

Tokens Used by Bedfordshire Market Gardeners

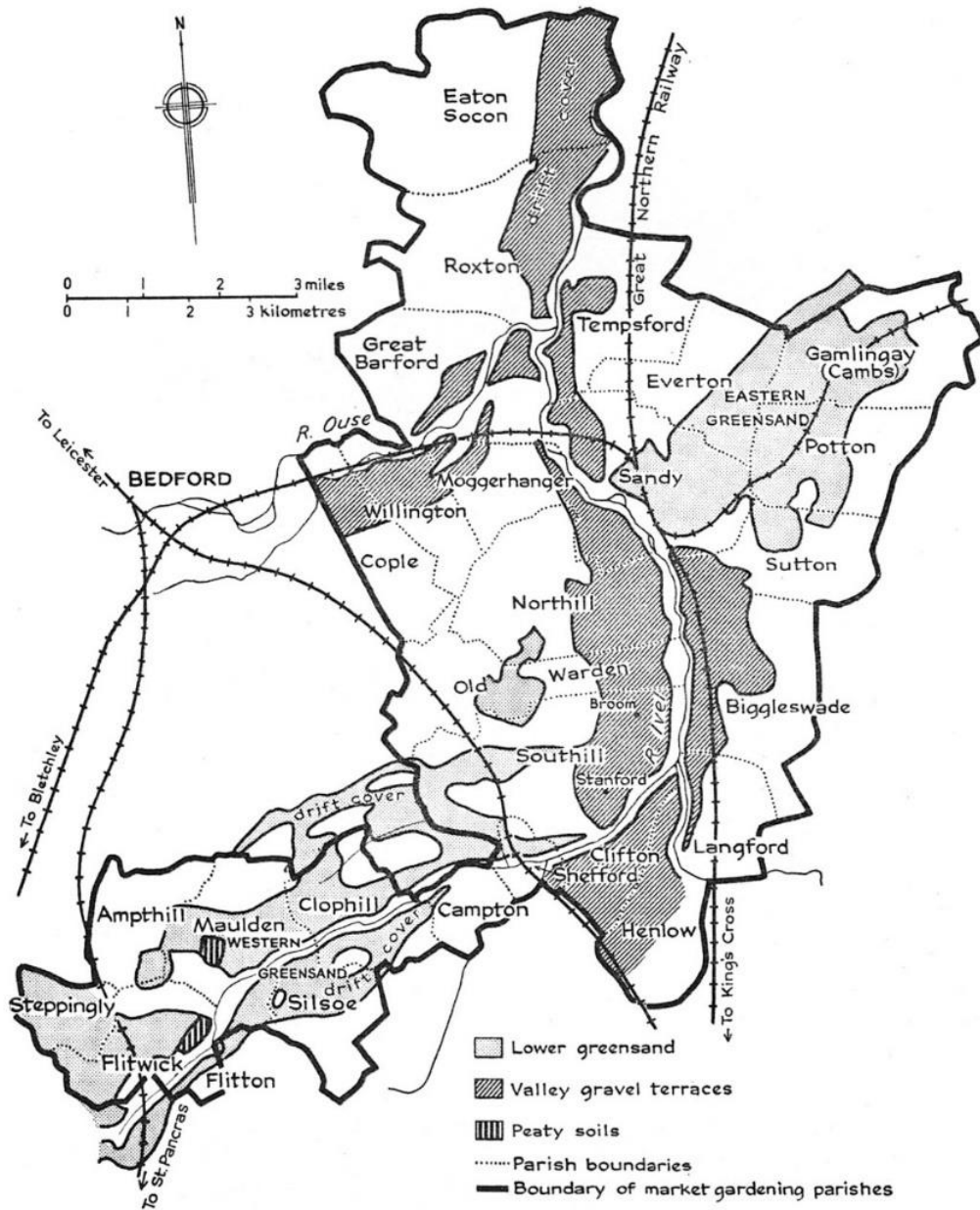
Gary Oddie

Prior to the 1850s, most of the crops grown on the very fertile soils of the Greensands Ridge, in Bedfordshire, were for local consumption. The arrival of the railways, with many local lines into the farming areas, opened up new markets for the produce. Crops included potatoes, peas, marrows, beans, beetroot, sugar beet, mangels, cabbage, brussels sprouts, parsley, along with the arable wheat, oats, and barley.⁽¹⁾

The loaded trains would leave at 4am in the morning, returning later in the day bringing back the empty containers along with manure from the London horses, zoos and other waste that could be used as fertiliser to maintain the fertility of the soil.

