

AN INTRODUCTION TO CONDER TOKENS

by Jeff Rock and Bill McKivor

The late Bill McKivor, noted dealer in Conder tokens, wrote an excellent introduction to the series, hosted on his website, which was often the first place collectors found for the series. The following is adapted and expanded from his notes, with illustrations added.

Part 1: The British Story

The first thing to cover is the actual name of this token series. In the United Kingdom, they are known as Eighteenth Century Provincial tokens, and they were issued by all four countries that are part of that Kingdom – England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Collectors in the United States have adopted the name of one of the first catalogers of the series, James Conder of Ipswich, and the name “Conder tokens” has stuck – note that this is Conder with an “e” and NOT Condor, like the bird. James Conder put out his catalog in the late 18th century, quite literally as these tokens were still being made. His arrangement became the standard reference for a century, until James Atkins followed it with a much larger and more detailed reference in 1892. Between 1910-1917 Richard Dalton and S. H. Hamer published — in sections — what has become the standard text on the series for over a century. A number of revisions, corrections, and additions to D&H have been made in the ensuing century, and new varieties or edge types are still occasionally found. But in comparison to the sheer size of the D&H work, over 550 pages, the number of revisions has been small, indeed.

The Conder tokens came into being just as the Industrial Revolution was getting underway. As society became industrialized — with machinery which made it possible to manufacture more products — the common laborer saw an opportunity to leave the farm and make a living wage for his family. There was thus a steady exodus from the provinces to large manufacturing centers, where the need to pay wages on a regular basis was hampered by a severe lack of small coin. Some of these new mills and manufactories were located in out of the way areas, and there was literally no change available in those locales. (Banks, as we know them today, did not exist, and one could not just run down and pick up a few rolls of various denominations when needed.) In the larger cities, with more and more workers arriving, shops of all sorts were opened to serve their needs, bringing with them still more workers that needed to be paid – and these shops also needed small coin to make change for their customer’s purchases.

All of this began to accelerate at a rapid rate by the mid 1780’s, but despite this, the Crown was reluctant to provide any quantity of small coin for the masses to use in their day-to-day transactions. The Royal Mint concentrated on gold and silver coinage, which was considered more prestigious – but England’s gold to silver ratio was slightly off, compared to much of the world, so even though the mint turned out vast quantities of silver coins, much of that output was bought up by speculators and shipped to Asia, where it was sold at a small profit and melted down. This lack of small silver further exacerbated the lack of genuine copper, and the only options left to factory owners was to pay their entire work force in large denomination paper money or gold coin, and leave it to them to try and make change – which might be done at a local pub, though only after the purchase of a few rounds of drinks, and one can well imagine

how little of the original pay was left after an evening out with friends! What is even more surprising is that while the mint barely broke even on gold and silver coins (which were to contain nearly their full value in those metals), they actually made a good profit on copper coin – often more than a 50% profit based on the cost of the metal used. With ongoing war and other expenses, one would think that any sort of revenue would be embraced by the Crown. But copper coinage in England had ceased in 1775 and would not start up again until 1797 – and even that later coinage was not made at the Royal Mint, but rather by industrialist Matthew Boulton, who got his start in the area of coining by striking – Conder tokens!

There was also the problem of extensive counterfeiting of British and Irish copper halfpence and farthings at the time – so much so that it was thought that well over half, and likely closer to two-thirds of the copper coin in circulation in England in the 1780s was counterfeit – and for Ireland, the proportion was even higher. Even more curious, this lack of a national copper coinage existed at the exact time that vast quantities of copper ore were discovered and mined, both in Cornwall and, in a much larger deposit, on the island of Anglesey off the coast of Wales. Because of the prevalence of counterfeit copper in circulation, it stood to reason that any nice, new, shiny, good weight halfpenny that the Royal Mint produced would be hoarded, and the lower quality, lightweight counterfeit coin would be spent. “Gresham’s Law,” which states that “bad money drives out the good,” was in force, and when all that was available in commerce were counterfeit coppers, that was all that was used. But periodically, merchants would be inundated with too many counterfeits and refuse to accept them – or only accept them at steep discounts. As always in these situations, it was the poorest members of society that got hit the hardest. Their penny loaf of bread might now cost them three or four pennies worth of counterfeit coppers – often stretching their meager budgets past the breaking point.



