

Farm Checks of the Fens (i) Introduction

Gary Oddie

The establishment in the 1980s of a specialist collection of tokens with a denomination of one shilling gave rise to an illuminating overlap with a number of other collections. A particular token or group of tokens could be identified, researched and written up as a small project. Outside the well-known series, one of the larger groups in the token shilling collection was the “names and places” category, listed alphabetically by issuer’s name and a few pieces were picked out, researched and written up.

Moving to Huntingdonshire/Cambridgeshire in the late 1990s, the “names and places” collection was rearranged by county to reveal a large number (several dozen) from the the area around Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, which is in a region called The Fens and includes south Lincolnshire and west Norfolk

A quick search of the trade directories revealed that most of the tokens had been issued by fruit and vegetable farmers. No catalogue of this series had been written and indeed, no published articles or notes describing the series could be found. Thus a project was begun to collect and catalogue the “Farm Checks of the Fens”.

As the years passed, the collection and catalogue grew and opportunities taken to give talks to local history, family history and numismatic societies and the annual Token Congress. These all raised awareness of the project, and brought new local contacts and information. One of the more memorable responses to a photograph during a talk was “I married his daughter.”

Some 25 years later, the flow of new material has slowed significantly and the opportunity is being taken to put on record the results so far.

This first note will give a chronological introduction to the talks and articles produced over the years along with a summary of the most up to date presentation on the topic.

Talks

- G. Oddie. Some Cambridgeshire Farm Tokens. Token Congress, 14-16 October 2005.
- G. Oddie. Fens, Fowl, Fruit and Farm (Some Cambridgeshire Tokens). Cambridge Numismatic Society, June 2006.
- G. Oddie. Farm Checks of the Fens. Proceedings of the 2021 International Token Web Conference, 23 May 2021, edited by Salgado, L. and Sa’ar, Y. pp56-67. This short version of the talk was recorded and is available on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWAb1V1MoCs>
- G. Oddie. Farm Checks of the Fens. Cambridge Numismatic Society, 24 May 2021.
- G. Oddie. Farm Checks of the Fens. Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire Family History Society, 21 June 2023.

Articles

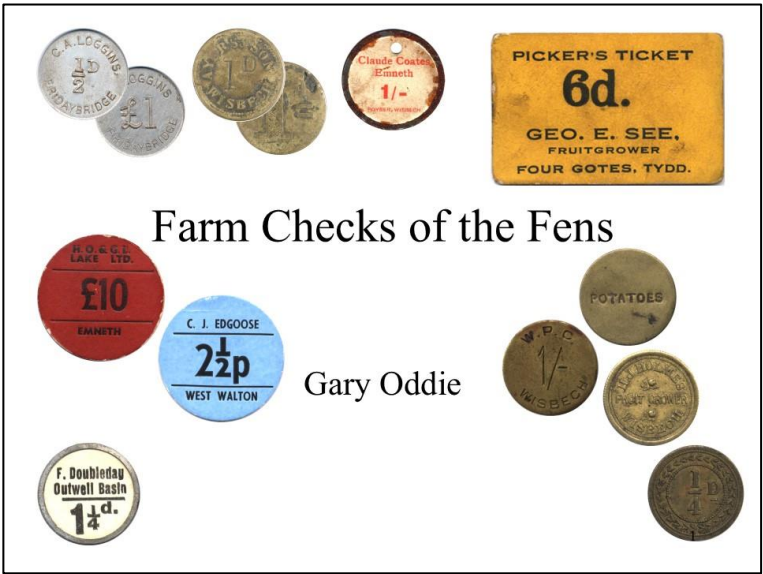
- G. Oddie. John Gilroy & Sons (Wisbech) Ltd. *Token Corresponding Society Bulletin* v12n9 pp349-352, December 2018. https://thetokensociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Volume_twelve-1.pdf
- G. Oddie. Farm Checks of the Fens – Contemporary evidence of usage. *Token Corresponding Society Bulletin* v12n12 pp444-448, September 2019. https://thetokensociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Volume_twelve-1.pdf
- G. Oddie. Farm Checks of the Fens – Anaysis of Hoards. *Token Corresponding Society Bulletin*. v13n10 pp472-477, March 2022. Should go online in 2025. <https://thetokensociety.org.uk/bulletin/>

The Farm Checks of the Fens talk has been through a few versions over the past twenty years and what follows is the most recent set of slides aimed at a general non-numismatic audience that is not familiar with the local history or geography. Extra notes have been added where the presentation would have expanded on the images and text on the slide.

