

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@powell18041.freemove.co.uk. Please note that the old LTTeditor@aol.com address advertised on some earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.

The Lincoln Imp

I'd never heard of the Lincoln Imp, but thanks to Martin Brightmore both for introducing me to him and for sending in one of the most interesting contributions seen for some while. The piece was found at East Bridgeford, Nottingham, and is 26mm across; general consensus amongst Martin's detecting club colleagues was that it depicted the Lincoln Imp, although their FLO apparently disagrees.



I'll let you Google the said imp for his history, and for that of his colleague at Grimsby; but suffice it that both were reputedly turned into stone gargoyles for their sins, and may now be viewed in their chosen homes at the cathedral and St. James' church respectively. Having compared the piece with a picture of the Lincoln gargoyle online, I feel that the token rendering seems very realistic indeed. In other words, I fully support Martin and his colleagues' theory.

There are certainly humorous depictions of people in the lead series, but usually because of the limitations of the people drawing them; in other words, they are probably often not intended as such. This one I feel is, quite deliberately, something different. I happily go along with the idea that it is intended to be an imp in the first place.

As to date, I would guess, from size and style, maybe early 18th cent; could be a decade or two earlier or later, but I don't feel it is pre-Reformation. Given the knowledge of the Imp in local folklore, I think its presence is just saying, "Of Lincoln", to people who might not be able to read those words if they were written; giving some assurance to users that it was local, and not just passed off by A.N.Other. If the token had anything on the back, that would be some guide to the name or trade of the issuer; but being uniface, I guess it is some sort of town piece. I wouldn't be inclined to assign it to the cathedral necessarily, just to some authority which needed to assure a supply of small change for whatever reason, whether commercial necessity or charitable distribution relating to the Poor Law {to name but two}. If the latter, it is of course possible that the cathedral was the coordinator of the exercise.

Equally, I can't tell whether the imp is Lincoln's, Grimsby's or anyone else's; but if Lincoln's is the nearest local resident imp, then I guess he is the most likely!

Token-like Lead Bottle Tops



The item on the left has a very attractive coin/token-like design yet.... it is a lead bottle-top. No health and safety worries in 1603, then. It is also certainly continental, but... is it for an individual bottle, or a communal flagon? Presumably the design indicates the maker and vintage. Anyone with other examples, or who knows how and during what period the things were used, please write in; I'd be delighted to hear.

The 19th Century and the Decline of Lead

The primary purpose of lead tokens, notwithstanding their occasional other use for passes and the like, appears to have been as a substitute for the coinage deficiencies of the day; a very long day, covering several centuries, during which the government and other officialdom produced enough high and middle value coinage for the workings of state and the affluent, but far too little small change for the day to day practical needs of many of the working public. The necessity created by this shortfall, when admitted, bred series of copper and brass tokens which the government tolerated for a while on three occasions {1648-72, 1787-99, 1811-20}; and when not admitted, bred lead tokens, forgeries or foreign coinage imports.

Most of the remedial measures applied to the regal coinage were inadequate, and resulted in the fairly quick resumption of unofficial measures which, however much decried by the authorities, were necessary for the ordinary transactions to continue. In 1821, however, a series of copper, initially only farthings but later halfpennies and pennies, was commenced, and went some way further towards meeting the need than any new copper coinage previously; and although there were still some limited mutterings up until the 1840s about small change shortage, resulting in several hundred mid-19th cent copper & brass issues {centred on the Great Exhibition year of 1851}, the dearth was never again so severe. After the 1850s, and the introduction of the new bronze coinage of 1860, it ceased to be an issue at all.

In any case, new metals and new token series, were appearing on the scene. These series started from scratch with the materials which had come into fashion; they did not think lead. There was a tendency to go to suppliers in the big cities, whose favoured metals were brass and copper. Even those two series which held longest to the old ways, namely hop and communion tokens, were moving from pure lead through pewter to white metal, a process which was well advanced by about 1830. The process of evolution was gradual, and lead lingered on a little until about the late 1840s, but after 1821 its decline was fast.

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What as to the tokens themselves? We know that they normally approximate to the short change of the day, and in our recent articles on the 18th century we have seen an increasing number which conform to halfpenny rather than farthing size, although the latter are still in evidence. This mirrors both the main series coinage and the copper token series of 1787-99. Like those coins and tokens, the crude lead is, by and large, of moderate thickness. What happens after the regal cartwheel issues of 1797/99 and 1806/7, however is that the next series of copper tokens in 1811 comes out big, bold and chunky. Not surprisingly, the lead follows suit.

