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AN ENGLISH NAVAL STORE TOKEN MISTAKEN FOR A CONVICT TOKEN

by Peter Lane



The above, so called, “unrecorded convict token” came on the Australian market in 1991 and it was later discovered to be an English token or pass. As it aroused considerable debate and research amongst Australiana collectors it is appropriate to record the findings in this journal.

In the late 1960’s an Australian collector showed a well known and respected London dealer a token with the symbolic arrow synonymous with convict relics. The dealer, Howard Linecar, wrote a letter to the owner in 1968 and expressed the opinion that the “item has Australian interest”. The collector placed the piece together with the letter with an auction house in 1991 and it was catalogued as a “Van Diemen’s Land Penal Office token or a check in copper (27mm), uniface, obverse showing an arrow pointed down followed by ‘PO/AUG/1823’. An unpublished and intriguing piece. Fine and extremely rare.”

The date is certainly within the convict period of Tasmania as the transportation of convicts commenced in 1803 and ceased in 1853. The convicts continued to serve the remainder of their sentences there long after transportation ceased. However the

premise that the letters “PO” related to the government body controlling convicts was incorrect.

The answer to this “intriguing piece” was found in a book published about eight years after Howard Linecar wrote the letter. The book, “*BRITISH COUNTERMARKS ON COPPER AND BRONZE COINS*” by J. Gavin Scott, cites a number of similar examples. The author attributes comparable pieces but with different dates with the letters “PO” as Portsmouth Dockyard. Other British Naval dockyards that issued this style of token were Chatham (C), Sheerness (S), Woolwich (W), and Weedon (MSD/WEEDON). The MSD stands for Military Stores Depot.

The “arrow” pieces are rarely seen in dealers catalogues so it is not surprising that the London dealer and the auction cataloguer had not seen these pieces before. The arrow which we closely associate with convicts is the symbol used by the British Ordnance to show the object belongs to the government and on some objects a “BO” is also stamped. The arrow signifies government property and as convicts were the responsibility of the government many items relating to them have an arrow.

Acknowledgments and References

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