

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 Please note that the old LTTeditor@aol.com address advertised on some earlier versions of LTT is no longer active.



:-:-:-:-:-

Money from the Monastery: Some Yorkshire Examples

A nice group of late mediaeval monastic pieces this month, kindly sent in by Yorkshire-based English Heritage curator Susan Harrison. As they are rather small, I have magnified them 3:2. We start with five pieces found in the grounds of Rievaulx Abbey.



The obverses are all highly unusual for Britain, although by no means inconsistent with some of the designs found in France and illustrated by Forgeais. Figs 2 and 4 show a man tossing a coin, which I suspect is probably to do with almsgiving; as, indeed, they all may be. Fig.5 illustrates livestock, something which an abbey would have possessed in plenty for the feeding of its many staff and visitors, so assume some related usage. I would favour it being an entitlement of someone, maybe a pauper or a monk, to milk; although a pass allowing access permission to the abbey's farming facilities is another possibility. Pseudo-money is often used within closed communities to limit the ways in which it may be spent, or for convenience, to allow later cashing for real money and thereby reducing the number of occasions, for security reasons, on which it was required to have real money around. Specifically, if a religious body wanted to give paupers money for milk or bread, it would not want them spending it on alcohol, which real money would allow.

Fig.1 appears to have the Lombardic {Gothic} letters "Ioh", short for Johannes {John, possibly the name of the abbot}. Personal names of abbots or the like, if present, could well convey authority in the same way that a monarch's name does on a coin, albeit more locally; having said which, English ecclesiastical lead/pewter seems to have much less verbiage on it than some of the French pieces shown

by Forgeais {see LTT_34,35}. Fig.1 could alternatively be interpreted as a group of people, with the upper pellets being heads, but I do not think that that is the intention; I think that the pellets, both above and below, are either ornamentation or, possibly, an expression of value {e.g. number of deniers/pence}. Forgeais also suggests in his Vol.3 {again, see LTT_34} that monks were sometimes paid for their services; a concept which is, indeed, rather strange to our modern minds, which tend to assume that monks just did for free whatever their abbots told them. It is possible that some of these pieces, where they do not show overt references to alms, may have been used as internal token coinage for such a purpose.

Fig.3 also appears to have an abbreviation, which could of course again be a personal name. To a modern mind, "WELB" might also be short for something like well-being, again implying alms; but somehow, this doesn't ring true with other issues of the times. Susan's local knowledge has inclined her to think it may be associated with the Rievaulx grange of Welburn, only a few miles distant from the Abbey, and to me this feels intuitively correct.

-:-:-:-:-

Moving now to the reverses, Figs.1,2,5 have ultra-common grids which may be readily dismissed, but Figs.3-4 are extremely interesting. Fig.3 is a cartwheel, which at its simplest is an extension of the mediaeval cross and pellets, except with a larger number of arms. The penny had one ring in its design; the associated larger values, groat and halfgroat, had two. When lead tokens are made based on these designs, they variously have none, one, two or occasionally more. Whether the number of rings has any significance is open to debate; it is just a simple design which conveys the suggestion of monetary authority, which maybe is as much as is intended.



Most cartwheel types have no barbs. A few do, on the ends of their arms, and there are hints that these may be buckets on the ends of millwheels, for picking up water or the like. The fact that Figs.3 come from a decidedly ecclesiastical setting suggests a further possibility which, I must admit, I have not considered before; namely that the design represents a crown of thorns, with cross superimposed. The facts that the barbs are on the ring rather than the arms tends to support this.

Fig.4's reverse could be another crown of thorns, if the Xs are intended to be joined to the ring; or it could be a pseudo-inscription around a circle with something, possibly a head, inside. Ecclesiastical communities were more literate than most so, whilst I am not sure that they would have resorted to a pseudo-inscription, they might have. Had there been seven crosses around the outside, and a broken crescent ring, I might have been tempted to think that the Pleiades had been attempted as a design, possibly at the time of an eclipse; however with nine crosses/stars and a full ring, I am inclined to dismiss it.



