

Manorial money? Three unusual lead tokens from St Mary Bourne, Hampshire

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Introduction

While employed as the Suffolk Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) in 2017, the author was shown images of two distinctive lead tokens. These had been found close together by the same individual during a metal detecting rally in Hampshire, on land within the parish of St Mary Bourne, near Andover. As these tokens were of very unusual appearance, they were subsequently recommended for recording via their local FLO – which was promptly undertaken. Though the author had intended to write something on these tokens at their time of finding, due to work commitments and other projects requiring prioritisation this did not transpire.



Figure 1: the two tokens from St Mary Bourne discovered in 2017. Images courtesy PAS.

However, in April 2023 the author was duly reminded of these previous finds by the coming to light of a third token (Fig. 2). Incredibly, this had been found in the same parish by metal detecting during the 1990's – though its significance was not realised until very recently. As such, these three tokens comprise the subject of this note.



Figure 2: the third token from St Mary Bourne, discovered by a metal detectorist in the 1990's. Images courtesy P Cooper, adapted by author.

The tokens

All three pieces are of identical appearance, having been cast from the same mould. Manufactured from lead-alloy, the two examples recorded via the PAS (see record ID [BERK-6A4DB1](#)) have diameters of just under 20mm, thicknesses of approximately 2.1mm and weights of 4.2 and 4.6 grams respectively. The diameter of the third find is approximately 19mm, with no thickness available and weighing precisely 4.33g. The obverses depict a bearded, uncrowned face with crudely-rendered hair, all situated within a solid inner border. Around this, the partially abbreviated Latin inscription CAP VITA REGIS is visible in Lombardic style script. By contrast, their reverses have a central short cross pattée within an inner solid border, surrounded by a pattern of repeating chevron motifs. This effectively fills the available space and creates a sort of 'sunburst' motif around the inner border. Although the portraits on these tokens are reminiscent of those present on pennies of the shortcross issue struck c. 1180-1247, the employment of Lombardic script infers a 15th to earlier 16th century date of production - perhaps c. 1450-1540. Gary Oddie posits that the thickness of these pieces suggests a later rather than earlier date within this range, perhaps c. 1500-1540 (Garry Oddie pers. comm 2023). Either way, the probable date of production for these pieces effectively crosses the late medieval/early post medieval transition.

Interpretation and discussion

The PAS record for the two tokens found in 2017 suggests quite reasonably that 'CAP' is an abbreviation of the Latin word 'CAPUT' (head). 'VITA' is probably in the ablative case (with, by, from) while 'REGIS' is genitive (of). The entire inscription thus translates word-for-word as 'the head from the life of the king', or, in a more nuanced format 'the head of the living king'. While in a literal sense this translation is correct, it does not account for the alternative meaning of the word 'regis' - specifically in religious contexts, where it is often utilised in reference to Christ. This is evident in the titles of various paintings from the late medieval and Renaissance world, one such example being Bernadino Luini's '*caput regis gloriae spinis coronatur*' (the head of the king of glory crowned with thorns), painted c. 1522. Given the latter, a better translation for the inscription on these tokens might be as follows: 'the head of the living Christ'. This implies that the uncrowned face visible on the obverse is more likely to be that of Christ rather than a secular monarch.

Given the above, the obverse design and accompanying legend are thus highly suggestive that these tokens were produced and/or utilised within a religious context. What their exact purpose in this sphere might have been is anybody's guess. Mitchiner and Skinner's two papers on tokens from London dating 1200-1425 (1983) and 1425-1672 (1984) discuss the various ecclesiastical functions of lead tokens. While some were apparently distributed to members of the clergy for the purpose of monitoring attendance at services (1983, 31), others were given in lieu of payment to workmen (*ibid*, 33). More still seem to have been handed out to ordinary people in need, the tokens to be redeemed at specific places which sold food or drink (*ibid*) and the vendors in due course re-imbursed by the relevant token-dispensing body. Thus, lead tokens could be both connected directly with religious activities, but also function as a component of ecclesiastical dealings with the laity.

A monastic association?

