THE CASTLE COMER COLLiERY TOKEN

S. A. H. WHETMORE

The Spanish dollar or piece of eight reales countermarked for use in trading by the Castle Comer Colliery, County Kilkenny, is the only silver crown-sized piece issued in Ireland by a private commercial undertaking. The coin was mentioned by Davis\(^1\) and by Boyne,\(^2\) both of whom gave not quite accurate quotations from a paper by Aquilla Smith, M.D., M.R.I.A., published in 1855, which included a description of the coin and the reason for the issue.

Dr. Smith’s statement reads\(^3\)

\[\text{‘18 Obv payable at Castle Comer Colliery 5 s. d.}\
\]

In an oval countermark three fourths of an inch in length, stamped on the obverse of a Spanish dollar of Charles III date 1798 weight 17 dwts 7 grains.\(^4\)

‘I am indebted to Mr. J. G. Robertson of Kilkenny for the following account of this countermarked dollar—“A friend of mine, who has often seen the coin, says that about forty years ago Anne, Countess of Ormonde, not wishing to lose by the depreciated value of Spanish dollars of which she had at that time a large number, caused all she had to be stamped with the legend ‘Castle Comer Colliery, 5 shillings and five pence’. Coals to that amount being given for them at the pits, Kilkenny traders used to take them in exchange for their commodities knowing that they could give them afterwards to colliers in payment for coals”’.\(^5\)

In this paper Mr. Robertson’s spelling ‘Ormonde’ is used throughout, such spelling having been almost invariably used since the elevation of the twelfth Earl of Ormonde to Marquess in 1642.\(^5\)

The countermark, while not common, is known on Spanish dollars of various dates in addition to 1798 found on Dr. Smith’s coin. The specimen once in the writer’s collection and illustrated on Pl. V. 19, is dated 1789. Captain Paget, whose collection was sold in 1944, had four specimens dated respectively 1774, 1791, 1801, and 1808. Bliss (1916) and Thelluson (1931) each had a coin dated 1801 which may have been the same coin and also the coin in the Paget collection. Thelluson had a second specimen dated 1804 which came from the Murdoch collection which may have been the coin which appeared in the Lingford sale (1950). It should also be noted that Cokayne (1946) had a dollar dated 1799 and Napier (1956) another dated 1796.

Mr. Robertson’s statements suggest that the token was issued about 1815, a year within the period in which similar tokens were issued in Great Britain. Mr. Robertson was born in Scotland in 1816 and trained as an architect. He worked in Kilkenny with

\(^{1}\) W. J. Davis, *Nineteenth Century Token Coinage*, 1904.
\(^{2}\) W. Boyne, *Silver Tokens of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1866.
\(^{3}\) Aquilla Smith, ‘Catalogue of Silver Tokens issued in Ireland’, *Proceedings and Transactions of the Kilkenny and South-eastern Archaeological Society*, 4 July 1855.
\(^{4}\) This is the specimen now in the National Museum of Ireland (cf. R. A. S. Macalister ‘A Catalogue of the Irish Traders’ Tokens in the Collection of the Royal Irish Academy’ in *PRIA* xl, c. 2 (Dublin, 1931), p. 166, no. 936).
\(^{5}\) Complete Peerage.
a relative, William Robertson, and was the architect to the dioceses of Ossory and Leighlin until 1869. He founded a museum in Kilkenny of which he was the Curator and he contributed several papers to the Archaeological Society on numismatic subjects. He moved to Dublin in 1888 and died there in 1900.¹

The issuer of the token can easily be identified. In 1815 the Earl of Ormonde was Walter Butler, the eighteenth of his line, who succeeded to the title in December 1795 and married in March 1805, Anna Maria Catherine Price-Clarke, an English lady, who died in December 1817; her husband surviving her until August 1820. She does not fit the title of Dowager Countess used by Mr. Robertson and was not, therefore, the Anne of the token. The seventeenth Earl of Ormonde was John Butler who married, in February 1769, Susan Frances Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of Earl Wandesford, who survived her husband, her son, and her daughter-in-law, dying in Dublin in April 1830.² She was the lady of the token and there is no difficulty about her name for there is authority for stating that she was known as Anne.³

