

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Please note that the old david@powell8041.freesevve.co.uk address advertised on earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.

Beacon Tokens in Britain

My thanks to Alex Kussendrager for bringing what is apparently a London beacon token to my attention, and a very fine one it is too. Alex has previously written for LTT on the beacon tokens of his native Netherlands {back page of LTT_100}, and we have seen a number of Dutch pieces since; they are toll tokens issued for use on the waterways, to finance the many lighthouses which ensure safe passage through them. Fig.1, however, is pictorial, and has a different purpose. Since the time of the Armada, if not before, fires have been lit on hilltops across the land to convey urgent messages, such as the landing or approach of an invading army, to convey to the locals along the route the need to put emergency defensive plans into action..... including, of course, lighting their own local beacon so that the next few villages, a few miles further on, receive and further the message.



Fig.2 is a more rustic example, from Suffolk, but it fulfils the same purpose; chunky, uniface and with an incuse design, it weighs in at 13.43gm and, with a very smooth uniface reverse, feels like a small weight. Perhaps that was to distinguish it from other, more conventional, farmers', traders' and parish tokens.



A good description of how a network of defensive beacons was used is given at:
 ⇒ <https://www.scarboroughsmaritimeheritage.org.uk/article.php?article=28>

As to the purpose of how the tokens themselves fitted into this, that is less obvious and one can but conjecture. Some possible uses are:

- ⇒ A pass granting access to the local beacon, for purposes of lighting, filling, tidying etc.
- ⇒ A permission/command physically conveyed by one authority to the next, as an instruction that their beacon was to be lit.
- ⇒ A payment, for later cashing in, to those tasked with the administration of a beacon.

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An Armada beacon consisted basically of a metal framework to hold a quantity of wood, mounted on a tall pole; put "Picture of Armada beacon" into Google and you will see a number of examples come up. How old many of them are is open to debate, and some are clearly modern reincarnations erected to celebrate either the Millennium or one of the recent regal jubilees.

The main Williamson series of 17th cent copper & brass tokens contains at least two examples of beacon depictions, one from London and one from Southwark, but as both of these are urban it is to be presumed that these are pub or shop signs; having said which, it is not unreasonable to think that their selection may have some historical basis. Fig.3, somewhat magnified, is a farthing of James Pitman of Southwark. Williamson comments that there was a public house called "The Beacon" in the High Street in 1723, and further remarks that a large part of Tooley Street near the church was known from the 15th cent onwards by a name which derived from the Old English phrase for "watch-tower". So, folks, look out for more examples in both lead and main series tokens alike!



Readers' Correspondence



First up, a mid-late 18th cent piece {Fig.1} notified via Stuart Elton; of uncertain provenance, although robust and well-formed initials like this often indicate Kent or Sussex. Stuart asks whether it might be a bell; possibly, but I am not wholly convinced. If the depiction is joined the whole way down both sides then yes; but if disjoint, possibly the tools of IM's trade pictured one above the other, with the bottom one looking suspiciously like a weaver's shuttle. I favour the latter.

Some of the artwork in the later stages of the lead token era is fairly degenerate; sometimes we can all take guesses and any one of us might be right, or none. In the case of David Boyd's Fig.2a I favour turning the piece 110 degrees clockwise to produce a tree or plant, or even the head and neck of a man. Fig.2b is a 90 degree turn, near enough to see the effect.



Tom Hams' Fig.3 is very faint, but looks like it might depict a soldier in uniform. The artwork is well executed, despite the effects produced by the soft-looking texture, and I wonder whether it could be emergency money made to serve the needs of a locally recruited militia. The style is mid-late 18th cent, so maybe we are talking about preparation for the Napoleonic Wars, although I would favour just a tad earlier than that. My first feeling with such a piece would be to ask whether the findspot was anywhere near where military training or recruiting might have taken place.

