Illustrating Buckinghamshire Seventeenth Century Tokens

Gary Oddie

Start the clock. Take token from tray, check focus and flash, click. Turn token over, click. Connect camera to computer. Open link, click, click, select all, CTRL X. Click destination folder, CTRL V. Rename files with metadata (055obv19mm and 055rev19mm). Right click, open with PaintShop Pro. Click near image, hold, drag, unclick, click drag, unclick, crop to selection, CTRL S. Click file in folder, CTRL C, click in document, CTRL V. Left click on image, right click on edge of image, more layout options, size, input 2.85cm, text wrapping, square, position, right wrt column, OK. Repeat last steps for reverse image. Click obv. image file, delay, click filename, CTRL C, click document CTRL V. Repeat for rev. filename. Thus adding filenames as text next to images. Stop the clock. A total of 5 minutes 32 seconds.

055obv19mm
055rev19mm
Shown 150%

[Other sequences and software packages are available.]

And thus the article can begin.

When photographing many pieces, there might be an economy of scale, but the rate limiting factors are the addition of the metadata to the files and the final image manipulation. Recent projects on James I shillings have shown that 100 coins can be photographed in an hour, then cropping/adjusting the 200 images and adding the metadata to the file names takes about 4 hours. Finally pulling the images into a document and scaling each image takes as much time again. There are alternatives, for example a camera set up to give a 100% image on the page and directly connected to the computer hard drive, but the total of just over 5 minutes per coin from photographing to scaled image on a document page is tricky to beat. Measuring weights and noting die rotation also slow down the process. The digital parts are quick and easy, the slow part is the human being!

This token was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it is the only 17thC Buckinghamshire token in my collection, being the same Daniel Finch who issued a token in Dunstable (W/D Bedfordshire 38).[1,2] Secondly, the item shown below is the letterpress printing block used to illustrate the piece in Manton and Hollis's 1933 book, on Buckinghamshire 17thC tokens, which is the main motive for this note.[3] The piece is number 71 on plate 4.

Fig. 1. Printing block and resulting print for Buckinghamshire 71 in Manton & Hollis.[3]

Taking a close-up of the printing block reveals that the metal has been cut by hand using some sort of engraving or milling tool(s). The fine engraving marks have been obscured by the ink residue in the recesses.

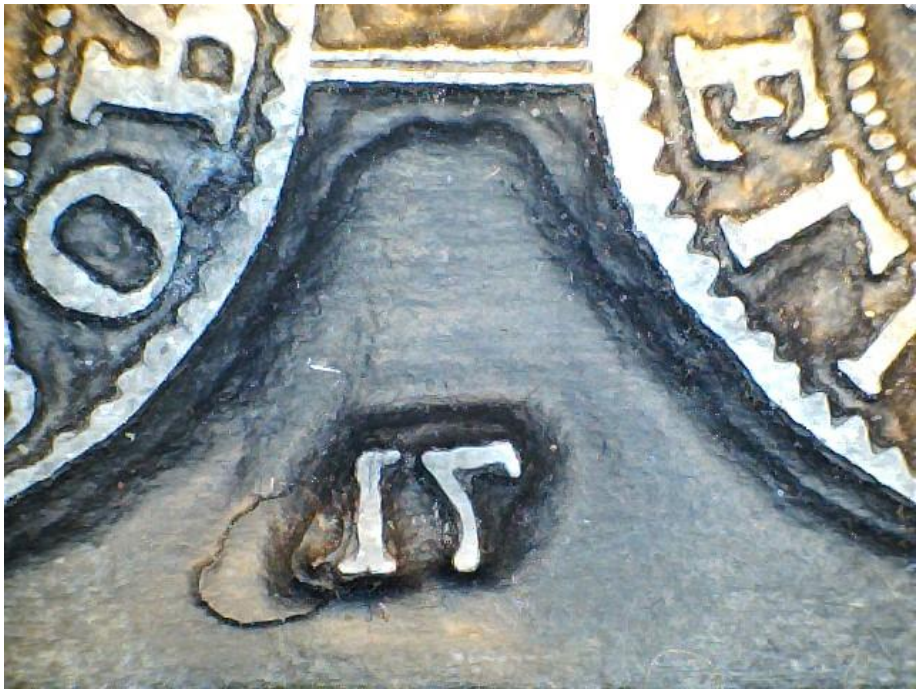

Fig. 2. Close-up of the printing black face showing tool marks.

