

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 LJFeditor@aol.com or dmpowell@waitrose.com

Lead Tokens and the Vermin Acts

The natural world provides frequent subject matter on leads both ancient and comparatively modern, and we have wondered before whether there was reason behind the choices. Did animals and birds appear on tokens because the peasant liked them and felt at home with them, or because they related in some manner to the purpose of issue?



Livestock traders, butchers; in ancient times, religious sacrifice; hunting, shooting, the fur trade; transport, in the case of horses; all are possible reasons for the issue of tokens. However, in the Britain of the 16th to 19th centuries, one of the most probable associations is with the administration of the vermin laws. Pieces such as the magnificent Fig.1 {38mm} clearly suggest the hunt, with the fox above, dog below, and HW, presumably the squire's initials, faintly visible between its legs. It is that a whip, rather than a snake, to the left? And a little help, please as to what that is at 2 o'clock. The John Collins piece from Sept {LTT_30} is clearly in similar vein, but pieces with overtly hunting connections are few and far between. Most of the subject matter is of more humble origin, usually a single animal or bird, and often less well drawn; to the point, often, of being unidentifiable.

“Hen” and “Duck” {Figs.4,5} might be shooting pieces, although it has been suggested that they are part of a child's game. Would you shoot a hen for sport? It would hardly offer much of a challenge. Next idea: the issuer was a poulterer. How many of the birds and animals depicted on types 18 and 19 can you actually eat, you have to ask; and similarly, with the vermin hypothesis, how many would you want to kill?

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With the current popularity of conservation, the favoured view is that you kill as little as possible; however, you might not find a 16th century peasant, or the authorities of his day, share your opinion. Most of rural Britain was living near the poverty line, there were several successions of poor harvests, and no public Poor Law relief existed until 1601. In short, anything which represented competition for the food supply, by preying



on crops or stock, could not be tolerated. In this latter category came many species which today would be regarded as harmless; in addition to which, some species were eaten which would not be contemplated today. “Four and twenty blackbirds, baked in a pie”, may be a bit of childhood doggerel to those of us born in the 20th century but, to some of our predecessors, catch-it-yourself was the difference between a reasonable meal and none. I'm not sure exactly what bird Fig.6 is, but he might just have been somebody's evening dinner

The first Vermin Act was passed in 1532 to protect the grain, and laid upon communities {e.g. villages or hamlets} the requirement to destroy an many jackdaws, crows and rooks, caught by netting, as possible. The going rate of payment was twopence per dozen, and any community which failed to satisfy the manorial court that it was making adequate effort was likely to finish up being fined.



This idea of being paid for killing suited everybody very well, in theory; it protected the population's food supply and the farmer's revenue, which in turn meant that the parson got higher tithes, and it gave the

peasant an extra source of income to supplement his meagre wage. In some cases you could also still eat the species caught. Incentive for everybody, except that in practice it did not work very effectively, especially in heavily wooded areas where king and Parliament could legislate as much as they liked but the crows were able to defy them with impunity. A few bad harvests in the 1550s and 1560s provoked an attempt at improvement: a further Act in 1566 along similar lines, but targeting many more species and entrusting responsibility for implementation to the parish officers rather than to the courts. The following list is not exhaustive, but here are a few of the recommended rewards:

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|-----------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| • Adult jackdaws, crows, & rooks: | 1d per three. | Fox, badger: | 12d each |
| • Young jackdaws, crows, & rooks: | 1d per six. | Weasel, polecat, stoat: | 1d each |
| • Starlings: | 1d per dozen. | Hedgehog, otter: | 2d each |
| • Eagles & ospreys: | 4d each | Rats: | 1d per three |
| • Woodpecker, jay, raven, | 1d each | Mice: | 1d per dozen |
| • Kingfisher, bullfinch: | 1d each | Moles: | ½d each |

The records state that it was the normal practice for the churchwardens, with the consent of the vestry, to delegate the collection of vermin and the distribution of payments to two nominees; but by what means did they do so? tokens or coins? Several species attract rates of one-third, sixth or twelfth of a penny; these are not values for which coins of the realm exist, so was there an element of rounding incorporated? because if not, there was not any other way to reward the catcher of five mice but by token.



The Act was reinforced in 1572 and 1598 and not repealed until as late as 1863. Killing rates look to be at their highest in the 17th and 18th centuries, just when very many leads depicting the natural world were issued. Coincidence, or not? one answer must be to look at what actually appears on them, and to see how many of the species killed were represented. If tokens were used, the initials on them, if not those of the parish, are likely to be those of the churchwardens or their nominated delegates.

