

Seventeenth Century Merchant Tokens in Sussex

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During most of the Seventeenth century, there was a chronic shortage of small coinage in Britain. Unsatisfactory attempts by James I and Charles I to introduce copper farthings by licensing their manufacture to certain members of the aristocracy had failed, and these licences were withdrawn in 1644. The chaos of the Civil War, which had started in 1642, resulted in the deferral of the introduction of an official regal copper currency. As a result between 1648 and 1672 the merchants of England and Wales responded by issuing over 20,000 different base-metal farthing, halfpenny and penny tokens so they could provide change to customers. It wasn't until 1672 that the official farthings, halfpennies and pennies that we know today were finally introduced and the issuing of tokens was banned.

These merchant tokens are of interest to family historians because they name the issuer, the town or village where they lived as well as identifying the type of business they operated. Such tokens have been collected for over 150 years by numismatists¹ but it is only in our generation that the resources have become available to thoroughly research the token issuers and their families. This can now be done by online access to parish records, wills and archived documents discoverable through better online cataloguing of county archive records. It is likely that there are many people who are unaware that they have a token issuer in their family tree.

We are indebted to numismatists for their work in developing the knowledge about these tokens and for maintaining a market for serious collectors which has helped to preserve many of them. The standard reference work by Williamson was published between 1889 and 1891, itself a revision of William Boyne's similarly titled original of 1858.²

Williamson's numbering system is still used today to identify tokens. For example, Sussex BW73 (B[oyme] W[illiamson]73) identifies the token issued by Mary Akehurst at Lewes in 1667. I had a particular interest in the Mary Akehurst token having written an article about her for the *Sussex Family Historian* journal in 2019. So I asked a London coin dealer how common they were. He said it was regarded as a common token but that there would probably be only 50-100 still existing. It took the dealer two years to find one of collectable quality and I have been a collector of Sussex tokens ever since!

In Sussex, some 230 of these tokens have been identified. This includes die varieties so the number of different issuers is somewhat less than this. The relatively low number is a reflection of the population and economy in Sussex towns and villages compared to places like London where about three thousand were issued. About one third of the Sussex tokens are undated. Among the dated, the earliest to be issued was at East Grinstead in 1650; and the last in 1670 at Midhurst, Petworth and Steyning in West Sussex. The most common occupations of the



The farthing token of John Medhurst of Battle, showing the Grocers' Arms. The initials M for Medhurst and I(J) for both John and Joan, his wife.

Sussex token issuers were mercers (31 tokens), grocers (23), chandlers (16) and innkeepers (16) (Fig. 1).

John Medhurst of Battle, East Sussex

One example of these merchant tokens is that issued by John Medhurst, at Battle in East Sussex (Sussex BW21). His undated farthing token shows the Grocers' coat of arms, thus identifying his occupation (Figs. 2, 3.) The shield on the Grocers' coat of arms shows nine cloves, being among the spices they sell. Originally known as Pepperers, they sold a range of herbs and spices and other products such as tea, coffee, chocolate, sugar, tobacco, dried fruit and nuts, mostly imported and sold "en gros", hence the Grocers' name. They did not sell fresh produce.

Grocers serviced both the wealthy and the relatively poor, and customers needed to rely on the grocer's integrity for the purity and weight of goods purchased. It was also inevitable that grocers offered some credit to their customers, so a sense of trust between the grocer and his customers was

Merchant Tokens (Cont.)

important, even more so in a small town like Battle.³

John was the second son of his father, John Medhurst, a chandler who died in 1654. His father left his property along with his tools of trade to his eldest son, William. To his younger sons John and Richard he left £10 each and to his daughters varying sums of £35, £15 and £10.⁴ It is possible that John's father paid for an apprenticeship for him, a common way of compensating younger sons who would not inherit the family property.

Given that John's father was a chandler, it is almost certain that the grocery store also sold candles. Someone in the family is likely to have continued the trade. It was probably his brother William who inherited the tools and equipment.

