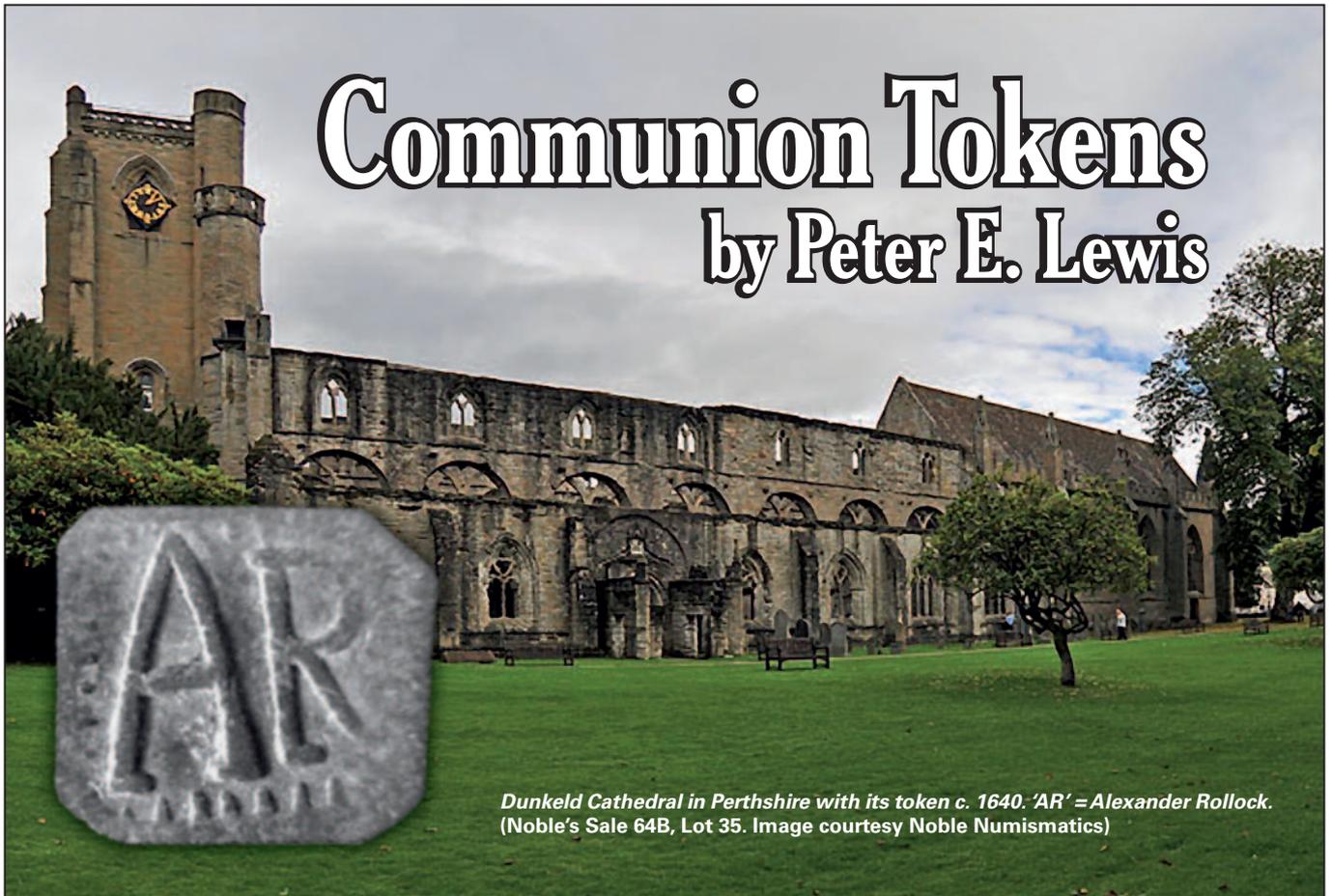


Communion Tokens

by Peter E. Lewis



Dunkeld Cathedral in Perthshire with its token c. 1640. 'AR' = Alexander Rollock. (Noble's Sale 64B, Lot 35. Image courtesy Noble Numismatics)

NO area in numismatics can be more enjoyable for the collector than Communion tokens, especially if he or she is religious. The token connects the collector to particular churches and the Communion services that occurred there, and more importantly to the people taking part in those services. But, as for any area in numismatics, the collector needs to have some knowledge of the subject

before being able to fully appreciate the coins or tokens. So let's start at the beginning.

