

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attachments to mail@leadtokens.org.uk Please note that the contact addresses advertised in earlier versions of LTT are no longer active.

The Three Cranes Tokens of Queenhithe



Our lead article this month concerns a rare group of tokens, all or nearly all deriving from one very specific Thames-side location; namely the immediate vicinity of the Three Cranes Wharf, to the east side of Queenhithe Dock. I'd don't recall having ever seen one in the flesh, and indeed it was only very recently that I released that the Cranes referred to the loading devices normally found in such locations rather than the birds depicted on other issuers' armorial shields. That is how scarce they are.

Colloquially the numismatic, detecting and mudlarking communities talk about the more recognised token series in terms of 17th cent {Williamson}, which stops in 1672, and 18th cent {Condors}, which starts in 1787. However, there is a heck of a lot of space in between, and lead issues are the cement which usually fills the gap. There are also one or two lesser-known copper or brass pieces in between; plus these pieces above which, apart from perhaps the Cumbrian colliery tokens, are one of the few examples of anything approximating to a series to be found during this interim period. I dub them, collectively and affectionately, 17½th cent tokens.

The only article previously written on these Three Cranes pieces that I know is that put together by LTT reader Philip Mernick for the *British Numismatic Journal* {Vol.77} in 2007, to which I recommend you; access details available overleaf. Five of the above illustrations come from that article., and the sixth from Philip himself. Philip is currently revisiting the subject, with a view to presenting a talk at Token Congress 2026 in October, so, if anyone has seen any of these pieces in the course of their travels, or can otherwise add any facts or ideas to existing knowledge, please let us know.

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A little about the pieces and their issuers now. The tokens are variously in lead, pewter, tin or white metal; i.e. lead-ish, but probably of inconsistent alloy. Some bear dates, between 1700 and 1739, and nearly all the issuers are fruiterers, also sometimes referred to in the press as cydermen, whose various personal events were usually recorded in the civil and ecclesiastical records of St. Martin Vintry, which was the Three Cranes' local parish.

There are currently about two dozen issuers known, most of whom started as apprentices and subsequently became members of the Worshipful Company of Fruiterers, hinting that some of them at least became fairly prominent and affluent as a result of their commercial activities. Given that the most

likely use of the tokens was as receipts for containers which passed hands at the docks,, as per the market checks of more recent times, it is interesting to contrast the probable status and wealth of the two issuing communities.

A number of the pieces have shop signs illustrated or stated on them in the normal way, e.g. the Bottle and Crane {Fig.1}, the Adam and Eve {Figs.3-4} and the Hand and Ball {Fig.5}; references to these can also occasionally be found in the records although, alas! St. Martin Vintry is not as profuse with its fine detail compared to some London parishes. Other pieces have personal family arms on, which is also a hint of status, and, like the shop signs, another feature encountered on the main 17th cent copper and brass series a few decades earlier.

Certain pages of the Vintry's tax records show a large number of these twenty-odd issuers packed together in two or three pages, which hints not only that they were a very compact community but that there might be other fruiterers on those pages whose tokens have not yet been discovered. No token in the series is known by about more than five examples, and most only by one or two; so, statistically, there are likely to be a fair number of other, as yet unknown, issuers out there. Only within the last few days have I discovered that certain of the known issuers were apprenticed to each other, and in one case there is a strong indication that two of them married in to the same family. So, plenty more secrets waiting to be revealed, I feel; anyone who knows anything, please write in!

Follow-up/references:

- ⇒ Philip Mernick may be contacted via his website at <https://www.mernick.org.uk/> , or else write into LTT and I will pass any information on.
- ⇒ BNJ77 may be found at <https://www.britnumsoc.org/publicns/bnj-articles-by-year> ; Philp's article is on page 286-292

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Readers' Correspondence

After the previous article it seems only appropriate to kick off this month's contributions with another piece from Queenhithe, Bolly May's delightful Fig.1, which from its diameter, 13mm, dates from the early 17th cent. Philip Mernick informs me that, according to mudlarks whom he has spoken to, the 18th cent Queenhithe context has been largely lost due to modern redevelopment and the environmental effect of introducing large speedboats in recent years; however, here is a nice piece from, maybe, c.1620. Comments welcome.

