



Conder Tokens: Interview with David Stuart (March 2003)

Conder Tokens: Thanks for taking the time for this interview David. You are one of the very active and very visible people in the online "conder world". You have a great web site - Alnwick British & Colonial Coins & Tokens - as well as a continual series of auctions on EBay. I've bought more than a few tokens from you myself. How did you get started with Conder tokens?

David Stuart: I collected coins from a young age, having been given some older ones by my grandmother. The fascination came from their age and the fact that they looked nothing like the coins I was used to seeing in circulation. Whilst on holiday at my uncle's, his friend, a bank manager, gave me a bag of "scrap" copper coins including Conders which I had never seen before and, for the same reason as above, they really caught my attention.

Conder Tokens: Do you remember your first token and if so which was it?

David Stuart: Yes, it was in the previously mentioned bank bag. It was an Edinburgh Hutchison halfpenny which fired me up. I was born and brought up in Edinburgh and didn't realise that coins were actually issued in my home town. My mother lived for a while in Hutchison Terrace, near where their old warehouse must have been situated. This came as a revelation to me, and since they are far more interesting, (detailed, related to real people, places, trades and businesses), than the boring regal coinage of the time, and economically priced, I was hooked!

Conder Tokens: Do you have a special area of interest within Conders, Edinburgh perhaps?

David Stuart: Yes, spot on! I collect Edinburgh and Lothian halfpennies, and Edinburgh farthings. I know the streets where the businesses were located and will eventually get around to seeing if any of the buildings are still standing. My collection of Hutchisons now extends to 27! I must be mad, but I know someone somewhere must be collecting Wilkinsons, so I've a long way to go! I tried to buy some of the rare Edinburgh Conders at the DNW Brodie auction but was blown out the water by the big boys, no names mentioned!

Conder Tokens: A particular favorite token?

David Stuart: I like the Edinburgh Campbell's Snuff shop Conders with the Turk's head, but my favourite is the one with the Highlander on it, D&H 18.

On a more general note, I find the Spence series fascinating. He used his tokens to take political pot shots at government and even included token collectors as his victims! The Pidcock series also interests me as the depiction of these animals (very rare at the time) was a real challenge to the engraver, usually James, and the factual stories behind the exhibits makes interesting reading, the two-headed cow, the lioness suckling the puppy, the rhinoceros, etc.

Conder Tokens: I like the Pidcock items also. I think its an easy series to develop an interest in



Lothian 18

Image by Gary Sriro

if you don't have the local background as you do with Edinburgh. You mention the tokens you didn't get from the recent DNW auction. Are there any super finds that you can't resist telling about? Any other missed opportunities?

David Stuart: Not really where Conders are concerned. If a collector asks me to identify a token I give the full story, good news or bad. Anything I've bought from dealers has usually been correctly attributed and priced accordingly. Occasionally I come across something special in a bulk auction lot I have purchased unseen, such as an EF End of Pain (man on gibbet) I acquired a couple of years ago. It was worth nearly what I paid for the whole lot, but I have also fallen foul purchasing blind and therefore do not recommend it. I did get excited about finding a Hutchison with a Clacke edge (D&H Lothian 48) in one of the lots. It was in low grade but to this date is the only one I've come across although D&H only rate it as "Scarce". Alas, I have had too many missed opportunities to list and they all come from one failing which I'm slowly trying to overcome. When I see a token or coin I like early during a coin fair, a gremlin appears on my shoulder and advises me to go round the other tables first, and come back for it. Too often I've listened and its been sold by the time I've returned. Now, if I see something I like, I buy it there and then, but sometimes.....

Conder Tokens: How active do you think the interest in Conders is now as compared to when you started collecting?

David Stuart: It hardly bears comparison. When I started, Conders were usually in rummage trays and not even on display. The change in fortune of the series is phenomenal. I think its because the series offers so many different subjects to collect, and its affordability.

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

David Stuart: I think a combination of factors have influenced collecting lately. As our general health has improved, so those people enjoying retirement have increased and found or reverted to hobbies, such as ours, to interest them during the new-found leisure time they have available.