Communion tokens began with John Calvin, the leader of the church in Geneva in the 16th century. He had been influenced by the Reformation, which called for a new approach to Christianity. Previously there had been a lot of ignorance and superstition, and the Reformers, beginning with Martin Luther in 1517, wanted the people to read the Bible for themselves and understand the basic tenets of Christianity. One of these tenets was the celebration of the Eucharist, also known as the Lord's Supper or Communion. In the Bible Jesus asks his followers to eat bread and drink wine as if it was his body and blood, and to do this in remembrance of him. Communing with Christ in this way was a serious matter, as Saint Paul warned the Christians in Corinth: *A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.* (1 Corinthians 11:28,29 - NIV)

In 1560 Calvin suggested that Communion tokens be used to make sure only worthy persons partook of the Lord's Supper, but the city council rejected the idea. They were, however, used in some Protestant churches in France and the Netherlands, and eventually in Geneva in 1605. But they quickly became widely

used in Scotland where Calvin's ideas had been promoted by John Knox, an influential preacher. In an article written in 1999 and entitled 'The Reformed Churches of France and the Visual Arts', Raymond Mentzer explained that "to avoid profanation of the Eucharist, the elders in the role as moral watchdogs distributed these entry counters to those members of the faithful whom they deemed qualified by virtue of correct belief and proper conduct." In Scotland, not only did the member have to be in good standing in the community but 'correct belief' was put to the test. In an extract from the First Book of Discipline, which was adopted by the General Ass-



Figure 2 - Square token from Oldhamstocks Church in Lothians, c. 1750. The 'K' stands for 'Kirk' and indicates the Established Church of Scotland. The reverse is blank. (Author's collection)



Figure 1 - Token of Dunfermline Church in Fife issued in 1839. The table number is 3. (Author's collection)



Figure 3 – Round token from Kilmonivaig Church in Inverness-shire, c. 1760. The reverse is blank. It has a coating of lead oxide. (Author's collection)

embly of the Kirk of Scotland in 1561, it is stated that “administration of the Table ought never to be, without that examination pass before, especially of those whose knowledge is suspect. We think that none are apt to be admitted to that mystery who cannot formally say the Lord's Prayer, the Articles of the Belief, and declare the sum of the Law.” On passing the test on the Saturday the member was given the token for the Communion service on the Sunday.

In rural Scotland the Communion service was generally held once a year and large numbers of people attended. Unlike modern services the people actually sat at a table to eat the bread and drink the wine. Often there were so many people that tables were set up outside the church. These tables were ‘fenced in’ so that there was one entrance and one exit, and no one was allowed in without a token. If there was more than one table the token would



Figure 5 – Rectangular token with cut corners from St Andrew's Church in Kilmarnock in Dunbartonshire. (Noble's Sale 64B, Lot 60. Image courtesy Noble Numismatics.)



Figure 4 – Rectangular token from Kemback Church in Fife. Mr Alexander Walker was the minister from 1736 to 1780. (Author's Collection)

have a table number stamped on it. (Figure 1)

The tokens were nearly all made of lead or an alloy of lead and tin. When they were first made, the lead tokens would have had a silvery appearance, but with time the lead oxidizes and a coating of white dust forms. This lead oxide is **toxic**, and collectors must be careful when they handle lead tokens. Rubber gloves may be necessary and special care should be taken if brushing off the dust.