Figure One: A 1787 token struck by the Parys Mines of Anglesey. The obverse features a Welsh Druid, while the reverse has the initials PMC for Parys Mines Co.

In 1787, the Parys Mining Company, in Anglesey, made a decision that changed the course of coinage history. Fed up with their inability to pay their many workers, they realized that they literally had a mountain of copper, and they had ample machinery to fashion that copper ore into bars and could easily make other machines that would roll those bars into strips, cut planchets, and strike their own tokens. Beginning in 1787, they produced Penny and Halfpenny tokens, with an attractive design of a Welsh druid, and a lettered edge that stated where the tokens could be exchanged for regal coin. Choosing, at first at least, not to profit from these tokens, they contained their full face value in copper, which was far more than any previous regal copper coin

in the United Kingdom had done. This meant that the tokens were eagerly accepted by the workers, and loved by local merchants, who were now able to refuse all counterfeit coin in trade. Even if people chose not to redeem these Druid tokens for regal coin they felt safe in accepting them, as the tokens containing their full value in copper. This led to these tokens being accepted further and further away from Anglesey. As copper prices rose, later Anglesey Druid tokens were struck at a slightly lighter weight, which gave their coiners a small profit, though the tokens were still far heavier than regal copper coins had ever been.



Figure Two: Upper left: token issued by John Wilkinson, the preeminent iron manufacturer of the day, with characteristic bravado styling himself “Iron Master.” Upper right: token issued by Roe & Company, who had a copper works in Cheshire. Bottom: a token issued by the Hibernia Mines Co. in Dublin (this specimen actually a counterfeit of that issue, produced in Birmingham, the dies used to make mules for collectors – but it is the variety of this type that can usually be found in choice condition).

As always, when a good idea pays off, others were quick to imitate it. While there were at least 12 million Anglesey penny and halfpenny tokens struck just in 1787-8, that was just a drop in the proverbial bucket, amounting to less than one coin for every person in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland (the island of Anglesey is nearly as close to Ireland as it is to England). Other large employers in need of coin to pay their workers took up the idea, with mines in England and Ireland, as well as England’s preeminent iron manufacturer soon striking their own tokens. But these mines did not have the resources that Anglesey had, and their tokens were struck by private coiners, many of them located in Birmingham, which was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution – and also the very center of counterfeiting for at least a century, so the knowledge of how to make coins was already there, it was just now turned to coining legitimate tokens (though the draw for counterfeiting was always there, and counterfeit Conder tokens soon appeared too – both counterfeits of known types, and tokens of completely fabricated design).

Token makers were kept busy with these large orders – until those orders were filled. They then turned their attention to making tokens for other, smaller businesses. Agents were sent out to other towns, both small and large, to procure orders for specially made tokens. The draw of having your own token made was threefold. First, they would guarantee a supply of small change to the merchant who ordered them. Second, they would work as free advertising for that merchant, displaying their name, address, and type of wares offered. Finally, they were struck at a lighter weight than the Anglesey Druid tokens and thus cost less than “face value” per token, which meant they could be circulated at a profit – and as many would be lost or otherwise not redeemed, that was an extra profit for the merchant (much like unredeemed gift cards today).



Figure Three: a selection of tokens struck for London merchants. Upper left, struck for John Bebbington, an umbrella maker. Upper right, struck for Basil Burchell, a purveyor of quack medicines (his anodyne necklaces for teething children contained mercury, and his sugar plums contained both lead and acetate, which did more harm than good!). Bottom left: a token for Jasper Kelly, a whip and harness maker (this example struck in white metal). Bottom right, a token for James Lackington, owner of the largest bookstore in London (with 800,000 volumes in his multi-level shop he called the Temple of the Muses).