The printing block shows the token at 100%, suggesting a simple transfer of an image of the token to the metal surface. A rubbing or tracing of the token was taken, the image was then reversed and transferred to the blank surface, thus indicating the metal that needed to be removed. The outer teeth and inner circle of beads are in the correct places, though not necessarily exactly the correct shape and size. This is the work of a skilled and practiced craftsman. I can find no data on the time required to cut such a block, but my guess is not less than an hour for a block of this size.

The Manton and Hollis publications and the source of the printing block will be returned to later, but first a brief detour into the history of the illustration of coins and tokens.

There are two excellent articles about coin illustration by Robin Eaglen in the BNJ 2009 and 2010.[4,5] The first starts at the renaissance and the invention of printing and finishes with Ruding's reuse of Martin Folkes' plates in his 1817 edition and the posthumous edition of his Annals of the Coinage in 1840.[6] The earliest printed illustrations of 17thC English tokens that I can find are the copper plates by Thomas Snelling in 1766.[7]

Eaglen's second instalment begins with the invention of photography sometime around 1839, though all of the required elements had been evolving for some decades with rapid developments in chemistry. Photosensitive chemicals (several options, but culminating in silver compounds), fixing agents, photo resists, acid etching etc. were all needed to create the first image and subsequent repeated transfer to a piece of paper. For limited print runs, whole photographic plates could be included amongst the ordinary printed pages. A large range of optical techniques evolved from the late 19th and through the 20th century including stereotypes, autotypes, collotypes, photogravure, half-tone and the supporting technologies – plaster casts and electrotypes. Each had its advantages and proponents, but often chosen for practical reasons such as the cost, the print run, the paper, the required image quality, the ease of creating reprints and the storage of the originals.

There were also a few false starts, and they probably seemed like a good idea at the time, such as the embossed impressions with metallic foils used by Humphreys in 1851.[4] Casually pleasing to the eye, but of little practical use due to the lack of fine detail, the copy I have seen also had deeply moulded (maybe 8mm) papier-mâché boards and must have been a nightmare for the bookbinders!

There is also a very comprehensive description of the different photographic methods and how to identify the results on the pel® website. These are the same people who supply archival storage and repair materials.[9]

The camera optics had been slowly improving through the 20th century and then came colour photography and rapid progress in printing technologies and for a while a significant premium could be charged for colour, maybe a factor of two or more, though competition has brought that margin down to maybe 20%. Then came digital cameras and digital image processing, and digital printers – completely missing out the wet film, darkroom and the chemistry with the toner or ink being added to the paper at the very last step. During every transition, there are always adherents to the previous technology and others who embrace the new. I recall one organisation that would charge £50 for a single b/w photograph on glossy paper. When photography went digital, for a while, the charge remained the same for an emailed file!

Having reached this point, it is now becoming clear that the printing block shown above is definitely an outlier or a throwback in the history of printing coin images. So, returning to the Buckinghamshire tokens.

James Odom Manton (c.1851-1946) was a district superintendent for the Midland Railway. His interests ranged from the Anglo-Saxon Mint at Derby to Buckinghamshire 17thC tokens. His collection of English silver and bronze coins, tokens and numismatic books was sold, with other collections, at Sotheby's, 10 February 1947. Interestingly his collection of Buckinghamshire tokens was not in the sale and have not been seen since.(10)

His first work on Buckinghamshire 17thC tokens was published in three parts in the British Numismatic Journal. Part 1 contained a general introduction to 17thC tokens, along with specific examples of trade and inn signs to be found in Buckinghamshire and a list of the number of token issuers at each location. The catalogue with Manton's own numbering system covers Nos 1-31 (Andrew Barowes of Amersham (W/D 1A) – William Willis of Beckingsfeild (W/D 24)) and there are no plates or illustrations.(11)

Part 2 covers Nos 32-132 (Thomas Cater of Brill (W/D 25) – Humphry Morgan [Oak]ley (W/D Bedfordshire 77A, now W/D Devon Chulmleigh 40A)), again with no illustrations.(12)

The final Part 3 covers numbers 133-222, of the main catalogue (John Amps of Olney (W/D 107) – Edward Winch of Wiccombe (W/D 179)), then tokens 223-229, a bulk reclaim of tokens then attributed to Colnbrook, Devon, (Thomas Burcombe (D 54A) – Edmund Slocombe (D 54H)), and finally number 230 a new piece (George Goad of Horton (D 67B, previously Staffordshire W 20 and Yorkshire W 127)). There is also an errata section and additional notes on some of the pieces from the previously published parts. Again, there are no illustrations.(13)

The three volumes of the BNJ in which Manton's articles appeared also included other articles with very good images. Whole page collotype plates from plaster casts and also screen-printed halftone when printed on a page of text (the tiny dots are visible).

