

West Caicos Sisal Company Tokens

Gary Oddie

This note begins with a brief history and description of industries that have taken place on the Turks and Caicos Islands and in particular sisal growing. This is followed by a description of the West Caicos Sisal Company and a group of tokens issued to pay the workforce and redeemable in the Company Store.

The style of the dies is quite unusual, with just a simple incuse legend. Thus when two specimens appeared of British half-pennies overstruck with the reverse die of the shilling token and more recently a British penny overstruck with the reverse die of the two shilling token, they were really quite obvious.

The three new pieces all appeared in the USA and were sold without any reference to the original use of the dies. This and other features of the pieces leads to the suggestion that they were struck using the original reverse dies, but many decades after the original token issues, possibly even as late as 2010.

Introduction

The Turks and Caicos Islands are in the Northern West Indies, and part of the Caribbean Islands (Fig. 1.).⁽¹⁾ The total area of the 30 main islands is about 238 square miles. The islands are flat (nothing higher than 160 feet above sea level), with large beach areas and mangrove swamps. There is very little fresh water. Various peoples have arrived and lived on the islands, starting with the Taino people who crossed from Hispaniola and Cuba sometime after AD 500. The islands were resettled around 1200 and the Lucayan culture evolved. The soil is poor and the islands suffer from hurricanes making any large scale sustainable food crops difficult. The Spanish arrived in 1512. Disease, combined with capture and export of the locals as workers to other Spanish controlled islands had made the indigenous population extinct by 1513. From the mid-1600s, salt collectors from Bermuda visited the islands seasonally and later settled with their slaves. After a brief time as a French possession, the treaty of Paris made the Islands a British colony in 1783. Many loyalists fled from the newly independent USA with their slaves to live in the Caribbean, initially farming cotton, though salt became the major industry on Turks and Caicos. Though slavery was abolished in the colonies in 1833, the population remained on the islands and the population of the Caicos islands in 1901 was 3083 with just 3% white. West Caicos is about 7 miles N-S and 2 miles E-W with a large central lake and could support a population of about 100 people.

