

Cornish coins and currency

Once Cornwall produced its own currency; George Care explores the fascinating world of Cornish coins. When Government currency became scarce in Cornwall, businesses in The Duchy produced their own tokens.

George Care researches some of the curiosities behind Cornish coins.

I should imagine that most of you reading this article have at some time or other found or come across a coin-like object in a junk box or family drawer and wondered as to what was its original use.

Most of these items are obviously not real coinage, although some do carry a monetary value in old pence. When were they made? For what reasons were they issued?

Cornwall abounds in such items due to its long history of trading, mining, fishing, farming and tourism, not to mention the defence of the realm from invaders. These small coin-like items that did not aspire to the learned or to the regal status of coinage were overlooked and generally confined to the junk box or dustbin.

Nowadays social history is respected and we are enthusiastically collecting, comparing, categorising and generally researching the backgrounds to these fascinating pieces. We still tend to refer to them loosely as tokens even though some are more accurately called cheques, tallies, medals and medalets. The name for this field of work is *paranumismatica*.

I will explain 'Cornish tokens' and give a brief insight into its past use. I do not give values as that is entirely up to what a dealer or collector is willing to pay. Hopefully this article will encourage younger persons in particular to start collecting and do further research. It may also give people the incentive to dig these items out of their hiding places and circulate them so that collectors will again have the chance to do their own research and add to the growing social history of the Duchy of Cornwall.

Pub cheques are usually metal tokens issued by alehouses, hotels and other retailers of wines and spirits. They were first issued in the second quarter of the 19th century and their use continued well into the 20th century. The term 'token' is not strictly accurate as they rarely passed as currency outside their place of issue, usually struck in brass but sometimes in copper; a typical cheque has the name of the establishment, the publican's name or initials and the address or town of issue on the obverse.

The reverse design frequently comprised just the denomination 1d, 1 1/2d, 2d, 2 1/2d, 3d or less frequently 1/2d, 4d, 5d or 6d. Sometimes the name and address of the person who produced the check can be found on the reverse. This can be very helpful in establishing the approximate date of issue. Less frequently, cheques actually show a pictorial representation of the name of the public house.

Gaming cheques were used for facilities offered by public house (e.g. bagatelle, bowls, billiards, skittles etc.). Evidence shows that such games were played for drink, the loser buying the round. A sum of money was paid to the landlord in return for which the players received cheques. With these they could either buy beer or take them home to spend at the public house on a future occasion. In this way the publican was able to make a charge for the use of his games facilities.

Many public houses were attached to concert halls and pleasure gardens and issued admission and refreshment cheques. Such cheques were used as part of the admission procedure. This ensured that a minimum amount of refreshment was taken and an admission fee was usually charged which was returnable in refreshment (e.g. a 3d refreshment check might be given as part of a 6d entrance fee).

Friendly societies often met in public houses and in many cases the publican was also the treasurer of the friendly society. It seems that it was common practice for a publican to demand that a certain amount of liquor be consumed by

the members of the society who used his premises rather than a fixed rent. Members could buy the metal checks and redeem them for refreshment during the evening. This type of check was also used as part of the benefit paid in the event of a funeral (burial society checks).

In the 19th century, wages were frequently paid out in public houses owned by the employers. Checks redeemable at the local public house or company beer shop were used as bonus payments to workers (e.g. W E counter-stamped on Oxford Inn, Redruth tokens, believed to be issued by Wheal Euny). These checks were also a great vehicle for advertising.

A peculiarity to Cornwall was sack tokens which were a series of coin-like items. They are quite common and of particular interest to researchers. More than 60 varieties are recorded, many from the south and south-west of the Duchy. The earliest example is dated 1840 and the latest 1882. Struck usually in brass or copper, most are round but octagonal, oval and square examples are also regularly found. What most of them have in common is that they each have a hole struck through them at manufacture.

