

# From Beldibi to Bedfordshire - 11,000 Years of Tokens

## Part 1. What is a Token?

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### Introduction

This Blog, and parts 2 and 3 to follow shortly, have been produced following a few requests for a permanent record of a talk that I gave at this year's Token Congress, held at the Hilton Northampton, 6-8 October, 2023. A video recording of the talk and slides was made, and should appear on the Token Corresponding Society website sometime in 2024.<sup>(1)</sup>

The slides were prepared well in advance and to practice the timing (41 slides in 45 minutes) a preview of the talk was given to the South Manchester Numismatic Society on 19 September 2023. A few weeks after the Token Congress, with the talk still fresh in my mind, it was repeated to the Cambridge Numismatic Society on 24 October 2023, when the scheduled speaker cancelled at short notice.

Rather than extracting images and text from the slides to create a long narrative, most of the slides will be reproduced whole and alongside each some description and notes will be given. This also allows extra references to be cited where I may have forgotten to mention them in the live talks. This isn't quite a script, but a running commentary on the slides which is essentially how I give talks.

Each of the slides presented in this first instalment is essentially a summary of a whole talk given at some point in the past 20-30 years.

Note that the slides have been embedded in the Word document used to create the Blog pdf and may appear grainy at 100%, but should maintain resolution when zoomed in.

### The Talk

Having collected coins since the age of eight and been a member of several numismatic societies, I have given quite a few talks over the years to these and other numismatic societies, metal detecting clubs and local history societies.

Specialising in shillings at the age of 13 most of the early talks were shilling-centric, especially regal shillings. Diversification into counterfeits and overseas shillings took place a few years later and then I looked into shilling tokens and more recently local tokens.

The first part of the talk briefly revisits some of these topics and finishes with a discussion of "what is a token?"

The second part of the talk and blog summarises a conference held at Warwick University in 2017, which broadened my perspective of tokens and inverted preconceived ideas of the relationship between tokens and coins. The final part of the talk and blog reveals quite an unexpected connection.

**Introduction**

- Introduction
  - Some Past Talks
  - A history of the shilling
  - 500 years of Counterfeit shillings
  - Around the World in 80 shillings
  - Bedfordshire 17<sup>th</sup> C tokens
  - Farm Checks of the Fens
  - Boy Bishop Tokens
- Warwick University
  - Tokens: Culture, Connections, Communities
  - An interdisciplinary conference at the University of Warwick, 8-10 June 2017
- Neolithic Tokens
- Back to Bedfordshire
- What is a Token?

2

Whilst shillings had been a money of account since Anglo-Saxon times, it did not appear as a coin until the reign of Henry VII in 1504 with the introduction of the tweldepenny testoon, with a realistic profile portrait, in 1504. There is an almost continuous history of shillings, from the debased issues of Henry VIII after 1544, all the way up to decimalisation when the shilling was replaced by the five pence piece.

Wherever and whenever coins have been issued here is almost always a background creation of contemporary counterfeits. Here are a Henry VIII testoon in lead (same mould as in Lawrence 1907<sup>(2)</sup>), a reverse die for a 1707 shilling, a mould for the obverse of an 1820 shilling<sup>(3)</sup>, and a 1967 halfpenny which has had its edges hammered down and been covered with solder to bring it to the correct diameter and weight of a shilling. This is my only British shilling dated 1967.