In 1932 Edwin Hollis published an article that included a single plate of tokens numbered consistently with the Manton articles in the BNJ.(14) The plate shows the George Goad of Horton piece (M230) and the eight Colebrook pieces now attributed to Buckinghamshire (M70 and M223-229). Edwin Hollis was the curator at the County Museum at Aylesbury (1908-1941). Hollis was instrumental in Aylesbury Museum acquiring the Oliver Ratcliff collection of Buckinghamshire 17thC tokens in June 1912.(10)

The following year, in 1933, the three BNJ articles by Manton were brought together into a book, described as "overprints of the British Numismatic Society's journal", published by the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society.(3) Both Jas. O. Manton and E. Hollis are credited as authors. The printed pages are identical to the BNJ pages, but with a change in page number and signature letter. The signatures of 8 sheets (16 pages) are the same as published in the BNJ. Additionally, the book contains a foreword (un-numbered), corrections and additions (p115), an index (pp116-118) and 13 un-numbered plates at the end.(15)

A few years later in 1937, Hollis published a further article on "Unrecorded [Buckinghamshire] Trade Tokens".(15) Three tokens are illustrated: Thomas Slayter of Chesham (D 49A), Robert Watson in High Wickham (D 177B) and John Fosscet in Windover (D 140A).

In 1973, the Buckinghamshire tokens were revisited with many pieces added and reattributed.(16) Those results were absorbed into the latest listing with one new addition in 1986.(2)

This might have been the end of the Manton & Hollis story, until 90 years later, when an item appeared on eBay with the following description and a series of photographs, four of which are included below.(17)

214 Letterpress Woodblocks Of 17th Century Buckinghamshire tokens 1932

Metal letterpress mounted on mahogany blocks.
A large collection 212 Letterpress blocks of 17th Century token of Buckinghamshire . Created for the 1933 revised copy of the Manton book which had a run of 75 copies.
I have confirmed this by tracking down a copy of the book at world-books and include it with the sale (it is number 59 of 75 ex library).
The plate nos match and the marks on the metal images correspond to the book images exactly .The blocks are in exceptional condition having only be used to produce a limited run of 75 copies. They provide a fresh image of the original tokens.
The majority of the blocks are still wrapped in their village or town.
A great addition to a collection or a wonderful display item mounted.
A rare one off opportunity to create your own sets of high quality prints or mount them for display.
If you require any further images please contact me.




Fig. 3. Text and selection of images from the 2017 eBay item.

The copy of the Manton & Hollis book was included in the sale. Though not one of the authors usual counties, this looked interesting and a price was negotiated. A few days later the lot was collected from the vendor in Aylesbury. There was the tray containing loose blocks and blocks wrapped in brown paper, and a box of groups of blocks also wrapped in brown paper. Several of these wrappers were damaged, and it transpired that the vendor had dropped them all on his drive when he had first taken them home. He wasn't sure if he had found them all!

The copy of Manton & Hollis had two ex-library stamps – Bucks County Library and also the Berkshire County Library Service at Slough. The binding was the original by F. Weatherhead & Son Ltd of Aylesbury, the same as several other copies I have seen.

The whole group had been found in a charity shop in Aylesbury.

The first task was to check if the set was complete.

