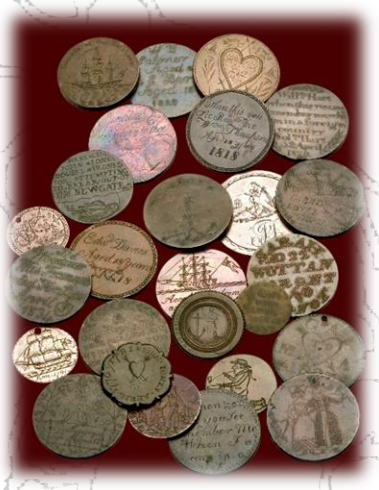
"Convict Love Tokens: Popular Imagery 1790-1860"
Timothy Millett Revisiting History and Arts behind the Leaden Hearts

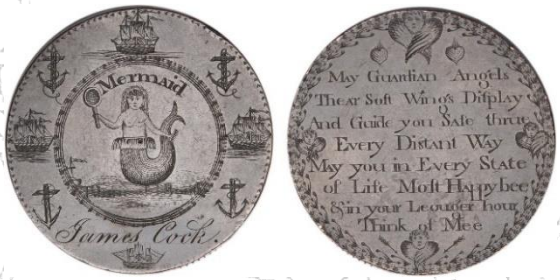
by Alexey Shitvov, Member NSI-NB

"People leave strange little memories of themselves behind when they die."
Haruki Murakami, Norwegian Wood



I do remember myself back in 2008 reading a short article on Australian on-line news resource about the acquisition by the National Museum of Australia in Canberra of a collection of convict tokens from a British collector Timothy Millett. The lot, comprised of some 300 engraved tokens and accompanied with related contemporary and archival records, was purchased for a stunning £300,000 after more than a year of negotiations, which divides as nearly £1,000 per token! Mad world, I told myself, for you can buy an authentic piece of ancient art of decent quality and provenance, or a chunky gold bullion for a thousand quid, so why one would venture to waste such money for a defaced cartwheel penny scratched upon with grotesque images of dancing drunks and cheesy rhymes? For ten years this mystery has been a brain slug of mine, along with other emotional anchors concerning the staggering coin prices, until the Society night on 5th October 2018, where, to my great pleasure and relief, the mystery was solved and the anchor lifted.

The invited talk by Timothy Millett attracted an audience rarely seen at the Society meeting in the recent years. Amongst those present were the wife and daughter of our late friend Victor Hamilton. Victor was an active member of the Society for many years and in few talks he gave on Papal medals and coins his emanating enthusiasm towards the subject could only be matched by the wealth of knowledge on the history and numismatics of the Papal States. Indeed, Victor has left great memories and a trace of his unquenchable optimism in our hearts.



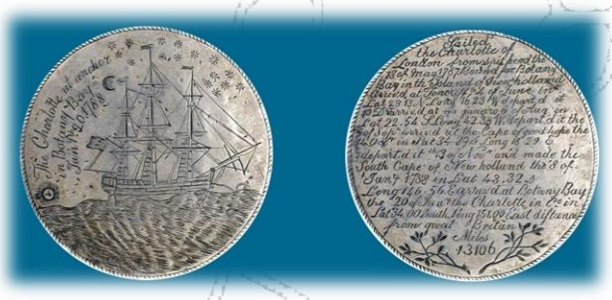
Engraved George III two pence coin
St. James's Auction 37, Lot 571
Est. GBP 200, Realised: GPB 1,300

Our speaker of the evening deserves a brief introduction too. Tim is from the illustrious Baldwin family by maternal descent. In the early years of his career, while still looking for a numismatic subject to specialise in, he started with the Baldwin's in London tasked with sorting out a huge collection of tokens from the proverbial 'Baldwin's vault'. At the time, this material was virtually worthless due to little or no interest from the collectors and dealers. As he was browsing through the rolls and boxes of old tokens, Tim became increasingly interested in the history and people behind the items. It turned out to be much more than a hobby and resulted in excellent published work, a series of personal exhibitions and invited talks.

