

Editor: David Powell

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 dmpowell@waitrose.com or david@powell8041.freemove.co.uk. Please note that the old LTT Editor@aal.com address advertised on some earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.

Picture Gallery

Following on from last month's Godmanchester piece, herewith another magnificent large piece from, so we think, Norfolk; certainly from that area or slightly to the west. 37mm in diameter, it has rather a brown tint; maybe some geologist or geographer amongst you would care to conjecture as to which county's soil that might represent. The two sides were photographed consecutively in identical light; one really is that differently coloured from the other, no doubt due



to precisely what they were lying in or on. As to the piece itself, "Thomas Chowne" around the outside in lower case, with the date 1768 in the middle. Mr. Chowne was no doubt a local wealthy landowner, and one who had dug up enough 17th cent main series tokens in his time to form an opinion of what tokens were meant to look like. This, apart from the size, is as near to that series in design as almost any other lead that I have seen. On the back, a rather spindly tree, unfortunately not very deeply engraved in the cast; however, its roots and branch structure are rather more realistically engraved than on the average lead.

Our other piece this month was found by a member of West Cumbria Archaeology Society on an archaeological dig at Holme Cultram Abbey, and kindly illustrated here thanks to John Mattinson, who quotes:

"The abbey was a Cistercian foundation and dates from 1150 when it was established by monks from Melrose in the Scottish Borders. This token was found in a robbed out trench where the south west corner of the cloister was - so could date anytime from the foundation of the Abbey to its dissolution to the time the stone was robbed out (if later than the dissolution)."

John wondered whether "SEL" had anything to do with salt, as the monks were known to be involved in the salt trade on the Solway; however, I favour it standing for Selkirk, as the Latin for salt would be SAL rather than SEL.

The object on the other side could be a ship, or a mitre; another reader has also suggested a bird or a monk's cowl, although I do not feel convinced by either of these. I personally slightly favour the mitre, as a symbol of ecclesiastical authority, although the ship is a very strong second candidate. Forgeais in Vol.5 of his description of Seine river finds {1866} identifies certain 15th cent pewter pieces, depicting a semi-shiplike vessel, as having a fiscal purpose; these bear a limited similarity to this piece which, I notice, also hints at a prow on the right hand side. Nick Holmes of the National Museum of Edinburgh comments, "the use of the Gothic letter E would suggest a mediaeval rather than post-mediaeval date", with which opinion I agree. I will guess at a date in the 15th or early 16th cent, a little before the dissolution of the monasteries; possibly not very much before. My preference is for the later part of that range; lettering {particularly multiple letters} was not much in fashion on tokens in the 15th cent, and the S and L do not feel particularly early.



It could have been made of lead...

Some clues as to what lead might have been used for are to be had by looking at what lead-contemporary pieces are to be found made in other metals. The bronzy looking piece on the right is the size of a post-1860 halfpenny and probably is one, yet the fine quality engraving could easily be of an earlier era; one could imagine that style of lettering on a tombstone c.1780-1820, although I suspect it is actually mid-late 19th cent. “Quart” indicates refreshment, and the size of the flagon of cider with which farmers often supplied their thirsty labourers, perhaps three or four times a day, at harvest. So, was WH a farmer or a publican? I’ll go for the latter, but I might be wrong. Ted Fletcher reckons it could have been a deposit check issued by innkeeper WH to customers who borrowed a quart jug to carry home off-premises ale. A few years earlier, his forebears might have been issuing pieces for the same purpose in lead.



-:-:-:-

The Early 17th Century: An Introduction

We now get to the heart of the story. Having concluded the 16th cent part of our chronology in January we now, entering the 17th cent, seem to have a well established and for the most part orderly London series of fairly good standard {as lead goes}, approx 13mm in diameter, rarely uniface, and with identifying initials or merchant marks. They are for the most lead rather than pewter, and of a reasonable thickness for their diameter; for very thin pewter, an earlier date is probably favoured. Their single initials are giving way, c.1600 to pairs {forename/surname} and, only a decade or so after, where the issuer is married, triads {surname, followed by issuer’s and wife’s forenames}. The range of pictorial depictions is expanding, with increasing number of trade signs, tools or guild shields in evidence, until by mid-century its subject range is very much similar to the main 17th cent copper/brass series which commenced in 1648. The typical diameter goes up from 13mm to 15mm during the first half of the century and is more or less consistent with the main series when the two meet. The main series is subject to edicts, the lead one to official mutterings of discontent; the main series stops and starts, but the subliminal lead series is there before, during and after. Except that sometime, c.1660-65, there is a change and the quality falls away. However, more of that later.