The Farm Checks of the Fens are a large series of checks or tokens, where approximately 60% are printed on colored card, 30% are struck in metal and a smaller number are printed on thin card that is protected by a metal rim.

The tokens are purely functional and thus only the name of the farmer, the name of the farm and the denomination of the token are needed.

The Fens are a unique agricultural feature of the British Isles created by a series of events that have occurred since the last ice age, both natural and man-made. The result has created approximately 1,500 square miles of rich and productive agricultural land.



Farm Checks of the Fens

Gary Oddie

Introduction

- Tokens
 - Token Congress Northampton 14-16 October 2005
 - Cambridge NS June 2006
 - International Token Web Conference 23 May 2021
 - Cambridge Numismatic Society, 24 May 2021
- The Fens
- Geography
- History
- Hydraulics
- Agriculture – pickers, baskets, tokens, hoards, trains
- Jam
- Back to the Tokens – manufacturers, distributions

2

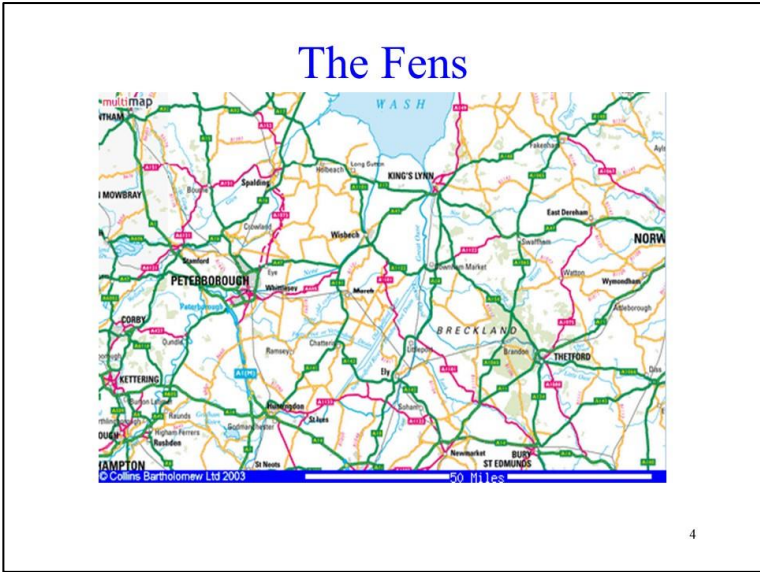
For those not familiar with the area, the Fens are on the east coast facing into the North Sea. All of the water from its catchment area drains or is pumped into the Wash and the North Sea.



The Fens

3

The Fens include parts of south east Lincolnshire, much of north Cambridgeshire (including parts of old Huntingdonshire), and westernmost parts of Norfolk and Suffolk



4

At the end of the last ice age the sea level was about 120m lower than it is today due to the water locked up in the ice. Any water from what we now call the Fens would drain down into a shallow North Sea. As the ice melted, the sea level rose and rivers and tributaries that were once inland started to back up and form large areas of marshland. The area was very boggy and liable to flooding and after several thousand years comprised many meters of peat.

There is some evidence that the Romans tried some small scale drainage and in the middle ages the local monasteries carried out drainage improvements. The drained land was found to be extremely fertile.

History

- Ice Age
- Lakes
- Sea Level Rise
- River Outfalls
- Marsh
- Local Draining
- Dissolution of the Monasteries
- Vermuyden
- NIMBYs
- Large scale engineering
- Drainage Boards

5

It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that large-scale hydraulic engineering projects were undertaken. The area was surveyed, rivers were straightened, channels cleared, and new dykes were dug. Then, as now, there was resistance to change from some of the local inhabitants and landowners, but ultimately the Dutch engineers started a drainage scheme that continues to this day.

The Draining of the Fens

Cornelius Vermuyden (1642)

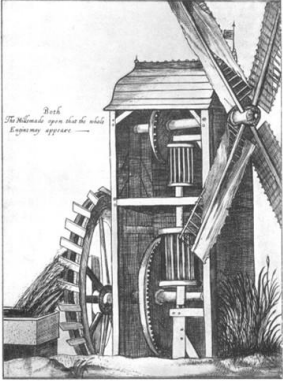

H.C. Darby (1953)

6


The earliest pumps used for raising the water into the dykes were driven by windmills.

The windmills and watermills on the outflows also found other applications. This 17th century token, which was issued by the oatmeal breaker Anthony Rachell in 1667, shows one of the gears from his machinery.

Windmills – Raising Water

Benwick Mill, c.1910



W. Blith, *The English Improver Improved* (1652)

7

There was a rapid development in draining technology, with ever larger windmills, pumps and dykes to carry the water into the Wash and the North Sea.