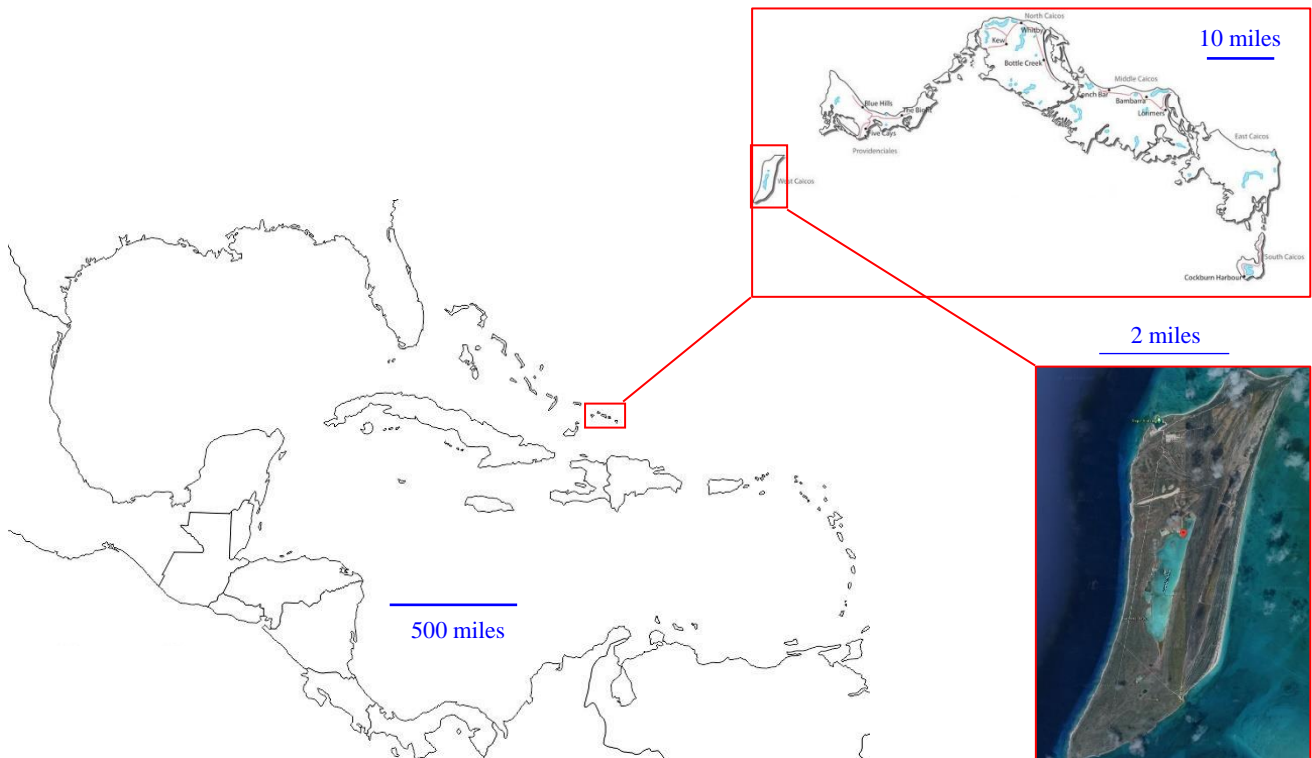


Fig. 1. Finding West Caicos (Thanks to Google®).

The West Caicos Sisal Company

Sisal plants had been introduced across the Caribbean and onto the Turks and Caicos Islands in the mid-19th century (Fig. 2.).⁽²⁾ They were very hardy plants and provided a more reliable income and required less effort than the other industries such as sponging, turtling, conching and basket making and could easily be scaled up. During 1890 large tracts of West Caicos was cleared for production of Sisal, this being mainly government land that had been leased out. Work began in August 1890 and by March 1891 500 acres on West Caicos had been cleared. In 1891 the two companies, West Caicos Fibre Company, Limited and East Caicos, Limited were registered. The first shipment of sisal was sent to New York in 1891 and for the first time in many decades the population were lifted above subsistence.



Fig 2. Harvesting Sisal (*Agave Sisalana*) leaves in nearby Haiti c.1960.

In 1906 the West Caicos sisal company had about 4000 acres under sisal cultivation but due to poor management only 800 acres were being productive. The total population on West Caicos was under 100, all based in Yankee Town. There were barracks for the labourers, stone buildings for the manager, engineer and overseers and two stations that housed the sisal extraction machinery. A Burrall steam traction engine, capable of pulling a load of 15 tons, was imported from Thetford, Suffolk in 1904 to move the raw leaves and extracted sisal (Fig. 3.). Tracks were constructed around the island and a causeway built across the large Lake Catherine in middle of the island. Once picked, the sisal leaves are stripped of their fleshy green part by a machine, using several rotating knives, all driven by a stationary oil engine.

A Crossley horizontal kerosene engine (Fig. 4.) was likely used to drive the belts which powered the Smith's patented 'fiber decorticating machine'.⁽³⁾ The fibre strands, up to six feet long, were dried and sent to Grand Turk from where they were exported by steamer to New York to be made into lightweight and strong twine, rope or matting.

The West Caicos Sisal Company had ceased trading in 1903, but it appears that the sisal industry continued for several years afterwards both in West Caicos and across the other islands.

A 1907 colonial report presented to Parliament in London, by F.H. Watkins, provides a very good history of the islands and description of other trades, but emphasised the possible expansion of the sisal industry, which continued during the next decade.⁽⁴⁾ However the market for rope was soon overtaken by cheaper and stronger manilla hemp grown in the Philippines and all sisal growing ceased on Turks and Caicos in 1919. After this, Yankee Town and the machinery was abandoned.

Sisal growing on West Caicos ceased sometime between 1909 and 1913 and the last company on West Caicos ceased trading in 1916. There was a small resurgence of the crop between 1944 and 1956 when 600 acres was planted across the islands to meet post war demand.



Fig. 3. The abandoned Burrall engine at Yankee Town, West Caicos.



Fig. 4. The original Crossley stationary engine on West Caicos.⁽⁵⁾

The sisal workers were paid by the task; cultivating, cutting, hauling, stripping, packing etc. For weeding $\frac{1}{4}$ acre a worker was paid 1/3d or 1/6d.⁽⁶⁾ A hoard of the tokens illustrated on the following page was found on the island and it is likely these were used to pay the workers for use in the company store in Yankee Town.⁽⁶⁾ The tokens were manufactured by S.H. Quint & Sons of Philadelphia.^(6,7)

The Token Issues of the West Caicos Sisal Company

Obv. **W.C.S.CO.**

Rev. **STORE TOKEN / TWO SHILLINGS**

Details. 32.5 mm, Cu-Ni, plain edge, Lyall 520. (DNW⁽⁸⁾)



Obv. **W.C.S.CO.**

Rev. **STORE TOKEN / ONE SHILLING**

Details. 24.5 mm, plain edge, Lyall 521. (GO)



Note: Lyall states Cu-Ni, however XRF gives Cu 61.0%, Zn 23.8%, Ni 14.6%, others < 0.3% which is more correctly called Nickel Silver. The Nickel makes it much whiter than normal brasses.

