

THE MERCERS THE MASONS AND THE MARINER
or
TOKENS OF ESTEEM – 17th century tokens and the development of Cheltenham USA and UK by a prominent Quaker family who issued tokens.

It was a chance encounter with the owner of a piece of land in the centre of Cheltenham which eventually led to the purchase of my first 17th century token. The man had, he said, a bundle of papers pertaining to the land which he couldn't decipher – a historian's dream! The papers were deeds dating from 1682 to 1997, the latter date being when the owner's father purchased the land. The earlier deeds, written in Secretary Hand, related to the town's original Quaker Burial Ground which put the Quaker's purchase at a date earlier than had previously been known.

What was revealed from transcribing the deeds and the research carried out led to a story of a family persecuted in the mid 1650s for being of a "dissenting religion", members of which were early founders of a town in Pennsylvania and later generations of this family being responsible for Cheltenham's early development as the town's spa. The deeds also revealed important information, that of the names of the principal Quaker leaders in the town – and some of those were issuers of Cheltenham's nine known trading tokens in the 17th century.

The relevance of members of the Society of Friends, otherwise known as Quakers, as issuers of tokens, is outlined by George Berry in his book "Seventeenth Century England: Traders and their Tokens" (1988, Seaby):

The birth of the Society of Friends coincides almost exactly with the issue of the first tokens. The period of their issue 1648-72 again coincides with the 'suffrances' of Quakers at the hands of a society which considered them to be not merely unorthodox but positively dangerous. Friends laid great stress on the ethic of hard work, so it is not surprising that many of them were successful enough in their business to issue tokens. ...Quakers came from all walks of life, as indeed their tokens tell us.

Firstly, the background to the story of 17th century tokens which were privately, issued for a 24 year period between the years of 1648 to 1672. There had been tokens in circulation for use as small change from the 13th century onwards and the city council of Bristol was licensed to issue copper tokens, with the approval of Queen Elizabeth I, in 1578. Whereas in 1613, the granting of a patent to strike copper farthings by James I to Lord Harrington enabled the monarch to boost the royal coffers.

With Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth having no crowned monarch, there was no King's Prerogative to issue coins of the realm therefore it was not an offence against the crown to privately issue trading tokens. Due to Parliament's inability to mint a sufficient number of low denomination coins some traders needed to issue their own unofficial coins, or tokens, for small amounts. These were crude, hammer struck, small tokens for everyday use – mostly farthings (issued until 1656) half pennies and some pennies, the latter mainly used in coffee houses.

The value of a farthing was mainly denoted by being of a smaller sized token. A further need for half penny tokens came about when, in 1661, the silver half penny of the Crown was taken out of use. When the crown began issuing farthings in 1672, the first Proclamation was given to cease minting trade tokens but cessation didn't finally occur until a third Proclamation was given in 1674. After this date tokens were destroyed or melted down. Boyne (1858) estimated – and it is generally accepted as accurate - that there had been around 20,000 different token issuers of

which, it was considered by Dickinson in 1986, that there are in the region of 14,000 known types of tokens.

Traders would issue and accept tokens from other traders in their town if they trusted the trader to be good for the reciprocal redemption of their tokens. It is unlikely that customers being given these low value tokens would have travelled more than a few miles radius from their homes. However, a 1663 token of Samuel Arrowsmith of Cheltenham was unearthed in an archaeological dig in 1990 at Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, some 25 miles away. Samuel was a haberdasher and had a son Obadiah who was cited in his will as a haberdasher of hats but it is not known if he was the same Obadiah Arrowsmith, mercer of Cirencester, who issued a rare heart-shaped token in 1665.

The design of the tokens was simple but informative, usually marked with a triad of initials – that of the trader’s name plus the initial of his wife’s name (occasionally his son) a bonus for the genealogist! Not all tokens were dated. On the obverse was the name of the trader and the date of issue and on the reverse either the family’s coat of arms or the arms of the trade and the place of issue and the value of the token, except for the farthing which was more usually recognised by being smaller than other tokens.



Fig. 1 Thomas Mason of Cheltenham Half Penny 1669 mercer or hosier

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Pictured here is the half penny of Thomas Mason of Cheltenham. His occupation has been given in various different documents as either a mercer or hosier but no occupation is stated on the token. On the reverse of Thomas Mason’s token, is the arms of his Mason family – a two headed rampant lion – rather than the arms of a trade. Whereas (Fig 2) John Mason (probably Thomas’s brother) has no coat of arms but the word “Mercer”.



Fig. 2 John Mason mercer of Cheltenham Half Penny 1667

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FIG 3 Thomas Ashmeade of Charlton Kings (Image © 2019 Neela Mann)

The token shown in Figure 3, that of Thomas Ashmeade of Charlton Kings, displaying the Grocers' Arms. Charlton Kings is now part of the borough of Cheltenham and this is the only token issued by a trader from Charlton Kings. Another Ashmead(e), Nicholas of Cheltenham, also issued tokens showing the Grocers' Arms. In the Cheltenham Probate Records 1660-1740, both these men were appraisers (valuers of inventories) and witnesses of will. The occupation of them both is given as mercer.