Windmills – Raising Water




Mill between Ely & Prickwillow, c.1900

8

The industrial revolution brought steam power to the Fens, initially replacing the windmills and in turn themselves being replaced by diesel engines and electric motors.

New Technologies



Lakenheath Old Lode:
 Windmill and scoop wheel c. 1800
 Steam engine and pump 1844
 Diesel engine and turbine pump 1926
 Electric Motor and turbine pump

9

One of the consequences of draining the Fens is that the soft peat shrinks as it dries out. In 1848 the Holme Post was driven through the peat and into the sub soil. By 1932 the soil level had dropped by 10 ft 8 inches, with just 11 ft 4 inches remaining. The large areas of flat open land combined with dry summers have also resulted in dust storms called the “Fen Blows” further eroding the top soil.

The Shrinking Fens

The Holme Post, erected 1848 (1953).

1848. Ground level.
 51 ft. above mean
 sea-level in 1936
 1860. Wastage
 4 ft. 9 ins.
 1870. 7 ft. 8 ins.
 1875. 8 ft. 2 ins.
 1892. 10 ft. 0 ins.
 1932. 10 ft. 8 ins.
 Depth of peat in
 1932 = 11 ft. 4 ins.

10

Although the railways came to Wisbech and the Fens in the 1840s, it was not until the 1880s that the agricultural potential of the area started to be realised. This map from 1937 shows the patchwork of different crops across the whole of the area owned by many hundreds of farmers and market gardeners.

Distribution of Crops (1937)

Land Utilisation map of England and Wales (1937).
 Brown – Fallow, Rotation, Market Gardens
 Hatched Purple – Orchards
 Dark Purple – Houses, nurseries, allotments

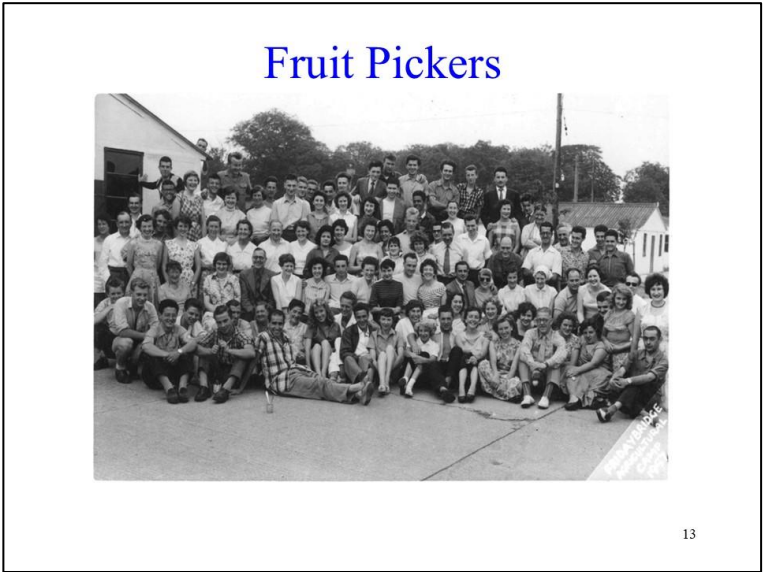
11

All of the crops are seasonal, and in the nineteenth century the local population was probably sufficient to pick the fruit and vegetables. Any excess was sent by train to markets, typically in London, but also in the midlands and the north. Production grew rapidly and soon many thousands of seasonal fruit pickers were coming from London.

