

# NOTES

## AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY LEAD TOKEN FOUND AT SKIRMETT

Shortage of small change for everyday transactions appears to have been a problem common to several centuries until the introduction of official copper coins. The brass trade tokens of the period 1640 - 1672 have long been known and studied, and for an earlier period it has been suggested that jettons, or counting-pieces, may have been unofficially used as money. Besides these there are less numerous groups of lead, and lead-tin alloy, discs which have been found both individually and during excavations, and whose date and purpose are much less certain, though they are usually referred to as tokens. Many bear simple geometric designs and have been loosely ascribed to the middle ages or the sixteenth century. Other lead discs have been found which have crude pictures of objects that could be trade signs, and some have very unskilled representations of human figures, whilst many others have monograms or sets of letters which suggest a seventeenth century date or later.

In March 1980 one such lead disc was brought to the Museum for identification and it has been thought worthwhile to illustrate it here as it is unusual in that it actually bears a date, as well as a pair of initials.

One side has what appear to be rudimentary human figures, but they are made difficult to distinguish by wear and damage to the disc. The other face carries the date, "1716", and letters presumed to be "DS". Both are back-to-front, suggesting that the maker had little experience in making moulds and casting metals, but this is quite a common feature of lead tokens. All the work is embossed and the alignment of the two halves of the mould appears to have been out of true as the two faces are slightly off-set from each other. The token, if such it be, measures 21 mm in diameter and weighs 6.7 g and was discovered under the floor of the Old Bakery in Skirmett.

The purpose of this and other lead tokens is debatable: various uses have been suggested, ranging from token coins to farm tokens, hop tokens, tavern tokens and counters, amongst others. Perhaps the figures portrayed on this disc might have presented a further clue if the scene could be more clearly distinguished. A large group of lead pieces was recovered from the Thames at Windsor and Wallingford<sup>1</sup> and of 124 tokens approximately one third had lettering, but there was no further indication of date for them. Two of the lead tokens found at Colonial Williamsburg in America<sup>2</sup> bore dates, 1707 and 1714, both accompanied by pairs of initials. Perhaps this present token represents a further example of an outbreak of token making by tradesmen after the legal prohibition of tokens in 1672 which was, of necessity, more home-made and unskilled in its products.

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1. Dean, Martin "Lead Tokens from the River Thames at Windsor and Wallingford" *Numismatic Chron.* V. 17 (7th series), 1977.
2. Hume, Ivor Noël, *A Guide to the Artifacts of Colonial America* (1970).



Fig. 1. Skirmett token (x 1½).