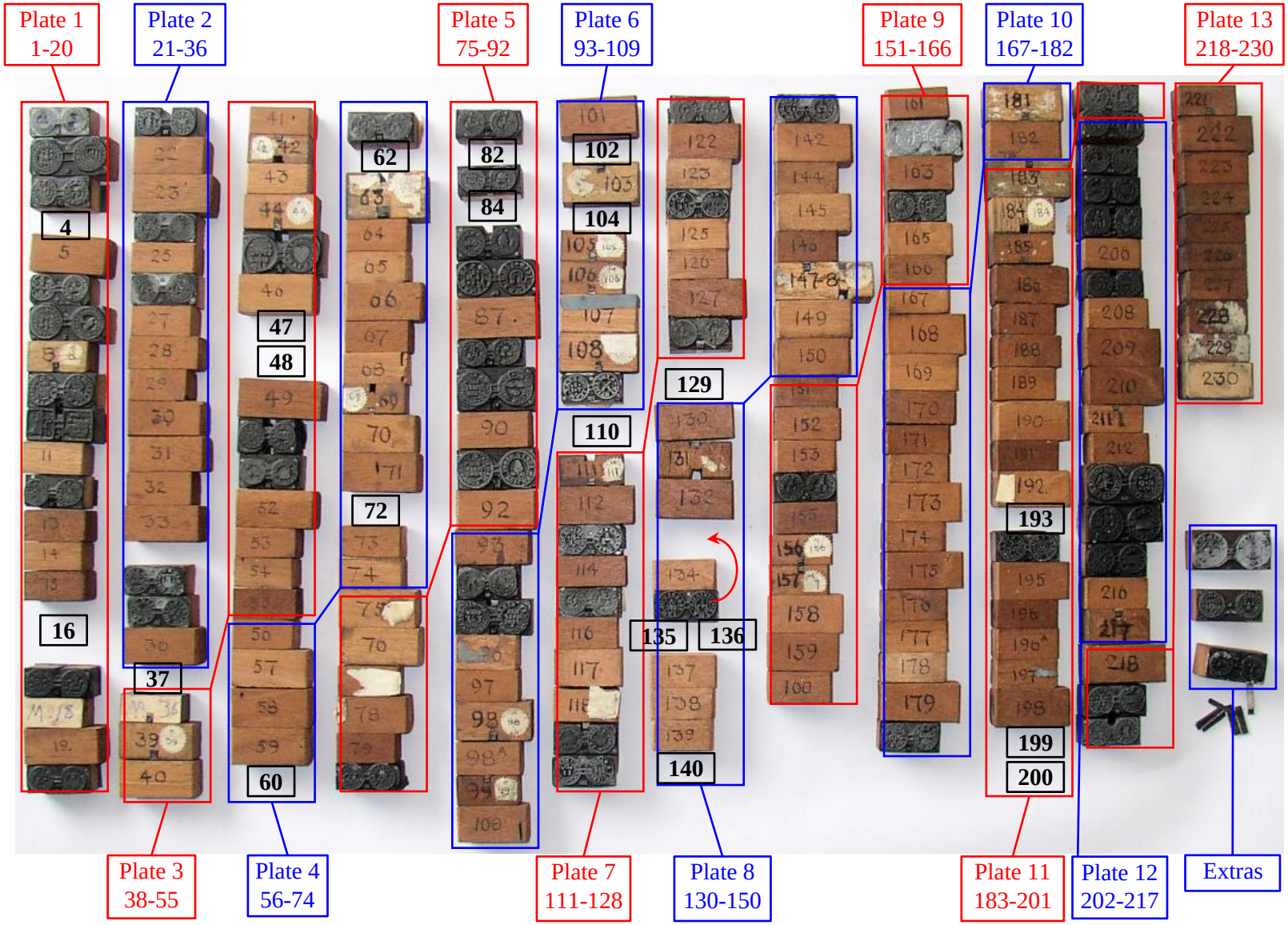

Fig. 4. View of all of the printing blocks, sorted into 20s.

The numbers in bold black refer to gaps in the plates, and 133 was misread as 135 and 147 and 148 appear on one block. Thus the group comprises a complete set of printing blocks for the plates in Manton & Hollis. The three extra blocks are for the new discoveries published by Hollis in 1937. The following image shows all of the blocks "face up".

Fig. 5. View of all of the printing blocks – face up.

It is clear that several of the blocks have suffered surface corrosion. A metal analysis of a good block gives: Zn 96.6%, Cu 1.7%, Pb 1.3%, Cd 0.1%, Fe 0.1% and corroded blocks are very similar, so it is likely just storage conditions rather than an alloy issue.

The images below show the blocks for the three new tokens, made later than those for the Manton & Hollis book and the close-ups suggest they were made by a different hand.

Thomas Slayter of Chesham (D 49A)

John Fosscet in Windover (D 140A)

Robert Watson in High Wickham (D 177B)

Fig. 6. Printing blocks for the three new pieces recorded by Hollis in 1937.

These three blocks are clean enough and sufficiently well preserved to show the circular milling marks where the bulk of the metal was roughly cut out. It is also interesting to note that all three are signed "H" possibly indicating they were made for Hollis or possibly even by Hollis himself. This space was always blank in the blocks used for the book.

As a final observation on the "hoard" of printing blocks, it can be seen that many of the blocks were grouped by location and wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. Most of the brown paper had no more than the name of the location and number of blocks inked on the outside. However, a few of the sheets had more information including the dates 10 March 1932 and 28 August 1930 and another of particular interest is shown below.