Also, history and archaleology television programmes are the new vogue in the UK, and this is drawing younger people to the hobby. After all, a token or coin is one of the cheapest objects of a bygone age that can be acquired relatively easily.

And yes, the mechanism that's brought it all together is the Internet. Ten years ago Conders were on lists of very few dealers, you had to know who, where, when etc. Now you can go online and find the whole range very easily. I have got to say that online auctions such as eBay etc., have been the springboard for making the hobby available to a wider audience.

Conder Tokens: I have to ask. How do you feel about slabbed tokens?

David Stuart: I'm glad to say that slabbing has not taken off in the UK. I suppose it serves a purpose for high value modern coins but to me, part of the pleasure of a token or coin is the "touchy feely" pleasure of handling something from the past. If I want to see coins behind glass or in capsules I can go to a museum. Obviously I do not recommend over-handling, and always hold the edges of higher grade and lustrous specimens. As for slabbed tokens, I can't think of anything more ludicrous. With Conders, edge inscriptions are just as important as obverse and reverse designs and must be clearly visible. Who would buy a coin if they could only see the obverse and had to take someone's word for what the reverse design was? I rest my case!

Conder Tokens: I like your thoughts on slabs. Do you have any other suggestions, observation or advice for reader who might be new to either coins or Conder tokens?

David Stuart: Yes, a few.

When starting out collecting, try to choose a theme or subject early on. As a youngster, I bought what the dealers had, rather what I wanted, leaving me later with a totally disjointed collection. As I said earlier, Conders offer a bewildering range of subject material, trades such as weaving, booksellers, mining, etc., themes such as animals, ships, canals, etc., and locations, either county, city or town. However, I cannot disagree with those collectors who buy what pleases them, but would caution them to exercise some control if their budget is limited.

What you pay for them is more problematical. Fixed price lists from genuine dealers will reflect a mixture of the dealer's cost, plus his mark-up and the Conder's relative rarity. So, having said this, you may pay slightly more but are unlikely to buy a common Conder for an inflated price, which leads nicely to on-line auctions.

Beginners can get carried along with the excitement of bidding and end up with ordinary material at inflated prices when their budget could have been used more rewardingly by exercising some caution. Collectors who do not have access to a copy of Dalton & Hamer should watch the auctions for a few weeks before joining the fray. This will help them recognise the more common types and avoid overpaying later. The common ones are common, so if you don't win one, another will be along shortly.

Rarity is another problem with on-line auctions. Do not believe claims of rarity unless they are qualified with reference to the source, i.e., Dalton & Hamer or Bell. I frequently see claims of excessive rarity on extremely common items which are totally unjustified, and those starting at high prices on the strength of this are close to fraudulent. I feel very sorry for collectors who

purchase material from these sellers as it will never be worth what they paid for it and far more could have been acquired for the same outlay.

Conder Tokens: What's in the future of your collecting and dealing?

David Stuart: Now that I am dealing full-time, that takes priority over collecting.....unless something nice comes along and I've got some spare cash! My attitude at present is that everything in my collection will be considered for sale if things get tight, but hopefully that will not be the case. I'm currently working on a big web site update which should be ready in a few weeks. I could be a lot quicker but prefer to have full descriptions and scans available as I like my customers to know exactly what's on offer. My attitude is the same with my ebay offerings which take longer than most to prepare.

Conder Tokens: Any new projects or directions?

David Stuart: I've a few ideas I'd like to follow up but making the time for them is the problem as I currently work 50-60 hours per week. I feel I may be trying to offer too wide a range of material on the web site and some consolidation might help ease the problem. My main thrust will continue to be directed towards Conders, Scottish coins and Communion Tokens.

Conder Tokens: Harry Potter coins, maybe?

David Stuart: I think Pobjoy Mint beat me to it!

Conder Tokens: Did you have a part in the movie?

David Stuart: I asked for an audition but they said they already had enough monsters!

Conder Tokens: This has been great. I've learned a lot and I think others who read this will also. Thanks again for taking the time to answer these questions.

David Stuart: It's been a pleasure Eric.