The idea caught on, and by 1795 thousands of issues of different tokens could be found in nearly all English counties, as well as the more heavily populated areas of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Generally, when one merchant in a town ordered tokens, other merchants felt the need to do the same, just to keep up with the competition. About 95% of the tokens produced for this type of circulation were halfpennies. Other than the Anglesey pieces, penny tokens were generally produced in small numbers for actual circulation (though far more were made for collectors). This was also the case with farthing tokens, though a large number were made for circulation in

Scotland. There were a handful of odd denominations like three pence, and shilling tokens, and even a one shilling and one pence token, all generally of very small mintage.



Figure Four: Two Scottish Conder tokens of different denominations. At left, a silver shilling token of Dundee, Angusshire. On the right, a farthing token issued by the tobacconist W. Bilton in Glasgow, Lanarkshire.

These tokens not only caught on with merchants and their customers but also created a groundswell of collectors who were soon determined to get one of each. James Conder's book was first printed in 1798, but several other, smaller, books were written as early as 1795, and new token issues were often published in magazines and newspapers of the day. Soon, it was a rare member of the upper class who did not have a coin cabinet full of these tokens – among the other things that they collected, from minerals, stuffed animals, and curiosities from across the world, which were starting to flow to England in trade (and, occasionally, in conquest). But it wasn't just the rich who were intrigued by these tokens, as their low face value meant that those of more limited means could also afford to collect some of the interesting examples that came their way. There exists a rare glimpse into late 18th century collecting in the records of Sarah Sophia Banks, the sister of Sir Joseph Banks. After her death in 1818, her collection of over 9,000 coins, tokens, and medals was gifted to the British Museum, where most remain today. In her records, Miss Banks kept track of every coin she bought, traded, or was given, and over 500 different people added to her collection, from as high up the social ladder as her good friend Princess Elizabeth, and various people in her social circle, but also a large number of merchants, tradesmen, and even servants. Miss Banks was an avid collector of Conder tokens as well, owning so many that when a gentleman sent her an immense number, bidding her to take any that she wanted, she herself returned the group a few hours later stating that that, extraordinary as it might appear, out of so many hundred there was not one that she needed. Collecting from circulation has always been an entry point for awakening an interest in numismatics – and that could include plucking obsolete coins out of change after new designs were struck, collecting state quarters today, or taking an odd-looking Conder token out of circulation in 1795.



Figure Five: an Anglesey penny, struck in silver. As this contained far more than a penny's worth of silver, the piece was struck either for presentation purposes by the owners of the Parys Mines, or as something special for wealthy collectors of the day.

The Conder craze expanded to the point where well-heeled collectors vied with each other to own tokens that the others lacked. The token makers were quick to add fuel to this fire, making many pieces for sale to collectors only — at a premium cost. For some varieties, special strikes were made in silver, brass, white metal or gilt (and a few were made in gold, though all but one appear to have been melted in the last century after the preeminent collector of the era had his collection stolen – twice. But such was his love of the series that he formed yet a third collection), with these variants avidly pursued by collectors both then and now. Many of the silver strikes are especially rare and made in small numbers either for presentation purposes by the merchant who ordered them, or as delicacies for collectors. Some managed to slip into circulation now and then as well, and all are highly sought after today.



Figure Six: A pair of cross-country mules. At left, a token with the obverse of a Scottish washer woman proclaiming success to the woolen industry, with a reverse of the Welsh copper mines at Anglesey. At right, a mule of two token types seen in Figure Three, the obverse a John Wilkinson token, the reverse here using the obverse of the exact Hibernia Mine token seen in Figure Three. The one on the left was likely made for collectors, the one at right made for circulation.

