

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 mail@leadtokens.org.uk Please note that the old david@powell8041.freeserve.co.uk address advertised on earlier versions of LTT will not be active after 31 May 2017.

Readers' Correspondence

Two nice mediaeval pieces to start, courtesy of reader Robert Mitchell. The first side of Fig.1 is very ordinary, but the cross and crosslets on the reverse are very nicely cut. One never quite knows what to make of incuse tokens, because they cannot easily be stylistically associated with cast or struck ones. Late mediaeval is suggested, and I would be inclined to use the size to date, using the table at the back of LTT_42, but any results would be fairly approximate. The regal coin type associated with cross and crosslets is the Tealby penny, 1158-1180, but we have little knowledge of lead being made that early, in addition to which there is no attempt on the cross and crosslets side of an edge inscription. The limited likeness may be purely coincidental.



Fig.2 is a common enough design until you turn it over; a ladder cross with gnetis, plus annulets in the angles, but with a badge catch on the back; specifically, designed for sewing on rather than fixing. It is, however, extremely well, and evenly, executed. I suppose it is late mediaeval again, although the diameter, maybe 20mm or so, is a bit larger than normal for most tokens of the period. The largest & best of the main series of early English pewter tokens were 18mm {BNJ53 type C}, and they declined in both engraving quality and size thereafter.



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My thanks to glass expert Colin Brain for sending in this unusual type 11 which depicts not the usual one wineglass but two alongside the decanter; indeed, one wonders for a moment whether it is a communion token but, no, it is a Thames find and hence almost certainly commercial. True, there was the odd Scottish church in London but, even so, the conservative clerics who used CTs for their crowd control did not advocate the practice of chucking the things in the river.

Colin's gut feeling is that the glassware depicted is c.1700-20, but at 20mm the piece seems, at first, a little on the small side for such a date. The average size of main series tokens leapt from 15-17mm to 19-21mm in a very short period c.1663-66, and one would expect lead pieces in 1672, or shortly after, to have increased to somewhere near the 22mm of the new regal farthing {Pilson's Law}. However, recent experiences during the last few years have suggested that the size of the late Williamson period tokens remained popular for a good deal longer than Pilson's Law would imply; in consequence of which, I feel that pieces such as this could be anything up to several decades into the 18th cent. The artwork of this one is very neat, however, which slightly hints at earlier rather than later {i.e. 1670-1700}; however, there will have been different levels of skills & tool availability in every age.

Another 20mm piece from Robert which illustrates the same sizing theme is Fig.4, dating from 1742. The small cross in a square between what may be nothing more than someone's initials will either be his personal mark or just a decorative doodle, but the piece is disproportionately attractive because (i) the lower serifs form a full exergual line and (ii) the device in the middle, joining up the crossbars, gives the impression of some sort of framework, like an inverted table. I may even have the piece upside down!



{continued on page 3}

Insurance, 18th and 19th Cent Village Style

Most of us have been brought up with the idea that it is advisable to ensure certain of the most essential things in your life so that, for example, you and yours are not left penniless, or without anywhere to live, if disaster should strike. The 21st cent way of doing this is to pay an annual or monthly premium via direct debit to a big company, who may be based anywhere in the country or even occasionally abroad, and if anything does go wrong you put in a claim, they refuse it, they refuse again when you appeal it, you go to the Financial Ombudsman, and the company then immediately concedes and makes an electronic payment into your bank account. The mid-late 20th cent model was a little simpler; the companies did pay out on genuine claims with greater ease, and your compensation came in the form of a cheque.

Before that, amongst those of more modest means, and before the days when such folk made regular use of banks, a man came round maybe every week; that kept the sums down compared with monthly. You paid him, he wrote the amount in his little book, and maybe even gave you a receipt. A paper receipt. We have computers now, we had paper then, and before that....? Metal?



Tokens are not just a piece of our history in isolation; most of them fulfil some role in society which still requires fulfilling today, but which is now in most cases done differently. One prominent role of the tokens was as a receipt, an entitlement, or a ticket to an event; all effectively the same thing to some extent in that you paid for or were given something, proof of which was supplied in the form of a token, and you then went off to redeem said token for whatever. One such use, of many, was for insurance.



In the days before formal state social security provision, the big family fears were death, particularly of the breadwinner, and illness. Even the most humble and impecunious were exhorted to make some effort to “put something aside for a rainy day”, as the hypothetical tragedy was more palatably described, but many did not. Thus it came about that certain folk, being concerned about this, decided to encourage good practice by forming clubs of various types; those designated sick and burial societies stating their purpose specifically {Figs.1-4} and the Friendly and Benefit Societies hinting at it {Figs.6-9}, whilst others hid in anonymity behind a name {Fig.5}. Much of this innovation falling in the early part of the 19th century when brass and copper token usage was becoming popular, it was natural that some of these societies adopted tokens as their means of administration.

Societies or not, there were still some potential customers who did not bite the bait, and in order to tempt them further many of the societies developed the practice of appending some social function to their AGM, at which drink and occasionally food {Fig.9} were on offer. There is therefore in many cases a certain ambiguity as to whether tokens with a value on {pence implied} were receipt for a weekly payment or a pseudo-pub token for the annual booze-up, with the latter theory currently favoured because of the known simultaneous existence of similarly-valued pub tokens at much the same period. However, it is not obvious.



A few {e.g. Figs.6-7} have no value on, but whether receipts or drink/food vouchers it may be conjectured that they had an implied value anyway, known only to the locals, which the society saw no need to publish to a wider audience. It may be noticed that several of the pieces have their societies' dates of establishment on {1837, 1802, 1843, 1833 on Figs.1, 6-8 respectively}, which gives some idea of when such activities were setting up. The Freuchie piece of Fig.9 is typical of the Scottish unofficial farthing tokens issued from about 1815 onwards; if it had been much earlier, it would likely have been issued in lead. Which brings me to my next point....