Market gardening in Bedfordshire expanded and by 1901 there were over 230 market gardeners operating in Sandy, Biggleswade and Potton. During 1910, around 20,000 tons of produce was sent from Potton station, mostly to the London markets. The peak month was July with 2,000 tons, mostly comprising shipments of potatoes.

The map below shows the extent of the market gardening area of Bedfordshire.⁽²⁾



With the increased use of road haulage, rail transport declined after the 1940s and many of the smaller stations on the branch lines closed including the Three Counties (Arlesey), Blunham, Ampthill, Pottton, Shefford, Girtford, Southill and Willingham stations. The larger stations on the main lines also closed their sidings where the goods had been loaded and unloaded.

A metal token or paper ticket was given for each sack or basket of produce picked. Several of the market gardeners used tokens stating their name and nearest village, but a significant number had tokens which showed just three initials. In 2004, the code for the initials was solved whilst giving a talk to the Biggleswade History Society, when a member of the audience presented a small cloth sack of tokens and knew the issuer (first two initials) and location (third initial). The issuer was her father. Most specimens have been found using metal detectors and it is suspected that many more similar tallies will have existed. If the tallies appear out of context (e.g., metal detector finds without a location, or even the nearest village) the correct attribution will never be made.

The produce picked on the farms was often collected in baskets that would travel from the farm to the wholesale markets by train, and later by lorry. Several market gardeners also operated stands at one or more of the London wholesale fruit and vegetable markets (for example Borough, Spitalfields, Covent Garden, Kings Cross, and Brentford). The baskets and sacks were reusable and were often named, and a deposit system (often using tokens) was operated to encourage the return of the containers and in good condition.

Obv. **E. P.** above **B.** all incuse.

Rev. Uniface.

Details Br, PE, 25.5 mm. [GO - 171].

Edward Peck, Broom from local knowledge. Also worked at Borough, Covent Garden and Spitalfields markets in London.

Kelly's . . . 1928] 1931-1940 Edward Peck, Broom, market gardener, 30 Council Houses. Castles 1965, Peck Bros, Broom, market gardeners.



Obv. **R. & B.** above **B.** all incuse.

Rev. Uniface.

Details Br, PE, 25.4 mm. [GO - 172].

Rook & Berridge, Broom, from local knowledge. In Kelly's 1920 farmers Frederick Joseph Rook, at Broom, John at Old Warden and William at Sharpenhoe, Southill, James at Cople.

In Castles 1925, market gardeners: A.E. Rook and an F.J. Rook both at Broom.

In Kelly's 1936, and 1940; Southill, Rook Bros. farmers, Yew Tree farm, Shefford. Broom Fredk. Geo. Rook market Gardener.



Obv. **A. M.** above **C.** all incuse.

Rev. Uniface.

Details Ae, PE, 25.4 mm. [GO - 185].

Detector find from Moggerhanger.

Searching through the directories for a market gardener with initials A.M. and a place with first letter C, which is close to Moggerhanger finds just one likely candidate. Algernon Mayes, market gardener of Cople, is only found listed in 1936. Cople is just two miles west of Moggerhanger with continuous fields between the two villages.

The above pieces are not die struck, but have been engraved using a machine and stencil, very likely by a local metal working business. The tokens are easily recognisable and if any readers know of others, the author would be happy to hear. Other pieces are also known where the initials and whole names have been entered using a single punch.



Originally, when starting collecting and studying Bedfordshire tokens 35 years ago, it was suspected that the regular appearance of London market tallies as metal detector finds in Bedfordshire was the result of casual losses in London that were being spread on the fields with the other waste and compost. The trains returned at the end of each day with all the empty baskets and crates along with sweepings and waste from the markets, as well as manure from the London horses and zoos. This possible token source may be correct in some cases.