Fruit Pickers

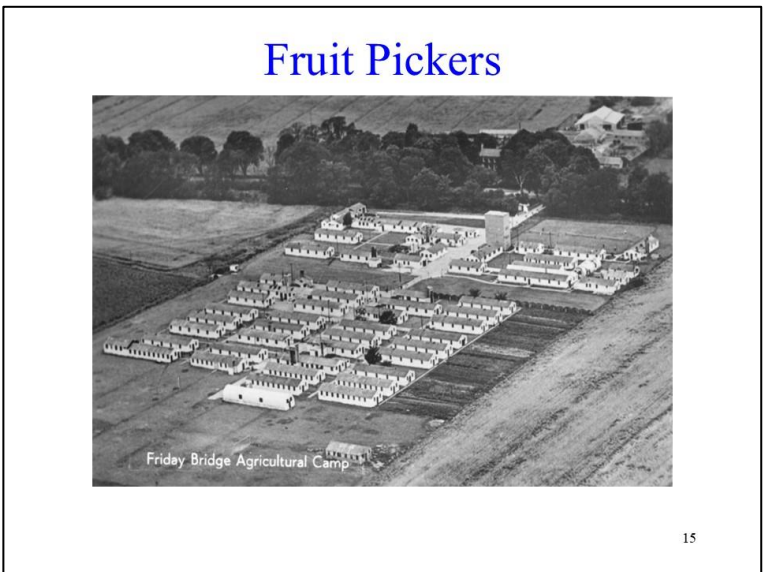
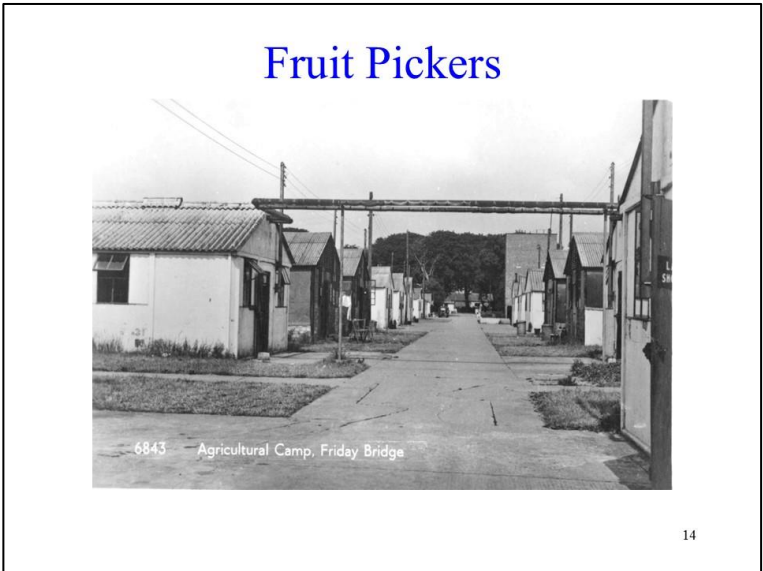
12

Whilst many farms would have regular teams and families working from year to year, there were several agricultural camps that could accommodate many hundreds of workers.



The camp at Friday Bridge had originally been a camp for internees during World War 2.

As with many other internment camps across the country, it is very likely that the Friday Bridge internees provided a useful crop picking workforce during the war.



Teams and whole families of pickers would work from farm to farm as successive crops ripened. They were collected in the morning and returned to the accommodation in the evening.

The strawberry pickers here can be seen picking the fruit into chips – a lightweight split wooden basket.

Fruit Picking

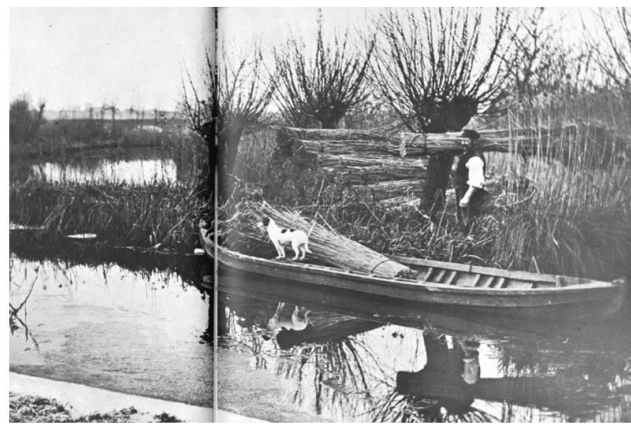


LONDON STRAWBERRY-PICKERS.
Business and pleasure are often combined in the strawberry-picking season by the poor of London, for whom a change of air in the country would otherwise be impossible. Workers are here seen in the Wisbech district.

16

For heavier fruit and vegetables, more substantial containers were needed, and woven baskets were used. The remaining marshy areas of the Fens provided ideal conditions for growing osiers, which were used to make the basket.

Osiers



Cutting Osiers, Babylon (Ely) c.1910₇

Once picked, dried and peeled, the osiers were sent to piece workers who wove baskets and hampers to standard sizes that could be easily stacked and transported.

Osiers



Osier stripping for Joe Munsey, Basket Maker, Cottenham, c.1900

18

Osiers



Erith 1890

19

The chip baskets were much cheaper and quicker to manufacture, but were typically used just once and passed on to the end customers.

The wicker baskets were designed to be returned to the farmer to be reused many times. The trains taking the produce to the markets, would return each evening loaded with the wicker baskets.

Depending on the size and use of the basket, there was a deposit payable for its return – 6d, 1s, 2/6, etc., and many of the market checks issued by the London wholesalers were used for paying these deposits.

Chip Baskets



Chip Basket Factory (British Basket & Besto Company?) 1920's

20

Returning to the tokens, the map on the left is Blaeu's map of 1648, showing the area prior to the major drainage schemes.

