



Conder Tokens: Interview with Bill McKivor (May 2003)

Conder Tokens: It only takes a quick look at your extensive web site, The Copper Corner, to realize that your collecting interests are much broader than just Conders, but to start I'd like to focus on this subset of "emergency coinage" and ask how you first became involved with 18th Century English Provincial tokens?

Bill McKivor: Your question about "emergency coinage" is interesting, as I find that though I am not alone in my interest, there are few who seem to understand the scope of it. I collected US Colonial coins for quite a while, and still do to some extent. When I received papers on the colonial era, one question seemed to pop up all the time. That was "Why did the colonies have no small change"? --- and, "Why did Britain not supply us with what was needed"?



The answer seemed to me not to lie in this country, but in Britain --- thus I began a study of the economic situation in both countries during that period. It became obvious that Britain could not supply itself with adequate good coin, and thus could not supply her colony.

This fact led to the people taking over and making coin of their own. Being a non-governmental issue, it was the "token" that was produced, and circulated because of the need for it. If the government had supplied what was needed, the token --- or "emergency money" would not have been needed, and would not have been made.

The reason for emergency money issues is a very involved question, which I partially answer on my web site, but is far too long for this interview. Suffice it to say that the need arose over and over again --- with the government not responding to the people. Tokens were issued in the time of Elizabeth I, but not in any great number.

Britain saw a number of periods of token issues --- 1648-1673, 1787-1804, 1811-1820 --- all "emergency money" issues. The USA had a hodge-podge of tokens, and foreign coin to use prior to the Revolution, and, until the US mint caught up with demand, much of it was still in use until the 1850's. As well, the US had a couple of genuine money emergencies that brought out privately made tokens, the Hard Times era, 1834-1844, and the Civil War, 1861-1865.

It only goes to prove that the government --- no matter how structured --- must keep pace with what the people need --- or they will eventually take things into their own hands. It takes a study of the economics of the country --- what was happening at the time, and the results --- to see why this emergency money was needed. I find it a fascinating way to study the history of a country.

Of course, my studies got me interested in the token coinage of Britain, as well as that of the USA.

Conder Tokens: The article in CTCC Journal on the fantastic Boulton and Watt items you recently acquired seems to point to an area of special interest within Conders. Do you have any other areas of special interest? A particular issuer? A particular favorite token?

Bill McKivor: Gee, Eric --- I am not sure you can tell just what I collect by looking at my web site. I was very fortunate to be able to find and purchase a wonderful group of medals and tokens from the Boulton and Watt families. It was all material that had been put aside by the principals of the Soho Mint in Birmingham, between 1787 and 1840. To say that I was excited to find it, and even more excited to be able to buy it, would be telling the truth. However, until it surfaced, I had few Soho mint items in my personal collection. Today it is a field that I am going to pursue, and look forward to enjoying it for a long time.

Note: Shown on the right is a Matthew Boulton Death medal, manufactured by Matthew Robinson Boulton at the Soho Mint. This copy was Matthew Robinson Boulton's personal copy of his father's death medal, with gold gilt shells of issue, and original inscribed wrapper from 1819. More information and photographs on the Boulton and Watt medals and tokens are available at The Copper Corner.



Being a dealer brings problems --- a dealer who is a collector at heart can become his own best customer, and that is a good way to go out of business!!

I firmly believe that every collector --- myself included --- changes what they collect, or evolve from one thing to another --- just as the natural progression of things.

As you collect, you learn, and as you learn, you grow. With growth comes realization of the existence of other interesting things, and we move on.

Most of the time we do not abandon what we started to collect, but find our horizons expanding.

I moved from coins to Colonial items in about 1985. In attempting to put together a nice type set of Colonial coins, I discovered that there were six "mules" of the Talbot, Allum, and Lee cents

issued by a New York firm. These mules were British --- and were called "Conder" tokens. That led to buying the Dalton & Hamer reference, where I was fascinated by the tokens I saw, and the history they told. I began buying a few. One day, in the 1990's, I bought a bag of 250 of them, and offered some for sale. I have been selling British tokens ever since. It has been a great way to handle some rarities that I would otherwise have never been able to see --- I guess you could say that I own them vicariously --- and enjoy helping others find items that make them happy.

So --- what DO I collect? I have some Provincial (Conder) tokens. Most of them are simply designs that I like a lot, or wonderful copper with wonderful color, which has always excited me. My favorite token is most likely Middlesex 535, the ice skater with the wooden skates at Hyde Park in 1795. I use it on my business cards.