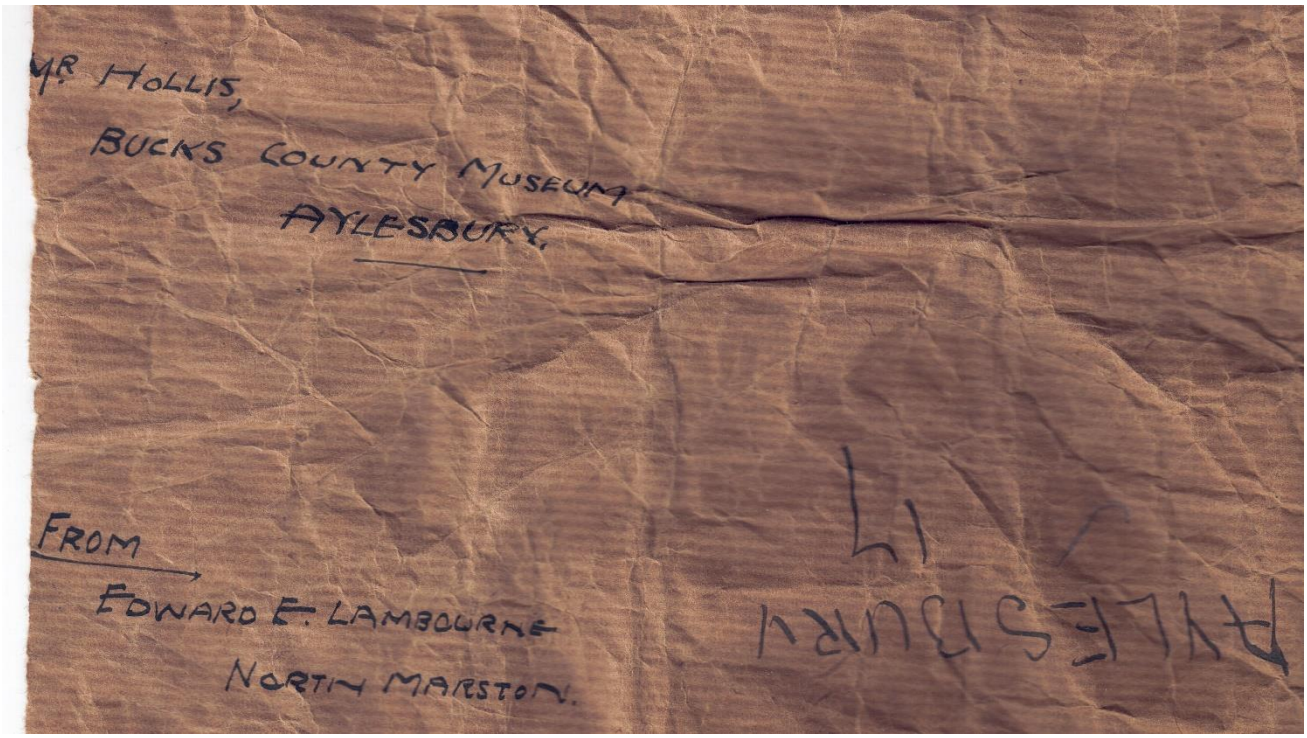

Fig. 7. Part of the wrapper for the 17 Aylesbury printing blocks.

North Marston is about eight miles northwest of Aylesbury. A quick search reveals that Edward Lambourne was a local historian, and his "Collection of Miscellaneous Papers, Notes, etc., Relating to North Marston" is catalogued in the National Archives and held at the Buckinghamshire Archives.[18] The material has dates ranging from 1416 to the 1980s.

The writing for all of the text is from the same hand, likely Edward Lambourne, which does raise the question as to his involvement with the Manton & Hollis publication. Unfortunately there were two Edward Ernest Lambournes; the father (1878-1951) and the son (1904-1989). The writing could be either, though is most likely that of the father.

Conclusions

This note has presented the printing blocks used to produce Manton & Hollis' 1933 book on Buckinghamshire Seventeenth Century Tokens and Hollis's article of 1937 listing three new pieces. The style of the illustrations is quite old when compared to what was available at the time of publication.

It is expected that the vast majority of such printing blocks have been lost in the decades following their use.

That the whole group appeared in Aylesbury, the town where Edward Hollis lived and was curator at the County Museum (1908-1941) and where he died in 1942, points to the blocks being with the Hollis Family or in Aylesbury Museum until they appeared for sale in 2017.

References

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(17) eBay vendor topline900, 13 July 2017.
(18) https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/c719e4f2-fa97-4bf2-93e0-d54cd011de9f

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