A modern Ordnance Survey map has been shaded to match Blaeu. The pale blue areas are the original tidal areas and the undrained Fens. The red dots are the locations of places known to have issued tokens. Looking more closely at the red dots in the blue area, these are all on slightly higher ground than the surroundings.

Distribution of Tokens



Blaeu (1648)



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A Pathé film from 1963 describes the Fruit Special train taking workers from the east end of London into the Fens for their working holiday. They were collected from the station by the farmers and taken to the accommodation.

Evidence of Usage (1963)



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW_CRnCb2A

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW_CRnCb2A

At the very end of the 1963 film, is a very brief scene where the farmer can be seen with a box of tokens between his legs. The tokens are sorted into bags, and he is reaching in to pick some out to pay for the baskets of weighed fruit. From the machine in the background, these are probably gooseberries.

The image on the left, taken from a glass slide, shows a similar scene, possibly at Cockett's Fruit Farm, Wisbech. In the lower left corner, a wooden tally box with eight compartments can be seen.

Tokens in Use



c.1935

1962

23

The pickers' tallies or tokens are typically struck in metal or printed on card. The metal pieces are typically earlier, but they are more robust and were used for a much longer period. They also account for the finds made by metal detectorists today.

The tokens are purely functional and thus only the name of the farmer, the name of the farm and the denomination of the token is needed.

The tokens are typically struck in brass or aluminium, and a few are in zinc, copper or steel.

Metal Tokens



24

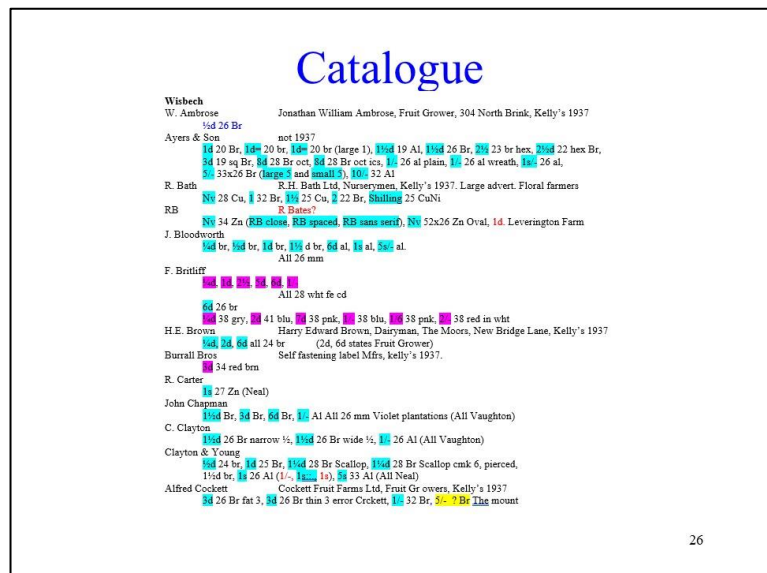
An alternative to the metal tokens are the printed cardboard tokens. These are inexpensive and easily printed by local printers. As with the metal tokens, the text typically includes the farmer's name, the denomination and the name of the farm.

An advantage of the card tokens is that they are usually printed on coloured card, which allows easy identification and sorting.



As the catalogue grew, a compact notation was devised that would allow new pieces to be quickly identified and the location of pieces already known. Pieces, reported from sales lists and other less accurate sources, could be checked and their descriptions updated.

The catalogue is alphabetical by issuing placename or farm name, where only that is given. Next is the issuer's name and then the different tokens in increasing denominations. Metal and card tokens are listed on separate lines and different coloured text and background used to identify the source.



This is the first page of the Wisbech section of the catalogue.

There are a few cases where the original token box has survived along with some of its contents.

This box belonged to S. Shinkins of Three Holes and also includes the look-up sheet for the payment to be made for a given the weight of fruit and number of chips.

The values are in new pence and includes half pennies, so must date to the 1970s.



The boxes were mostly acquired by Dick Pentelow in the 1970s and are all roughly the same size, with several compartments, each capable of holding a few hundred tokens of each denomination.

Hoards

11 hoards
5405 tokens
114 types
Typical order 50-100 of each denomination, maximum 200-300

28

The metal tokens were produced by several manufacturers. The tokens of Emsley and Collins of Whaplode also include the name Burrall Bros Wisbech. However, several of the tokens also show Vaughton of Birmingham on the reverse, suggesting that this issue had been subcontracted to one of the major manufacturers of metal tokens.

Other makers of metallic tokens include Ardill of Leeds and Neal of London.

