

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](mailto:dmpowell@waitrose.com) or [david@powell8041.freemove.co.uk](mailto:david@powell8041.freemove.co.uk). Please note that the old [LTTeditor@aol.com](mailto:LTTeditor@aol.com) address advertised on some earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.

## The Early 17th Century: London Obverses

This month we look at the obverses of early 17th cent London tokens, i.e. the sides containing the initials, before embarking shortly on the much larger task of considering the many varieties of reverse which were springing up. We will consider these, and their meanings, against the background of the better-documented 17th cent main series.

Due to the need to home in on the fine detail of these early and middle 17th cent pieces, many of which are very small and/or in poor condition, I have decided to magnify the pictures in the next few articles of this series, until we reach the post-1672 period of the regal copper farthing, by a factor of 1.5

Merchant mark pieces apart, late 16th cent London pieces had, for the most part, one initial per side; by the early 17th cent we almost always have two, if not, when the issuer was married, three. In the 17th cent merchant marks and monograms continue as an occasional means of identification {Figs.1-3}, but pairs and triads of initials are more common. These tend mostly to take a few standard forms, which may well indicate different manufacturers; the task is therefore to identify and distinguish these. There is evidence in one or two cases of floral and other designs which also appear on main series 17th cent tokens, and where this happens we again need to compare.



The most common type of early 17th cent London obverse is the type defined by Figs.4-8; very neatly-lettered pairs and triads, the former {Figs.4-5} usually with a pellet above and below. The triads of this type sometimes have a single pellet low {Fig.6} or lower-centre {Fig.7}, although a trio of pellets as per Figs.8-10 is probably the commonest form. There are varieties, which we will come to in a minute; but, the question to be asked is, how significant are they, do they indicate different makers who can be distinguished by ornamentation or lettering style, and if so how many makers were there? In the above group, Figs.7-8 feel as if they very definitely come from the same stable, and several of the others might. Figs.9-10 are just fractionally smaller; is that significant, or not? We tread a fine line, between wanting to categorise on the one hand and reading in too much on the other.

Figs.11-12 are again very neat, albeit in slightly different lettering and much lighter metal; their picture alone I have not lightened, like the others, to make them more



visible. They are also a touch chunkier and less pewtery than the foregoing pieces. Fig.11 is very conservative, having the all-common pellets, but varieties with stars {Fig.12}, annulets {i.e. rings, Fig.14},

rosettes {Fig.16} or acorns {Fig.15} all occur; as also do occasional pieces with neat lettering but without any ornamentation whatsoever {Fig.13}. All of these marks appear on a number of pieces; they are not one-offs. Fig.13, the plain one, looks just a touch more backstreetish than the others, but not excessively so; and indeed, it is probably the minor, less equipped and less sophisticated manufacturers who will have omitted the finer points of artistry.

Fig.15 marks the beginning of a theme which extends into the main 17th cent series. When botanical motifs start to replace mere rings and pellets, it is natural to attach them to a stem which comes up between the letters, and which may be attached to something at the bottom. In the acorn piece {Fig.15} the stems just intertwine but in the rosette piece {Fig.16} they are joined by a feature, commonly found on 17th cent tokens, called a Stafford knot. Worcs.85, to quote Williamson {Fig.17}, is dated 1666 and comes from the town of Pershore; although more elaborate and almost certainly later than Fig.16, the progression of the theme through Fig.15-17 may be clearly seen.



Note also the pierced cinquefoil, a flower like object, at 12 o'clock {the start of the inscription} on the Worcestershire token. This same subject of mintmarks, and whether or not they are important, comes up on main series 17th cent tokens just as much as this series; apart from the mullet {five-pointed star} on most of the early pieces, ascribed to David Ramage, nobody has much idea whose they are. Or whether they are just doodles. Figs.18-19, the first uniface and the second depicting on the reverse an obscure standing figure, probably an angel, are a cruder rendering of the same idea. Fig.19 is a Thames find but the other may be provincial.



Back to the higher-quality pieces, the pun, a known occasional feature of the 17th cent main series tokens, makes what may be its appearance on lead. Fig.20 has issuer initials MB, and it is a fair bet from what sits astride them, instead of a pellet, that the B stands for Bird. Whether he is the Oxford watchmaker Michael Bird, as tentatively suggested by one of Token Corresponding Society colleagues when I showed this piece at the annual Congress last year, is uncertain; there being a main series piece, Oxon.119, of 1668, which depicts a cock. I think that the bird on this lead piece is probably also a cock, not that the bird is very clear or I much of an ornithologist. The reverse of Fig.20 is the George and Dragon, a common business sign of the period and an extremely intricate one to get on to the flan of a piece of 14mm lead. As the piece was found on the north bank of the Thames, I will conjecture that it is probably the issue of a different Mr.Bird.

Several examples are known of Fig.21, the "Juggler" piece, depicting a dog; the issuer being a GC, who is married to a wife called A. Now, there is a second variety, two examples of which are in the British Museum; identical to the first, except that GC's wife is now called M, and a date, 16-51, now flanks the dog. I will guess that this is the earlier, but it is by no means certain.

Figs.22-24 are another trio of reasonably well-formed pieces with neat pairs or triads; very passable workmanship, but in each case one wonders whether it is by a different hand than the examples shown to date. Fig.23 shows the form of W favoured in the early days with crossed Vs; as time goes on, fashion veers towards joining the Vs at the top rather than crossing them in the middle, as we do today. The latter is the normal rendering on main series 17th cent tokens, although possibly that may only reflect the choice of one or two major manufacturers.