Alongside this we have other less accountable series; provincial pieces aping the London model, and London series of a degenerate nature which are not to the same standard as the better lead. It a feature of English lead throughout its history, that a high-quality series is succeeded by low-grade imitations; the Winetavern pieces c.1250-1300, the type Ms c.1425-90 and better London lead c.1550-1660 all suffer a later succession of poor descendents. It is certainly not impossible that these phases to some extent overlap and co-exist, since unskilled engravers may be working in the backstreets at the very same time as a skilled London die or mould cutter in well organised commercial premises maybe only a few streets away.

These cruder pieces are more varied in size and texture and are more likely to be uniface. Still around 13-15mm for the most part, they are not as easily dated as the better London material; I will try and estimate, but given that the odds of getting it wrong are higher, must ask you to forgive any errors. Around this period {and it is possible that a few of the pieces are earlier}, some of the familiar stock token and other devices of 18th cent pieces start to make their appearance, albeit on items of much smaller size.

Finally, there are occasionally well-made pieces from the provinces; perhaps very few, but in all things to do with crude lead it is essential to keep an open mind. There are exceptions to most rules!

Provincials:

We will take a look first at the less regular pieces which are known or suspected provincials.

Figs.1-4 are a group of light-coloured pieces which all have either one or two initials on; they are variously provenanced, with Fig.2 coming from the Eynsham area of Oxfordshire, Fig.3 from Surrey and Fig.4. from Cambs. Fig.2 looks earlier on account of its single letter and later on account of its chunkiness; I'm going to give preference to the latter. It has what is probably meant to be a merchant mark on the back. Formal merchant marks do not occur with any great frequency on the crudest pieces, but one would have thought that their idea of personal visual marks would appeal to a largely illiterate population. Perhaps many of the later type 9s, irregular geometrics, are attempts to create just such a mark. Indeed, it is possible that rural communities could have retained informal personal marks well into the 18th cent, long after most of London and the other commercial centres had consigned them to oblivion.



Fig.5 is an anomalous piece. With an intended original diameter of about 12mm, lessened on one side by defective manufacture, it surely feels a late 16th cent piece; indeed, without the modern single A it could even be the first half of the 16th cent rather than the second. However, there is a triad, or even perhaps more than a triad, on the reverse; A/DA, or even A/DA{retro-L}. That argues for very early 17th cent, but I wouldn't be sure. The piece is from West Sussex.



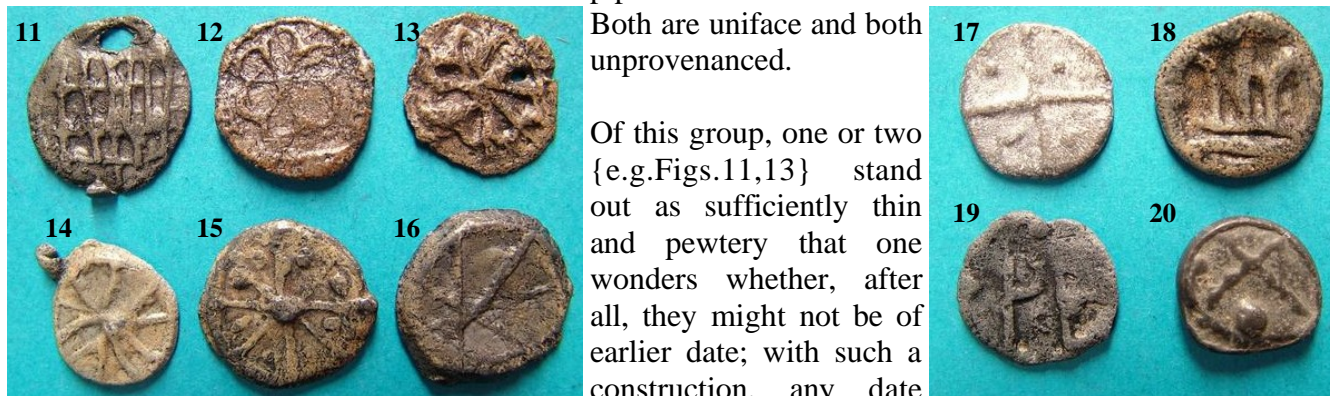
Still on light-coloured pieces, we move now to a couple of finely-executed pieces, Figs.6-7, one displaying a cartwheel and the other a leaf. Both are uniface and of uncertain provenance, although the former is possible from Hampshire. Note an early example, by provincial standards, of a beaded border around the leaf; evident also on Fig.8, one of a pair {Fig.9 being the other} of attractive 19mm pieces from Foxton, on the Cambs/Herts border. The rather racy Fig.8a appears to depict a lady, whom from the heart on the other side of the piece one might assume to be someone dear to the issuer; but whatever, he had access to the skill to do her more artistic justice than most crude lead engravers of his time. Another clever touch is the shape of the bottom of the bust; not content with a large heart on the reverse, he works another, albeit inverted and disguised, on to the obverse truncation. The two pieces were found together, are of identical size and fairly similar patination, and are probably by the same manufacturer; plus, as a bonus, Fig.8 gives us a date which likely applies to Fig.9 also. The article on early dated pieces in LTT_45 {Dec 2008} suggests that there were other pieces of similar style and date.

