

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 Please note that the old LTTeditor@aol.com address advertised on some earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.

Going Down like a Lead Balloon - well, here is one

Well, here is a first; a hot air balloon on a lead token. Fig.1 is 4.32gm in weight and 22mm across, yet from its subject matter it cannot presumably be earlier than the Montgolfier experiments of 1783. The English Channel was crossed in 1785, and presumably knowledge of the feat, and interest in the subject, spread in Britain, to urban centres at least, fairly quickly. This is a Thames find; quite likely it is a ticket for a close-up view of an ascent, probably in the Greater London area, very much along the lines of the ticket for a public hanging shown on page 4 of LTT_60.



The only other token issuer I can think of who depicted a balloon is the flamboyant businessman Isaac Earlysman Sparrow {b. Deptford 1793, d. London 1830}, who issued a number of fairly common advertising pieces, commonly construed as unofficial farthing tokens, in the mid-1820s {Fig.2}. Sparrow, an ironmonger who in 1826 also produced a leather sauce, presumably some kind of polish or preservative, was obsessed with balloons; on 23 June 1823 he went up in one with Charles Green, a famous 19th century aeronaut, and boasted about it ever after. All known varieties of his tokens depict a balloon, and his premises in Bishopsgate were shortly afterwards named Balloon House.

Sparrow was twice afflicted by bankruptcy during his last few years and one must wonder to what extent his ballooning interests were responsible for that. Could he, or would he, have issued lead tokens, either before his copper ones, or after his financial difficulties, when he was less affluent? His copper pieces are all around 23mm, only a millimetre or so larger than Fig.1, which might also have passed for a farthing; but the characters on the back of the lead piece are indistinct, and if initials contain nothing which might pass as an I or an S.

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Picture Gallery

Thanks to new detectorist Simon Burt for sending in his first-ever two lead token finds, deriving from a



farm in East Sussex; illustrating very well the link between hop tokens of known style {Fig.1} and stock tokens of obvious anonymity {Fig.2}. Fig.1 is not in Alan Henderson's book on the series, but it could well be; there are other known Sussex pieces of almost identical style within it, which could well be by the same maker. Henderson is the first port of call when trying to identify these, but new ones like this are always being found, so do please write in and let us know if you get one. 12 indicates the value, in either pence or bushels. Either M is the surname and WT the forenames of man and wife, or M is the initials of the village/farm name and WT those of the farmer.

Next up, two very interesting Devonian pieces from the same issuer reported by regular contributor

Hendrik and both found in, wait for it, Belgium. To be precise, Fig.3 from Maria-Aalter "near" Bruges, in West Flanders, and Fig.4 from Diest, in Brabant. I'll leave you to work out whether from the same mould. The first looks very much like a token, but the second, although very similar, hints more of a seal. The diameter is approx 21mm. Now for the even more interesting bit; the inscription appears to read "WILLIAM MAY.... EXON", i.e. William May of Exeter, who just happens to be the issuer of a main {Williamson} series token, Devon 132, depicting a lantern and dated 1663. Circumstantial evidence suggests that William May was a cloth merchant, in which case he could well have issued both tokens and seals; but either way, an interesting issue from "your side of the canal", as Hendrik so delightfully puts it.



Probably also from this side of the canal is Fig.5, another one of Hendrik's finds; as it is only 8½mm in diameter, I shall take the liberty of magnifying it 2:1. The weight is a mere 0.25gm. It appears to be a standard mediaeval king's head, but there are two initials, F-I, flanking.... which stand for what? Ferdinand & Isabella {of Spain, 1474-1504} are the only couple of royals who fit, but stylistically I am far from convinced.

Octagonal lead tokens are fairly rare, so my thanks to Tim Davies for Fig.6, which is 25mm across and 5.12gm; a little large for the Williamson period, but bearing the typical 17th cent triad. The lettering style suggests mid-late 17th cent, even if the size argues adding a decade or three. By chance I have recently come across an octagonal engraved piece in copper, Fig.7, bearing a triad on one side and what looks like "CLARAT" on the other. Is Clara T a person or a drink? I'll favour the latter, in which case the issuer is a wine merchant; although the previous owner thought she was a young lady, in which case the piece is probably either a love token or a baptismal gift. All the time assuming, of course, that that strange lower-case "r", amongst five upper-case letters, is what I have taken it to be. This piece is even more difficult to date; stylistically it is firmly 18th cent, probably mid-18th cent, which is even further removed from the heyday of the triad; nor is there any clue in the metal flan, which appears to be just metal sheet and not derived, like most engraved tokens of the time, from worn coin.