Commencing his presentation, Tim set the scene for his talk aiming to revisit the imagery of the convict love tokens in the context of the contemporary history, fashion and artistic trends. Many convict

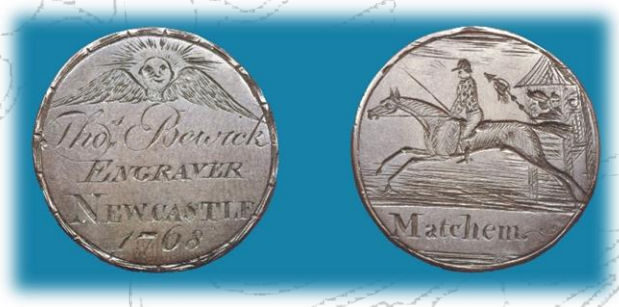
tokens were made out of George III copper pennies, which were quite unpopular at the time due to their excessive weight for the low face value. The low relief and soft material of the coins facilitated the home production of the tokens, using just a stone, a pinch of sand and some water to remove the host image and to polish the token blank.

The late XVIII-th – early XIX-th century Georgians were obsessed with protection of their property, which fuelled the avalanching conviction rates across the country. The contemporary judicial system was notoriously harsh on petty criminals with many people ending up in prisons for minor offences. As the prisons and jails were getting overwhelmed with increasing numbers of the inmates, the British American colonies gained their independence and the Transportation Act of 1717 ceased to provide the suitable capacity of the criminals from the country, the government came up with what seemed to be a viable solution: those convicted of lesser crimes were given a choice of deportation to the remoted lands of New South Wales (NSW), where the first penal colony was established at Sydney Cove in 1788. At the time, such travel was considered a one-way trip, so some convicts even preferred gallows to transportation. Those who chose the latter were actually not in the worst position, for many of them would have a second chance to start new life. Besides, many paupers would not have a chance to succeed at home anyway.



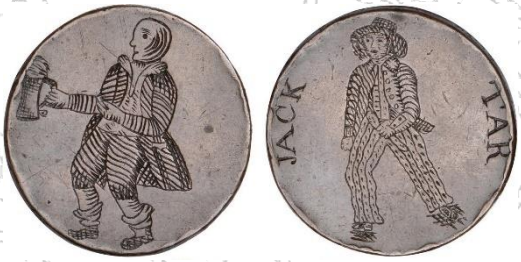
As a passing gift for their near and dear, the convicts made engraved tokens out of the copper pennies. At that time there may have been many skilled convicts imprisoned for counterfeit and other profession-related crimes. Indeed, engraving was very popular during the Georgian era. Typically, a skilled engraver would have to spend seven years in apprenticeship before having permission to join the professional community. In prisons, all skills find their use, so no wonder that the engravers and jewellery makers had plenty of opportunity and time to do work for other inmates for a small barter payment. The convict tokens may have started as personal items engraved by the skilled inmates for themselves and quickly became a fashion industry behind the prison walls. Even those convicts, who did not possess skills in jewellery making and engraving before the sentence, started learning new techniques of token making with the aid of very basic materials and tools. More elaborate line engraving required higher skills, whereas crude stippling was attainable even for a novice.

Regarding the iconography of the convict tokens, it did not appear in the vacuum. Indeed, the inspiration came from many different sources, including Biblical texts, contemporary images popularised by the affordable transfer-print pottery and ceramics, coins and locally issued halfpennies, book plates, journals and newspapers etc. The token imagery derived from many sources exhibiting some preference towards the visual language of arts available to those literate and illiterate alike. As an example, Tim showed the picture of a token dated 1768 and engraved by Thomas Bewick, who did his apprenticeship in the 1760's in Newcastle upon Tyne and later in his life became a famous natural history author. The token celebrates the success of Matchem (1748-1781) – a thoroughbred racehorse who had a great influence as a sire. Apparently, the image, showing the beautiful stallion in a race,

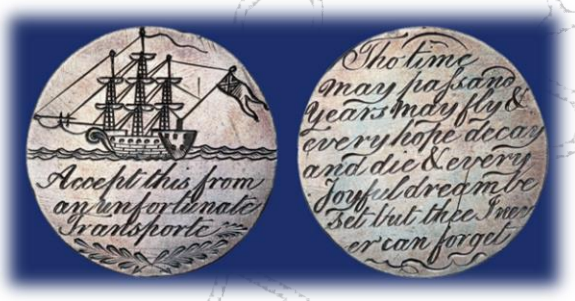


may have been adapted from a contemporary printed source. The engraver, who was just 15 years old at the time, demonstrates the mastery in details and passion towards the subject.