The issuers were mill owners and corn dealers who provided the facility of grinding flour for the local farming community. The corn and flour was transported by both road and rail, usually in sacks. These were expensive to produce as they had to be both rot and vermin resistant. To ensure the return of these costly items, tokens were issued. The best incentive to ensure that they were returned to the hirer (i.e. the miller) by the farmer was that the deposit was only redeemed on production of both sack and token.

The hole was to enable the tokens to be strung together or stored on a spike. However, on at least one occasion, charred tokens have been discovered attached to the burnt remains of sacks.

Maybe the hole was just a convenient way of attaching the token by string to each sack. Maybe it was some form of accountancy of the number of sacks of grain brought in, to the number of sacks of flour issued to the hirer. Maybe a commission as well as a charge was made by the miller to the farmer. I'm sure that research will continue as new tokens in the series are discovered quite regularly.

One of the most common forms of paranumismatica (miscellaneous, coin like objects) is that of the advertising ticket or token. These are usually round but many other shapes occur. They appear in a variety of sizes and metals, brass and copper being the most common.

These became very popular from around 1820 and no doubt they were a business necessity in those days prior to mass media advertising. It is reasonable to liken them to the modern day visiting card. Almost every conceivable product and trade is mentioned on these pieces and they advertise large emporiums and small corner shops. There is a school of thought which suggests that these pieces became necessary and in fact circulated, albeit to a limited extent, as a direct result of the shortage of small denomination regal copper coins of the realm. However, most do not have a value and so could only have been used perhaps as 'IOUs' or an incentive to 'come again'.

A common type of token which turns up regularly everywhere in the country (Cornwall is no exception) are the usually small, sometimes bracteate (one sided) tin tokens bearing the word COOP. These fall into the main categories of co-operative society dividend checks, co-operative society mutual club change and co-operative pre-payment tokens. Their use was varied and complex and would take a complete article on its own to describe their usage. They turn up in button boxes, rubbish tips, river beds and children's toy boxes.

There are tokens and coin-like pieces from Cornwall that fall into no particular category, yet are immensely interesting.

Two such items in my collection is a token for a Penzance bathing machine and a wreck service token.

Bathing machines at Newquay at the turn of the century.

It is difficult for us today to imagine that the thought of sea bathing would create alarm and trepidation for the visitor to Cornwall. It was well into the 18th century before bathing became a way of life.

We often see a telescope at some point on Cornish promenades or sea fronts to this day but few of us are aware of their history and few give it a thought that they are today being used for similar motives as they were in the 1800s.

In 1873 Kelly's Post Office Directory lists one bathing machine operator in Penzance. He was George Stevens of Cornwall Terrace. His bathing machines were located between the western end of the promenade and the Larrigan River. Only a few of the local people appear to have used them but visitors apparently made them a paying proposition. The 3d token shown is now all that survives of those halcyon days on the beach.

Wreck service tokens were issued by the Board of Trade to people who gallantly assisted ships in peril. The Board of Trade supplied the life-saving rocket apparatus, a design originally devised by Henry Trengrouse of Helston, to HM Coastguard. The tokens were issued by the officer in charge of the HM Coastguard or volunteer in charge of the rocket apparatus at the scene of the wreck. When volunteers were enlisted as extra assistance each was given a token that was to be handed in when claiming payment.

The rise of Cornish currency

The world industrial revolution started in Cornwall and with it came problems not anticipated by large employers or the Government.

Businesses now employed larger numbers than ever before and pay days were a problem; there were simply not enough coins in circulation.

Some mines issued their own currency – five examples of Cornish pennies were struck in 1811 alone. One showed an engine house and whim on one side and a pilchard between four ingots of copper on the other.

Another problem realised in Cornwall first was when the price of copper rose, people found that coins would be worth more when melted down. This again led to a shortage of coins and so tokens were introduced. When the value of copper fell, mine owners paid workers in tokens that could only be spent in shops or pubs that they owned thus reducing the cost of labour.

However, the crash of Cornish mining eventually meant that 'mine company currency' was as worthless as the company that produced it.