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Please note that the old david@powell8041.freeserve.co.uk address advertised on earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.*

Picture Gallery: An 18th Century Miscellany

A mainly 18th cent group this month, which we will start with a few which might just make the 17th. The slender depictions of Fig.1 feel as if they borrow from the main 17th cent series, as do the attempts at an edge design; possibly a bell or an anchor on one side {neither fully convincing} and a moon and stars on the other, although why would one need two shop signs on the same piece? Perhaps Fig.1a depicts, instead, a tool of the issuer's trade.



Fig.2, although slender, is decidedly curious. It was found in the Malvern area. On the left, there are what might be letters, maybe LS {one retrograde}, which might be the issuer's initials. The middle is arguably a jug, butt why would you then have a ladder, or alternatively a porter's stretcher, leaning at 45 degrees on the right? Presumably one of my guesses is wrong. The jug could be some sort of lifting apparatus…. in the 17th cent? Mystery unsolved, guesses please.

Fig.3 looks a little more straight forward; a tea or coffee caddy, or a cheese cover; definitely something to do with refreshment, although worth remembering that tea and coffee were both still in their very early days. Figs 4-5 deal with the same subject, albeit almost certainly the alcoholic variety. We haven't come across many of these {classification type 11} utensil tokens recently, and for those of you who haven't seen it, may I refer you to the article in LTT_87, more than ten years old now, in which I collaborated with glassware expert Colin Brain about the possibilities of dating glassware shapes from tokens and vice versa. The other side of Fig.4 is a more characterful than usual variant of the standard lis/trident type; one could almost imagine a chirpy little bird standing, flapping his wings, after having partaken of the wineglass on the other side.



Often, on lead tokens, the two sides seem rather unconnected; somehow, one would like one of the pair to refer to the issuer, rather than both just being anonymous. The lis/bird of Fig.4 is presumably a shop sign, but Fig.6? The anchor is a common stock design, and the tree/bush almost as frequent. Fig.7 poses an enigma of a different type; one side feels ecclesiastical, the other not particularly. The reverse, without deviating too far from token styles, does not feel quite typical. If a church piece, it could be rather earlier than everything else on this page.

In the world of real coin, overstrikes are not uncommon; it was the numismatic method of recycling. How often do we find them on lead? Fig.8 has a clear undertype which reveals that it started life as a Beata Regina jeton of the 1574-1614 period. The overtype, three initials in a row rather than a triad {unusual}, looks stylistically as if it could be as late as the early-mid 18th cent..

Pairs of lead pieces from the same source are always pleasant. Figs 9-10 are two different specimens of the same double-sided item, and have probably lived their whole lives together; their upper and lower exergues suggest a date not too far from c.1700-20. Like Fig.8, they have a line of three initials. This is relatively scarce for those days; people did not have middle names like they do now. Use of the triad was in decline at this date, but could this be a late alternative form of indicating the traditional information: issuer's surname, his forename, and his wife's? and if so, was the middle or the end initial the forename? Figs.11-12, by contrast, are two different uniface pieces, possibly from the same stable, whose common patina suggests that they, too, have spent life together.



Fig.13 is one of those nice enigmatic ambiguities with which artistic limitation presents the lead enthusiast. My first impression was that the depiction was of a church with a steeple at the right hand side, and hence a village piece, possibly in connection with local Poor Law or vermin administration. However, the steeple has a circle or ball on top. Nothing wrong with that, but not many steeples do, and if you move the whole structure left the circle becomes the head of a chandler, working his stick of candles in the manner frequently seen on both the copper and other lead tokens of the period.



Figs.14-15 show trees, the first looking particularly robust; particularly when they are that strong, one wonders whether the Royal Oak, a popular pub and shop sign for Royalist issuers after the Restoration, is intended. Fig.15 looks a little more fruit-bearing, so might alternatively be a picker's token, although it would also be an apt sign for a fruiterer, Did they have fruiterers in those days? Very much so, although it is not a trade which Williamson specifically lists. Fig.16 is the rather more common simple plant, or bush; well, one presumes it is, but with some of these, particularly those with blobs at the ends of the arms, one might ask whether they are candlesticks. The shape of Fig.16 is odd; if there was a fragment broken off, the original was certainly not round. Maybe it is a shycock target, which often has a straight edge.