This rabid interest also led some token makers to manufacture “mules”— pieces made by using the obverse of one token, and the reverse of another — to make additional delicacies for the collectors of the day. While some considered these mules to be “spurious” issues, designed to cheat the public and fool collectors, they have remained popular with collectors, and today often

command large premiums compared to most of the genuine tokens struck for circulation. Supply and demand always work their magic together. Sometimes, though, mules were made just to use up old dies to bang out a few more tokens, and the resulting product was sold in bulk, at a discount, to those who could get them into circulation; this happened a lot after 1795 when most of the Birmingham token makers were running out of new orders to fill. Generally, if these mule varieties tend to exist only in higher grade, they were made for collectors, while those that exist mainly well-used, were things dumped into circulation, likely close to 1797 in an effort to use up whatever dies and planchets were still on hand before the token maker closed up shop for good.



Figure Seven: Two examples of the architectural tokens to be found in the Conder token series. At left, an issue showing the church of St. Mary Aldermanbury, an ill-fated building that was mentioned as early as the year 1181. Destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, it was rebuilt by Christopher Wren – only to be gutted in 1940 by a blitz in WWII. The walls were left standing, and in 1966 the stones were moved across the Atlantic to Westminster College, in Fulton, Missouri, as a memorial to Winston Churchill, who had given an influential speech there! The original footprint of the church remains in London, complete with a plaque. At right is a Yorkshire token showing on one side York Cathedral, and the other Clifford's Tower – both of which look nearly identical today as they do on the token.

There were also a large number of tokens made showing some of the architecture of the day – including castles, churches, and many of the gates that still or had once existed in London, Birmingham, and elsewhere. Some of these are artistic masterpieces, and it is amazing that one can still walk around London today and see that many of the buildings depicted on these tokens of 230 years ago still exist, and many of these buildings still look substantially the same.

Unlike copper coins of the era, Conder penny and halfpenny tokens usually came with a lettered edge, which were added to the blank planchets prior to striking, using a Castaing machine, which involved putting in a blank planchet and turning a crank by hand, a laborious and time-consuming task (farthing tokens were too thin to have a lettered edge applied). Though when Matthew Boulton perfected his steam presses, he was able to strike the obverse, reverse, and edge of the token with a single blow, creating a process that is still in use at government and private mints to this day. On a genuine trade token, the lettered edge would give information on the issuer, or where the token could be redeemed in regal coin. Some varieties were made using incorrect edge legends – either accidentally, from an incorrectly-edged blank planchet being tossed in with the correct ones, or on purpose to not actually have to redeem any of those tokens. These edge varieties give collectors even more things to hunt for, and some of the unauthorized edges are exceedingly rare, and far more valuable than those tokens with the correct edge.



Figure Eight: A political token sampling, mostly by Thomas Spence. Upper left, a token with Spence's bust on the obverse and the reverse showing the head of King George III conjoined with that of an ass. At left, a token showing the beginning and ends of oppression in Spence's view – starting with Caine and Abel, and ending in a bonfire burning religious texts, and ownership deeds. Bottom left, a striking image, of a prisoner (perhaps Spence himself) gnawing on a bone, with the reverse featuring a crowing rooster atop the back of the British lion, with the message Let Tyrants Tremble at the Crow of Liberty (this example struck in brass). Any of these tokens would have been enough for Spence to be tossed in prison again! Lower right, a very different sentiment. While collected as part of the Spence issues, it was most certainly not issued by him, and features Thomas Paine hanging from a gallows, with the pun END OF PAIN around, while the reverse shows a book titled The Wrongs of Man, a rebuke to Paine's book The Rights of Man. Spence was a great admirer of Paine.