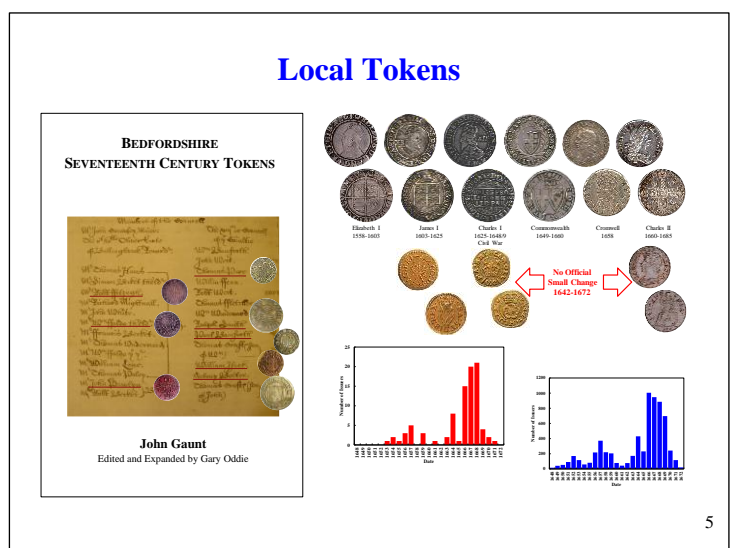


Diversifying into token shillings and foreign shillings allows a tour of most parts of the world that were once part of the British Empire – the countries that were shaded pink in the old school atlases! This is where the main differences between coins and tokens are seen. Coins are history from above – monarchs, governments and broad acceptability – the official currency. Tokens are history from below – an object created by local people, companies, organisations, because they provide a useful function in their day-to-day activities.

Shown here are a co-op dividend token from Clitheroe, a Welsh ferry token, an 1864 card truck ticket from the Knockmahon copper mines, “proper” coins from Ireland in 1927, and Massachusetts in 1652, and more tokens from Kelly’s Estate (Jamaica c. 1832), a dog tax token from Adendorp (South Africa) and a token stamped KPS, which was fortunately found in a hoard in the Kingston Pumping Station (Jamaica), thus confirming its attribution.



When it comes to tokens, they are usually collected and studied by series or geography or both. The following questions usually arise: who, when, where, and why? Working on seventeenth century tokens from Bedfordshire eliminates the when and where. The why is a chronic lack of small change following the cessation of production of patent farthings c.1644. The vacuum was filled by maybe 20,000 local traders and corporations that issued tokens. The date distribution of the local issues follows the national pattern with the general peaks and troughs attributable to contemporary factors affecting production, up to 1672, when they were banned and replaced by an official copper coinage.



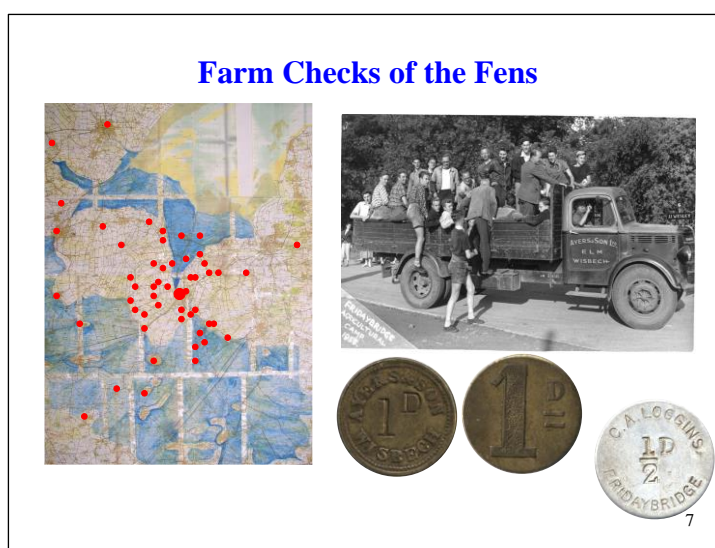
Having published the stories behind the Bedfordshire issuers of seventeenth century tokens<sup>(4)</sup>, the other Bedfordshire tokens were not forgotten (see part 3), but a move to working in Cambridge resulted in a broadening of the local collections to include various Cambridgeshire series. Again the 17<sup>th</sup> century tokens form a neat well-defined group (hopefully in print in 2024), and there is a diverse range of other tokens from later series.

Cambridgeshire has a few of the medallic tokens of the 18<sup>th</sup>C, a handful of pub and co-op checks and most other series are represented by one of two examples: coffee house, hospital, casino, factory etc.



However, collecting by county, does have its limitations, as most tokens are not issued with geography in mind, but just for practical purposes. One such series is the Farm Checks of the Fens, though dominated by north Cambridgeshire, and is geographically limited by the rich agricultural area of the Fens and includes west Norfolk and south Lincolnshire.