Very occasionally one encounters a piece which has a letter alongside a number, in this case W6 {Fig.17}, and wonders what its purpose is. Possibly the "6" is a not-very-well-drawn "G" and "WG" are the issuer's initials; however, that argument doesn't feel very convincing. Ideas welcome on that one, please. Fig.18 shows a number, 45, not normally encountered as a value on a lead token. True, hop tokens are known with values 30 and 60 {bushels}, but they are quite large values, and therefore bigger in size . A truncated date, (16)45 or 17(45) is possible; the latter being more likely, as 18mm diameter and 5.32gm feels a bit too big and chunky for the earlier date. Given that the other side is blank, an issue date seems rather unlikely, although 1745 does feels .about right Perhaps we are looking at an early example of a type with serial numbers, such as a pay or tool check? Fig.19 is a much simpler example of a single number, or letter; scratched, rather than moulded or cast, one cannot be sure whether it is a retrograde "S", or a lazy attempt at a "2".



At the bottom of the previous page, several pieces depicting heads, the first two of which look as if they could have been borrowed from antiquity. Fig.20, particularly, looks for all the world as if it has been modelled on a denarius of one of the Roman ladies of the early 3rd cent, maybe Julia Maesa. Such pieces would have been dug up at intervals all over Britain, and occasionally by people who were just happening to seek design inspiration for pieces of their own. Whether the issuer was female is anybody's guess; in other series about 4% were, on average, mostly but not entirely widows running their late husband's business. The high exergue on the reverse suggests mid-late 18th cent.

The four large pellets on Fig.21 quite possible indicate a value; this one has potential for being a mining token, as 4,5,6,7 are numbers often found on them as indicators of the size of the wagon filled. Effectively, that would make it the colliery equivalent of a picker's check. The busts on Figs.22-23, both uniface, are more modern and look to be derived from the coins of George II and III respectively.



Another themed group are Figs.24-26, which all depict varieties of what is either a harrow, i.e. an agricultural implement, or a counting board, which on main Williamson-series 17th cent copper is usually chequered; indeed, it is from these counting boards that the word "Exchequer" is derived Both "The Harrow" and "The Chequers" appear frequently as shop and tavern signs, although on lead few makers go to the trouble of shading alternate squares. The reverses are all fairly various, although the trio were all discovered at the foot of the same tree near Harlow, which suggests that they all relate to the same premises, possibly an inn, even if they were not by the same maker. Fig.25 looks the oldest, and probably depicts a merchant mark.



Several more robust pieces next, the first two{Figs.27-28}, depicting cross variants which look as if they have been quite distinctively chosen, suggesting that they emanate from sort of official, perhaps ecclesiastical, source. The reverse of Fig.27, 16 pellet-ended batons, is not quite the usual type 3 cartwheel. Both obverses exude formality, especially Fig.28, which probably derives from some City institution. Fig.29's reverse is again from the lis/trident family {classification type 4}, and looks as if it could easily have come from the same maker; however unlikely, as the second side appears to depict a talbot, a popular hunting dog of the time which we have seen on several pieces before.

The device on Fig.30 is curious, but probably a retrograde "G"; one reader has already suggested that it might stand for "Guest", and is a pass issued by the landlord of an inn called "The Anchor". Whether true I know not, but it is certainly a very plausible suggestion.



Next, several mid-18th cent stock type hybrids of the type previously discussed in LTT_86 {Figs.31-34}; attempting to generate more artistic interest by superimposing two or three of the common designs, which frequently produce quite attractive results. Fig.31 is a cross between a cartwheel and a 6-petal, retaining the look of a pseudo-groat, whilst Fig.32 retains the outer ring of the groat, only, whilst inserting a neat and regular version of the cartwheel which looks more like a ships wheel than most.. Figs.33-34 look a little more rustic but none the less attractive, the latter particularly; Fig.33 exploring variations on how to deploy the angles between the arms of a simple cross, whilst Fig.34 takes a large flower-head as the basic design and proceeds to adorn it with elaborate shading.



Figs.35-36 show the degeneracy into which some late 18th cent token manufacture started to descend. The first shows its issuer's initials clear enough, in a style good enough to approximately date it, but the reverse is highly ambiguous: a flower-head or not, with two symbols below which might be either PL {issuer's initials} or 97 {last two digits of date}; both retrograde, leaving one uncertain in both cases as to which way round they are to be read. Fig.36a is possibly a couple of candlesticks, but more likely issuer's initials "II", possibly but not necessarily for "JJ". The reverse, Fig.36b, has been suggested as a man tending a horse but might just be a very bad rendering of a stock type from the lis/trident family.