Opinions of the character of the Dowager Countess differ. It has been stated that ‘... as lady of the castle [she] was careful to keep up at least her due importance. It is not impossible for women or men either to mistake pomposity for dignity. True pride is accompanied by an amiable condescension: cold unbending ceremony is the result of false pride and not of dignity. I thought (perhaps erroneously) that her ladyship made this mistake.’⁴

A few years before 1814 a new road was constructed from the Castle Comer collieries to Carlow, the cost of which was raised by public subscription to which Lady Ormonde contributed £1,000. A contemporary writer remarked

‘I am happy in having this opportunity of expressing my admiration of the liberal manner in which this lady at all times supports every project which may tend to the benefit of the country. To make her neighbours and tenants comfortable and happy and to improve the surrounding country by every means in her power, appear the noble and patriotic boundary of Lady Ormonde’s wishes and exertions.’⁵

Another writer records

‘1798 The town [Castlecomer] was attacked and partially burned by the Croppies, who, after a sharp skirmish known as the “Battle of Comer”, were put to flight by the regular army.

‘Mason in his Statistical Survey published in 1802 writes “Castlecomer has 211 houses: many of them good and slated: part of this town was burnt during the late rebellion and has been rebuilt in a handsome manner; the principal part of the town is one very broad street well built. A barrack for infantry has been begun above the town, estimated at about £4,000 and a new market house is about to be erected by Lady Ormonde.”’⁶

1 Abstracted from an obituary notice in the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland Journal, ser. 5, vol. x, 1900.
2 Complete Peerage.
3 The Complete Peerage x, p. 164 footnote, states ‘Dublin Mercury, 14–16 February 1769; Burke’s Peerage. M’Call, Family of Wandesford, p. 103, says that she was known as Anne, her full name being Frances Susannah Anne, and he dates the marriage 13 Feb.’
4 Sir Jonah Barrington, K.C., Personal Sketches of His Own Times, 1827, vol. i.
5 Richard Griffith, Geological and Mining Report on the Leinster Coal District, Dublin, 1814.
One further reference to expenditure in Castlecomer

'Castlecomer... Adjoining is the seat of the Countess Dowager of Ormonde which, with a great part of the town, was destroyed in the disturbance of 1798; it has however been rebuilt in a style of superior elegance...'.¹

There was a practice of 'paring and burning' used to bring waste land into cultivation which was forbidden by Act of Parliament, which imposed a fine of £10 per acre on those who used it. Some landlords prohibited the method entirely, others paid no attention to the act and some allowed the use of the method under rules of their own imposed on their tenants. One such was Lady Ormonde who allowed the practice but caused her tenants to enter into a bond to put 100 barrels of lime per acre in the second year, to take two crops and then to lay the land down with grass seeds.²

All these references to Lady Ormonde give the impression of a competent lady genuinely interested in using her position and means to restore and develop the district in which she lived and that Sir Jonah Barrington was right to admit that his estimate of her character might have been erroneous.

Turning now to the colliery a report, dated 1814, states

'This [Castlecomer] colliery was commenced in the beginning of last century by Sir Christopher Wandesford and has continued at work almost uninterruptedly ever since.'³ Taking these words literally they mean that the colliery began between 1 January 1700–1 and 15 March 1706–7 when Sir Christopher Wandesford was created Baron Wandesford and Viscount Castlecomer but there is evidence of much earlier working. The Ormonde manuscripts include the following letter

Sir Christopher Wandesforde to John Welsh.

