

A Token of Two Counties

John STRETFEILD of Rotherfield (Sussex) and Tonbridge (Kent)



Fig. 1. The Stretfeild [Streatfield] token with the Skinners' coat of arms – undated but 1664-72.
(British Museum)

This rather unique token was issued in two places in different counties: Rotherfield (REATHERF) in Sussex and Tonbridge (TVNBRIDG) in Kent, as indicated on the token. It is identified in Williamson as Kent BW557 but does not appear in any list of Sussex tokens as it is not generally known that Rotherfield has a token.

The token identifies the issuer as a mercer but has the Skinners' coat of arms. Skinners were involved in the hide and fur trade, so perhaps not incompatible with the mercers' trade in a small country town or village. Items like shoes and gloves could complement the fabrics traditionally sold by a mercer, whose trade would perhaps be better described as a clothier in such places.

There is some evidence to suggest the Streatfields were involved in the skinners' trade at Rotherfield, providing some justification for the coat of arms. The leather industry there may well have supplied goods to the Streatfield outlets in Rotherfield and Tonbridge.

Rotherfield

Rotherfield was an important village in the Sussex Weald with close connections to nearby towns and villages, especially the larger towns of Tonbridge and Lewes. Its importance originated from the iron industry in the 15th - 17th centuries which created much employment and wealth (at least for the iron masters). There were iron furnaces around Rotherfield which were still operating during the period merchant tokens were issued and these had attracted many workers, including a number from Europe whose iron making skills were valued.¹ There was also a leather industry in the village as mentioned in Pullein². The Rotherfield Historic Character Assessment Report of 2008 also states:³

There are references to tanning, a currier, a saddler and glove makers in the period c1600-50. In 1652 tanners from Rotherfield sold their goods at the Lewes leather market.

Tonbridge

Tonbridge would have been a small market town in the late 17th century. It had a Norman castle, built to protect the important river crossing over the Medway, which unfortunately was destroyed as a consequence of the Civil War.

According to Chalklin, the population of Tonbridge in the late 17th century is estimated to be about 600-800 people. The town was an important commercial centre for the area with a weekly market and from 1671 a monthly cattle market. The trades and crafts were mainly blacksmiths, butchers, shoemakers and tailors, with the cloth industry being very important to the town.⁴ Tonbridge was on the main road from London to Hasting and Rye and as a result there was also business for carriers and innkeepers with about half a dozen inns in the town.

Tonbridge town was certainly a better location for a mercer's shop than the smaller Rotherfield village. However, it would appear that both shops were a part of a broader business which encompassed the leather and fur trade, and it is likely that Rotherfield played a role in the manufacture of goods that were sold in the shops.

The Streatfield Family

The token issuer is John Streatfield who married Elizabeth Stanton on 1 Jul 1664 at Chiddingstone, Kent, hence the initials I.E.S on the token. Knowing the marriage date allows us to date the token as between 1664-1672. They lived at Tonbridge where four of their children were baptised:

Mary Streatfield, 7 Dec 1665
Thomas Streatfield, 29 May 1667
Elizabeth Streatfield, 13 Sep 1669 [died?]
Elizabeth Streatfield, 27 Jun 1672

The wills of William Streatfield, mercer of Rotherfield, proved in 1673 and Richard Streatfield, mercer of Rotherfield, proved in 1688 identify the family as comprising brothers Robert of Westerham, John, Edward, Richard and William.^{5,6} William's will proved in 1673 mentions the three children of John Streatfield as Mary, Thomas and Elizabeth confirming the link to the Tonbridge family.

The will of Richard's widow, Anne Streatfield, proved in 1693 refers to the bed and bedding of her servant John Ward that "*now lyeth & standing in the shop chamber of my dwelling house*" indicating that her shop was part of her house and that it was probably run by her servant. This may well be her husband's old mercers' shop. Rotherfield was just a small village comprising a church and a number of dwellings clustered around a village centre which is where their house and shop would likely be.

Skinner's

The author's research into his own family history at Rotherfield has identified circumstantial evidence for the Streatfield family's involvement in the skins and leather industry there. The evidence arises in the history of a property known as Drapers, located half a mile out of Rotherfield village.

George Barber owned a house in the village and the 23 acre property Drapers, both inherited from his father. In 1605 the manorial records state that "*George Nynne alias Barber, searcher of raw tanned leather is sworn*".⁷ A searcher was a representative of a certain craft or guild whose role was to police the craft on behalf of the civic authorities and in the interests of the guild. For the leather industry there was a statute concerning the "*true and just tanning, currying and working of leather*" requiring mayors, bailiffs or other head officers in market towns to appoint and swear yearly two or more persons "*of the most honest and skilful men*" to search and apply a seal to leather that was of acceptable quality and to seize any leather or leather goods that had not been sufficiently tanned or curried.⁸ This leads one to the conclusion that George Barber was involved in the skins and leather industry and perhaps the Drapers property was used for this purpose. If that is the case, then its location out of town would have been appreciated by the villagers.