Precise local policy evolved and changed over time; determined by the vestry and based loosely on the above, it varied enormously from parish to parish according to the state of the local finances and the officials' perception of the needs and/or threat. There was little or no collaboration between parishes on policy matters and if you were, for example, a hedgehog who lived in a parish where the officers had vowed to hunt your species to extinction, all you had to do was waddle your way to one of the five adjacent parishes where, since time immemorial, no-one had given a toss.

The rates of reward changed, too; parishes would delete or add species to the list, or raise and lower rewards, from one year to another according to whim. Their sense of proportion seems occasionally to be questionable; a disabled soldier or sailor returning injured from overseas service, and rewarded by his parish with 2d for his pains, would probably not be overjoyed to hear that someone had got twice as much as that for killing a small rodent or two. Likewise, if the vestry overestimated a bounty rate, the relevant species would be exposed to a frenzy of killing by all and sundry eager to take advantage of the offer whilst it still lasted.



Against the argument for token usage in respect of authorised killing, it could be said that some of the species mentioned above, specifically some of the rodents, and other small animals, appear rarely if at all on leads; also, that birds appear on some small, late-mediaeval pewter tokens which are likely to have an issue date earlier than 1532. Opinions invited, please....



There is an excellent recently-produced book on this subject of deliberate killing of wildlife, "Silent Fields" by Roger Lovegrove, which I am grateful to for inspiring this article and which I am pleased to recommend. It goes into much further details about both species and locations, should anyone wish to pursue it.



Guess the Origin of this lot....

My thanks to Marcus Phillips for supplying photographs of the following 35 pieces. They come in mirrored pairs, i.e. any piece depicted on the left has as its other side the correspondingly-positioned picture on the right. Some of the designs will be quite familiar, others will not. They all come from a similar area, and those of you who are familiar with particular findspots may wish to try and guess where that is. We've had precious little luck trying to pin designs to specific areas so far, and this little quiz question might just convince you how difficult it is. Answer at the bottom of page 4.



Picture Gallery

A large hunting piece to start with {Fig.1}, depicting a deer or stag; on the other side, just a pair of rather unexciting initials, WC, with again a good rim of radial dashes. It is 34mm diam and of uncertain origin, although significantly most of the larger pieces shown in these pages recently have come from Oxfordshire, Berkshire or Gloucestershire. Would anyone like to refute the implied theory by producing a few 33mm+ pieces from other parts of the country?



In similar vein is this piece kindly sent in by Alan Kinnear {Fig.2}; 35mm diameter, 2mm thick and a massive 20gm found, guess where, on the edge of the Cotswolds somewhere to the north of Cheltenham. In other words, Gloucestershire again! The obverse is simple, IR with pellets, but in superb condition; however, look at that man, weight-lifter or whatever he is, jumping around on the reverse! Delightful.

One bird which would have made it to the front pages of this edition had there been room is this one from near Farnham, Surrey {Fig.3}, courtesy of Adrian Oates. The piece is 23mm in diameter and 2.5mm thick..



Another find {Fig.4}, thanks to Martin Reed, this time from Broughton, Hampshire, shows a merchant mark with a triad of initials {usual meaning, presumably} within: GK/R. Merchant marks, previously discussed in are a method of identification used in an age when the majority of the population were still illiterate, starting c.1350 and continuing until fairly late 17th cent. The 15th and 16th cents are the peak period for them, and I note with interest the 19mm diameter, which is quite large for most of that period. The script is not Lombardic, so the first third of the date range is out; but from late 15th cent on, it could be any time. K is quite a rare initial, and most likely stands for Katharine; however, not guaranteed.

Reader Jan den Das has mailed in from Holland with this clarification of a piece which I earlier illustrated in July 2007 {LTT_28, shown again here as Fig.5}:

- “Your question if BB actually stand for **BomBazine** was also my first thought, but there are also seals with one crowned B. It stands for the quality of the bombazine. one B for the third quality, two B's for the second quality and a crowned eagle for the first quality.”



Answer to Quiz on page 3:

Sorry, folks, but Marcus' pieces come from the Lebanon; which strongly suggests that local lead coinages have been around for ages, across a considerable part of the world, and possibly in some places without any great intermission between ancient and modern times. LTT will continue to concentrate on British lead, plus that of other countries such as France which are likely to have found their way over here by virtue of medi-aeval trade and warfare; pieces of other nations will be shown from time to time as we see them, but....I'm afraid it is a wide field!

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