
FEATURE ARTICLE

A NUMISMATIST'S FORAY INTO LOCAL HISTORY

By Paul Curson

Introduction

Why is the village of East Ilsley of interest to a numismatist? My aim in this short article is to address this question, and I'll be bringing you up to date on my knowledge of a particularly interesting find. I hope to illustrate to you that not only does numismatics provide a useful, accessible toolset to the local historian, but also, in turn, the local historian can assist the numismatist in gaining a more complete understanding of their subject. Finally, there are questions of local interest that remain unanswered, and the final pieces of the jigsaw have yet to be put in place. You might be able to help; at the close of this article, I leave with you with a key piece of the jigsaw, and I leave you with a question.

Before we start, we should be clear about the term 'numismatics'. Let me simply quote to you the definition from Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Numismatics>):
*(Numismatics) is the study or collection of currency, including coins, Tokens, paper money, and related objects. While **numismatists** are often characterized as students or collectors of coins, the discipline also includes the broader study of money and other payment media used to resolve debts and the exchange of goods.*

Reading Coin-like Artifacts

We begin by considering the picture shown below.



Here we have two separate specimens of the same design. The left hand side shows what we call the 'obverse', and the right hand side shows the 'reverse' – these terms roughly equate to 'heads' and 'tails'. Each specimen is approximate 18.5 mm in diameter, making them comparable in size to a current one pence piece. Both specimens are made of a base metal of different appearance.

Let's examine the details. The picture obverse shows a central figure appearing, rather casually, to hold a rather large set of weighing scales, surrounded by a circle of beads. Then we have an inscription around the perimeter which reads 'RICHARD•WESTON•AT •1669'. The reverse bears a central inscription that simply states 'HIS HALF PENY', and is again surrounded by a

circle of beads. This is surrounded by a further inscription around the perimeter 'ILSLEY•IN•BARKSHEIRE'. Note the wonderful spellings!

Now take a look at the picture below. This shows an enlarged mid-section of the reverse. Allow me to indulge in a final, more subtle numismatic observation, in that a raised 'mark' can be seen to the left of the 'P' in 'PENY' that appears to break the circle of beads, as highlighted by the ellipse. I am guessing that you are unlikely to consider this mark to be part of the intended design, but instead regard it to be some kind of flaw.



Interpreting the 'Evidence'

We are fortunate here to have examined a primary source of local historic 'evidence', and one which offers some pretty accessible details. (It helps enormously that these specimens are in very good condition – often it is much more difficult.) I imagine that you have formed some ideas already for yourself? Let's see if they align with my own. What we have are some location keywords (ILSLEY, BARKSHEIRE), a date (1669), a name (RICHARD WESTON), a denomination (HALF PENY), and, significantly, an owner (HIS), referring, we can infer, to RICHARD WESTON.

The next step probably requires some (but only a little) prior knowledge: This is a Halfpenny of Ilsley in Berkshire, issued not by the government, but by a private individual, Richard Weston. This means that we have a Token, rather than a coin, made from base metal. The Token is dated with the year 1669 – the year of issue. Now, applying a little local historical information (which I have gleaned from a local historian) I understand that around the year 1669 East Ilsley was of a size and population at least comparable with that of today, whilst West Ilsley was perhaps significantly smaller. It is therefore most likely that the use of this Token centered on East Ilsley. We have here a Token, not from a large town or city, but from a Downlands village. Astonishing!

As a numismatic aside, the marking seen on the reverse is, I believe, due to what numismatists refer to as a 'die flaw', which is the result of a hairline crack in the die itself. Since the die is used to create the impression on the Token (there is one for the obverse and one for the reverse), the flaw appears on the Token. This crack would have soon rendered the die useless. Another die would have been cut of the same design. The two specimens shown have been struck from two different dies of the same design, or type. This is not apparent from the photograph, since I have shown different sides from each specimen.

Anyway, back to history, now our historical analysis really begins. We can start to ask questions such as: Who was Richard Weston? What was his profession or trade? Why did Richard Weston have a Halfpenny Token issued in his name, at this time, seemingly for use in a village location? How do we interpret the strangely clad figure holding scales? Are there other Tokens like it? To begin answering these questions, we will need to consider this Token in a broader historical and regional numismatic context.

Why did Joe Bloggs Make ‘Coins’?

Ok, let's first tackle the question 'Why did Richard Weston have a Halfpenny Token issued in his name, at this time, seemingly for use in a village location?' The simple answer lies in the fact that there was an acute shortage of small change in the first half of the seventeenth century – and indeed at many times before then. It would have been comparable to not having coins today, but only banknotes, and no other means of payment. Just banknotes! Today, how would we buy a newspaper with only a banknote, and no prospect of change?

One reason for the desperate situation in the middle of the seventeenth century was that silver denominations of a penny and smaller were very small, and very losable. They contained their value in silver, and silver was no longer worth what it once was. This was the basis of coinage – the value of the denomination was equalled by the value of the metal from which it was made. Anything else would have been a 'Token'. For this reason (amongst others), the government was very reluctant to issue small base metal coinage. Some copper Farthings were issued privately under patent for general use, but these were not successful, and there were many forgeries in circulation. Finally, England was recovering from the civil war. The coinage, along with everything else, had received a battering.