The tokens were issued by farmers and market gardeners to seasonal workers (often from the East End of London) who were paid by the lb or bushel for the fruit and vegetables picked. The tokens were swapped for notes at the end of the day or week and meant that the farmers did not have to handle large amounts of small change. Nearly 3,000 tokens are known from about 700 different issuers. The tokens are mostly from the inter-war years to the 1960s, a few are earlier and a few decimal issues are known. Many photographs and post cards are known showing the farmers, the pickers, and their accommodation and a few even show the tokens in use.



Another series not bounded by modern borders is that of the so-called Boy Bishop Tokens. These lead tokens, typically the same diameter as medieval pennies, half-groats and groats are found across East Anglia (my data, red circles). When incorrect identifications are removed, this map is almost the same as one derived from the 548 pieces listed by the Portable Antiquities Scheme<sup>(5)</sup>. Nearly as important are the areas where they have not been found by detectorists (white crosses). Most of the designs follow that of the official silver coinage which allows them to be dated c.1475-1558.

There is no evidence to support Haigh's speculation connecting the tokens to the Feast of the Boy Bishop<sup>(6)</sup>. New finds and issuing locations named on tokens now cast significant doubts on Rigold's Bury St Edmunds-centric view of the issue of these tokens.<sup>(7,8)</sup>



Another area of tokens that has been of interest, especially over the past few years are engraved coins, often called love tokens. Typically unique, the motives for their issue are purely personal and typically point to a very specific event, date and sometimes location. A first classification of engraved coins has been published.<sup>(9)</sup> The story behind the token shown here (Thomas Witheridge) has been published in the BNS Blog.<sup>(10)</sup>

The recent book describing Tim Millett's collection gives a measure of the breadth of the motives and sometimes the depth of the individual stories that can be uncovered.<sup>(11)</sup>

With many engraved coins showing a date, it is possible to see trends in popularity for this activity, with peaks appearing during times of war, or when circulating coins were already smooth due to wear, or specific motives such as separation from loved ones due to convict transportation.

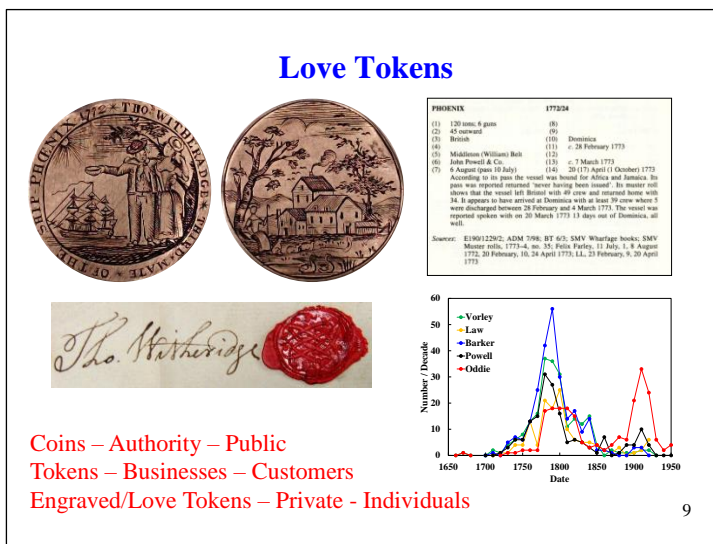
Thus a pattern is appearing that distinguishes official coins from tokens. Official coins are issued by an authority and they are defined as acceptable for use in commerce and taxation by all people. Tokens are issued by individuals or businesses, for the use of their customers or workers and have a narrow circulation. Sometimes tokens become acceptable for wider circulation and exchangeable for official coinage. Taking this to its limit, a love token is typically unique and has a single intended recipient and is not intended to circulate.

For many centuries coins with intrinsic metal value and bullion by weight were sufficient for most transactions. In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century promissory notes appeared in western countries that allowed easier and more secure transactions, all based on trust and backed up by the name on the paper and the guarantors. These were initially traceable back to a metallic reserve. Typically these were for large transactions, and this leads to a dearth of material for the shilling collector.

However there have been a few occasions where small denomination paper money has circulated or been proposed. The silver shortages of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a widespread issue of paper and card tickets, whilst documented at the time, none are known to have survived from England and just a few are known from the Isle of Man and Ireland.<sup>(12)</sup>

Towards the end of the First World War it was anticipated that there wouldn't be enough silver left to maintain a fine silver coinage (0.925) and low denomination notes were printed by the Treasury (with signatures of Warren Fisher and Bradbury). A reduction of the silver in the coinage to 0.500 resulted in the notes never circulating, but a few did "escape".