In passing, it should be noted that Fig.9 observes the inverted triad format. IA/R indicates {male forename, surname/female forename}, whereas the more usual mid-17cent form would be A/IR. The presence of an inverted triad on an undated piece should place it quite early in the century, around the 1625 date illustrated here.

Fig.10, of uncertain origin, looks at 22mm even more out of place for its stated date of 1621. One feels that it ought to be at least half a century later.



Figs.11-18 all show some variation of standard stock types: cartwheels, lis, flowers, grids and the like. With one exception, which has an irregular geometric on the back, all are uniface; Figs.11-16 come from the Medway area, whilst Fig.18 comes from somewhere near the Bucks/Herts/Oxon border. Such reverses become increasingly common from this time forth, and will predominate on the chunkier 18th cent pieces. Only Fig.19 of this rivery-looking batch shows any initials, and only Fig.20 shows any semblance of trade-related subject matter; in this case, a rather feeble attempt at the crossed pipes of a tobacconist.



Both are uniface and both unprovenanced.

Of this group, one or two {e.g.Figs.11,13} stand out as sufficiently thin and pewtery that one wonders whether, after all, they might not be of earlier date; with such a construction, any date

from the mid-15th cent might be viable. One wonders whether the piercing and deep recess of Fig.13, in two of its eight petals, are meant to represent the eyes of a face? if so, reminiscent of type L, c.1450, although of course the latter could be imitated in the provinces for many years.

Other pieces, however, are chunkier and feel more definitely c.1600-50; Fig.16 for example. The cartwheel is so off-centre that one wonders whether an initial, K, is intended. Note also the “slopy-sidedness” of this piece; sloping edges, as if the flan had been sliced off the bottom of a cone, are more than an occasional feature of the lead token manufacture of this period, and may commonly be found. Perhaps it became a favoured practice because it was made the piece easier to extract from the mould; rather than have to prise it out, you could just turn the mould upside down.



Whilst on river finds, herewith three more initial/monogram pieces, all much more darkly patinated than those which opened this article. Figs.21,23 are Kentish, but where in Kent is unknown; Fig.22, whose monogram is debatably the precursor of some type 13 frameworks, is a Thames river find. The Thames borders Kent; are they originally country pieces which reached the big city, or vice versa? Fig.21, in particular, feels that it might be London; the quality of that S looks quite good. On the other hand, all three are uniface, which tends to be a more provincial feature, and the supposed D of Fig.23 is capable of other interpretation. Nor should it be imagined that the less able and less equipped backstreet manufacturers of London necessarily allowed their rural counterparts the monopoly of features, like single-sidedness, normally associated with them.

Finally, Figs.24-25 show that all is not always what it might seem. Small but moderate thickness lead, they are about the right size for this period. Fig.24, the rabbit, looks the quintessential provincial type 18.....except, it was apparently found in S.E.Europe. Do I believe that? it looks very English; oh, well, I guess they have rabbits over there as well. Fig.25 is another slopy, and with about the same dimensions. Type 12, quartered geometric, yes, but a very specific quartered geometric; this is the expanded cross into which type M degenerated a century earlier {LTT_56, page 3, Fig.5}. So, issued early 16th cent or copied early 17th? If it feels too late for the 17th cent, ponder whether the C-reverse C lis, met on some of the 18th cent lead, is not a further degeneration of this design. We will be back on that theme in due course!