Communion tokens come in various shapes and with various designs on them, but initially they were square or round with only a few letters on them. (Figures 2 and 3) Later, rectangles became popular, usually with the name of the church and the date. (Figure 4) Then in the 19th century rectangles with cut corners and ovals were common, and after 1840 nearly all of these had a Bible verse on the reverse. (Figures 5 and 6) The most common verses were “This do in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24) and “Let a man examine himself.” (1 Corinthians 11:28)

In the 19th century wherever the Scots migrated to in the world, their Presbyterian churches issued Communion tokens, although not every church did. Apparently a third of Canadians are of Scottish descent and a lot of tokens were issued there. Other countries are England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. A number of books have been written about Communion tokens, some dealing only with particular countries, e.g. *Australian Communion Tokens* by M.C. Williams and R.S. Ward (1992). Lester Burzinski's *Communion Tokens of the World* (1999) lists 7000 tokens and illustrates 3000 of them. Noble's catalogue for Sale 64B in 2000 illustrates hundreds of tokens and is very useful. Of the non-catalogue books, Michael Shutty's *Communion Tokens: A Guide for Collecting Scottish, Canadian & United States Tokens* (2013) is an excellent introduction to the subject.

For many collectors most of the pleasure comes from discovering exactly where the particular church was, and this sometimes means consulting old maps. Also

it is often possible to find an image of the church on the Internet with some information about it. If the token has an image of the church on it (Figure 7) it is interesting to compare it with the picture on the Internet (Figure 8).

Many Australians have Scottish ancestors and might even know the town or village where they came from. For them it is an exciting experience to find a Communion token from the very church where their ancestors worshiped. Often the church and even the village no longer exist, and this gives the experience an added poignancy.

Some of my ancestors came from the Highlands of Scotland in the region of the River Tay. This river begins in the Grampian Mountains, flows into Loch Tay, and then into the Firth of Tay. (Figure 9 – map) They were known as the Tay's people. After the introduction of Christianity and especially after the Calvinistic reformation in the 16th century, they would have gone to church, like everyone else in Scotland. But life was tough in the Highlands and when Presbyterians were moving to the northern part of Ireland in the 17th century, some of the Tays people would have been happy



Figure 6 – Oval token of the Free Church of Scotland. This was a stock token used by many churches. (Author's collection)



Figure 7 – Token from Kinnoul Church in Perthshire. (Author's Collection)

to join them. Similarly, in the 19th century when people in Northern Ireland were offered assisted passage to Australia they took the opportunity. When my ancestor, Mr Tays, arrived in Sydney he went straight to the government office to collect the cheque he had been promised, but by some bureaucratic error it was made out to the name 'Teys'. Faced with a recalcitrant bureaucracy and running short of money, he changed his surname to 'Teys'. He had many descendants and everyone in Australia with this unusual surname is likely to be related. My grandmother's surname was 'Teys' and therefore some of my genes come from that beautiful part of Scotland around Loch Tay. (Figure 10). When I

hold an old Communion token from a church in that area (Figures 11 and 12) I experience a tangible connection with my Scottish ancestors, and I can almost feel my Tay genes doing a little Highland fling in amongst my rather staid English and Welsh genes.

The whole idea of issuing Communion tokens sounds reasonable, doesn't it? But there were some serious problems. James Boswell, the Scottish biographer of Dr. Samuel Johnson, drew attention to the possibility of abuse of clerical power. In 1773 he wrote, "In Scotland there is a great deal of preparation before administering the sacrament. The minister of the parish examines the people as to their fitness, and to those whom he approves,



Figure 8 – Photo of Kinnoul Church.

gives little pieces of tin, stamped with the name of the parish, as Tokens, which they must produce before receiving it. This is a species of priestly power, and sometimes may be abused." (*The Story of the Token*, by Robert Shiells, page 33)

Certainly not everyone who wanted to attend the Communion service was allowed, and obviously those who thought they might fail the examination would not even present themselves. Sometimes the reasons for exclusion were trivial, for example in one Scottish church a man was refused a Token because he rode to church on a bicycle. On another occasion a woman "actually sat down at the table without a Token. There was a short but decisive conference amongst the elders,

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Figure 9a – Map of Scotland.