Edward Johnson, of Cheltenham, whose token shows the mercers' arms, is known to have been a mercer and a maltster. Johnson left £1,673 in his will when he died in 1670 – a rich man whose “linen draper, silk and haberdasher wares” alone were worth £668. Interestingly he fits the bill as the true meaning of a **merc**er (see below or overleaf) as shown on his shop's inventory are boxes of spices to the value of £10 – the inventory having been appraised by Samuel Arrowsmith (see above). Milne, quoted in Berry, explains this switching of occupations and pictorial coats of arms and warns to be “...very cautious when dealing with mercers, grocers and drapers as ... many tokens bearing the Grocers' Arms were issued by mercers.”

The Grocers' Arms, represented by nine cloves on a shield, appear on many tokens for traders who were not what we would know today as grocers. It is a coat of arms with a particularly interesting history. The cloves used as symbols are part of the coat of arms of The Worshipful Company of Grocers, originally known as the “Guild of Pepperers” in 1180. (See Fig 4) The “Pepperers” were recognised as general traders, dealing in spices, gold and silks from the East and the Mediterranean, using pepper as a form of currency, from where the term ‘peppercorn’ rent originates. The cloves, being one of the most expensive of spices, symbolised wealth and standing. In 1348 the Guild's name changed to ‘The Company of Grossers of London’ – the word ‘grosser’ referring to a particular type of merchant who traded in ‘all manner of merchandise vendible’. The Guild was once the first of The Great Twelve Livery Companies of London, but were demoted to second place when, during a City procession, one of the Grocers' camels (also a symbol of the Guild) which had been hired for the pageant emitted unfortunate smells in front of Queen Elizabeth I. The Guild which took over the top spot from the Grocers, and still holds first place, was that of the Worshipful Company of Mercers!



Fig 4 The arms of the Worshipful Company of Grocers

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<https://grocershall.org.uk>

The term 'Mercer' comes from the latin term *merx* which means merchandise. A mercer came to mean a trader in fabrics such as silks and fine textiles, such as the materials that would have been traded and imported by the original 'Pepperers' and 'Grossers' from the East. The merchant company initially formed solely to trade in produce from the East – the East India Company – set up their first base in 1601 in the only place found to supply peppers - the Moluccas or Spice Islands. In the same year the Royal Mint struck the first 'portcullis' money for the East India Company – one of the first export orders undertaken by the Royal Mint. Dick Whittington, three times Mayor of London, and commonly portrayed as a pantomime character, was from Pauntley in Gloucestershire and became a Mercer, making his fortune selling fabrics to the royal courts. The Mercers' Hall in London burned down in the fire of London in 1666 around the time the traders' tokens were in circulation. When Mercers' Hall was rebuilt it became, in April 1694, the place where the Bank of England was founded and initially conducted its business.

Back to our two Quaker families, the Masons and the Ashmeades of Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. Cheltenham parish records tell us that there were around 350 families in the town in 1650. It was around this time that William Fox founded the Society of Friends, known as Quakers. It is known that as early as 1659 two Cheltenham Quakers were imprisoned for refusing to pay tithes to the Church of England. By 1676, Cheltenham had a population of 1,169 which included nine mercers. In 1678 the Quaker Robert Wall of Hasfield in Gloucestershire, had taken from him for not attending church worship, a mare and colt worth £6 10s. On 7th October 1684 a

raid on a Quaker meeting in Cheltenham, which was deemed illegal as no more than five people were allowed to meet together for worship, saw the hosier Thomas Mason and seven others sent to prison at Gloucester Castle for attending a meeting of Quakers. Mary, Thomas's wife had to manage three small children, her eldest being William aged 9 years. The following year John Mason and three others were fined a total of £86 8s for not attending church the Church of England services.

In 1681 William Penn, a prominent Quaker, had been given a large land grant in America by Charles II to pay off a debt owed by the king. Penn sailed to America with the intention of establishing a colony in the region of Philadelphia, which would serve as a sanctuary for religious freedom and tolerance. The following year, passengers in one of Penn's ship's "Bristol Factor", were the widowed Mary Ashmead, her son John and Mary's daughter Esther. Esther Ashmead had married Tobias Leech in the house of the prominent Gloucestershire Quaker Richard Wall, who had also sailed to join William Penn in forming Pennsylvania. John Ashmead purchased 250 acres of land from William Penn, Tobias Leech 350 acres and Richard Wall 300 acres. On this land they developed the town of Cheltenham USA, named after the town of their birth in Gloucestershire. And their connection to the Mason family? Both John Ashmead, Thomas Mason and Tobias Leech were witnesses at the marriage of Jacob Davies and Ann Ashmead in Cheltenham Gloucestershire in 1674 and Thomas's sister Mary married an Ashmead.