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Baltic Seal Update

Following our mention of Ged Dodd's Peacehavens {Baltic seal} website in LTT_96, it would seem appropriate to illustrate such new specimens as have come our way recently.



Iron Age Potins, part 2 of 2

Following last month's illustration of the Cantian potin's degeneration over the four decades from 100 to 60 BC, approx, here with the final form of the piece c.45-40 BC {Fig.1}; bull/box reduced to what looks like two rungs from the middle of a ladder, in a manner not unreminiscent of an 18th cent type 13, whilst Apollo has been reduced to what looks like an eye-hook.



The French, or Gauls as they then were, were not quite so blinkered in their approach to coin design; although, having become involved at an earlier stage of potin's evolution, they did have longer to think about it. When I first came across Iron Age coinage, before discovering crude lead, I decided that to be an Iron Age coin designer you had to have a species of brain cell like no other on the planet. Having since seen what some of our local lead manufacturers produce in their workshops, I guess I am now a tad more sympathetic! Herewith a cross-section of North-West Gallic designs; for those having trouble with identification of the non-portrait pieces, think first horse, head and boar before all else.



Potin: Notes on Manufacture

R.D.Van Arsdell's "Celtic Coinage of Britain" has some very interesting comments on the manufacture of Cantian {Kentish} potin, which no doubt apply not only to Gallic potins but also, to some extent I would imagine, to our own more recent pewters and crude leads. The author describes the evolutionary struggles of the Cantian manufacturers to master the making of these pieces, and identifies five stages in the development. He reckons that clay rather than chalk moulds were used throughout:



1. Initially, images were impressed into the mould using a “mother coin”, i.e. an existing specimen, as a master. This approach was quickly replaced by both cutting out and inscribing the mould with a stylus, but either way the coins produced were rather thick and dumpy. Such coins are all rare, so this stage obviously passed fairly quickly.
2. During the next phase the diameter of the earlier pieces is maintained but the metal content reduced, causing them to become thinner. The mould cavities were made by pressing a cylindrical object into the clay, perhaps with some sort of wooden dowelling. The parts of the mould relating to the design, the edge of the mould and the interconnecting sprue ducts were worked with a stylus, but the disc cavity itself was no longer produced in this manner. This did not work very well, there being problems both with die alignment matching and with surplus squeezed-out flash; no doubt, the surfaces of either the obverse or reverse mould, or even both, were often bumpy. This approach was, therefore, again quickly abandoned.
3. In order to produce better-mating moulds, various techniques of smoothing the clay surface were attempted. Each of these produced striations, or lines, on the face of the coin:
 - Scrapers were drawn across the face of the clay block, producing thin striations.
 - The clay block was cut in two using a wire, producing medium striations.
 - The clay was pressed against a flat wooden surface, producing heavy striations.
 - Thin textile was pressed into the clay to produce the cavities, which produce crossed striations mirroring the weave of the cloth.

The second and third of these methods continued to produce heavy flash, and with the exception of the thin striation pieces, which presumably were the most successful and therefore lasted longer, are all extremely rare.

4. There then follows a much more numerous output of coins which are thin and flat with smooth fields; flash hardly ever occurs, and mould alignment is almost entirely eliminated. Indeed, so few are the flaws that the method of manufacture is difficult to detect, but Van Arsdell suggests that perhaps smooth sheet bronze was used for all pressing-in of clay and soft-metal; used in conjunction with, for the first time, some more efficient alignment method for holding the moulds together during casting.
5. There was one outstanding problem from the above; namely, that the trade off in sprue thickness, between thick sprues which would conduct metal easily, and thin ones which would break off easily, was not always easy to obtain. The desire to resolve this, in conjunction with an attempt to speed up the production process, resulted in a change of policy whereby the pieces were made smaller in diameter but thicker, so that thick sprues could be more easily broken off with less risk of damaging the basic coin. These pieces are again fairly scarce, possibly due to unpopularity; but whatever the reason, struck bronze coinage replaced them.

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Plenty to chew over there, as to whether our fellow-countrymen a millennium and three-quarters later, ignorant of the lessons learned by their predecessors, reinvented some of the same wheels. Most likely, though, that the Cantian mint even in those early days was a slicker, more official mint with a more contiguous production spreading over several decades; whereas many of our 18th cent makers were probably making one-off batches and had little or no incentive to experiment once they had knocked up the requisite few hundred pieces. The Cantii, too, were a tribe, almost if not quite a kingdom, and even in those early days size and weight standards might have been demanded; therefore, not surprising that they persevered with production improvements to a greater extent than their more temporarily and locally motivated Georgian successors.