

A Pewter Oddity from the Thames Foreshore

A G Bliss

Introduction

In 2011, the author of this note was walking the north bank of the Thames Foreshore by the Millennium Bridge. Spotting a large, black disc lying partially submerged in the mud, it was quickly realised on recovering the object that this was some sort of medal (Fig. 1). A subsequent trip to the London Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) resulted in the object being recorded onto the Portable Antiquities Scheme database¹, though no parallel could be found and no attribution beyond a basic description was undertaken. Being an interesting item, the author subsequently offered the object to the Museum of London as a donation - though as it displayed no clear link with the city aside from being found there, the piece was (graciously) rejected.



Figure 1-Obverse and reverse views of the medal. Image by author.

Description

The medal is of an impressive size, being c. 37mm in diameter and almost 5mm thick. Despite residing in the anaerobic mud of the Thames for several centuries, its surfaces are now somewhat corroded with 'clumpy' whitish corrosion products typically encountered on pewter and lead-alloys with a high tin content. An orangey stain on one face perhaps indicates where a ferrous object lay in contact with it at some point prior to recovery.

¹ See record LON-BD4196

Though somewhat worn, all the surface designs on both faces of the medal are quite easily discernible. On one side, the arms of Great Britain are visible – though due to the corroded state of the medal they cannot be exactly made out. However, they appear to represent those used after 1707 (see below for the blazon)².

Quarterly, first and fourth Gules three Lions passant gardant in pale Or armed and langued Azure (for England), second quarter Or a Lion rampant within a double tressure flory-counter-flory Gules (for Scotland), third quarter Azure a Harp Or stringed Argent (for Ireland), the whole surrounded by the Garter; for a Crest, upon the Royal helm the Imperial Crown Proper, thereon a Lion statant gardant Or imperially crowned Proper; Mantling Or and Ermine; for Supporters, dexter a Lion rampant gardant Or crowned as the Crest, sinister a Unicorn Argent armed, crined and unguled Proper, gorged with a Coronet Or composed of Crosses patées and Fleurs-de-lis a Chain affixed thereto passing between the forelegs and reflexed over the back also Or. Motto "Dieu et mon Droit" in the compartment below the shield, with the Union Rose, Shamrock and Thistle engrafted on the same stem.

On the opposing face of the medal (which is probably the reverse) a ‘Tudor’ style rose and thistle can be seen sprouting, both set underneath a crown. Interestingly, graffiti is visible in the fields to each side of the latter element – an ‘A’ to the left, and an ‘R’ to the right (Fig. 2). Though it is possible this feature could pertain to idle doodling made by the object’s owner, it is equally plausible that these are intended to represent the royal cipher for Queen Anne (1702-1714), thus *Anna Regina*.



Figure 2- View of graffiti flanking the crown on the reverse of the medal. Photo by author.

Discussion

No parallel for this medal has hitherto been found in any of the standard works on the subject, including *Medallic Illustrations*³. It appears reasonable, therefore, to posit that this piece is either unique – or was never produced in sufficiently large numbers for a second example to have been encountered. Based on the latter, it is therefore the author’s hypothesis that this is likely to be some sort of trial piece. Before the full-scale production of medals, it was fairly commonplace in the 17th and 18th centuries for ‘test’ pieces to be struck in base metal as a cheap and easy way to assess the suitability of the design or quality of the dies. However, in most instances such test pieces were destroyed – and as such they are scarce

² Brooke-Little, J. P, 1978. *Boutell's Heraldry*. Eighth revised edition. London: F Warne Ltd, pp. 202-222.

³ Hawkins, E, 1885. *Medallic illustrations of the history of Great Britain and Ireland to the death of George II* (Vol. 2). London: Order of the Trustees of the British Museum.

finds. Considering all the above, it is interesting to theorise within this context that the crudely incised graffiti on the reverse of the medal could be interpreted as a suggestion for changing the design. Alternatively, the piece can also be seen as a ‘one off’ unofficial or home-made object that was never intended to be issued to a wider market.

But to what historical event does this potential trial piece pertain? Two pieces of evidence give a likely indication: first, the appearance of the English rose and Scottish thistle together as defined national emblems on the reverse, and second– the aforementioned ‘A R’ in the reverse fields. If these are taken as representing a royal cipher, we can assign this piece quite securely to the reign of Anne. Taken in conjunction with the appearance of the rose and thistle together, it seems likely that (whatever the circumstances of its production) this piece was intended to commemorate the 1707 Acts of Union that politically integrated Scotland and England. Interestingly, its appearance is completely different from the officially produced medals designed by John Croker, which were struck both in copper-alloy and silver (Fig. 3).



Figure 3-Silver medal commemorating the Acts of Union in 1707. Image courtesy Stack's, Bowers and Ponterio (2017).

The only other historical event in British history to which this medal could refer is the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne in 1603/1604, though the overall ‘style’ of this piece is very much early 18th century rather than early 17th.

Closing thoughts

The author would welcome information regarding any other medals comparable to this example, whether in private hands or museum collections. Acknowledgement and thanks must go to Nigel Mills, for his help in researching this object prior to its publication.