Susan remarks that, where known, the find spots at Rievaulx Abbey were all in the dorter subvault or the reredorter; indicating that they were casual losses, dropped whilst using the accommodation. She also has tokens from other abbey sites on her patch. To quote her: "I have further tokens which might make interesting comparisons - e.g. from Fountains Abbey, one with two capped figures holding a staff {Fig.6} and another with the letters ABBA and a rat like quadruped above and below {Fig.9, overleaf}. I haven't got images of the reverses to hand but the ABBA's is a grid."



Fig.6, the two capped figures holding a staff, is BNJ53 type C; a beaded border pictorial token, of a type which I intend to write on sometime as part of a general chronology of the early lead period. This one shows two pilgrims, walking left. We have seen solitary pilgrims before, on the road or having a meal

break {Figs.7-8 made an earlier appearance in LTT_20}, but I think this may be the first time I have seen a pair travelling together. These pilgrim designs are collectively fairly common, and it can be assumed that they relate in some manner to payments made for hospitality along the pilgrims' route. The BNJ authors reckon that type C specifically is c.1200-50, although the type lingers sometimes in progressively degenerative form until well into the late 14th cent, possibly even beyond.

On Fig.9, take it from me that the symmetrical curved creatures above and below the lettering, whichever way up you, are rats; maybe not the most elegant or well-nourished rats you have ever seen, but rats. They do each have four small legs and a long thin tail; they are not just curved lines. Birds and animals are both frequent choices of subject matter on lead tokens, and I have previously written {LTT_36} about the probable use of lead tokens in connection with pest control and the Vermin Act. Pest control would likewise have been an issue in the days before such Acts came into force, and whoever's job it was at the abbey would probably have got paid for doing it. This might have been done using an internal currency which was exchanged for real money at some regular reckoning session, maybe once a week. Such a system would be particularly needed if the going rate for a single rat, or other species, did not exactly coincide with the value of a coin of the realm.



Abbas is Latin for abbot; by putting his title on a token, rather than his name or bust, the piece could be used under any succeeding abbot without anybody querying its authority. Susan would be very pleased to hear your further thoughts on any of these pieces so, if you have any, please let me have them and I will gladly pass them on.

~::~~::~~::~

Postscript:

Nothing to do with lead directly, but in 1934 another token {Fig.10, not magnified} was issued at Fountains Abbey in connection with the Fountains Abbey Settlers Society and Trust, a social experiment which was set up in that year to provide houses, in a rural location, for unemployed craftsmen from Tyneside. The experiment was short-lived and of only limited success; further details about that readily available online, but the point is: the stated value is a unit of work, not a monetary sum. You got one of these for doing something for somebody, and you could spend it, not on buying commodities, but on getting somebody else to do something for you. This is a 20th cent example, but it is well worth thinking about whether, in earlier days when small local communities had plenty of practical skills but little money, they used lead tokens for the very same purpose. If anyone sees any other such tokens, of whatever date, please write in.



~::~~::~~::~

Readers' Correspondence

Feedback on earlier articles is always welcomed, not least because certain pieces are specifically shown in the hope that someone will come up with ideas. Herewith a recent selection, for which thanks to the various contributors.

Further to my article in LTT_100 {Nov 2014} about cut fractions, John Bromley has kindly mailed in a picture of a cut three farthings {Fig.1}. He writes:



“I think the reason three farthings coins are rare is because pennies were cut professionally and put into circulation and few people ever found themselves in need of an odd farthing or three farthings which they had to cut for themselves.

The cuts are normally always very clean and straight edged implying some sort of guillotine being used. This in turn suggests the coins were cut at the mints or at some official centre locally and put into circulation as pre-cut fractions. The fact the coins are always cut along the arms of the reverse cross suggests they were cut singly rather than in a stack. This Henry I three farthings is an anomaly because the quarter had obviously been cut in a moment of need, so it is not as clean a cut as seen in the image. The cut is still along the cross arms, but because these are slightly off centre it results in a cut quarter which is not exactly one quarter of the original coin.

You can imagine what might happen to a half or quarter being cut from a coin using scissors, chisels or knives – one snip or whack and the un-held fraction has pinged off into the distance never to be seen again – well, not for the next 700 years or so!”