Obv. **W.C.S.CO.**

Rev. **STORE TOKEN / SIX PENCE**

Details. 32.5 mm, Br., plain edge, Lyall 522. (DNW)



Obv. **W.C.S.CO.**

Rev. **STORE TOKEN / THREE PENCE**

Details. 24.5 mm, Br., plain edge, Lyall 523. (DNW)



Obv. **W.C.S.CO.**

Rev. **STORE TOKEN / ONE PENNY**

Details. 20.0 mm, Br., plain edge, Lyall 524. (DNW)



Obv. **W.C.S.CO.**

Rev. **STORE / HALF PENNY**

Details. 16.5 mm, Br., plain edge, Lyall 525. (DNW)



Thus far, there is nothing new, however the three pieces presented on the following page have all appeared since 2010 and are made using the same W.C.S.Co. ONE SHILLING and TWO SHILLING reverse dies as the above tokens.

The New Pieces

- Obv. Incuse **STORE TOKEN / TWO SHILLINGS** with just a smudge where the date should be, possibly 1886.
 Rev. Victoria bun-head profile worn to a silhouette.

Details. 30.8 mm, Ae, plain edge. Counterstamped on the reverse of an extremely worn Victoria bun-head penny.

Notes. ebay item 274900140541 ended 18 Aug, 2021. Unsold, starting price \$3.99 plus \$13.25 p+p and \$7.29 import charges!



- Obv. Incuse **STORE TOKEN / ONE SHILLING**

- Rev. Standard half penny reverse, 1861.

Details. 26.02 mm, plain edge. (GO). Counterstamped on the obverse of an extremely worn and damaged Victoria bun-head half penny.



- Obv. Incuse **STORE TOKEN / ONE SHILLING**

- Rev. Standard George V halfpenny obverse, 1928-36.

Details. 25.47 mm, plain edge. (GO). Counterstamped on the smoothed reverse of a George V half penny.

Notes. The smaller bust means the host coin was issued 1928-36.



Close inspection of the letter forms for the original tokens and later strikings show that the dies have the same flaws, but have also become thinner and less well defined due to corrosion, as shown below.



2s token – Damaged T in TWO



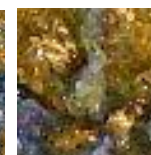
2s on Victoria penny – Damaged T in TWO



1s token – Damaged T and hooked R in STORE



1s on Victoria 1/2d – Damaged T and hooked R in STORE



1s on George V 1/2d – Damaged T and hooked R in STORE



Discussion and Conclusions

The official series of tokens with their incuse legends are extremely unusual in the British and British colonial series. That a hoard was found on West Caicos is conclusive in attributing the initials, though no contemporary documentary evidence has been found for the tokens.

The recent appearance of three pieces struck using the same reverse dies as the W.C.S.Co. tokens is very suspicious as the sisal industry has ceased activity on West Caicos by 1916 and the whole of Turks and Caicos by 1919. The host coins for the new pieces also raise alarms, especially the George V halfpenny showing an obverse that can only be from 1928-36 and the other two pieces are just too damaged to have been circulating before 1919. The host coins look like something that would be found in a dealer's junk box today.

That the new pieces were found without any connection or reference to the original use of the dies suggests they are all of very recent manufacture.

Notes and References

- (1) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turks_and_Caicos_Islands
- (2) <https://www.tcmuseum.org/culture-history/sisal-industry/>
- (3) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sisal>
- (4) F.H. Watkins. The Caicos Islands: with special reference to the Further Development of the Sisal Industry. 1907.
- (5) <https://www.visittci.com/west-caicos/yankee-town>
- (6) R. Lyall. The tokens, checks, metallic tickets, passes, and tallies of the British Caribbean & Bermuda. 1988.
- (7) Founded in 1849, and sometimes referred to as the Quint Mint, produced stamps, stencils, medals, badges and coins such as the Masonic Chapter pennies. For the past 30 years the company has focussed on flexographic printing plates and pharmaceutical blister packaging.
- (8) DNW, 14th February 2012, Lot 1302.

When working on my grandparents' farm in the 1970s and 80s, rolls or 'Red Star' sisal baler twine were a familiar sight during hay time. I recall the mechanism that automatically tied a tight knot in the strings was very impressive.

