-essential, like air, and was provided regardless, thus sparing it from being controlled in this way.

Williamson’s “Uncertains” include the piece shown on the right {Fig.1; W.Unc.98}, depicting a carrier on one side and a water fountain on the other. Although shown magnified 3:2 here, it is of the size of a late 1660s main series commercial halfpenny or municipal farthing. The piece is helpfully dated 1658, which is earlier than almost every commercial halfpenny of the Williamson series, but certainly one or two municipalities {e.g. Bristol and Gloucester} were already issuing communal farthings of this 20-21mm flan size by then.

Thompson & Dickinson, when cataloguing the Norweb collection, made reference to one of Marcellus Laroon’s “Cryes of the City of London”, a series of 74 drawings depicting the wide variety of the city’s people and personalities. Shown on the right, they thought that the carrier’s depiction was very similar to the one on the token.

The token inscriptions, in Latin, are unhelpful: for the record, “Where {the water} seeks to increase continually, there is never pain when {the work?} grows less”. In other words, it is a general token; there seems to be no



desire, or need, to assign an issuer's name to it. That would appear to imply that, at the time of issue, the facilities were under some sort of communal ownership, or that usage was city-wide and the token universally redeemable; i.e. interchangeable between all the various water-controlling authorities.



The 17th cent main series shows a number of other pieces which show carriers or porters at work {e.g. Figs.3-4}, but the suggestion is that these are generally concerned with the transportation of objects, not liquid. The carrier piece of Fig.1 overleaf is not particularly common or well known. Could lead therefore have supplied the token needs of an industry whose product was seen as so general and so basic? There are a lot of lead tokens

out there with a single W on them, at least on one side; so just a thought that they may not all be the initials of people or villages.... plus, whilst you are looking for them, keep a lookout for anything which may resemble a bucket.



Finally, and rather tongue in cheek, there is the occasional type 4 lis which, when turned upside down, could just about be imagined as a jaunty porter swaggering down the road swinging his arms and carrying something; not shown, but possibly a couple of water buckets {Fig.5}. OK, rather far-fetched, maybe, but crude leads are not called that for nothing!

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POSTSCRIPT: Since writing the above., I have become aware that Napoleon took measures to improve the quality of Paris' water supply and that a number of tokens were issued from 1807 onwards, presumably as permits to access the new facilities. "Eau Clarifiée et Dépurée", say the pieces, or something similar, i.e. "clarified and purified water"; which, evidently, the previous water wasn't. There are a number of different pieces, all in copper, which differ by various features such as the name of the company contracted to {Figs.6-7, dated 1807}, or the location of the access point {Fig.8, dated 1809}; the last-mentioned specifically states, "Cloître Notre Dame", i.e. the cloister of Paris' main cathedral. By 1811 {Fig.9} it does seem to be regarded as necessary to make the distinction.



There are two values, une voie {22mm} and dix voies {27mm}, i.e. one journey and ten journeys, and a pair of buckets on the reverse of Fig.8 nicely illustrate that a voie consist of being allowed to carry a pail in each hand. These pieces are, when purchased, effectively receipts for the water rates of their day. So, what possibility of some such token system for administering water supply in this country? and, as no brass or copper tokens are known for the purpose, apart from Unc.98, what chance lead?