

The Checks of George Prier, Borough Market

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Many wholesale and some retail market traders have used a token or check system to reduce the use of coins and notes in the busy working environment and to speed up business at the markets. The tokens were used as a receipt for the deposit paid for a basket or box containing fruit or vegetables etc. The deposit would only be returned on delivery of an intact box along with a token. By showing the correct number of tokens it was thus possible to exchange empty boxes for full boxes and only have to pay for the contents on account. The token system also meant that the trader could keep a tally of how many boxes were with his customers and eliminated the possibility of paying out deposits on un-named boxes.

Such token systems may date back to the 1840s in the fishing fleets and markets,⁽¹⁾ but they really came to prominence in the 1850-60s in the London and larger provincial fish, fruit and vegetable markets. They started to become redundant in the 1930-60s with the introduction of relatively cheap and disposable packaging. A small number of token systems continued to operate into the 1970s.

One of the main manufacturers of the market tallies were the Neal family, with succeeding generations operating from several addresses between 1866⁽²⁾ and the firm's closure in 2006.⁽³⁾ A surviving order book shows that a few market checks were still being ordered by traders in the late 1960s when typical orders ranged from the low 100s up to 1000 of each denomination with dies costing 28/6 each, the tokens 18/6 per 100 and extra holes charged at 1/- per 100.⁽⁴⁾ Though Neals were striking tokens for other customers with decimal denominations, the order book shows no orders for market checks in the 1970s, and as yet no decimal market checks are known.

Though Neumann included several market checks,⁽⁵⁾ the serious collection and study of market checks started in the 1960s and the earliest published notice I can find is from 1973.⁽⁶⁾ Publications peaked in the late 1980s with Neil Todd (and collaborators) producing a series of catalogues for the larger London markets, including for example Borough market in 1986.⁽⁷⁾ These catalogues all showed how valuable trade directories would become in researching the names, addresses and dates of operation of businesses. The subsequent decades have brought further catalogues of the tokens, and background research on the issuers, for several of the smaller London markets and a few provincial markets. There is an ongoing project to catalogue all market checks and an online listing that describes about 1500 tokens issued by the traders at Spitalfields market.⁽⁸⁾

My own collection of shilling tokens includes quite a few market checks and for many years, the piece shown below has sat in the trays for Boro' market.

Obv. **G. PRIER BORO' MKT.** around 1^s
Mid-line of 1 aligns with upright of **R**
Rev. **G. PRIER BORO' MKT.** around 1^s
Mid-line of 1 aligns between **P** and **R**
Details: Br, plain edge, 30.9×24.0 mm, 4.1 mm
hole going through from obv. to rev.
150%.



The directory entries for this piece given by Todd are as follows [1864] . . . 1869~1894 . . . [1899] where George Prier is described as a fruit and potato salesman at 2(3), Park Street, Borough Market.⁽⁶⁾

Online searching adds that in 1867 “the partnership between . . . William Robert Alchin and George Prier at No.2, Park Street, Borough Market, Southwark . . . was dissolved”.⁽⁹⁾ The 1871 census gives George Prier, aged 36, born at Blackwater, Hampshire, living with his two elder sisters and a domestic servant at No.2, Park Street. He is described as a fruit, pea, and potato salesman. Further digging on genealogical sites reveals that George died at Hartley Wintney, Hampshire, in 1902.

This is typical of the information that can be found for an issuer of market checks. Other materials that can sometimes be found include the following: company stationery such as billheads and receipts, named boxes/crates, photos that include the stall (often by accident as part of a larger view), and railway labels from their suppliers. For George Prier there was nothing else, until one day recently, on ebay . . .

. . . . BOX FULL OF C PRIER , BORO MKT" 1 SHILLING BOROUGH MARKET TOKENS 100S⁽¹⁰⁾

A few days later and the box arrived – 265×150×45 mm, made from a softwood that has at some point been varnished. Looking at the relative wear to the varnish on the lid and sides of the box, I would conclude that the last person to use this box was right handed! The wood looks to have been recycled, and it is simply made with no joints, just glued with nails through the bottom into the sides and the lid is fixed using brass hinges with steel screws. The left hand hinge lacks screws and the wood on the back is damaged. The box looks, feels, and smells contemporary – a phrase I have never used before!



On inspecting the contents, there were found to be 332 shilling tokens from G. Prier. They are all from the same dies and interestingly all have the hole punched through from the obverse to reverse as described above. Stacking several pieces on top of each other shows that the alignment of the hole relative to the token is identical. The manufacturer must have had a very repeatable process that punched the holes, as they appear to have been added after the token has been struck.



Though they are brass, most of the tokens in the box have an uneven staining and a coppery tinge, probably due to the acidic conditions of their storage – vegetable juice, dampness, dirt and sweat from handling. The tokens have that slightly slippery/sticky feeling typical of when copper and bronze has been stored badly. Hands certainly have to be washed after handling the tokens to remove the green tinge!

Every market trader using tokens would have needed some form of storage for them. The tokens could be kept in a small box or a small sack, especially if only one denomination was in use. It has been suggested that pierced tokens could be suspended on a string or wire. I am not convinced by this, as a string would be prone to breaking, not to mention the challenge of threading the smaller holes, and a wire I would expect to lead to wear in the holes, which I have not observed. If the trader had multiple denominations e.g. for different sized boxes, baskets or crates or for different produce, the box would have been compartmentalised to make finding the required tokens easier. Different shaped tokens, different metal and different holes (or cut outs) would all serve to distinguish different tokens.

I have never seen, what is likely to be, an original box for market checks described before. Storage boxes for other series of tokens are known, for example those used by farmers in the fens employing seasonal workers to pick the fruit and vegetables, typically dating from the 1960s and 70s.^(11,12) These boxes have multiple compartments to store multiple denominations.

The box of G. Prier tokens is a very rare survivor considering it was last used in the 1890s and the contents must comprise almost all of the original stock (maybe 350 pieces), with just a few odd pieces being lost during use or in the intervening 125 years and taking a different route into collections.

References and Acknowledgements

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