I have a small collection of "rampant Lion" tokens --- the symbol of Scotland. I also have a nice collection of tokens dealing with the madness of King George III. I can tell the whole story using tokens, and have done so at club meetings. I am now, of course, collecting Soho Mint medals --- you might say I got a wonderful start with them. In US Colonial coins, what I collect is Irish as well. I have most of the die varieties of the Voce Populi token coinage of 1760.

I also have the tokens that formed the original tie-in for me between colonials and Provincial tokens --- the Talbot, Allum, and Lee mules. There are six of them, but it took me ten years to complete the set. Other than the above, I have very few British tokens.

Satirical medals and satirical paper money are fun collecting items, Items from ghost towns in Nevada, Bryan money, and --- well, if it has a neat story, I might just collect it. Most folks would call my collection a "accumulation" --- but I enjoy it.

Tokens are made by the people, and tell their stories, so it is easy to see why I would like them. Becoming a dealer simply allowed me to do something I enjoy anyway.

To me it is not a job, and I don't do it to make a living. It is simply a hobby gone mad.

Conder Tokens: What you have said as you've described your "hobby gone mad" helps very much to see where Conders fit in the "big picture" of issuing money as well as pointing out the many approaches one can take in collecting. I'm wondering if we will be seeing a token series on the "madness of Bill McKivor" anytime soon? And, since you mentioned clubs, I'm wondering if you could provide some history on the CTCC?

Bill McKivor: Ha Ha. A token series on my madness would be voted on by my wife, I am sure --- but other than that, can see none in my future. I shall leave issuing tokens for others!!

The CTCC was the brainchild of the late Wayne Anderson. Along with another enthusiast, Joel Spingarn, they worked up a plan for a club which was formally launched in May of 1996.

CTCC stands for "Conder Token Collector's Club" --- a term that is used in the United States, but not much in Britain, where the tokens are called "Provincial Tokens of the 18th Century".

Wayne was quite taken with the pieces --- the quality, the themes, the history --- so he began

asking around. At the time, I was one of the few dealers in Conder tokens in the US, and was one of the people he contacted. I helped out where I could, as did many others, and the club became a reality. Many of us saw the club as a chance to discuss tokens, share information, and make friends of like interest, and it has worked out that way. The CTCC Journal has been a great success, and features lots of information that is hard to find without owning a library just for tokens, as well as some wonderful articles featuring original research by the members. The advertising gives the collector a choice of places to go for tokens, information, or books --- and has been a great help to all.

Wayne was taken from us much too soon --- a wonderful fellow, who would share anything he had, and willingly. The club will most likely, in my view, evolve to include other token issues of the British Isles --- the 17th Century tokens, and 19th Century pieces --- as I find my customers collect them, as well, and it is a shame to leave them out. When one looks at the history of token issues in Britain, they are all tied together in some common ways --- as the reason for the issues were similar.

The CTCC was an idea that came about at the right time. I think it is interesting to see the number of enthusiastic collectors of the tokens in the USA.

My friends in Britain are rather amazed, as the USA seems to have as many enthusiasts for the tokens as exists in the country that produced them!!! The UK now has its share of members in the club, and with the means of communication we have now, I think the future of the club is secure.

Conder Tokens: How has collecting changed over the last ten years --- especially as more people have gone online --- but for any other reasons also?

Bill McKivor: Eric, collecting has changed a lot over the years. As late as the 1950's and 1960's most people collected the coins and tokens of their country almost exclusively --- and collections were often taken from pocket change. This has slowly evolved --- there are still challenges to be had in picking coins from pocket change, but other things interfered to slow this trend.

Years ago, stamps and coins were among the very few options open to a young collector--- today there are video games, sports cards, and a myriad of other things a young person can get interested in. This has led to the coin/token collecting population being an older group. They also, therefore, have a certain amount of discretionary income, and look for better material.

What they want is not found in pocket change, and the demand for higher grade pieces has fueled a market for them. The same can be said of tokens, though the number of token collectors who collect the middle grade material remains strong. For a token collector, both history and quality seem to be the driving influence.

The marketplace that these collectors use is vastly different, too. One major change has been the advent of the "slab" market. Supposedly, one can ignore how to grade, and simply buy a slab with the grade already on it. Coin World Magazine just concluded a study. They sent a group of coins in for slabbing, broke them out and re-submitted them to another company, and repeated this a number of times. Some of the coins sent in were judged within one grade by all --- but a

couple of them ranged from EF to MS64!!! There was a difference of nearly 100% in the value between the high end and the low end. Thus, I am not an advocate of the slab market. I like to see all three sides of a token --- including the EDGE. Grading, even among so-called professionals --- is an opinion. My opinion is plain --- each collector must learn to grade for him/her self.

