

Coins excavated at Mr Ratford's house in 2010

During the 2010 CAFG excavations on the possible site of a 17th/18th C house at Home Farm on the Wimpole Estate, three metal discs were recovered. They were generally quite corroded and one still remains in very poor condition. Gentle cleaning of the other two revealed one to be a George III Irish halfpenny (see Photograph 1) while the other was a 17th C token issued by John Bird here in Cambridge (see Photograph 3). These pictures can be compared with examples in better condition shown in Photograph 2 (George III) and Photograph 4 (John Bird).



Photograph 1. Excavated George III Irish halfpenny, 25mm diameter (Trench A, context 2)



Photograph 2. Near mint condition George III Irish halfpenny with Type 3 bust

Although heavily corroded, the excavated coin and token can be seen to contain all the significant elements visible more clearly in Photographs 2 and 4.

The excavated George III Irish halfpenny date cannot be recognised, although it starts with “17....” This Type 3 bust was used on coins minted in 1774, 1775, 1776, 1781 and 1782. There was a shortage of coin for the Irish economy about this period so a large number of forgeries were made (often in Birmingham) and circulated in both Ireland and England. The forgeries were often poorly executed and were thinner and lighter than the official Royal Mint examples. The excavated coin is both worn and corroded but does appear to be lighter than expected compared to official coins, suggesting that it may be a forgery.



Photograph 3. John Bird farthing token, 15mm diameter (Trench B, context 6)



Photograph 4. John Bird farthing token, Fitzwilliam Museum access number CM.BI.183-R (reproduced with kind permission of The Coins and Medals Department, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

The excavated John Bird farthing token is clearly dated 1667 and was one of many tokens produced by large numbers of independent minters (probably over 20,000 in England, Wales and Ireland) at this time. This period, just after the English Civil War, was another time of shortages in small value coins (farthings to pennies) and to keep business going merchants and others issued their own coin. They were extremely restricted in their area of circulation, for example in London one street would often not accept tokens issued in a neighbouring one. These tokens first appeared in London in 1648 but spread over all England by the 1660's. Their use was declared illegal by Charles II in 1672, with the warning repeated in 1674 at which point they were mostly melted down as they had become worthless.

The excavated token was issued by John Bird, a member of the Merchant Taylor's Guild who operated somewhere in Cambridge (probably Trumpington Street). Given the usually restricted geographical range these tokens were used over and the closeness of Wimpole to Royston rather than Cambridge, it is perhaps interesting that this token came to be in Wimpole.