1664 September 3 Dublin—Upon consideration of your note sent unto me by Mr. Wallis, I do hereby condescend and agree that there be yearly delivered four hundred barrels of earth coals at the coal pits of Idough, in the County of Kilkenny, unto and for the use of my most honoured and dear good friend his Grace the Duke of Ormonde, and his good lady his Duchess, during both their lives, provided that the said coals be had and taken away in such convenient manner as may not hinder the carriage of the country; and that payment is made for the digging of the said coals per barrel as the rest are paid for, to begin the first of May next.

And that in regard the year is far spent now, there be delivered two hundred barrels for this present year. To which end and purpose I have given order for the delivery of the same accordingly.

And withal I do most humbly submit myself unto what his Grace shall further declare in and concern the passages that passed between his Grace and my father and shall in all parts perform the same: for truly I am a mere stranger thereunto, and further desire to be expressed. Sir, if these be answerable to your expectation in the behalf of my Lord, I desire you would signify it by your consent under your hand; if not, I desire you to restore this back again to Mr. Wallis.⁴

This letter was addressed 'For John Welsh, Esq., Agent for his Grace, James, Duke of Ormonde.' The territory of Idough was erected to the Lordship of Castlecomer by Charles I.

Sir Christopher's letter was a formal offer to supply coals on the terms stated and, if Mr. Welsh accepted, a contract was concluded. It may be safely assumed that the matter

¹ Pigot's New Commercial Directory of Ireland, 1824.
³ Richard Griffith supra.
⁴ Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Marquess of Ormonde, N.s., vol. iii. Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904.
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mentioned in the final paragraph also related to coals since it is unlikely that anything irrelevant would have been included in such a document.

When Thomas Wentworth, later Earl of Strafford, sailed for Ireland in July 1633 to assume office as Lord Deputy, he took with him two friends to be his most trusted advisers, one of whom was Mr. Christopher Wandesford of Kirklington, Yorkshire. Mr. Wandesford became Master of the Rolls in 1637 and was appointed Lord Deputy in March 1640 after Strafford had returned to England but he died in December in the same year. ¹ The writer of the latter was his son who had been created a baronet in 1662.

The Dictionary of National Biography, in an article on Christopher Wandesford gives an account of his acquisition of the Castlecomer region

In 1635 Wandesford had purchased from the Earl of Kildare the lands of Sigginstown, near Naas, but resold the estate to Strafford, who intended to build a royal residence there. Instead of it Wandesford acquired (25 July 1637) Castlecomer and the territory of Edough or Idough in the county of Kilkenny. The title to this district had been found to be in the Crown by inquisition taken at Kilkenny on 11 May 1635 and the sept of the Brennans who held it declared to have no legal claim to their lands. Strafford expelled them by force and Wandesford rebuilt the castle, restored the park and settled a number of English families on the estate. Wandesford's conscience does not seem to have been quite easy and by his will made on 2 October 1640 he ordered his executors to pay the [Brennans] a sum amounting to the value of a 21 years lease of the lands they held in 1635 . . . the legacy was never paid owing to the rebellion . . . in 1695 Wandesford's grandson the first Lord Castlecomer obtained a decree extinguishing the claim of the Brennans to it, they having been attainted as rebels.

An earlier account gives a somewhat different impression.

The sept of the Brennans, a branch of the Fitzpatricks and who was said to have taken their name from or have given a name to the district called by Breoghan were the former proprietors of that part of the territory of Idough, erected by Charles I to the Lordship of Castlecomer and comprising about 13,400 acres. During the administration of Lord Strafford in Ireland Sir Christopher Wandesford purchased this territory from the Brennans and quartering a few soldiers there to protect the possession was one of the facts alleged in the articles of impeachment against that nobleman. The last representative of that branch of the Brennans, who were the ancient proprietors died in a reduced condition about 6 or 7 years ago and what is remarkable, he constituted, by his will, the present Countess of Ormonde as his sole heir.²

The legatee was the lady of the token.