The exact function of the tokens found at St Mary Bourne is unknown, as is the mechanism which stimulated their production. However, we can surmise that they relate specifically to some aspect of human activity occurring in the landscape surrounding their findspot. To the author's knowledge, no other tokens of the design found at St Mary Bourne have been recorded from other areas of Britain. This implies relatively small scale, localised production of these pieces - quite possibly on the parochial level.

Given their apparently religious subject matter, connections can be made here with evidence for the restricted issuance and association of generally scarce lead tokens connected with monastic foundations or more generic ecclesiastical contexts. These minor series contrast markedly with the large-scale production of East Anglian 'Boy Bishop' tokens (see Rigold 1978), variously issued from Ely, Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds. In regards to the former, Gary Oddie notes the existence of pieces possibly connected with both Elstow Abbey in Bedfordshire and Soham Abbey in Cambridgeshire (Gary Oddie 2023, pers. comm), while a late medieval group from Holme Cultram Abbey in Cumbria are also worthy of mention (Rennicks 2016, 28-36). Although none of these tokens specifically name the institutions they were found near, their spatial distribution and presence of mould duplicates infers production in the immediate vicinity.

Taking forward the working theory that the three tokens discussed within this note might be monastic-related issues, wider spatial and historical analysis has the potential to shine light on this aspect. Although there is no monastic foundation at St Mary Bourne, three potential candidates for issuance are present within the vicinity of the findspot. Two of these are possible, but in the author's view drastically less likely than the third.

Possible candidates for issuance

Ten miles to the southwest, a foundation of Benedictine nuns was present at Wherwell Abbey, formally surrendering to the Crown in 1539 following the second Act of Dissolution. However, this seems a little far for a distinct group of three identical lead tokens to be associated with. These objects, as with the 17th century 'traders' series, rarely travelled far from their place of manufacture.

A second candidate can perhaps be found in Andover Priory, markedly nearer at just six miles to the southwest of St Mary Bourne. However, despite its geographical closeness, Andover's status as a so-called 'alien' house of Benedictine monks held via the French abbey of Saint-Florent de Saumur (BHO 2023/Doubleday and Page 1903, 219-221) probably removes it from the running for producing the tokens discussed here, as it closed its doors in 1414 when the 'alien' institutions were suppressed (*ibid*). Assuming a manufacture date of 1450-1540, this is at least 30-40 years before the tokens from St Mary Bourne were likely cast.

This leaves the third, arguably most likely option, which is both geographically closest to St Mary Bourne and also chronologically commensurate with the production date of the tokens found there. Directly to the south east (the next parish over) at only 2.5 miles distance is the modern settlement of Hurstbourne Priors. Although today a small village, its name hints at ancient monastic associations – though not as an ecclesiastical foundation in its own right. Hurstbourne Priors (or *Hesseburna Prioris*, as it was known through much of the medieval period) was originally an Anglo-Saxon estate of at least 9th century foundation (BHO 2023/Page 1911, 287-291). The estate was high-status, possessing its own manorial church that survives today in the form of 12th century medieval rebuild with subsequent additions. Initially gifted to the Abbey of Abingdon, it subsequently came under control of the Benedictine Priory of St Swithun at Winchester Old Minster, the ancestor of Winchester Cathedral, in 993 (*ibid*). Overall control and administration of the

manor by the Winchester clergy continued until 1535, when the Priory was dissolved by Henry VIII (*ibid*) and its holdings confiscated.

Conclusions

Based on the evidence above, the author suggests that the three tokens discussed in this note are local products of the ecclesiastical manor at Hurstbourne Priors. *Hesseburna* would have likely employed a large workforce for the purposes of both agricultural labour and estate administration. As such, the fact that lead tokens are well attested in the documentary record as being distributed variously to labourers, workmen and craftspeople in lieu of services rendered (Mitchiner and Skinner 1983, 30-31) is especially relevant to these objects.

Although there is no way of being 100% certain regarding the above assertion, the weight of circumstantial evidence is undeniably compelling in this instance - to a degree which seems increasingly unlikely to be coincidental. The immediate adjacency of the manor to the findspot, its high status as a large, ecclesiastical estate and the probable presence of a workforce necessitating payment in token-form indicate that *Hessaburna Prioris* clearly had the means, motive and opportunity to issue the three tokens found at St Mary Bourne. Further token finds and their distributive analysis may assist in confirming this numismatic ‘smoking gun’.

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