I'll magnify the item a bit; it is worth looking at, for it illustrates some valuable points regarding the accommodation of the maximum amount of information on small flans. The typical diameter of lead tokens rose from 13mm in 1600 to 15mm in 1650, approximately, and 13mm, frankly, was not enough to get any appreciable quantity of data on. The issuer, TB, is a grocer, and he wants show his name, shop sign and his guild arms, the latter stating the nature of his business. So, TB goes top right above the bird, and that is arguably more attractive than putting TB on one side and the bird on the other. One problem solved, but there are still nine cloves on a chevron to be fitted in the shield on the other side.. On a 15mm flan, fine; on 13mm, a bit of a push. So, what does our resourceful engraver do? Turn the bottom trio of cloves upside down so that they fit nicely under the chevron. Ten out of ten for initiative, that man.

Whilst on early material, Simon Vanstone's Fig.2; he asks, does that mitre indicate that it is a Boy Bishop issue? That is one of two possible explanations; the other is that it is an inn or shop sign. Either way, however, the date feels late 16th cent. What determines the issue, however, is the merchant mark on the other side; a style of identifier, used instead of lettering, in days before most people could read or write. Introduced in the 14th cent, the 15th and 16th cents were their heyday.



Users selected the design for their merchant mark in the way they selected their shop signs; some combination of whim, meaning and personal preference. Straight lines were the most popular components, due to the greater ease with which they could be carved by merchants on to the wooden containers holding their goods; some incorporated the initials of their issuers, or even a monogram of their full name, whilst other designs were meaningless. The downside of merchant marks, both then and now, was that they could not be readily indexed for reference. Presumably, back in the day, the relatively small mercantile community encountered each mark with sufficient frequency to become familiar. 450 years on, distinguishing the various issuer marks is not a quick or easy task.

The mitre reverse is common on pieces of this date and size, and, strangely, they quite often seem to be slightly oval. Fig.2, before magnification, is approximately 13mm across, arguably 12x14mm. Why should a merchant choose an ecclesiastic symbol, Simon asked? The answers to that are as varied as with the merchant mark. A few possibilities:

- ⇒ Perhaps his surname was Bishop;
- ⇒ Perhaps there was a church or cathedral nearby, and he felt that an ecclesiastic symbol helped link shop to location in customers' minds.
- ⇒ Perhaps he wished to curry favour with the church, to encourage them to use his services. He may even have been a clothier who stocked their vestments.
- ⇒ Perhaps he wished to suggest that he was Church of England rather than non-conformist, in days when people were sensitive about religious allegiance.
- ⇒ Perhaps he was naming his premises after a favourite pub in the home town of his youth.
- ⇒ ...or, maybe, he just liked the design and knew that no-one else locally was currently using it!

The only pre-requisite was that the mark had to be unique within the issuer's area of influence, to avoid confusion with others.

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Moving on a few decades, and about 3000 miles west, Lance Stickney found Fig.3 whilst digging at his home near Boston {Massachusetts, not Lincolnshire}. The house was built in 1666. It is obviously very difficult to say anything too certain when the design is so vague, but the thoughts which come to mind are:



- ⇒ If a token or weight, the number of holes might indicate a value. However, the piece is very considerably larger than those of the 17th cent, which in Britain were typically 19-21mm across for halfpennies and 15-17mm for farthings. No general rules, of course, and any community either here or in the US was welcome to do its own thing, but gut feeling is that it cannot be a token. If a weight, it is possible that it was deliberately manufactured a little on the large side and then holes deliberately drilled to reduce it to the desired figure. That is slightly more plausible.
- ⇒ It is just possibly a test piece, used by someone to practice their drilling skills on before attempting the operation on some more important piece of metal, e.g. the component of a machine.
- ⇒ In the 17th cent, particularly, it was often the practice to nail coins to the lintels and doorposts of one's cottage in the belief that it would ward off witches.

Given that Lance lives in a part of the world which was famous for witch trials at about the date concerned, e.g. those at Salem in 1692-93, I favour the last. Just in case English readers think that that idea is too far-fetched, just remember the activities of Matthew Hopkins in East Anglia in the 1640s.



