

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.

An Early 16th Century Selection



Some pieces from the “Black Letter” period, alternatively known as BNJ54 type O(b), to start this month. A relatively uncommon type compared to most, they herald the dawn of modernity as the Reformation approaches, and are a delight both in terms of quality of execution and the amount of written information they hint of conveying; against which is balanced the frustration that said information is almost unreadable except to the most knowledgeable palaeographers. It is to the name of the particular script employed that the series takes its name.

We are used to pseudo-inscriptions, where someone who is unable to write one has inscribed a meaningless alternative, but the trouble with black letter is that, even on a very good piece, one cannot tell whether the engraver has done that or not. Are the inscriptions on Figs.1-3 meaningful words, or just intermittent graining used for decorative effect? In favour of proper lettering, it may be argued that:

- ⇒ The various slanted uprights which fill the outer rim are neither so tightly packed or regularly spaced as those of the small type M pieces which preceded a short while earlier.
- ⇒ Certain of the uprights are notched {think E,F in modern terms} or joined to each other {think H,N}.
- ⇒ There are a few round or partially rounded characters as well {think B,D,P,R}
- ⇒ A few more modern doodles are also in evidence {for comparison, think of the mintmarks and other miscellaneous marks on 17th cent main series pieces}.

All of these features, particularly the first three, bode well for the presence of an alphabet. By lead standards these are quite mature pieces in terms of execution, so one could reasonably expect the inscription standard to be good as well.

The shield is the most popular reverse on these pieces, and as with the smaller BNJ54 type L of the previous century is very varied in its specifics; plus, of course, it has a much larger flan on which to display them. The favourite reverses, within the bounding inscription, are the existing stock designs and the Tudor Rose.

Ships occasionally occur, but one has to wonder whether Fig.4 belongs to type O or not. In terms of metal and style the obverse is good, but it is a trifle large and the reverse, a scratched petal cross superimposed on a circle, feels like a bit of an afterthought.



The design is of the right period, but this is far earlier than one normally thinks of for incuse etching. Finally Fig.5, which is quite definitely uniface. The standing angel feels like that of a late mediaeval gold coin and “Gloria in Excelsis” round the edge fits well, even if not in Black Letter script; however, despite the roundness of the edge, it is thought to be a seal. The diameter of both Figs.4-5 are around 26-27mm, which is beyond the usual range of tokens of this period.

Readers' Correspondence

Continuing the previous page's 16th cent theme, my thanks to James Prater for Fig.1, showing a piece which he found on the beach at Whitstable {Kent} twenty years ago. Of the usual 11-12mm diameter of the period, but magnified here, it is of a generic type probably issued for a couple of decades in the 1540s and 1550s and followed by other dated stock issue thereafter. We have seen something similar before, but on that occasion the figure on the reverse {identical} was too poor to illustrate. This one is nice and crisp. He appears to be praying and may be an angel, which is an interesting choice of subject to start appearing immediately after the Dissolution. One has therefore to ask whether the issue is ecclesiastic rather than secular; in which case poor relief or internal taxation are the most likely reasons.



Tony Gilbert has volunteered some suggestions regarding the piece on the right, previously shown as Fig.8 on the front page of LTT_126. He reads the inscription from 10–2 o'clock as ALD (followed by something unknown above the shield) then SLA. Having scrolled through the list of Lord Mayors of London, he thinks that this could be the seal of ALDerman Sir Stephen SLAney, member of the Skinners, Politician, Alderman of Portsoken, Sheriff of the City of London in 1584, and Lord Mayor in 1595. Uncertain, but if the characters above the shield are not a date, and I think now that they might be lettering, that is the sort of idea which is worth thinking about.



I am grateful to Tony also for the idea that, where two initials straddle a crozier as per the pieces shown at the bottom of LTT_128, page 3, the initials may possibly represent the rank of the church official preceded by the location of his {arch}bishopric, rather than the personal initials of his name. Tony suggests Durham/Dunelm Bishop for DB, which a possible London Archbishop for LA would support. Reports of further examples would be welcome, to test whether this theory remains feasible.



Reader John Bromley, having read LTT_126's recent article on type L, has kindly contributed two locally found pieces from Gloucestershire {Fig.5-6} on which he can recognise the family arms. One never quite knows whether these simplistic armorial depictions are fact or fiction and it is pleasing to know that John has been able to equate these to the De Clare family arms of "ore three chevrons gules". Both are 11mm and uniface, again magnified for convenience.



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Paul Cannon, one time Assistant Curator of the West Berkshire Museum at Newbury, reports that the type of distinctive pieces shown on the front page of LTT_124 are very familiar, due to a local detectorist having once brought in a group which he had found together. From memory Paul recalls that there were five of them, some with casting sprues attached. All had the very distinctive right facing busts with radiate crowns or rays radiating from behind the head, and with the flanking initials I-S as per the piece on the left, which he agrees depicts a talbot. He recalls the group containing two varieties:

- ⇒ Rev: talbot, with I-S flanking on the obverse {Fig.7}
- ⇒ Rev: peacock facing with feathers splayed, again I-S on obv.