Manufacturers - Burrall Bros

Tea Dealer & Grocer, High Street, 1887
Patent Fastener Label Mfrs, Bedford St., 1900
Self Fastening Label Mfrs, Nene Parade, 1929, 1937

Ardill - Leeds
Vaughton - Birmingham = Burrall Bros?
Neal - London

Card tokens are easily printed locally, and though there would have been several printers operating in Wisbech, just one token has been found that includes the printer's name.

This token is printed on very thin card and has had a steel rim added to make it more robust.

Poyser

Weds 4th February 1931
Opening of the new concrete bridge.
William Poyser,
(Printer &) Stationer, (1900), 1929, 1937

30

The majority of the tokens were issued by farmers, market gardeners and for orchards. The back story and history are relatively simple to find, though exact dates may be challenging when two or three generations of a family have the same name or initials.


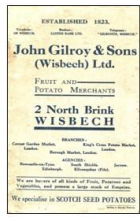
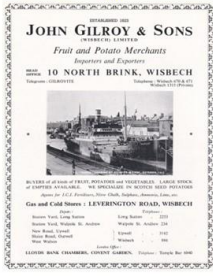
However a few tokens stand out and have a much larger story to tell. For example, John Gilroy & Sons (Wisbech) Ltd, who operated at the wholesale markets in London at Kings Cross and Covent Garden for many decades.


In 1960, Ernest Hickling, Esq., who was the Chairman and Managing Director of the company, was given an OBE (Civil Division) for services to the marketing of fruit and vegetables. The company was wound up in 1967.

The farms were spread out across the Fens and the fruit and vegetables were collected and taken to the stations by horse and cart.

As the businesses and volume of produce grew, the demand for rail transport increased. In 1883 a dedicated train line was constructed between Outwell Basin and Wisbech station. This branch line had many stops along the way for collecting the produce and transporting the agricultural workers across the area.

John Gilroy & Sons (Wisbech) LTD








Kelly's directory of Northumberland (1827, 1828-9, and 1855) grocer and tea dealer on the High Street of Berwick upon Tweed
 Northumberland and Durham Advertiser of 12 March 1857 John Gilroy & Sons, Potato Warehouse, Mill Dam, Brewery Lane, S. Shields
 1911-1920 no entries
 1891 - 1903] 1906, 1908, 1910 [1911-1918 with John Gilroy & Sons, as fruit salesman, at 2 York St., Covent Garden and a 1919 entry at 50 Longacre
 1920-1967 Wisbech when wound up
 Token 1911-1914

31

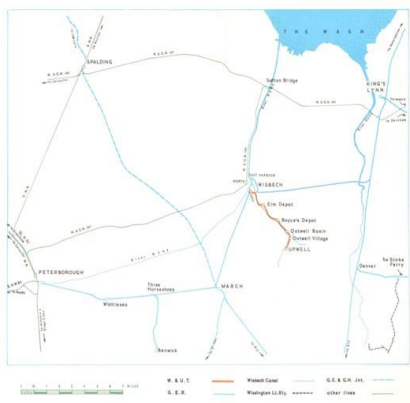
To The Station



1058.

32


Trains



Wisbech - March 1847
King's Lynn 1848

Wisbech-Upwell Steam Tram
20 August 1883 - 21 May 1966

Wisbech - Outwell Basin;
1st class 3d,
2nd class 2d,
Goods 4d per ton.

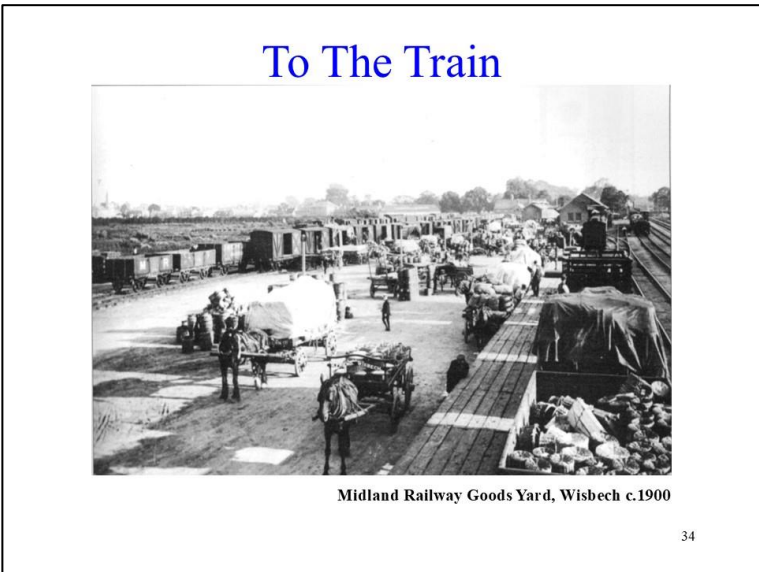


Drewry Shunter D2202, crossing Elm Road in 1963

33

The trains were loaded in the afternoons and evenings and set off for their wholesale markets and buyers early in the morning.