Insurance did not just begin coincidentally at the same time as lead tokens; at least, not for the better off, whose companies' fire insurance plaques, dating back to the very early 18th cent at least, can still be seen from time to time on many an old house or cottage {not to mention a number of websites}. What about the less well endowed, and the small local communities? did they have any facilities earlier? because the need to safeguard would still have been there, and all the social issues behind it as to whether or not to do anything about it, in the 18th cent as much as the 19th. Perhaps people were just too poor, but one thing is likely: if they did, they probably used tokens, and this time lead tokens, for exactly the same purposes as are mentioned above. As to which, who knows, and perhaps no-one ever will. Maybe our common types, petals, cartwheels, lis, anchors and the like, all had certain distinct meaning which now we do not know about, and that this was one of them; however, I suspect not. Other reasons for lead token issue in the 18th cent are much more likely, but I just present benefit society usage as one more possibility which may be added to the pile of possibles.

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Readers' Correspondence {continued from page 1}

Finally this month, Fig.5 from Sheila Gunn. It is an occasional but not particularly common type of geometric token, involving part-circles; somebody wanted a design, and made it by drawing two series of approximately concentric arcs, one from each side. It would be relatively easy to draw; keep your hand in approximately the same position and, for each line, adjust the angle of the drawing implement to vary the radius of the arc. The more difficult bit comes in trying to date it. Stylistically, one is tempted to say early 18th cent, but the diameter suggests rather earlier than that, maybe mid-17th cent. There is also an argument for thinking late mediaeval, 1400 plus or minus a little, as (i) that was when simple geometric designs were first introduced, and (ii) 14-15mm was about the usual size at the time. However, late mediaeval pieces are usually more finely executed and rarely uniface. I will guess mid 17th cent, albeit without any great conviction.



A New Book on Lead - they don't come very often!

My thanks to Stuart Elton for informing me that the piece shown as Fig.4 on LTT_116, page 2 is an inner disc from a four-disc clothier's seal, specifically of the London based clothier Peter du Bois, born in England to a family of Flemish origins and flourishing as a merchant in London c.1618-37. Shown alongside the original picture is a full specimen from his Bage seals website, <http://www.bage seals.org/>, which I encourage you to explore. Put "Du Bois" into the search engine and you will find several. You will see that the fuller version shows a tree on the second side; this is a rebus for the issuer's name {Bois, in French, equals wood, for those who haven't got it, and what are trees made of....?}



Stuart, who has contributed to these pages on quite a number of occasions, has a book coming out shortly, indeed, it may even have appeared by the time that this edition of LTT is published: "An Illustrated Guide to the Identification of Lead Seals Attached to Cloth, from the British Perspective", by S.F. Elton. {LATE NEWS: Should be out last week of April. Details overleaf, on pages 5-6}

The above extract on the Du Bois piece is but a précis of a longer piece on Du Bois as a commercial seal user, and which further expands on his relationship with other merchants in Devon. Multiply this up by similar background stories for many other seal-issuing merchants and I am sure that Stuart's work is going to be a very interesting read-cum-reference book for those of us who keep coming across pieces on the are-they-aren't-they visual boundary between tokens and seals.

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Lead Tokens noted on Other Websites

Whilst talking about what other people are writing about lead tokens, I would like to thank reader Alison Gittens for pointing out the article on "Lead Tokens: Coinage of the Ordinary Man", at <https://janealisonsmithdaily.wordpress.com/2013/01/08/lead-tokens-coinage-of-the-ordinary-man/>. Apart from what it actually says by way of introduction to the subject, there is one gem of a piece illustrated; an ordinary type 14 cross with a date 16-60 occupying two quarters and flanking a crescent, above two more conventional crosslets in the others. Take the date and the crescent away and this looks a very ordinary provincial piece, but the neat execution of these two features is reminiscent of the good London lead produced up to 1665. The specific date 1660 is calculated to set one drooling that it may be Restoration-related, in the same way that an American will enthuse over 1776-dated pieces despite the fact that they are often no rarer or more attractive than their adjacently-dated look-alikes; and indeed there is a possibility that this is a piece by someone celebrating their Royalist sympathies. I tend on balance to think that this piece could have borne any mid-17th cent date up to about 1665, but one does have to admit that the crescent does pose the question as to whether it was intended as the top arch of a crown.



Not that it is lead, but there is one very exceptional dated piece in the main Williamson series, which I illustrate here, magnified 3:2 for effect; namely, Surrey 197, issued by William Wimple of Newington Butts. The date on it is, very specifically, 3 June 1652; not just plain 1652. Nobody has yet found what was so special about that date to its issuer. One may expect an exact date on medallic items which commemorate national events, or on reused old coins which have been engraved to celebrate personal anniversaries, but on a commercial piece? Try following that on lead or, indeed, any other metal.

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We are very lucky to have small, contemporary records of history scattered throughout our soil in the form of lead seals. With a couple of notable exceptions, they have largely been ignored by archaeologists and historians, but the recent explosion in the numbers found and recorded has helped to bring their importance and potential to the attention of those interested in our heritage.

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Most of the extra examples, referenced beneath the images, can be quickly located and viewed through access to the internet.

About the author—Stuart F. Elton:

After thirty years as a government scientist, early retirement allowed the author to indulge his hobby of metal detecting. This soon evolved into a passion for recording and researching the lead seals he and his fellow detectorists discovered. After setting up his own website, which now contains thousands of such seals, he progressed to helping local museums and then the Museum of London with the re-cataloguing of their cloth seals. Over ten years of this experience and worldwide correspondence with other enthusiasts and experts has led to the production of this book.

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