After the death of King Charles I, in 1649, the country was under the governance of the Commonwealth. There was no King, and consequently no 'King's Law', leaving the way open for innovation. Here, private Tokens were able to flourish, following their introduction in 1648. The Seventeenth Century Tradesman's Token was successful because it was a local solution. There were few incentives to forge these pieces due to the limited distribution of each type, and they were from a trusted issuer. It wasn't until the beginning in 1672, that King Charles II produced the first official, regal issue of copper Halfpennies and Farthings, and began to suppress the issuing and usage of these humble Tokens. Many were subsequently melted down, but, thankfully, many also survived!

Sizing up the Competition

Are there other Tokens like it? Well, the Richard Weston Token is, in many ways, quite typical of a class of Token referred to as 'Seventeenth Century Tradesman's Tokens', which is the subject of this section. Let's see how it compares with other Tokens in this family.

Some basic facts about 17th Century Tradesman's Tokens:

- Tradesman's Tokens were issued between the years 1648 and 1672. So, our Richard Weston Token, issued in 1669, was issued relatively late on the 17th Century Token Timeline.
- Tokens were issued in many Town, Cities and villages across England, Ireland and Wales. Berkshire is well represented, with issues from some 25 locations. A selection of more local issues of interest include Blewbury (2 types issued), Harwell (1 type issued), Wantage (19 types issued!), Yattendon (1 type issued), and last, but not least Ilsley (1 type issued). The Richard Weston Token is the only type of Token issued in Ilsley. Newbury also issued Tokens – including so-called 'municipality' Tokens – a slightly different family of Token, but one that would have played an important role in local currency.
- During the early years of issue, most of the Token were Farthings; later, Halfpennies were issued. Nothing exciting here, we have a regular Halfpenny issue.
- Most of the Tokens are round. However, from about 1668, some other shapes were used, including heart-shaped Tokens, diamond, square pieces, and octagonal Tokens. Most of

these are quite rare. Nothing exciting here either, we have a typically sized Halfpenny. I should mention that the Farthing was quite a bit smaller.

- Most of the Tokens contain a pictorial device. To help users of these Tokens readily identify the trade of the issuer, it was common for the arms of trading guilds to be shown in the design. There are forty or so in use, from Apothecaries to Woodmongers. Our Richard Weston Token does not picture the arms of any guild, though this is not unusual. However, we shall return to this point shortly.
- Many Tokens included the name of the issuer. This is also the case with our Richard Weston Token. This will, of course, be of considerable interest to the local historian. Once again, we shall return to this point shortly.
- A fascinating aspect of these Tokens is the variety of spelling seen. The spelling seen on some Tokens is done phonetically — the actual spelling ignored. There are towns with numerous issuers where the town is spelt in a different way each time – there was no standard in used. As we have seen with our Richard Weston Token, we have some interesting spellings: ‘BARKSHEIRE’, and ‘PENY’, but not as bizarre as some.

What's in a name?

Let's now turn our attention to the questions of ‘Who was Richard Weston?’, and ‘What was his profession or trade?’

There is a full on-line version of an old text in the National Archive (see http://www.archive.org/stream/tradeTokensissu02unkngoog/tradeTokensissu02unkngoog_djvu.txt). The Richard Weston Token is referenced in this work – and others – and is the only Token attributable to Ilsley, Berkshire. However, in this particular listing, the author attempts to identify Richard Weston. Here is an extract:

There appears no entry in the Parish Register of the name Weston. The Rev. J. G. Eames, Rector of West Ilsley, and the Rev. J. R. Terry, Rector of East Ilsley, have kindly had search made, but can find no record. I find, however, that there was a family of considerable local influence of this name in Newbury in the 17th century. They were clothmakers, or clothiers, as more usually called. Philip Weston was of Bassock Combe, Winterbourne, Berks.

It is interesting to note here that whilst the Name ‘Weston’ is referenced, there is no mention of a ‘Richard Weston’, and there is no direct link to the village of Ilsley. There could be a link here, but it is currently rather tentative.

A more promising line of enquiry has been established by none other than your very own Eric Saxton. I do not wish to steal Eric's thunder, as it were, so I'll provide only the salient points: It has been deduced that a Richard Weston and his first wife Katherine moved to East Ilsley sometime before 1659. In addition, the same Richard Weston was buried in East Ilsley on 28th February 1694. Finally, we know Richard's trade – he was a Grocer. Now, it was quite common for Grocers to issue Tokens at this time, so this is a very plausible connection.

A Picture Says a thousand Words!

Was the Richard Weston on the Ilsley Token a Grocer, as the above research suggests? As mentioned previously, a Grocer would more commonly use the arms of the Grocers Guild as a pictorial device. The question is, can we find a connection here in the picture below, showing the pictorial device on the obverse of the Token?



Scales are of course a generic symbol of justice. They have also been used in connection with the Apothecary trade, and the Baker's trade. Interestingly, before 1617 both the London grocers and the apothecaries belonged to the same guild.

I leave you with this picture that may link the Token that we have examined in this article with the finding that there was a Richard Weston in the village at that time, trading as a Grocer. On the other hand, we could go out of our way to speculate that the image may suggest a link with the Newbury-based Weston family of Clothiers.

Is there some clue in the figure holding the scales?

***Postscript**

The editor will be pleased to pass on any questions, arising from this article, to the author. Likewise, we would like to hear from anyone able to add to the present information, thus helping to verify that final connection.

If there are any members out there who feel like submitting an article for future inclusion, the editor would be very pleased to hear from you. If you have a particular interest, 'hobby horse' or have made an interesting discovery in the course of your research, please share it with your fellow members.