The image here is late afternoon when the trains are returning with the empty baskets and crates to be collected by the farmers.



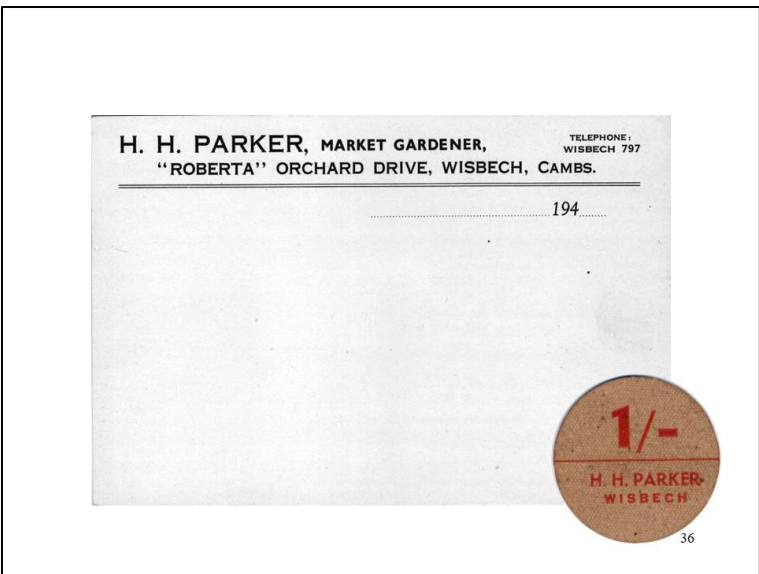
To make sure that the produce went to the correct merchant or auctioneer, and the reusable baskets were returned to the original farmer, every container was labelled.

These labels are often found with the tokens and other local ephemera, showing that the produce of the Fens was reaching markets across the whole of the country.



Other ephemera can also be found that adds a little extra detail that might not be found elsewhere.

After twenty five years of cataloguing, it is still not possible to estimate what proportion of farmers used tokens. There was likely a minimum size of farm and workforce that would justify the use of a token system.



When the supply of a particular crop exceeded the market demand, wholesale prices would drop and it would be more profitable to send to local companies that would make preserves to be sold in different markets.

Chivers

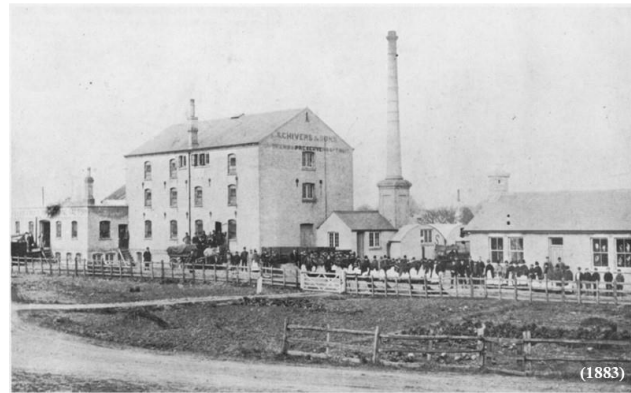


First Boiling in 1873

37

Originally market gardeners, at the very south of the Fens, the Chivers family started a fruit preserving and jam business in 1873. By 1875 they had built a four floor factory and were employing 150 people.

Chivers Jam



Local family - market gardeners, Cottenham, Histon and Impington
Four Floor Factory, Victoria Works, Histon, built 1875 , 150 employees

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The company expanded, buying other fruit farms across the country and over the following decades diversified into other crops and developed new methods of preserving, canning and packaging.

Chivers Jam



Parchment lids, 1894

39

The company had its own research and engineering departments, held several important patents, including the screw-top jam jar lids that pop when the seal is broken.