But commerce and collecting were not the only reasons these tokens were struck. These small discs of copper were perfect to espouse political views or make social commentary. This happened on both sides of many of those issues – from tokens made in support of the King, certain members of the aristocracy, or leading military heroes, to those of a decidedly seditious nature which often called for the abolition of all the above! Chief instigator of the latter type was Thomas Spence, who had dozens of dies cut and had several hundred different varieties of tokens made to foster his own political views, which envisioned a democratic society, with free education, common ownership of land, the right of all adults to vote (including women and the poor), and social safety nets that protected the most vulnerable in society. For these views Spence went to prison three different times. In true form, Spence included this sacrifice of personal freedom on his own tokens. Tokens were also struck to honor others, including members of the London Corresponding Society, who had been charged with treason or other high crimes – as well as the barristers who bravely defended them (and usually won). One of the ironies of the series is that the Spence tokens were not only collected by the same rich, upper-

class, and aristocracy that the tokens mocked, but they survive today, often in excellent condition, mainly because of those very same collectors!

Part 2: The North American Story



Figure Nine: One of several tokens that feature a bust of George Washington on the obverse, which are part of the Conder token series as well as the colonial American series. On the left is an example of the Washington Liberty and Security penny token. At right is the 1791 Small Eagle cent, which was initially made in England, in hopes of obtaining a contract coinage with the United States, which had not yet erected a mint. When this did not materialize, the remainder of the tokens were dumped into circulation, and most exist in well-worn condition.

So, what do these tokens have to do with North America? While few pieces listed as Conder tokens were specifically struck for any of the areas formerly under British control, there are several tokens relevant to the area. Most important are a number of tokens that feature George Washington on the obverse, an unusual honor to a man that had only recently wrested control of the American colonies away from England! It may seem surprising that the British would strike tokens with the image of the man who had just defeated them in war, but, while that loss was a blow to British prestige, there was widespread admiration for Washington, especially after he voluntarily stepped down from power, refusing to set up another monarchy after his two terms as president. Indeed, when King George III heard of this, he commented that by giving up power Washington would “be the greatest man in the world.” Given the political nature of some Conder tokens made and used in England, one suspects the coiners of the Washington tokens also found a subtle way to contrast the hereditary monarchy of England with the democratic elections of the United States, without ever crossing a line into sedition.



Figure Ten (part 1): A sampling of tokens with ties to North America. Here, the undated Kentucky token, which features a “starry pyramid” on the reverse with the initials of the new states, a K for Kentucky is at the top; this is listed as both a Conder token and as part of the colonial American series.



Figure Ten (part 2): A sampling of tokens with ties to North America. On the left, an example of a 1794 Talbot, Allum & Lee one cent token. On the right, the Talbot, Allum & Lee obverse, muled with an obverse of a John Howard Conder token.

There were also tokens that are tied directly to North America, such as the Kentucky Token and various mules using obverse dies intended for tokens made for the New York firm of Talbot, Allum & Lee – here the regular tokens made for the firm, though struck in England, are not listed in D&H because the location is given as New York, clearly not part of the United Kingdom in 1794! But the mules, using the same obverse dies, paired with the dies of known Conder tokens (often broken or in late die states), are included in the D&H book – in reality both American and British collectors tend to add both types to their collections, Note that any Conder tokens with a US connection will command a premium compared to other Conder tokens of similar rarity, simply because of supply and demand. This has resulted in the vast majority of such tokens which were once in British collections and dealer’s inventories to have sailed across the Atlantic in the last century and a half, especially those in very choice condition, which sell at an even higher premium.



Figure Eleven (part 1): At left the obverse of the 1794 Copper Company of Upper Canada token, sharing a similar obverse design with a Lanarkshire Conder token, at right.



Figure Eleven (part 2): At left, the obverse of the “1781” North American token, clearly modeled after the obverse of the Dublin Camac, Kyan and Camac tokens.