The earliest reference to the subject which I have found is dated 1652

Already one Coal mine hath bin found in Ireland, a few years since, by meer hazard and without having been sought for. The mine is in the Province of Leinster, in the County of Carlo, seven miles from Idof, in the same hill where the Iron Mine was of Mr. Christopher Wandlesworth. [sic] of whom hath been spoken above. In that Iron-mine, after that by degrees they were gone deeper at last in lieu of Oer they met with Sea-coal, so as ever since all people dwelling in those parts have used it for their firing finding it very cheap; for the load of an Irish car drawn by one garron,³ did stand them, besides the charges for bringing it in 9 pence only 3 pence for the digger and 6 pence for the owner.⁴

The earlier reference to Mr. Wandesforde relates to an ironworks stated to have been owned by him in Idough in County Carlow. In these passages there is evidence of carelessness and, in the matter of the ironworks, an admission that the reader could not be given any particulars since, so far, none had been received.

¹ Miss C. V. Wedgwood, Strafford. ² William Tighe, Statistical Observations relating to the County of Kilkenny 1800–1, 1802. ³ A small Irish horse. ⁴ Gerard Boate, Irelands Natural History, 1652.
A map in the 'Down' survey of Ireland (1655–6) shows the 'Territory of Edough and Castlecomber Parish' in County Kilkenny, within one boundary marked 'Protestant Land'. The area within the boundary is of the same order of magnitude as that of the 'Lordship of Castlecomer' already mentioned. Only two features are shown, an indication of 'Castle Comber' and of habitation thereby and a small enclosed area about 3½ miles north by east of the Castle marked 'clay moyle-head'. Griffith stated that in the Leinster coal district 'slate clay is usually found in the roof of the coal and fire clay the substratum in every district but one'. The remark on his map may be an indication of mining for coal. Boate is alleged to have written that the mine was discovered in 1626 but the reference has not been traced. It is safe to conclude, however, that coal was exploited in the neighbourhood of Castlecomer much earlier than has hitherto been supposed.

Tighe reported that the fumes from burning the coal were somewhat obnoxious, being particularly injurious and offensive to asthmatic persons unless they had been habituated early when, in some cases, the seventeenth Earl of Ormonde, for example, they preferred the coal. Dr. Ryan of Kilkenny recommended cold bathing as the best method of counteracting the effects of the fumes. The same authority stated that Lord Wandesford received an income of £6,000–7,000 a year but Lady Ormonde was not so successful and a few years before 1800 she advertised that the mines were available to be leased but no arrangement resulted. In the three years ended 31 March 1800, when the price of coal was 6s. 3d. per barrel (ten hundredweights) and a collier's pay 2s. per barrel, her average annual profit was £2,760. About this time an experienced coal-mines manager was brought from England but Tighe remarked 'may give much information but firmness and perseverance as well as knowledge will be required to counter private interest, ignorance and prejudice'. On 1 April 1800 the price of coal was raised to 8s. 8d. per barrel and in the four months April–August the profits were £1,183, a figure indicating that the income for the whole year would not reach £3,000, since June and July, for some reason, were the best months in the year for selling coal.

With her interests in coal and land Lady Ormonde must have needed substantial sums in metallic money, the supply of which was so lamentably short in Ireland at this time. Edward Wakefield gave evidence in 1810 to a Select Committee of the House of Commons based on his experience during a recent tour of Ireland, when he found the monetary situation most unsatisfactory. He mentioned the Bank of Ireland tokens for 6s., overstruck on Spanish dollars, and the import by individuals, mainly from Liverpool of unstamped dollars, which were used in transactions according to their weight and the price of silver which depended on Government buying for the Army going abroad or the demand when ships of the East India Company were sailing. During his visit the dollars passed for 4s. 6d. to 4s. 11d. It is probable that, in this way, Lady Ormonde obtained her 'large number' of dollars; the reason for their countermarking is known, protection from a fall in the price of silver; to reach the possible source of the suggestion to countermark requires following a circuitous route.