The Draper's property passed from George Barber to his son Thomas. After Thomas' death it passed to his widow Ann who held it for "the term of her natural life" and then to their son Thomas. Ann did not remain a widow and married the clothier Samuel Theobald about 1655. In 1663, together with their son Thomas Barber, they leased the Drapers property to Richard Stretfield at £7 p.a.⁹

Counterpart lease for 21 years or the lives of the grantors from 29 Sep 1663 at £7

Date: 29 Nov 1663

*Samuel Theobald of Tonbridge in Kent, yeoman, and his wife Ann, and Thomas Barber of Westerham in Kent, servant to **Robert Stretfield of Westerham, yeoman, to Richard Stretfield of Rotherfield, clothier** four pieces of arable and pasture with the shaws, coppices and underwoods (23 acres) called **Drapyers in Rotherfield, occupied by Richard Stretfield** reserved: timber and pollards of oak, ash and beech; lessee to pay the quitrent of 3s 8d; detailed husbandry covenants Witnesses: Thomas Hosmer, **William Stretfeild**.*

The property Drapers was finally sold in 1787 to William Peerless, whose will identifies him as a glover and a fellmonger (a dealer in hides or skins, especially sheep skins).¹⁰

There is no direct evidence as to the use of the Drapers property, but it seems that everyone associated with it has a connection to the skins or leather trade. It leads one to conclude that there was justification for placing the Skinners coat of arms on the Streatfield token and that the family likely played an active role in the skins and leather industry at Rotherfield.

REATHERF

The interpretaion of REATHERF as Rotherfield requires an explanation.

In documents written in the 16th and 17th century, Rotherfield is commonly written as "Retherfeild" or "Retherfeld". The will of Thomas Barber of Tonbridge, made in 1683, has "*all my lands lying in Rearfel [Rotherfield] in the county of sothsex known by the name of Dreapars or by any other name*".¹¹ Words were spelt as they sounded, and "Reatherf" is not so bad when one considers that the die-maker had run out of room for any more letters and the super-capitalisation of the letter "F" at the end of REATHERF is probably indicating that there should have been more to follow (i.e. F for FIELD).



Fig. 2. The spelling of Rotherfield as REATHER^F with the super-capitalisation of the letter “F” at the end.

Conclusion

While there are other examples of a token being issued for two towns or villages¹² it is rare and this is the only one in Sussex or Kent where the two places are in different counties.

The use of the Skinners Arms on the token is probably accurate, despite the issuer being described as mercer, and the die-maker’s solution to making “REATHERFIELD” fit by using REATHER^F is interesting craftsmanship.

Lastly, as a collector, it is very satisfying to put my “hometown” of Rotherfield on the map. The big question is whether I will ever see one of these tokens in my collection.

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¹ An example was Maynard’s Gate Furnace at Rotherfield which was a gun founding furnace in 1574 and still operating in 1653 but ruined by 1664 (Wealden Iron Reseach Group: www.wirgdata.org)

² Catharine Pullein, *"Rotherfield: The Story of Some Wealden Manors"*, (1928) p. 281.

³ Roland B Harris, *"Rotherfield Historical Character Assessment Report 2008 (Sussex Extensive Urban Survey Project)"*, Wealden District Council, Sussex, (June 2008) p. 13.

⁴ C.W. Chalklin, *"A Seventeenth-Century Market Town: Tonbridge"* *Archaeologia Cantiana* 76, 1961.

⁵ Will of William Streatfield, mercer of Rotherfield, made 10 May 1673, proved 14 Nov 1673. (ESRO: PBT 1/1/33/112)

⁶ Will of Richard Streatfield, mercer of Rotherfield, made 18 Jun 1685, proved 23 Oct 1688. (ESRO: PBT 1/1/38/151)

⁷ Catharine Pullein, *"Rotherfield: The Story of Some Wealden Manors"*, (1928) p. 281.

⁸ Danby Pickering, *The Statutes at Large, Vol VII*, (1763), Cambridge. p. 106 (1 Jacobi [1604], CAP. XXII).

⁹ ESRO: AMS 6860/10/1

¹⁰ Will of William Peerless of Rotherfield, made 9 Feb 1799, proved 7 Nov 1800. (ESRO: PBT/1/1/68/507)

¹¹ Will of Thomas Barber of Tonbridge, Kent, 28 Oct 1683, pr. 14 Dec 1683 (KHLC: DRa/PW4).

¹² For example, Kent W378 THO. WATERS OF LID [Lydd] OR APELDORE [Appledore]