Phil Mose's Fig.4 looks fairly ordinary 18th cent at first glance but there is a slight air of mystery about it; the middle character of the first side is neither a pure initial nor a monogram, nor is it obvious whether the moonlike curves at top and bottom form a part of that symbol or not. Those large I-like pillars to the side: what are they, pillars or letters? The pairs of initials on the other side are probably a pair of churchwardens or business partners, depending on the nature of use; maybe the symbol on the first side represents their parish or company, respectively.

Next up, a few of those pieces which are pleasantly confusing, by showing possible evidence of two different manufacturing periods simultaneously. Usually these are 18th cent tokens, or late 17th, which borrow from the old mediaeval designs, but not all of them can be so easily dismissed.



Jim Woodroff's Fig.5 is one such. I am presuming that we are looking at an arrow/crossbow-bolt head rather than something like a stylised fir tree. If the piece is small enough to be late mediaeval, which I'll guess it isn't, then maybe crossbow bolts were in limited supply and the rationing of them was controlled by tokens. If it was a pilgrim's piece., then an arrow/pointer might be to remind the holder and his overnight host that he was "on the way" to Canterbury or wherever. However, such ideas are all rather fanciful and I have no firm idea what its purpose was. Any ideas welcome!

Philip Vaughan's Fig.6, magnified here, is also somewhat enigmatic. At first glance one thinks maybe late 17th cent or early 18c from the style of the first side but the diameter, little more than 13mm, is far too small; it suggests either (i) early 17th cent or (ii) near the end of the mediaeval period. The cross is certainly based on a late mediaeval idea but the barbed wheel feels a tad more modern; geometric designs started c.1350-1400 but are usually simpler than this one. This is a hybrid of designs: a common cartwheel, but with a variety of irregular prongs and forks on the spokes, suggesting that some period of evolution has elapsed since the geometric subseries started up. If those are intended to be barbs on the spokes, they could be the prongs on a water-wheel which the buckets were hung on; it is a feature which is seen occasionally on later pieces of the 17th and 18th cents.



No doubt about the period of Adam Ernest Holt's near-cartwheel-size Fig.7; it has to date c.1800, but nevertheless the issuer has chosen a design which borrows from a long way back, namely the late type M degenerates of the end-15th cent. Evenly-spaced diagonal shading? that is very 1500-ish, whilst one can make out in the central ornamentation some evolution of a human head; possibly that of a king, borrowed from a mediaeval penny. The obverse is much more conventional; crude issuer portrait, probably that of a land-owner. With only one initial visible, an "I" on his right rather than the usual two initials flanking, open to debate as to whether it is his surname initial or a numeral indicating the value "one".

James Hurst's Fig.8 also has a hint of c.1500 about it, in this case the BNJ54 type N "black-letter" series with its inscriptions which are ultra-hard to read. No way is this 29-30mm piece from that period, it is clearly mid-late 18th cent, but so random are the rays on the edge, in contrast to the last piece, that one wonders whether they are meant to be decorative lines or characters. The black-letter series is about pieces which look as if they are gibberish round the edge but actually read something meaningful to the very few people who can manage it. Many lead token issuers have done the exact opposite, putting pseudo-inscriptions round the edge which try to pretend that they are real. In the middle, occasionally, are pieces which have such variety of edge that they ask the question briefly: inscription, or not?



Finally, Ian Stannard's Fig.9, which on one side looks like a c.1700 communion token {CT} but was found in the Isle of Axholme, an area of inland Lincolnshire not exactly renowned for Scottish ecclesiastical practices. I've magnified it a bit so that you can better appreciate the reverse; the actual size is about 15mm on the short side and 17-18mm on the longer. The reverse design is curious; if one wished to project the idea of an ecclesiastic background, one might argue for a tall upright cross against the background of rays from a blazing sun. Possibly irrelevant here, but in Scotland the tall upright cross on an early CT usually indicates the Episcopal Church {Church of England in Scotland} rather than the Church of Scotland {Presbyterian}. Not that there was anything to stop a church anywhere adopting a policy of deploying CTs if it wanted to; there was one in Berkshire which chose to. My thanks this month, everybody, as always, for some most interesting contributions.