...however, he does not remember the goat reverse or the I-P initials. So, somebody please find the peacock, which I have not personally seen, and look out in case there are any more variations. However, good that all observations consistently point to the same locality; that is progress!

Administration Districts on Tokens

We have once or twice discussed in these pages, {e.g. LTT_84} in connection with communion tokens, the use of tokens with different table numbers to divide large congregations into manageable groups for the purpose of administration. Others might use letters of the alphabet for similar purposes of convenience; as indeed does the local council round my way, for denoting its parking zones. Very different applications, from different eras, but alike in requiring a group of tickets or tokens for each identity.

With lead tokens we are used to seeing single digits and thinking “value” first; if not, maybe a serial number. A single letter we suspect of being the initial of the user’s surname, or his location, or occasionally a specific commodity {e.g. bread} with which the tokens were connected. Yet there are other reasons, less thought of, of which administrative division is one.



I am grateful to regular Dutch correspondent Alex Kussendragger for bringing my attention to this pleasant set of examples from Leiden {see <http://www.loodjes.nl/Leiden.html> }. They are what he describes as “Poorman’s money”, bearing a depiction of one of the city gates on one side and an area letter, or occasionally number, on the other. They form a rather neat set.

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So, do we have any English examples? As usual: quite possibly, but we may not recognise them as such! There is a group of 19th cent brass pieces along these lines, however, which encourages us to think that they may have had some earlier predecessors.



There is a group of Poor Law Unions in the north Herts/Beds/Hunts area, and another couple in London, which issued tokens, most of which bear numbers, usually in the range 1-4. Of the northern group, Bedford is the only one not to use numbers; its pieces, illustrated in Fig.7, are amongst the commonest of the group. The pieces from the other three Unions in the group, Biggleswade, Hitchin and Huntingdon, are shown overleaf. All four Biggleswade numbers can be found with relative ease, but for the other two, and the two London Unions, only isolated district numbers are known. It could be that the missing numbers are yet to turn up, but equally it may be that the decision to issue tokens was taken at district rather than Union level, and that certain districts’ tokens do not exist.

The latter does not sound very likely, however. Poor Law Unions in country areas typically comprised about 10-12 parishes apiece, and their purpose was to combine their resources more effectively than if each individual parish had had to reinvent the wheel; for example, Unions usually had one workhouse apiece. If the parishes were sparsely populated and widely spread, it might not be practical to combine so many in one Union, but the principle would be the same. Any divisions of Unions into districts are less likely to have been documented for posterity; and indeed, it may have been thought desirable to keep the arrangement flexible. Hence numbers rather than geographic descriptions on the tokens!



Figs.8-10 show the format of the pieces for Biggleswade, Hitchin and Huntingdon, respectively. All have the words "bread ticket" on the reverse; Biggleswade as per Fig.8b, with the number on the obverse repeated {albeit with two different districts' pieces shown, in this case}, whilst Hitchin and Huntingdon shared the reverse of Fig.9/10b. None of them, however, have the word "district" on; so, despite the likely meaning, are we making it up?



Here, moving to the southern pair of Unions, Fulham kindly comes to our rescue; beneath the large numeral, and in support of it, is clearly stated "No.1 District" {Fig.11}. It is a larger piece than its Herts/Beds/Hunts equivalents, and comes with the name of its maker, the well-known W.J.Taylor, on the reverse.

The pieces of St.Olaves, Southwark, are identically sized and quite possibly from the same source; however, they do have different designs again and, significantly, the reverse {Fig.12/13b} comes accompanied by both numbered and un-numbered obverses. It would be interesting to know which came first, so that we could appreciate whether the practice of district-numbering was introduced or abandoned during the period of issue. So, look for possible equivalents on lead; it may well be that district-numbered administration, using tokens, dates from before the age of brass.

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A Possible Oil Token

My thanks to Paul Fretwell, one of the staff at Eltham Palace, for providing me with the picture on the right, which appears courtesy of the English Heritage Trust.



Visitors to Eltham Palace may care to look in the Garter Suite dressing room, where there is an unusual token amongst the small collection of locally-found numismatic material on display; a uniface lead token with a wide-banded letter "O" on it, shaded in. The diameter is about 25mm, unusually large for what is suspected of being an early 16th cent item. True, type N "black letter" tokens are of similar date and diameter, but of more sophisticated design, and thin, whereas the Eltham Palace piece is simpler in concept and of greater, more variable thickness.

As to what the "O" might stand for one can but conjecture; obviously not a value, so presumably the initials of some service or commodity. Oil would appear to be one of the more obvious candidates.