At the beginning of both World Wars, there was expected to be a run on precious metal and so Postal Orders were repurposed to be used as small change.<sup>(13)</sup> The poundage fee was guillotined off and not charged when they were put into circulation. Of the tens of millions so treated, very few have survived. As an aside, all Postal Orders have a unique prefix and serial number which ran (mostly) continuously from their introduction on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1881 all the way through decimalisation up to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1975 for the shillings and 5p postal orders. It is possible to see the effects of war and inflation on the rate of production and issue of the Postal Orders.<sup>(14)</sup>



The existence of catalogues for many series of tokens is both an advantage and disadvantage. When a catalogue has been written, any subsequent works and catalogues owe a debt to the pioneer for defining the limits of the series. Whether these boundaries stand the test of time, or even the test of other contemporary collectors leads to problems. Many series have perimeters that are not well defined – for example the 18<sup>th</sup>C tokens listed by Dalton and Hamer reaches twenty years into the 19<sup>th</sup>C by including lead tokens from Edinburgh but follows earlier catalogues and omits all tokens from before the 1787 issues of the Parys Mining Company.<sup>(15)</sup> Even today the series known as Unofficial Farthings still has ill-defined boundaries, one of which might include the diameter of the token.<sup>(16)</sup>



When collecting and cataloguing an uncharted field, the most difficult issue can be where to draw the boundary. At the 2006 Token Congress, held in St Helens, Bob Lyall presented a series of objects and discussed what might and might not be included in a catalogue of tokens.

At the 2007 Token Congress, held in Swindon, I replied to Bob’s question with a series of items that were nominally valued at a shilling, once colloquially referred to as a bob (or 5p).

However, tokens bearing a denomination, either stated or implied, is still quite a restrictive definition of a token. Tokens do not appear by accident but are created for a purpose defined by the issuer. For the narrow field of pub checks, in 1867 G. Grant Francis gave a simple explanation that these tokens were “A trade convenience which publicans might use however they chose.”<sup>(17)</sup> This description might equally be applied to any tokens from any series.



### Conclusion to Part 1.

This blog has covered a lot of ground from regal coinage to various series of tokens that are of interest to the author. My own simple working definition is that a “Token” is something that represents something else (physical or otherwise).

Coins issued by any official body are actually tokens defined as legal tender and acceptable across a population governed by the writers of those laws, with defined values, intrinsic or otherwise. The objects are designed for multiple use, continuous exchange, payment of debt and taxes. The historical choice of metals that were both scarce and difficult to extract allowed the money supply to be controlled and measured. When something can be measured, it can be taxed and the revenue used to support the establishment that created the product. This point will be returned to in parts 2 and 3 of this blog.

Objects that are classically referred to as tokens, are created to serve a function that helps with the running of the business or service. Tokens can be issued for many purposes ranging from replacements for an absent official coinage, to co-op dividend checks, to prepayment checks, to truck tickets and casino chips, or for advertising purposes etc. In 1991 a first attempt to systematically list and describe different token series was made.<sup>(18)</sup>

Other tokens might be objects given as tokens of esteem, when this is an engraved piece of metal (the host is often an official coin) this becomes a love token. Tallies, representing money, commodities, time, a worker's presence or even the large Bakelite disks used by rail companies to allow safe access to single track lines are also known as tokens.

Once the main series of tokens that have monetary uses are excluded, surprisingly few "tokens" indicate their exact mode of use or even the word "Token". Tokens are not issued by accident but are so often taken for granted by their issuers and users that scant contemporary documentation survives for almost all issues. However in all cases the tokens are no accident, and the issuers and users knew exactly what they were doing.

With this in mind and recognising that some cataloguers' definitions and rigid boundaries may not always be in line with the original intended use of the pieces, if in doubt, collect and catalogue it anyway! The vast majority of genuine tokens were never issued with a catalogue in mind! As a wise person once wrote "if you can't find a book or catalogue for the things you collect, then it is up to you to write it!"

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