Figs.1-12 show the sort of piece which results; always 10-15gm minimum, sometimes 20gm or more. There are few pennies, because the emphasis is on small change, rather than large change, and one or



two examples of the latter have already been shown in the article entitled “Paranumismatic Obesity” in LTT_49. Some more will follow in a continuation of that article next month. What is noticeable, however, is the paucity of interesting design on these late pieces. Nearly all feature standard stock designs, with either a pair of initials, nothing or more of the same on the back. Largely gone are the plants, birds and animals, the objects of trade, the decorative heraldry. We are nearing

lead at its least attractive; quantity of lead is replacing quality of token, with only the condition of the better specimens to ameliorate.

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The farthing does, however linger on as it does in both the main coinage and the 19th cent official tokens of 1811-20; Figs.13-15 show pieces dated 1803, 1811 and 1833 respectively. Doubtless there are others, undated, but apart from thickness they would probably not stand out from their 18th cent counterparts; and in any case there are some earlier pieces, such as George I’s “dump” copper of 1717-18 which, if imitated for size, might produce ambiguous specimens.

A more interesting phenomenon is the evolution of the hop token, or indeed the family of farm pickers’ tokens generally. It is likely that much crude lead fell into this category anyway {we just don’t always know which}, and crops require picking and pickers paying regardless of the dearth or otherwise of the official money supply. In other words, pickers tokens will have carried on after 1821 just as they did before, as is evident from the 19th cent pieces, increasingly pewter or white metal, found in Kent. It can be great fun to identify just which leads are the precursors of these, and indeed there are clues; nor are all of them indeed precursors, since new pieces are still coming out of the ground which have a decidedly 19th cent style.



Fig.16 is one such; such fancy script is more reminiscent of certain white-metal hop pieces than it is of crude lead, nor is the plant quite the usual five-petal or lead botanical type. On the other hand, it is more like crude lead than the Henderson series in that it does not have a value on it. It truly sits on the edge; and interestingly, there is a hint of a date, possibly 1796, which is earlier than most Henderson pieces, at the bottom.

By Fig.17 we are forty years on, and far advanced in terms of design; well formed issuer initials and value, plus a date, 1839. The triad is unusual at this date; possibly a placename above and farmer’s initials below, than the standard 17th cent meaning of husband and wife. It is fairly clearly a hop token, but quite unusual even by the standards of that series.

Fig.18 is an oddball. Some hop tokens are just crude counterstamps, like this one, but the carving of a bird’s head on the other side {sorry, only just visible} is bizarre. It says hop, quite clearly, but hop

tokens are rarely pictorial and, when they are, only depict things like oast houses, plants and heraldry related to their issuers.

By the time they enter the Henderson period {1800-ish}, hop tokens tend to have quite neat issuers initials and values, moreso than on the generality of crude lead, and it may reasonably be conjectured that some of the neatest of our type 2s and 8s are in fact hop tokens, probably but not necessarily from Kent and East Sussex, which have not been identified as such yet. Apart from



which, it is rare outside hops for crude lead to display a denomination of value. Figs.19-23 display a group; at a guess Figs. 19,22 are the newest and Figs. 20,23 {which may be by the same issuer} the eldest, but it is not guaranteed. Some of them may be early 19th cent, others late 18th; and before that, there were almost certainly Kentish hop tokens like Fig.16 overleaf with no stated value at all. It is one of the pleasures of crude lead that there is individual issuer taste which over-rides strict design chronology, and that old and new ideas, far from being segregated, intermingle considerably.



Before leaving the subject of hops, compare the numeral of Fig.25 against a Maundy threepence {Fig.24}. The latter is dated 1763, although the style of the numeral was little changed throughout the 18th cent up to 1786. The said style is remarkably similar on the two pieces; likely, therefore, that the engraver of the hop token mould was drawing on the coin for ideas?

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Lastly, we come to the late flourishing of lead tokens in north-east Durham, mentioned before; I am not sure how wide an area of circulation they had, but certainly that around South Shields and the adjacent coast. I do not know what the reason was, but presumably there was some specific local need; suggestions welcome, from those who know the local history of those parts. The features are that they:

- nearly always display an anchor, which is sometimes flanked or accompanied by initials and/or a date; such combination is unusual on lead anchor types elsewhere.
- the reverse is usually a six-petal or, occasionally, an abbreviated name. Some are uniface, or have initials.

The dates seen are in the 1830s and 1840s, which is later than nearly any other crude lead, and the pieces are often quite attractive. It would be good to know more about them.

You have seen most of Figs.26-32 before, but I illustrate them again here for completeness, to show their place in the lead token chronology.