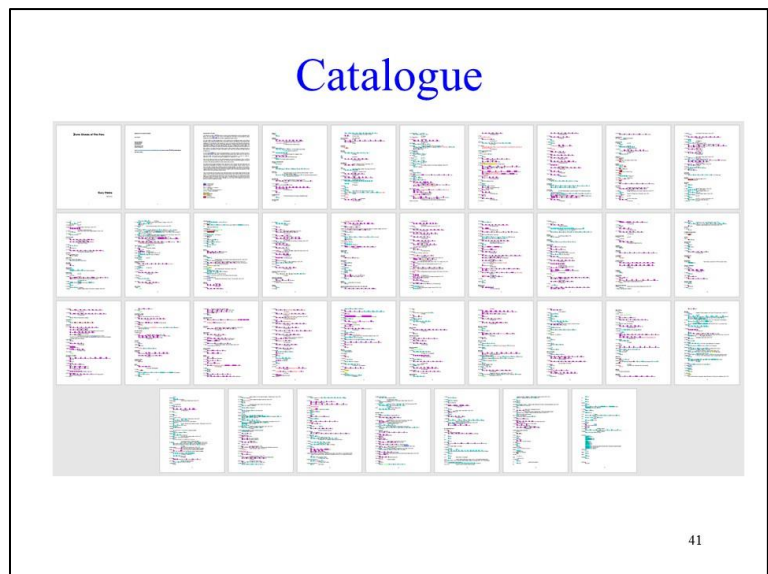
Following vitamin C research conducted by Mamie Olliver in the firm's microbiological laboratory in the 1930s, the Histon factory scaled up its production of blackcurrant purée to supply both soldiers and civilians during the Second World War.



Changes in crops, production techniques, mechanisation and transport after the 1970s, brought to an end the need for a large workforce. Wisbech station closed to passengers in 1968 and the final goods train was in 2000.

In summary, the area known as the Fens, with an area of about 1500 square miles, and its agricultural activity between the 1880s and 1970s, based on many small farms, has resulted in a very large series of picker's checks.

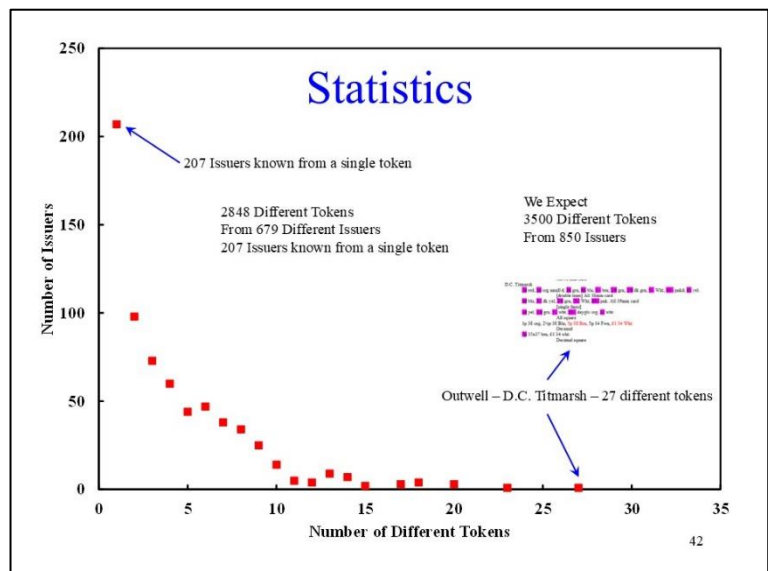
This is a screen shot of an early catalogue. The latest version will be presented in Part (ii) of this note.



In an attempt to determine how many tokens might have been issued this chart analyses the distribution of tokens in the catalogue.

For example, 207 issuers are known from a single token which might be single specimen or one example from a hoard comprising a single denomination. This latter case it typical when the farmer uses just one token for the deposit on a container.

At the other end of the scale, D.C. Titmarsh of Outwell issued 27 different tokens, both pre-decimal and decimal.



The surviving token boxes have between three and eight compartments, suggesting that a typical number of tokens in use on a farm might be six. More tokens will be found, from both known issuers and new names. Many issues will have been completely lost to the melting pot, fire or compost, and metal detectorists will continue to find pieces that can be added to the catalogue.

As a very rough estimate, the present catalogue might be 80% complete.

Acknowledgements

- Dick Pentelow (R. Wade Potatoes Ltd)
- Duncan Pennock
- Jim Hutchinson
- H.C. Darby
- Geoff Percival
- Chris Parrish (etc)
 - COB, Whitmore, Simmons, Tokens For Sale

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As a postscript, the catalogue of tokens now lists several more contributors. Most recently (November 2024) the pieces held by the Wisbech & Fenland Museum were reviewed. Collected independently over the last 40 years, with 450 tokens, and little duplication, the collection provided 62 new pieces, mostly filling gaps in series from known issuers, and a handful of new issuers. Noting that adding 62 to maybe 3000 is just a 2% increase, the estimates suggested above are probably reasonable.