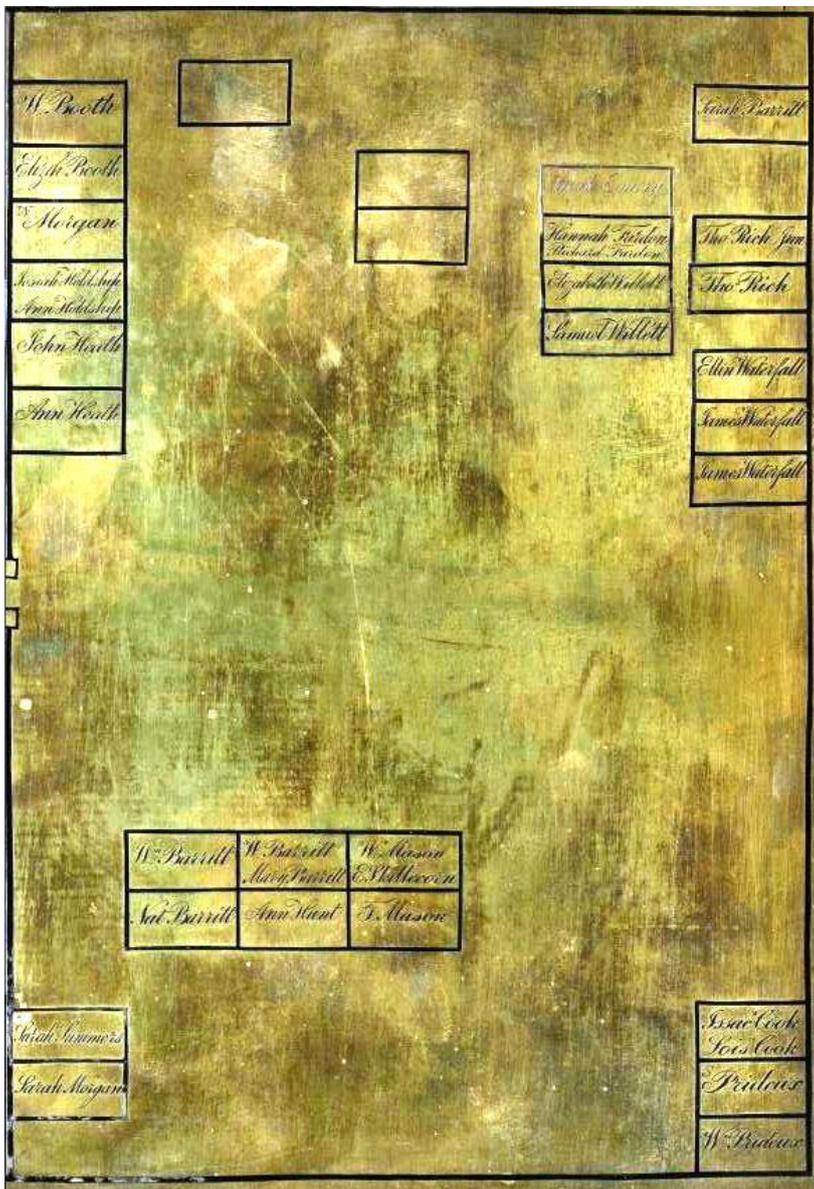


Fig 5 Quaker Burial Ground plan 1888. Brass plaque from the Friends' Meeting House Cheltenham, Gloucestershire Image © 2018 Neela Mann. Used by kind permission

In the Cheltenham Friends' Meeting House is a brass plaque (Fig 5) showing the layout of the graves in the original Quaker Burial Ground, the deeds of which I stumbled across when meeting the present owner. The plaque, which is dated 1888 around the time when land was no longer used as a burial ground, contains 30 named graves including that of one Thomas Mason, hosier buried 7th Mason 1711 and that of Thomas's son William Mason. Buried in the same grave is one Elizabeth Skillicorne, Thomas's grand-daughter and William Mason's daughter.

William Mason is a significant figure in the history of the town of Cheltenham. Like his father Thomas, he was also a hosier and must have done well, purchasing land including Bayshill Meadow in Cheltenham. It was in 1716, in this meadow, that William Mason noticed pigeons frequently came to peck at a spring. The spring never froze over in the winter and it is said that a farmer's sick horse was cured by drinking these waters. This was the original spring from which Cheltenham's spa waters were developed starting when William Mason built a well over the spring. The town's coat of arms (Fig 5) includes pigeons to show their importance in the development of the town..

Fig 5. Cheltenham Borough's Coat of Arms *Image © 2017 Neela Mann*



Exploiting the spa further after William Mason's death in 1723 was a retired sea captain and entrepreneur from Bristol – Captain Henry Skillicorne. At the age of 52 years of age Henry had married William Mason's 22 year old daughter Elizabeth who had inherited the spa and land. Skillicorne was able to turn the town into a fashionable place for the gentry to see and be seen. In 1876, Henry Skillicorne's great grandson became the first mayor of the newly formed Bourgh of Cheltenham.

Who would have known that this chance meeting with the owner of land and deeds from 1682 would lead to such a story! And the Thomas Mason token? My son happened to own it and, on hearing the story of the Quaker Burial Ground gave me my first token - and you know how it is, my interest in tokens and their history developed. Do you have a story attached to the acquisition of your first token or coin? Do tell us!