In 1327 James le Botiller or Butler received a grant or a confirmation of the right to the prisage of wines imported at Irish ports as appurtenant to his hereditary office as Butler.
1328 he was created the first Earl of Ormonde and his rights of prisage and butlerage passed down the centuries to the eighteenth earl. In 1806 the Government decided to extinguish these rights and passed an Act\textsuperscript{1} authorizing the Irish Treasury to contract to secure them and to charge the compensation to the Irish Consolidated Fund. Negotiations took place with the earl and his trustees and an agreed contract was presented to the House of Commons on 22 May 1810 and implemented by an Act which received the Royal Assent on 20 June 1810.\textsuperscript{2} The agreed compensation was £216,000, the necessary money resolution was passed on 28 May 1810 and the confirmery Act also received the Royal Assent on 20 June 1810.\textsuperscript{3} The transaction was financed by Irish Treasury Bills and there is no reason for thinking that Lady Ormonde obtained any advantage.

The very detailed implementing Act shows that, when the negotiations started the Earl of Ormonde’s Trustees were the Earl of Enniskillen and the Rt. Hon. Maurice Fitzgerald. In 1808 they wished to resign and new trustees were appointed by Act of Parliament\textsuperscript{4} their names being William Morland and John Hosier of Pall Mall, Charles Butler, barrister-at-law of Lincoln’s Inn, and Job Hart Price-Clarke of Montagu Street all in the County of Middlesex. William Morland was probably a partner in Morland, Ransom & Co., 56 Pall Mall, London, agents of the Glasgow Bank founded by Lord Kinnaird, one of Morland’s partners, and others in 1809. The bank issued countermarked Spanish dollars, with which Morland must have been acquainted but it cannot be stated with certainty that he ever met Lady Ormonde.

The trustee Job Hart Price-Clarke was the father of the girl who married Walter Butler the eighteenth Earl of Ormonde and there is evidence in the Ormonde papers in the National Library of Ireland that he was in Ireland at least in 1806–10.\textsuperscript{5} Sir Joseph Barrington,\textsuperscript{6} who claimed to be an intimate friend, did not give the earl a very good character and the Ormonde papers indicate financial difficulties from time to time. Price-Clarke seems to have acted as the earl’s agent in Dublin and was interested in the prisage negotiations, the earl’s claim to which was disputed by the authorities in certain Irish ports; those in Waterford petitioned Parliament whilst a right to have their claim examined by the court was reserved, in the implementing Act, for the authorities in Cork, where Price-Clarke resided for a time. From his family relationship and interest in family matters over a considerable time it may be concluded that he would have known Lady Ormonde very well.

Mr. Price-Clarke’s country seat was Sutton Hall in the parish of Sutton-cum-Duckmanton in Derbyshire, the house having been built by the Earl of Scarsdale who died in 1736. His estates had to be sold to pay his debts, which included the cost of the Hall and they were purchased by Godfrey Clarke of Somersall.\textsuperscript{7} The estates passed to Godfrey Bagnall Clarke, who died in 1780, his sister and heiress married Job Hart Price who took the name of Clarke. Lord Ormonde, after his marriage to Anne Price-Clarke occasionally stayed at the Hall.\textsuperscript{8}

The lord of the manor of Sutton-cum-Duckmanton was Richard Arkwright of County Dublin, to whom I am greatly indebted.

Willesley Castle who was also lord of the manor of Cromford.\textsuperscript{1} He was the wealthy son of Sir Richard Arkwright, of cotton-spinning-machinery fame, and the issuer of the well-known tradesman’s token, Spanish dollars countermarked CROMFORD DERBYSHIRE around 4/9. It is surely probable that Arkwright and Price-Clarke were acquainted, that the latter knew of the Cromford token and advised Lady Ormonde to adopt the countermarking practice herself.

\textsuperscript{1} Stephen Glover, \textit{Directory of the County of Derby}, 1829.