THE "DUNKIRK" TOKENS

By ARTHUR C. GRIFFIN

It is an unfortunate fact that of the large number of books published on the eighteenth-century token coinage few are able to give any notes on the historical background of the various issues. Excellent as these publications are in their ways they are little more than descriptive catalogue-lists and information about the token issuers, their lives and their businesses is extremely scanty.

The collection and collation on a national scale of detailed information on tokens would undoubtedly be a colossal undertaking, but one which might be broken down and tackled county by county by students of tokens or by numismatic societies operating within their particular territories. The task should be commenced while old records are still available and while old buildings still exist; otherwise many of the tokens which are at present something of a mystery will no doubt remain so.

The halfpenny tokens listed under Dunkirk in the Somerset section of Dalton and Hamer’s catalogue have long been in this latter category and it is in an attempt to throw some light on these issues that I have prepared these notes.

There are three main types of the Dunkirk halfpenny, all similar in design. The obverse, which is common to all, depicts a fleece suspended with an ornate monogram or cypher below. The legend SUCCESS TO THE STAPLE OF ENGLAND surrounds the central design. The reverse of the first type portrays a large five-storied building and bears the legend DUNKIRK FACTORY 1795. Charles Pye in his work on tokens says that only a few impressions were struck. Certainly this type is scarce and presumably was the first issue.

The reverse of the second type differs in that the mis-spelling on the first issue is corrected to read DUNKIRK and SOMT. (for Somerset) is added below. According to Pye some 5 cwt. of this issue were struck and these pieces are frequently met with. There is yet a third type, similar to the foregoing but lacking the small ornamental flourishes about the cypher on the obverse. Pye appears to have been unaware
of this third issue and it may be that his figure of the amount struck is an inclusive one for both the second and third types.

Unlike the majority of contemporary issues the Dunkirk pieces have no edge readings. The edge of the first type is grained obliquely to the left on the normal coin but varieties exist with upright graining, part graining to left and part to right, with graining to the left over an original reading PAYABLE IN DUBLIN OR LONDON and with plain edge on a large flan.

The second type has the edge grained to the right with one variety—plain edge struck without a collar.

The third type also exists with two edges—grained to the right and with plain edge. There are therefore nine collectable specimens in all.

These edge varieties are without exception extremely rare and it is possible that they were concocted for sale to token collectors of the day. On the other hand they may be genuine errors on the part of the manufacturers. It was customary to inscribe the edges of blanks before striking and carelessness by workmen could easily cause incorrect or mixed edges. Moreover, some manufacturers are known to have used up blanks left over from previous requisitions, thereby saving time and the expense of remelting.

The whole issue is, however, well-struck and of good weight and undoubtedly made for genuine commercial purposes.

The tokens, with their fleece design and reference to “the Staple of England”, are obviously connected with the clothing industry. The building appearing on the reverse is a typical woollen mill of the period.

An original circulation not far removed from Bath is indicated by the fact that worn specimens of the commoner varieties are occasionally found in the possession of local residents.

Examination of some early maps of Somerset shows the former existence of an area or old site marked as Dunkirk or Dunkirke situated within the parish of Freshford. At this picturesque village five miles from Bath may be found abundant evidence of a clothing industry which has now disappeared. Some weavers’ cottages are still to be seen and two old cloth mills still exist, one being now a rubber factory.

The second mill, standing below Friary Woods away from the
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village proper, is still known locally as Dunkirk Mill. This is a substantial structure and although now disused it is not as yet completely derelict. The outer fabric is almost entirely covered by creeper but appears to be quite sound. Large areas of the roof remain intact. Most of the flooring has collapsed to the ground but the main staircase can be ascended with comparative safety. Behind the mill is the mill pond and two smaller reservoirs used for breeding trout.

There can be no doubt that this is the building depicted on the tokens and I suggest that a strong case exists for the relisting of the "Dunkirk" pieces under Freshford, Somerset.

The identity of the token issuers is concealed in the monogram on the obverse of the tokens. The catalogue reading of this monogram as M & I is surely suspect. The second of the letters can only be an old-fashioned J.

The student of the history of Freshford will, ere long, come across the names of Methuen and Joyce in connexion with the local woollen industry and in his book on Freshford the Rev. P. J. Goodrich says: "Wealthy were the clothiers who resided at Freshford. The names of Methuen and Joyce are noted in our history. Each of them, of course, was intimately associated with the production of cloth."

Goodrich does not tell us which member of the noted Methuen family was connected with the Freshford cloth trade at the time of the issue of the tokens, but most probably this was Paul Methuen, M.P., a Wiltshire landowner, who became a baron in 1838. It was an ancestor of his, another Paul Methuen, who founded the industry at Freshford and imported Flemish weavers for the purpose. Many of the latter no doubt originated from the then Flemish town of Dunkirk and presumably applied the appellation to their new surroundings in memory of their former home. When Paul Methuen died in 1667 he was described by a contemporary as "the greatest cloathier [sic] of his time".

The influx of the Flemish weavers is clearly traced in the parish registers where many foreign-sounding names can be read to this day.

Of Joyce we can be more specific. In 1803 a Parliamentary Committee was set up to inquire into the wool clothiers' petition made that year and it is recorded that Mr. John Joyce of Freshford gave evidence before the Committee as to the exact duties of inspectors of cloth. In the Parish Church at Freshford is a memorial tablet inscribed: "John Joyce, clothier, of this place, who died 25 April 1804, aged 56 years."

Near the church is the village store which until recently had been in the hands of one local family for many generations. Here it was that the mill workers exchanged their tokens for goods and some appreciable business must have been transacted here as Freshford in 1795 contained 150 dwellings and had a population of around 900.

According to Pye, the "Dunkirk" tokens were struck by W. Lutwyche of Temple Row, Birmingham, from dies by Arnold, and Pye must surely be correct in his statement as the Dunkirk obverse die can be found mulled with another of Lutwyche's productions, the
Bishop Blaize reverse of the Leeds token. The majority of the contemporary Bath token-issuers obtained supplies from Lutwyche and no doubt the nearby Freshford issuers did likewise. It is interesting to note that a Mr. W. Lutwyche resided at 12 Marlborough Buildings, Bath, towards the end of the eighteenth century. This may have been the token manufacturer himself or at least some connexion with the firm and, if so, it would have been easy to place orders for tokens through this local contact.

The Dunkirk tokens are well up to Lutwyche’s usual high standard of striking and Arnold’s skill is apparent from the fine cross-hatching of the windows on the token reverse, each individual window pane being clearly shown.

As in other localities, the woollen industry at Freshford has died out, stifled by foreign competition and the introduction of the cotton trade, but the old Dunkirk Factory and its tokens still exist as reminders of those bygone days.