J.R.Carpenter's Fig.4 is an example of an occasionally occurring variety of the cartwheel type {classification type 3} where, instead of spokes meeting at a central point, there is a circle in the middle with segments radiating out. There is obviously potential for something, e.g. issuer initials or numeric value, to be placed in the circle; in this case probably not, although the crud which clings to the piece renders that a little uncertain. The segments are definitely filled, however; probably with a character apiece, some of them looking like numbers. Two of them look as if they could be "17", which could, but not guaranteed, be the first two digits of the date of issue; for 34mm diameter or thereabouts, along with the style, suggests fairly late 18th cent. Finally, that bend; is it accidental damage from the passage of time, or the deliberate folding over of coinlike items converted into love tokens? I favour the latter, as I think a love token would be more thoroughly folded. My proofreader wondered whether the segments might represent the zodiac, but I am not sure there are enough of them.



It is always good to see a rustic face or bust with a bit of individual character about it, such as Bill Read's Fig.5. The guy shown will almost certainly be the issuer, but as to why he made it is anybody's guess. Findspot context is the best clue as to whether he is more likely to be a farmer or a shopkeeper.



Keith Smiley's Fig.6, similarly; the depiction in this case being an armorial device of the issuer rather than his physical features, increasing the chance of him being a gentrified landowner with an estate. Even that, however, is not wholly guaranteed, for an estate will only support so many, and over the generations the more peripheral members of landed families sometimes moved into professions, as the presence of personal arms on a number of main series 17th cent tokens will testify. With such a piece, one has to ask whether there were any well-connected families resident near the findspot, and what their armorial devices were. A landowner has different reasons for issue than a tradesman; a pass granting permission to be on his land, or payment for a unit of work done, are amongst the most likely possibilities.



Ken Webster's Fig.7 looks more than just a cartwheel; there would appear to be a variety of characters around the ring, not that they are sufficiently legible to be able to spell anything. If there had been twelve of them I would have included a clock face amongst the possibilities, raising the probability that the issuer was a clockmaker, but don't think there are that many. On the other side, as is often the case, a would-be enigmatic depiction just becomes a pair of issuer initials {EK} once you turn the piece round 90 degrees anti-clockwise. From the size, a date c.1800 is likely.



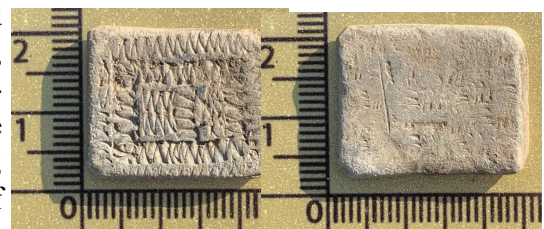
In similar vein is Keith Gowland's attractive Fig.8 which, at about 40mm, is even bigger. It is thin and a bit battered in terms of shape, but the patina, well-formed initials and clear obverse markings are all good positive features. A hybrid of cartwheel and mediaeval groat, these elaborate compounds of standard stock designs tend to be mid-18th cent or thereabouts. The vague hint of clock design is, as with the previous piece, probably coincidental. 40mm is quite large even by the standards of the cartwheel penny era so, whilst it could still be of that date, we have also to consider other options. It is not impossible that it could still be mid-18th cent, rather than early 19th, even though 40mm diameter is quite scarce then. Some of the hop token series had a range of values of all different sizes, and the top-of-range ones, typically for 120 bushels or five shillings, were around crown size. Fig.9, from an unidentified issuer and 42mm in diameter, is an example for comparison. Fig.9 is Kent or East Sussex in style., whilst Fig.8 is of uncertain origin.



Whilst on the subject of superimposition of types, something very different. Paul Hopwood's Fig.10 is an older piece, typical early 18th cent in style, although the surprisingly small 15-16mm diameter argues for a date even earlier than that, even as far back as mid-late 17th cent. The obverse is at heart a not particularly well drawn cartwheel, but there is something symmetrical superimposed on that which, although quite crude, looks as if it might be a standing person. Hybrid stock designs are common enough, but this combination is not. On the back is what one might call a grid, except that with only two uprights and two crossbars it is barely worth the name. So, what else could it be? A fence, perchance?