We end with two pieces, one the simplest of the set, the other arguably the most interesting. Fig.37 is what you do when you have absolutely zero artistic skills; cut a blank and then scratch the most basic of designs. Two feeble lines crossing, that is all. You might not think that that is enough to identify it as a valid token, but if it is only used within a very limited community and everybody within that small population knows what it stands for, maybe that will do. Nice to have something better, but sometimes needs must.

Fig.38, uniface, depicts a hot air balloon, which dates it to no earlier than the mid-1780s. We have written on these before, in LTT_98 and LTT_116 {front page in both cases}, and all three pieces are different. It is an amazing subject to see chosen, and one can but guess that they are tickets for a demonstration event. Strangely, Fig.38 came from Saunderton, near Princes Risborough, which by chance is one of the only two or three places where I have seen a hot air balloon in action personally. However, I don't think that the use of lead tickets these days would go down very well with the modern health and safety folk, so I think we can safely assume that Fig.38 is an original, rather than a modern copy!

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Something A Bit Fishy ....



Fish-shaped tokens like Fig.39 are occasionally seen, plus my thanks to Jack Pryor for showing me Fig.40. I don't know which ports used them or what their precise purpose was, but my hunch is that they were used like market checks; i.e. as receipts given for containers temporarily passed from one trader or supplier to another. Boxes, crates etc. may only have been worth sixpence or a shilling apiece, typically, but collectively they were big money and it was important to control where they were and who was holding them. At least there is not too much doubt about the issuer's trade! It would be good to know which ports employed such tokens so, if you find any new examples which might hint at the answer, do please let us know.



What the Eel is Going On?

{The following is predominantly a precis of an online article, describing and quoting the work of two mediaeval historians, John Wyatt Greenlee and Paul Freedman, on the eel as a unit of mediaeval currency. The full version may be found at https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/medieval-eel-rent-map-england}

In medieval England, eels essentially became currency; medieval peasants would use the fish to pay their rent and make other economic transactions.

Medieval land users were required to pay rent to the landowner each year, and in many cases, these rents were paid "in kind"; not in coins, but rather with goods, such as chickens, eggs, and—would you believe it—eels. The first recorded rent payment made with eels was in 700. By the time of the Domesday Book survey in 1086, there is evidence of something more than half a million eels being paid in rent in England every year; indeed, in Domesday there are more rents paid in eels than anything else. Eels were somewhere in between a delicacy and an everyday item; the fact that people were asked to pay rent in eels shows that their landlords wanted them, particularly in East Anglia, where the terrain was congenial and the eels most numerous. A lot of mills paid rents in eels, probably because there were plenty readily available near the mill races.

Monasteries and religious institutions also carried out a large number of eel transactions. In the pre-Reformation Catholic world, there were large numbers of fasting days in which you had to abstain from meat; Lent in particular, and others up to a total which amounted to nearly a third of the year. Meat markets shut down, and fish was a primary commodity. Fish were plentiful and could be easily gathered. Since eels were an appropriate Lent meal, monasteries saw them as a highly sought-after commodity and collected them in droves from their tenants. Some monasteries received tens of thousands of eels in rental transactions, stockpiling the eels to then pay for their needs.



Illustration of a transaction conducted using eels as a medium of currency, taken from a 14th cent manuscript

The distribution of eel rent transactions are displayed at https://historiacartarum.org/eel-rents-project/english-eel-rents-10th-17th-centuries/ , which, as its name implies, highlights the surprisingly late date up to which rental payments in eels were made. The transactions vary from a few eels to several tens of thousands of eels. One of the larger ones concerns Ely Abbey, now Ely Cathedral {just wondering, had did it get that name?}, paying another abbey 26,275 eels to rent a fen.

Over time, the practice of paying rent with eels slowly declined. Possible contributory reasons are:

- ⇒ the changing availability of money,
- ⇒ changes in habitat and ecology,
- ⇒ a possible reduction in eel population due to the Little Ice Age,
- ⇒ the knock-on effects of the Black Death, a shifting of the market more in favour of the labourers, meaning that lords couldn't get away with asking for rents to be paid in kind, and a shifting of the landlords to sheep farming instead of the more traditional and opportunistic hunter-gatherer methods, leading to changes in the medieval diet.

So, if you find a lead token with an eel on, or something like a squiggly "S" which looks as if it might be an eel, now you know. Are some of the type 4 tridents in fact eel forks? Maybe more on that later.