Belgian reader Hendrik has found some more of the leaden bottle tops discussed briefly on the front page of LTT_92 {Sept./Oct 2013}. They are apparently the lids for medicinal containers used for housing Theriac, an ancient medicinal compound which was particularly favoured in and around Venice. His contact Raf van Laere kindly expands further:

“Theriac from Venice was considered to be the best but, as a consequence, it was widely copied in other places. The bottle-tops from original Venetian theriac are usually well readable and mention the name of the pharmacy that produced it e.g. Il Moro (The Moor, which shows the Head of a Moor), the three sisters etc. The inscription which normally begins at the top reads TERIACVM and usually also mentions in one way or another the name of the pharmacy and the name of Venice. Often a date is added.

Since the legend on your piece seems impossible to read - I can distinguish not much more than TERIA – it was probably used for an imitation theriac. However it remains an interesting find which gives insight into the medication which our ancestors used, in this case with as much result as any other placebo.

More information on these ‘bottle-tops’ can be found in: P. Voltolina, *La storia di Venezia attraverso le medaglie*, Milano 1997 (3. vol.)”

Further information on Theriac can be found in its Wikipedia entry or by looking at <http://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=168018>, which shows another example.

-:-:-:-:-

Tony Gilbert has written in with comments on various pieces shown recently. Regarding the piece shown on the front page of LTT_96 {Mar/Apr 2014}, he favours the inscription “GEO. VEN.OF.EXON” standing for “George, Bishop of Exeter”; notwithstanding that Venn is a particularly Devonian surname which might pertain to a commercial issuer, “Ven” is also short for “Venerable”, a title not unassociated with senior churchmen. This is certainly another very plausible explanation, although I think that both are possible.

For Identification, please...



Weights expert Norman Biggs has kindly sent in the following five pieces from his oddments box, inviting readers to conjecture what they might be. Their sizes and weight are, respectively:

- 1: 8.96gm / 22mm
- 2 15.82gm / 24mm
- 3 5.67gm / 20mm
- 4 16.84gm / 29mm
- 5 23.63gm / 27mm

He also has a rectangular version of no.1, and a cut half (round); their weights are 7.60g and 3.98gm respectively. I've seen a rectangular cut version {klippe} of this piece before, weight 7.32gm, but I don't know what their purpose is. As the "6" is always retrograde, perhaps it is meant to be a "d"/"p".

I think that no.2 is probably a Dutch beacon token, used for raising tax for the running of lighthouses, along the lines of those discussed on the back page of LTT_100 {Nov 2014}. The value 24 s{tuivers} may be faintly discerned on the reverse, and the date, 1743, is in the correct range for the series.

No.3: Immediate gut feeling here is that I want to magnify the photograph, and/or work the piece over gently with an old toothbrush, to see if I can make sense of the inscription; depending on the wording, that might give some clue as to the category. With its 12 o'clock pseudo-mintmark and a ring of lettering, it looks vaguely like a British 17th cent token without being very convincing. I have not seen the reverse before, and one might wonder from the two lis whether it could be French; however, the pleasant but conservative design could probably come from any one of a whole variety of countries. I really would like to crack that inscription. Jeton, possibly? Philip Mernick, more knowledgeable than me on such things, feels not.

No.4: The heraldry probably indicates some European province or town, but which ...? It could be a town token used for charitable distribution, but that is a best guess. On the back, somebody with no great skills or equipment has had the vague idea of trying to turn a blank surface into a cross and pellets, but appears to have abandoned the idea fairly quickly. Belgian reader Hendrik has had a preview and thinks that it is probably issued by the guild of St.Lucas, possibly in Antwerp or Middelburg.

No.5: The devices depicted are presumably merchant marks, which in this country typically date from 1350 up to the late 1600s, with a peak in the 15th and 16th cents; however, the size and weight of this piece suggest that, if it was English, which I suspect it may not be, the mid-late 18th cent. The design, however, just doesn't fit comfortably with such a date. The second merchant mark looks like it could be a stylised Paschal lamb and upright cross, but maybe I am just being over-imaginative. A common mediaeval design, the latter could have been the inspiration for someone's personal mark.

Any more suggestions welcome, folks....