Next up, Fig.11, a very pleasant lightly-patinated Northumbrian find from Dava Patten. Northumberland behaves like Scotland to some extent in respect of church communion tokens {CTs}, being border country, although not every parish is covered. In England the Anglican church is dominant, in Scotland the Presbyterian; so, in England, it is usually only where there are Scottish-influenced Presbyterian churches that CTs are used. The pieces are varied in terms of size and shape; rectangular ones are common, but this one is rather on the bigger and chunkier side of average. I'd be stretching my imagination a little to deduce that the obverse depiction is a church, but not impossible; however, CTs usually have some initials on them, either of the minister and/or the parish name.





Brian Cruz' Fig.12 imitates Celtic design, but with a diameter of some 20-22 mm is far too large for the Iron Age period. In terms of execution and size it looks early-mid 18th cent. Lead token issuers often imitated designs from the past, and if they found an old coin in the ground, of whatever period, that might well inspire them if they were looking to choose a design for their own piece.

Fig.13, from Ian Stirk, looks like a spoil heap piece, where something has gone wrong during manufacture and the maker has cast it aside. In this case, maybe it was being struck on lead sheet and a piece of the design came away on the side, meaning that it was hardly worth cutting the excess or sprue off the outside because the result was going to be defective anyway. There are other examples where casting did not go to plan and the sprue was thick enough that the maker did not fancy his chances of getting it off cleanly and thought that he would cut his losses by manufacturing a second token rather than wasting time in a futile attempt to clean up the first one. Test striking is, of course, a viable alternative explanation. For example, perhaps the manufacturer was trying to see whether his lead sheet was thick enough for striking, and fractured it during the course of the attempt..



From a piece which has design but no shape we move to one which has shape but no design; namely, Ronnie Shucksmith's Fig.14. With nothing but a neat hole at the top and a number of crude but smooth indentations further down, I will conjecture that this 40mm by 60mm monster is meant to be a beggar's badge, and that the number of indents represents the allocated number of the locally-licensed beggar concerned. It will have been heavy, uncomfortable and conspicuous for him to wear, and deliberately so, in order to dissuade him and others from applying. The subject has been discussed in several earlier editions of LTT {see index}, and in most cases the pieces bear some design accompanied by a physical number; as per Fig.15, only slightly smaller, from Julian Spyeby; however, nothing wrong with resorting to the approach of Fig.14 if manufacturing and artistic sources were limited.



From the ugly now to the neat and attractive, in the form of Mark Deller's well-formed Fig.16, found near Dorchester. I usually associate this type of design with seals, typically around 1700, but in this case the piece is so extremely well formed that a token is suggested. Tokens are occasionally made by clamping halves together in the manners of a seal, and Fig 16c hints that this might be the case; so, difficult to be wholly certain whether we are looking at a well-executed token or a very neatly applied seal. True, the lion rampant does often appear on some of the Elizabethan and later jetons of the 1574-1614 period, but usually within a cartouche. I have looked at Mitchiner's Tokens and Jetons Vol.3 pages 1631-1657, which is the most extensive reference for these pieces, and cannot see anything which looks particularly similar, although I do agree that the quality of execution is similar. Given the official-looking nature of the piece, This is more likely to be an authorising officer/postholder rather than an individual tradesman.



Finally, Martin Gardens' Fig.17, a little magnified, which looks for all the world like a late Elizabethan 12mm piece... until he informed me that it was found in Rome! The reverse is a scorpion, from its absence in this country {fortunately} never used as a shop sign or pub name, whilst the single initial was a common precursor to the 17th cent triad.

More on Continental Communion Tokens



Figs.1-2 are from a group of about nine Communion tokens {CTs} advertised a while back by a leading German auction house as part of a major collection of Danzig-related lead tokens which also included many of the civic pieces, associated with payment for compulsory work, discussed in LTT_151. Fig.3 is a fine lead piece from Lübeck. Yet, none of these pieces appear in Burzinski, the current standard reference work. How many more of them are there out there? Or did Burzinski {who died in 1999} have some criteria which caused him to think that they did not warrant inclusion?