The Conder series also has some ties to Canada as well. As seen in Figure Eleven (parts 1 and 2), the designs of both the 1794 Copper Company of Upper Canada token and the “1781” (likely struck around 1820) North American token were at least partially influenced by Conder tokens. The lower image is certainly much more striking in nature and suggests that the Irish Camac tokens were known enough in Canadian circulation that the image would be recognized and trusted, and new tokens with the design would be accepted in commerce. Given that the average grade of these North American tokens is quite low, it seems that they did circulate extensively – and though this token has also been adopted as part of the colonial American series, few would have circulated in the United States, given their light weight – but Canadians would have welcomed any circulating copper coin at this time.



Figure Twelve: a 1792 Irish Camac, Kyan and Camac token with the ubiquitous counterstamp of Devins & Bolton of Montreal.

Interestingly, there is also proof that at least one of these Camac tokens circulated in Canada, as one exists with a counterstamp from Montreal. Around 1863 the Montreal druggist Devins & Bolton began counterstamping copper coins with their name. In 1880, the elderly Devins stated, “When I was first in business, owing to the numerous and endless oddities of coins then in circulation, I purchased everyone I got hold of (and stamped them) with the words ‘Devins & Bolton Montreal.’ I kept count up to 1,800 dollars, but did not give up stamping.” (Just this figure translates to at least 180,000 coins counterstamped!). This ubiquitous counterstamp is found on a huge array of coins and tokens, from North America, as well as from the United

Kingdom and European countries as far flung as Portugal, Austria, Norway, and Sweden. While this is the only example of the countestamp on a Camac token that has been seen, it is certainly possible that more of this token type were sent over to Canada to circulate after 1805, when they were no longer needed in Ireland, having been replaced by Matthew Boulton's copper penny, halfpenny, and farthing coinage for that country.

Part 3: The End of the Story

By 1796, the supply of Conder tokens — real ones, spurious pieces, and medalets that often circulated as tokens and are now catalogued as part of the series — far exceeded demand. Their quality had deteriorated to the point where some were no better weight than the counterfeit copper coins they had originally sought to replace. Something had to be done, and the government finally stepped in, and called a halt to the manufacture of tokens in England. Recognizing that the Royal Mint was not up to producing a great quantity of copper coin, the Crown finally awarded a contract to Matthew Boulton and his Soho Mint for the coinage of penny and two pence coins in 1797, these being the infamous “cartwheel” coppers. The era of Conder tokens had come to an end. But, for a ten-year period, extending from 1787-1797, almost all copper pieces in circulation in the UK were either counterfeit coins or these tokens — and the tokens were certainly far more desirable than the counterfeits, both by merchants, and their customers. Conder tokens were designed and manufactured by private coiners and were not limited by any rules governing their design, and taken as a whole, they form a history of a people in a way never seen before — or since! Through them, we can look in on life in the late 18th century. We can see how they lived and thought through their commerce, politics, advertising, and even view their architecture. Avidly collected at the time of their issue, many of these tokens survive in wonderful condition to this day, and remain surprisingly affordable. These are literally pieces of history that can be held in your hand, and collectors today find them perhaps even more fascinating than they did years ago. The study of these tokens has proven to be rewarding to many, and the stories behind the tokens and the era are exciting to discover.

The Conder Token Collectors Club

The Conder Token Collectors Club is devoted to the study of this fascinating series, and while most of its members are in the US and UK, there are also members in Canada, Europe, and as far away as Australia. The club publishes a journal twice a year, bringing new discoveries and solid research to collectors, and the club offers both print and digital memberships, with the latter just \$10 (US) a year. Joining gives you immediate access to all 86 previously published issues, and both print and digital membership allows you a free ad, which can be used to buy or sell, or just to announce an area you are researching and seek assistance on. Information on the club can be found at: <https://ctcc.info/> and you can join the club directly from that page, using PayPal. In addition, dues for Young Numismatists (under 25 years old) are just \$5 (US) a year. As a special thank you for any YN reading this article, if you email Jeff Rock directly at rosaamltd@gmail.com, I will gift you a free one-year digital membership.