The other letter which may be distinguished by several forms during the mid-16th to mid-17th cent is A, for which the following may be found:

1. Bar across the top, V-shaped join below.
2. Bar across the top, straight bar joining the arms below {as Fig.27}.
3. No bar across the top, straight bar joining the arms below {the modern style, as Fig.26}.

The chronological order is roughly as indicated above, although at any given stage the choice will have been a matter of individual preference and some engravers may have continued using old forms for some years after other makers had brought the new ones in. Such a use of letter forms may be taken as an indicator arguing for a slightly earlier or later date, provided that you take it with a certain pinch of salt. Form (3) is the norm by the time of main series 17th cent tokens, although examples of form (2) are still occasionally to be seen.

There are one or two series of early 17th cent lead tokens which, whilst definitely London, have slightly more rustic looking letters; Figs.25-27, the first two of them quite probably by the same maker, are examples. Fig.25 has on its reverse a curious-looking item which is probably a piece of horse-harness, whilst Fig.26 has a bell, one of the commonest business signs, and Fig.27 a shield full of guild arms. All are well drawn and the detailed heraldic shield, like the George & Dragon mentioned earlier, would have been quite difficult to render. These are therefore high-quality London pieces, despite the rather humble appearance created by their lettering.



Only slightly evident in the picture of Fig.27 are hints of a Stafford knot and beaded edge, plus a “slopy rim” finish {discussed last month}. Figs.25-26 by contrast are thicker and feel like small discs, rising in their centre due to the higher-than-usual relief of their artwork. Little things, but the sort of feature to look out for when trying to identify different trends of a manufacturer’s work.

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## *Contemporary References to Unofficial Small Change in Historical Documents, Part 1 of 2*

I am indebted to the Mitchiner and Skinner article in BNJ53, page 35, for several useful references to the usage of lead tokens in the 16th and early 17th century period, derived from a variety of earlier works, particularly Ruding’s “Annals of the Coinage of Great Britain” {1840}; also, to the UK Detector Finds website for comments relating to galley halfpence which, although foreign coins rather than lead tokens, were imported to resolve the same problem that lead tokens were trying to address. Some of these references are reproduced or paraphrased below. It would appear from them that the typical London lead piece was generally equated to a farthing, although the 1574 reference does also speak of halfpennies.

In 1402 the Commons petitioned the king to provide halfpennies and farthings for the poor people, but little was done to alleviate the shortage.

Italian soldini, known as galley halfpence, were introduced to England in the late 14th cent and were prohibited by statute at least five times in the 15th cent and again in 1519-20. They continued to circulate until the 1530s.

Erasmus, who first came to England in the late 1490s and visited intermittently until 1512, was aware of lead tokens in circulation and described them in his writings as “Plumbeos Angliae”; i.e. “lead pieces of England”.

In 1571 Westminster Abbey paid something in excess of £5 for token production at Easter, and a small amount also on Trinity Sunday; whether for ecclesiastical or charitable use is uncertain. From the Norwich entries below, I will guess the former.

By 1574 the then long-existing practice of coining private money in lead, tin and even occasionally leather, for putting out for use by grocers, vintners, chandlers, alehouse-keepers and the like, was “grown to such excess as to be the subject of frequent complaints”. Of this abuse, and the dearth of farthings and halfpennies, Ruding quotes Queen Elizabeth herself of being very much aware, and comments that the making of both these values in lead, was “to the great derogation of the princely honour and dignity”. A similar objection was made to Bristol’s city authorities in 1594, on account of their local municipal issues begun three years earlier.

In 1591 Budelius, an early economist, wrote that Erasmus’ “Plumbeos Angliae”, see above, were still in use eighty years later.

In 1612 it was estimated in a report by Sir Robert Cotton, trying to put a case for regal small-money coinage, that there were 3000+ people in London who had five pounds apiece of lead tokens made and issued every year by tradesmen and their customers. Cotton’s report was the one which preceded the issue of the earliest Harringtons in 1613, the first of the wafer-thin and much-hated official farthings produced under licence by a succession of royal favourites between 1613 and the early 1640s. The royal proclamation which announced them commenced with a statement to the effect that for some time past lead farthing tokens had been issued, and tolerated, for passing between “vintners, tapsters {i.e. publicans}, chandlers, bakers and other like tradesmen”.

The authorities’ idea was that the new pieces were meant to replace crude lead, but from the evidence in these pages it is obvious either that, throughout this period, either the public preferred privately issued lead or that the Harringtons and their successors were inadequate and untrusted. Ruding reports the following observations about the Harrington initiative:

- “Private traders, finding themselves unable to carry on their business without smaller money than the legal coins, were driven by necessity to provide something to supply the deficiency of lawful currency, and had for some years past struck farthing tokens, as they were called, in lead.”
- In 1615: “It was still found extremely difficult to entirely check the circulation of the old farthing tokens, and it became necessary to forbid them by proclamation”
- In 1616-17: “The undue practices against the proclamations for establishing the currency of farthing tokens, it appears, were still continued, for in a proclamation dated 17th March it is stated that diverse chandlers etc. had, since the last ordinance, made used and uttered {i.e. issued} their unlawful tokens.

No doubt such rumblings continued throughout the next three decades, but despite them it is very obvious that the lead tokens remained alive and well; the general public taking much the same attitude to official proclamations that it is suggested that certain of our EU partners do today, when faced with uncongenial legislation. In other words, ignore it!

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My own estimation of early 17th cent lead issues using Esty’s statistical formulae, discussed earlier in LTT\_52 {July 2009, page 3} when we were talking about type M, was of the order of 2200-2400, revised from an earlier 2400-2600; pleasingly not too far out, given the quality and quantity of the data available and the difficulty of distinguishing one period from another.

*{To be continued}*