Note where Perth is. (Wikimedia Commons)

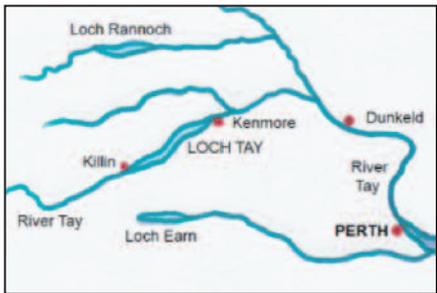


Figure 9b – Map showing the River Tay and Loch Tay. (Author's drawing)

and the criminal was at once escorted to the door, where, woman-like, she sat down and had a good cry.” (*The Story of the Token*, page 35)

Not only were these tokens toxic because of the lead in them, but they were toxic theologically. They represented a barrier that self-righteous men erected to prevent men and women of simple faith from doing what their Lord had commanded. Saint Paul had stated, “A man ought to examine himself.” NOT “A man ought to be examined by others.” His words were clearly shown on many

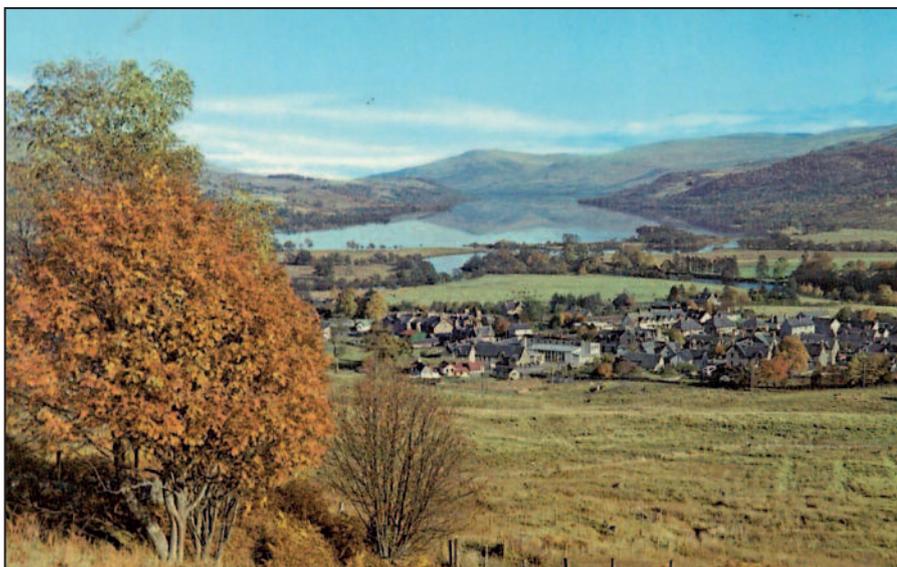


Figure 10 – View of Loch Tay from the west.

The town in the foreground is Killin. (Postcard in author's collection)



Figure 11 – Token from Kenmore Church in Perthshire. The inscription in three lines is Mr I C / K Kr / 1760. Mr James Campbell was the minister from 1759 to 1780. (Author's collection)

of the tokens that the ministers gave out. Did they never read them? This verse is in Chapter 11 of Paul's letter and these learned gentlemen needed to read only to Chapter 13 to get Paul's view on knowledge: “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:2) Where was the love in preventing people from partaking of the Lord's Supper?

Even today, in all walks of life, people exert their authority and use their power in ways that stifle love. In the area of religion, where is the love in preventing



Figure 12 – Photo of Kenmore Church at the eastern end of Loch Tay. How many people who live in the Brisbane suburb of Kenmore know where the name came from?

gay people from partaking of the Lord's Supper? Of course propriety and knowledge are important, but they are not what Christianity is about. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.” (John 13:34)

Collectors of Communion tokens should understand these matters because they are involving themselves in a sacred area at the heart of Christianity. They should not judge others, including those ministers of religion who withheld tokens from members of their congregations: they were doing what they thought was best. Saint Paul said, “Wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts.” (1 Corinthians 4:5) Some Communion tokens are heart-shaped, representing the love of God. (Figure 13) Perhaps collectors should put these at the heart of their collections.

☆☆☆



Figure 13 – Heart-shaped token from Airth Church in Stirlingshire. ‘AK’ stands for Airth Kirk. The reverse is blank. (Noble's Sale 64B, Lot 5. Image courtesy of Noble Numismatics.)