The communication explosion has caused large numbers of people to become aware of collecting areas they never knew existed. In the case of the "Conder" tokens, it has raised awareness and caused excitement across the USA, as it already had in Britain.

The collector of today is far more informed than he/she was yesterday. More books have been written, on every numismatic subject imaginable, and the computer has changed collecting just like it has changed everything else.

The internet has allowed communication to an extent we never had before --- people can share information, check prices, go to chat rooms and discuss the tokens or coins, and even critique buyers and sellers!!!

Of course, one cannot think of the computer without thinking of E-Bay, or like on-line auctions. These are fun to watch --- with nice material selling for nothing, junk selling for many dollars more than value, informed and uninformed sellers and buyers. An informed seller selling to an informed buyer makes the transaction sensible for both --- they both understand the value of the piece up for sale. The uninformed buyer is the one I most feel sorry for --- I have seen some unbelievable prices paid for common material.

Thus much has changed, but the basics have remained the same. The collecting population is older, wants nicer material, and is willing to pay for it. Whatever one wants to collect, there is more information out there, one can get it faster, and find out the availability of items. However, the collector still must know what they are doing, and not just blindly trust to someone else's opinions.

Conder Tokens: Any special advice you feel comfortable sharing with other collectors ... especially those that might be new to either coins or Conder tokens?

Bill McKivor: Well --- this is one of my favorite areas. I give talks on the subject, and gave one just recently in the Pacific Northwest Numismatic Association's Numismatic theatre.

My talk is 45 minutes, and even then I just touch the high points, so I will cut it very short this time.

New collector or old, common sense should be used when buying and selling coins or tokens.

First --- buy the book before you buy the coin (or token). Real old advice, but important. Even if you wind up not using the book, it has told you a lot about what you DON'T want to collect, thus saving you lots of time, and possibly money. Something in your reading will spark an interest, and then you should concentrate on that. You will be surprised --- after a while YOU will be considered an "expert" in your field --- and you will know more about it than most dealers ever

will.

Second --- learn all you can about the area of interest you have decided to concentrate on. Go into buying and selling decisions as informed as you can. Learn as much as you can about pricing --- get lists from dealers, check web sites.

Third ---learn to grade. When I buy, I look at the token, then at the holder to see if I agree with the seller. If you wind up in the "slab" market, the method should be the same. Buy the coin/token --- NOT THE HOLDER. Ken Bressett, the editor of the Red Book guide for US coins, has said that "Grading is easy --- all you need is a good light, a good magnifying glass, and about 20 years experience". Well --- this is true --- try to see lots of tokens --- but outside that, become comfortable in the area you have chosen to collect. It won't take too long to learn to grade if you concentrate on a particular area until you become proficient.

Fourth --- Buy only the best you can understand. If you can't decide if the coin or token is VF or EF --- you have NO business accepting someone else's decision that it is an EF, with the corresponding price. That comes back to point three --- you MUST learn to grade for yourself.

Fifth --- find a dealer that you can trust, one that will work with you to help you reach your goals. One that will willingly share information, and do it in a friendly fashion. A dealer, or dealers, who you can go to for good merchandise and information will go a long way toward you enjoyment of the hobby.

So --- learn all you can --- learn to grade ---buy only the best you can understand --- and find a compatible dealer.

Last --- if buying by mail --- do not be afraid to return things.

I am a mail order dealer --- and understand that everyone does not see things the same way. No good dealer should be upset in the slightest if a customer returns a token. So if you don't like what you see--- it just doesn't fit --- return it. The worst piece in my collection is one I should have returned --- but did not.

One other thought --- we --- you and me --- do not own these pieces. We are just passing through. While you have them, take good care of them, so the next owner will be as proud as you are to own the tokens. We owe that to history.

Those are the basics.

Conder Tokens: What's the future of your collecting? Any new projects or directions?

Bill McKivor: The future of my collection is as it has always been --- fluid. I really have no plans. Obviously, with my newly acquired grouping of Boulton and Watt family medals, I have started to look there for the immediate future. However, it just goes to show that one never knows what lies at the next bend in the road. In October of 2002 I had no idea that this material existed, or would be for sale. Today, in May 2003, I find myself with a lovely collection of rare medals. Tomorrow, who knows what shall interest me. I find out a lot by just reading--- my

token and medal library is quite large, and I am always buying more books --- and often something I read about becomes a collection eventually. I like to think that I collect history --- and the tokens and medals simply are my tangible connection to the past.