Reverting to the geography of the transportation, Tim briefly touched upon the colonial history of Australia. Discovered by Captain James Cook, the settlement opportunity had not been fully recognised by the British Government for a long time. Threatened by the growing power of the French Empire, the government had to secure the protectorate. After the Napoleonic wars, followed by the economic crisis in Europe and beyond, more ships previously deployed for the war service became available for transportation of the British criminals to NSW. As more convicts headed to Australia, more tokens were produced and their imagery became more homogeneous, exhibiting some common symbols and popular motifs, such as crossed hearts, hearts with arrows, pipe smokers etc. The token poetry derived from the popular tunes and rhymes of the days, e.g., Jack Tar and His Girl Nancy.



Engraved George III two pence coin
St. James's Auction 37, Lot 572
Est. GBP 100, Realised: GPB 320



The token poetry had live context indeed, which gives it more power of expressing the feelings and hopes of those departed from their friends, families and beloved ones. The sympathy of the general public towards the poor fellas who by a tweak of fate appeared behind the bars could also be traced in the contemporary literature. Some variations of the published poetry may have appeared in the token rhymes, obviously, with plenty of lapses and misspellings.

The tokens that can be attributed to individual convicts represent an important study group in itself. Such tokens, letting alone their common sentimentalism, bring alive the story and deeds of their first owners. The token made, or ordered to be made, by Daniel Bates in 1833 commemorates his transportation to Australia. One side of the token shows a stippled image of a man in chains, smoking a long pipe, with a dog, trees and hearts by his side. The other side features an image of a woman in elaborate dress holding an umbrella, with a pot plant on either side of her. Daniel Bates was accused of breaking into a farm to steal goods, and he was sentenced for 7 years as the result.

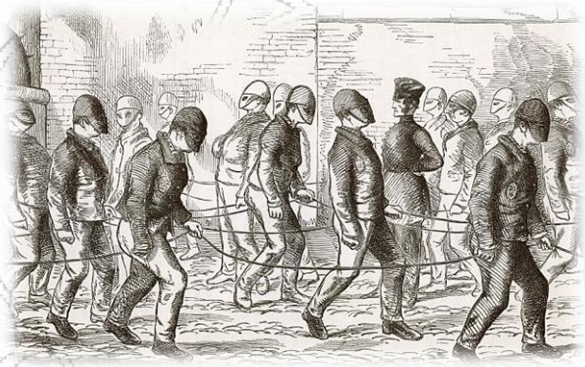
A heart-shaped token bearing the text "Meriah Duchesne Born August 8th 1759" may have been a mother's parting gift to her new-born baby. In those days, the babies left at the stairs of the London Foundling Hospital by poor mothers would be accepted and taken care of, and the mothers customary left small personal items in hope that they would find and take their babies back when their financial situation improved.

An 1838 token of William Brain commemorates the love of its 21 year old owner, proudly stippled on one side, who was tried and sentenced to 10 year

transportation at the Warwick August Assizes. The other side of the token reads: “When this you see think of me when I am far away Wm BRAIN”. Brain was granted a ticket to leave after 6 years, probably due to his good behaviour. While still in prison, he married Maria Bryne – an Irish female convict who arrived on Isabella, so after all he struck his luck overseas. In fact, he was just one of a large number of transported convicts who found their love and new life in Australia, perhaps as a compensation for condemnation and physical suffering they were drawn through by the tweak of fate and the implacable sword of justice.

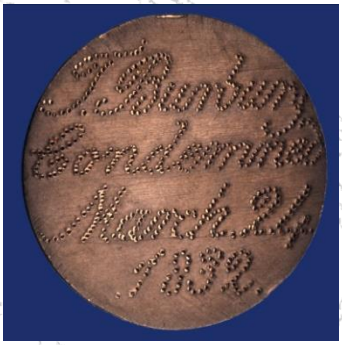
A token of Mary Ann Whitlock, aged 22 in 1831 and sentenced to 14 years for stealing a silk purse with a half-crown in it, sends sentimental farewell to the owner’s aunt, perhaps the only person who really cared for her: “Adieu dear aunt adieu”. Mary had problems with the law previously, having been convicted for vagrancy. While serving her term, she married a free settler in 1835, yet this did not improve her relationships with the law. In 1842 she was convicted of “misconduct in having formed highly improper companionship and suspected of being accessory to a felony, ordered to be removed to Launceston and recommended that the ticket of leave promised in 1843 be withheld”. After serving full term of 14 years, she was eventually granted a free certificate at the age of 36 and then disappeared from the records.