CTs are mainly a Presbyterian phenomenon, but other churches did occasionally use them and Burzinski seems to have included everything he knew about, regardless of religious denomination or nationality, if he thought it was associated with the performance or conduct of the communion service. Quite a number of countries are represented in his book, including some from the European mainland, even though the number of examples for some of them are very few. There are, for instance, several dozen French Huguenot méreaux mentioned. So, did he exclude the rest because he thought they were for some other purpose, despite their depictions, or did he just not know about them?

My suspicion inclines to the latter. A chalice on a token always suggests CT, even if unbeknown its purpose is internal ecclesiastical taxation, payment or administration, and a little online research suggests that the Roman Catholic church also had its own CT near-equivalents, called Beichtzeichen. A German work of 1920 on the different types of tokens {Ref.1, details below} includes the following:

“Die Beichtzeichen der katholischen Kirche kontrollieren die Erfüllung der österlichen Beichtpflicht. Sie waren partikularrechtlich vorgeschrieben, um die Osterkommunion empfangen zu können. Diese Zeichen, in der Neuzeit aus Papier, waren im Mittelalter aus Metall.”

which translates as:

“The Beichtzeichen {confessional CTs} of the Catholic Church control the fulfilment of the Easter confession. They were prescribed by particular law in order to be able to receive Easter communion. These tokens, made in modern times of paper, were made of metal in the Middle Ages.”

That doesn't feel very much different from the Protestant equivalent, although given the dates on the pieces above it would appear that the definition of “Middle Ages” is a bit elastic.

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A 19th cent book on the chronology of Leipzig's history suggests that Beichtzeichen were occasionally used by the Catholic church to address special issues, as well as to guarantee congregational integrity at Easter. It translates:

“1533. Issuance of confessional tokens {Beichtzeichen} to research the secret followers of Luther. 28th March, merchant Peter Gengenbach interrogated about his religious beliefs.”

Possibly a token was issued to each attendee, with the specific intention of seeing which members hadn't got one when they were gathered back in afterwards. If any of our overseas readers know of any further examples, or can enlighten us as to their various purposes, please write in.

{Ref.1 = https://archive.org/stream/numismatischezei53stuoft/numismatischezei53stuoft_djvu.txt }

Tokens to Pay for Baptisms?

From a fictitious source comes an interesting insight into the possible purpose of Fig.1, an ecclesiastical token from the church of St.Paul, in Liège. From Belgian author Charles de Coster's "Till Eulenspiegel", written in 1867:

⇒ "Needs must," said Soetkin, "when the babe is borne to baptism, that we give two petards to the priest and a florin for the feasting."



Whether this was a locally agreed rate or one in use on much of the continent I do not know, but our two-petard token {Fig.1} now looks as it might have been used for paying priests, an issue which we have already talked about when looking at the Parisian mudlarking of Arthur Forgeais in LTT_34/35. No modern British lead will have been made for this purpose, but go back to the ecclesiastic pewter of mediaeval days and some of it likely was.

The church in Liège also produced a one petard token {Fig.2}, so one wonders what that might have got you for your money....

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Crown & Anchor

The illustration on the right comes from "Played at the Pub", by Arthur Taylor, one of an excellent series of books on Britain's sporting heritage, and particularly local sporting heritage. See www.playedinbritain.co.uk for further details. In modern times the game appears to be played with an equivalent of what look very much like poker dice, but in older times? The crown and anchor are two of the designs of our most common stock tokens, whilst hearts and, to a lesser extent, spades are also frequent token subjects. Could something in the {type 4} lis/trident/feathers family, also common, be the club? OK, maybe a little over-imaginative, and perhaps all coincidence, especially if the game is not that old; nevertheless, worth a thought in passing.