John is described in the church records as haberdasher in 1652 and a mercer on his will in 1689, yet his token has the Grocers' Arms. This points to some potential overlap between the various trades, so maybe his goods also included some haberdashery and

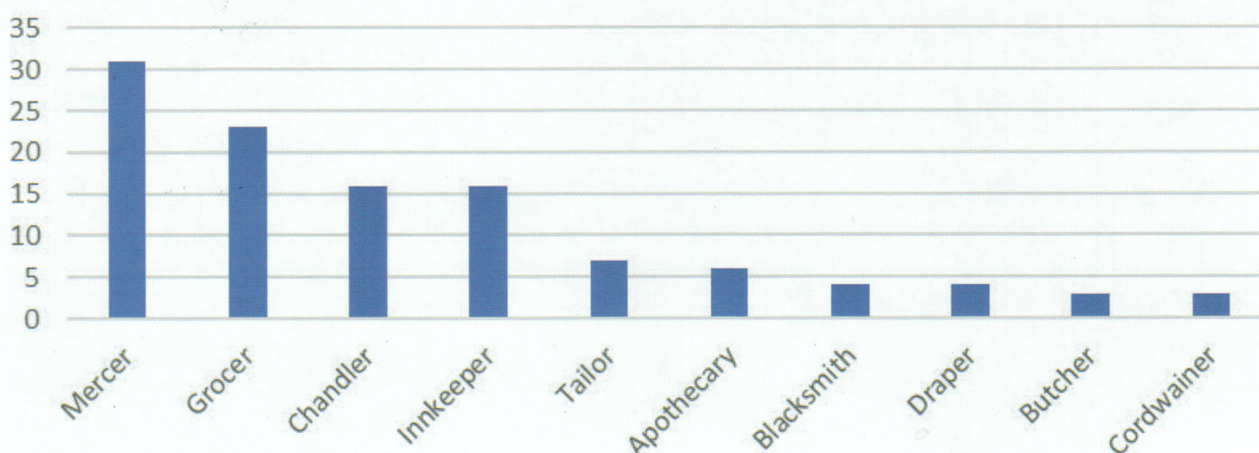


Above: Grocers Arms 1532 The coat of arms of the Worshipful Company of Grocers, established in 1345. In all the Livery Companies of the City of London, the Grocers rank second, behind the Mercers. (Wikipedia)

cloth, although it is unlikely he would have been a serious competitor to the wealthy Giles Watts, the mercer at Battle who also issued a token.⁵ We can probably surmise that John Medhurst's business was more akin to a general trader who dealt with a wider range of lower value goods.

John Medhurst's token has his wife Joan's initial "J", showing this was issued sometime after his second marriage circa 1660. The inclusion of both the husband and wife's initials on the token was an almost standard feature, although exceptions are known.

Sussex Tokens Issued by Occupation



The number of merchant tokens issued in Sussex by occupation

Merchant Tokens (Cont.)

John died in 1689 at Battle and was survived by his wife Joan and two married sons. His will leaves the sons £5 each and lesser amounts to grandchildren, while Joan received the remainder and the house for the duration of her natural life.⁶ Clearly, this was not a hugely profitable business. However he was an important and respected man in town with his name appearing as witness on many wills in that period.

Usage in the Community

Not all merchants or tradesmen at a particular location issued tokens. At Battle, for example, we see none for occupations such as baker, butcher, shoemaker, and blacksmith. It is therefore interesting to consider how these tokens were used in the community, whether tradeable at the issuing merchant only, or more widely accepted. There is evidence to show

that these tokens could be accepted at other businesses if it was known that the issuing merchant would honour their value. Berry talks of innkeepers having sorting trays for the various tokens on their counters and the tokens being redeemed by the appropriate merchant from time to time.⁷ Also, there are examples where the town itself issued tokens for general use to facilitate trade amongst the poorer people. This happened, for example, at Rye in 1668 and Midhurst in 1670. In a small town such as Battle, some degree of cooperation between the merchants is likely to have existed, and the tokens were probably used in surrounding villages. They would also have had significant intangible value to the issuers in generating loyalty and awareness in regards to their business.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Numismatics is the study of coins and other currency units. Numismatists study the physical properties, production technology, and historical context of specimens of currency.
- 2 Williamson, George C 1889-91, *Trade Tokens Issued in the Seventeenth Century*.
- 3 Suggested reading: Stobart, Jon 2012, *Sugar and Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650-1830*, Oxford University Press.
- 4 Will of John Medhurst, Chandler of Battle, made 8 Jan 1649/50, proved 7 Feb 1653/54. (TNA: PROB 11/239/305)
- 5 Giles Watts, undated farthing token showing the Mercers' coat of arms (Sussex BW23).
- 6 Will of John Medhurst, Mercer of Battle, made 13 Dec 1689, proved 7 Apr 1690. (TNA: PROB 11/399/129)
- 7 Berry, George 1988, *Seventeenth Century England: Traders and Their Tokens*, BA Seaby Ltd.

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