Alongside the popular prints and engravings, tattoos were another form of prison crafts and a contemporary source of inspiration for the convict token iconography. According to the prison records, some 37% male and 15% female convicts had body tattoos. Adam and Eve by the tree, rose-thistle-shamrock triskelion, maritime scenes – all imagery suited the token themes.



Revisiting the early XIX-th century jail environments, Tim paused on the Newgate prison in Central London. Apparently, prisoners who had money would have a better conditions behind the bars. Sir Arthur Griffits, the administrator at the Newgate, in his Chronicles of Newgate quotes a prison inspector's report: "The most peaceably disposed found some occupation in Newgate making tokens, leaden hearts, and grinding the impression of penny-pieces, then pricking figures or words on them to give to their friends as memorials. The initials or names of a loving pair were punched upon them, together with a heart or some symbol of affection, sometimes with a motto such as 'True for ever', 'Love for life'…. The greatest value was attached to these tokens by the criminal classes. Those at large constantly wore them round their necks and treated them as amulets to preserve them from danger and detection." According to these notes, the convict tokens were in great fashion as protective charms in the tough world behind the bars.

Not for all of nearly 160,000 convicts transported to Australia was that the end of the road. Some managed to start new chapter in their life, sometimes even a very good one. A token of Thomas Burbury tells a story with the happy end.



Thomas Burbury, aged 23, a skilled weaver, was tried and convicted at Warwick Coventry Assizes in 1832 for having taken part in a riot, machine breaking and arson in the steam factory. He had been sentenced to death, but after pressure from the local community and members of parliament this was replaced with transportation for life, and so he was sailed to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). Under the public pressure, his wife and baby daughter were also granted a passage to Tasmania the same year. While in Tasmania, Thomas was assigned to Thomas Anstey and, by 1834, was appointed a constable at Oatlands. He was granted a ticket of leave in 1837 for his loyal service in the post and a free pardon in 1839. In the meantime, he was acquiring land in Oatlands in his wife's name. In 1842 he was a clerk of the Oatlands Racecourse, became district poundkeeper in 1853, and was elected to the Oatlands municipal council in its first elections in 1862. Burbury and his family became respected members of Tasmanian society, and one of his descendants, Sir Stanley Burbury, even raised to become the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Tasmania.

Concluding his talk, Tim summarised the main points why convict love tokens are of interest and worth collecting. Each token has a lifetime story behind, which often can be rediscovered with the help of government archives and painstaking research. Each story is entertaining, when one is empathetic enough to immerse and follow its line and life without prejudice or judgement, but above all each story teaches us small lessons on the things we often forget in our fast and turbulent modern digital life. Some say the only lesson that history teaches us is that we do not learn lessons, but it is all the half pint empty talk. Human history is a treasure chest and he who dares to be rich, intellectually and emotionally, will dig in it for pleasure of finding answers to the questions of life.

So, I am asking myself now again, why, why on earth would one pay a thousand quid for a crudely made convict token signed to unnamed recipient? People do collect strange things, weird things, like bodily relics of ancient saints and memoirs of maniacs. Is it the market, fashion or goose bumps that set the price for such items? Is it uniqueness of the engraved tokens and that sweet feeling of ownership that tickles one's ego and pride? I guess it is all the above, plus the unique opportunity to do meaningful research and rediscover things, both factually and emotionally, that sew the tears on the garment of history that every single one of us, regardless of social status and personal views, weaves with every day of our lives. This, I hope, is the real value of the convict love tokens, whereas I shall leave the discussion of their cash price to the museums and investors. After all, is not it curious that the begone lives and feelings of destitute convicts and social outcasts hide the treasures of the history? And have you never heard that "the stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

The meeting notes were taken by Alexey Shitvov, Member NSI-NB. The images are courtesy of Timothy Millett, unless otherwise stated. For comments, opinions and corrections, please contact the NSI-NB Editorial Board via https://www.numsocirelandnb.com/contact

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