However, as the decades passed, some of the names would become familiar, and recognisably local. There are now two independent pieces of documentary evidence from the 1940s that London market tallies were also being used to pay workers in the Bedfordshire fields. The tallies and tickets were accumulated and exchanged for larger notes at the end of the day or week.

Obv. **COLE & SON**
Around, in small letters **R NEAL 49&50 PERCIVAL ST EC**

Rev. **1^s** with small **R. NEAL 50 PERCIVAL ST**

Details Ae, PE, 29.8×22.3 mm. [GO - 104].

Market gardeners: 1920 Alfred Cole, 88 The Baulk, Biggleswade.

1936 Cole & Son, Maulden, Alfred Cole & Son, 88 The Baulk, Biggleswade.



Obv. **COLE & SON BORO MARKET** in small letters **R. NEAL 49&50 PERCIVAL ST**

Rev. **1^s**

Details Br, PE, 24.0 mm. [GO - 105].

Acquired locally (Biggleswade) with the suggestion that it is a local business.

Alfred Cole & Son, Borough Market Potato salesmen 1906 – 1965 [1967. . .

Castles 1925, A.B. Cole, market gardener: Maulden, Ampthill, also A. & R. Cole, Maulden.

Castles 1965, A. Cole & Son, the Baulk, Biggleswade, market gardeners. Cole Bros, Maulden.



Obv. **Alfred Cole & Son, Borough Market S.E. 1947**
printed serial number **2622**

Rev. Blank.

Details Printed black on dark pink, thin card, 50×38 mm. From a roll, perforated on short edge. [Private Collection. GO - 106].



These tickets were issued by Alfred Cole and Son, Borough Market, London, to female pickers for each box or bag of peas gathered on his Bedfordshire farms. The tickets were exchanged for cash at the end of each day or at the end of the peasing (pea picking) season.

This is confirmed in the memoirs of the granddaughter of Alfred Cole who lived at Priestley Farm, Flitwick, Bedfordshire, 1925-47, where two tickets (#2600, #2601) are illustrated in b/w.⁽³⁾ Bedfordshire Archives also has a strip of three tickets (#2632 - #2634) along with two of the brass tokens. [Z908/5/1].

In 1949, Thomas Wyatt Bagshawe accessioned a group of tokens to Luton Museum. The tokens were a 6d, 1/- and 2/6 issued by R. Rumbold at Spitalfields market [GO – 163-165]. He had collected these several years earlier from the users H. Dennis & Son, market gardeners, Hill Farm, Blunham, Beds. The farmer had stated that the tokens had been introduced by the London produce buyers around 1930 and were known as Pea-Picking Tokens or Bag Checkers.

These are two pieces of contemporary (1940s) and independent pieces of evidence that tickets and tokens from the London wholesale fruit and vegetable markets were in use, in the fields of Bedfordshire. The tokens could be from the family's stands on the London markets or from other produce buyers working at the markets.

Reference and Acknowledgements

- (1) G. Oddie. *Bedfordshire Tokens, Tickets, Checks and Passes*. St Neots Press, forthcoming, 2023.
- (2) F. Beavington. The Development of Market Gardening in Bedfordshire 1799-1939. *The Agricultural History Review*. Vol. 23, No. 1, 1975. Pp23-47.
<https://www.bahs.org.uk/AGHR/ARTICLES/23n1a2.pdf>
- (3) M. Roberts (née Cole). *Farm of My Childhood, (Priestley Farm, Flitwick, Bedfordshire, 1925-47)*. 1991, p.9.

Many thanks to the Bedfordshire Agricultural History Society for permission to reproduce the map.

Thanks to Stuart Adams for help with the London Market directories and also to Elise Naish at Luton Museum for sharing the Bagshawe accession records for the tokens in the collection.

In tracing the market gardening businesses, along with the usual Kelly's Directories of Bedfordshire, Castle's Guide to the Fruit, Flower, Vegetable and Allied Trades (1926, 1954) has proved very useful.

