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The Parramatta St John's Sunday School Medals

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Preamble

Numismatics is not just the collecting of coins and medals. It is importantly also a study which can reveal the historical background and tell about the lives of the people associated with a coin or medal. Historical medals in particular offer a rich background of information dealing with a particular period and the people of that period.

This article deals with award medals given as a reward for achievement and focuses on the medals presented to children of the St John's Sunday School in Parramatta, New South Wales during the early nineteenth century. It also deals with religious commemorative medals that were distributed to the children at this school.

Background

Referred to by Jervis as 'The Cradle City of Australia', Parramatta, or Rose Hill as it was first called, was by 1791 a town larger than Sydney and possibly more important¹. The first wheat was harvested in Parramatta in 1789² and its superior soils produced an abundance of food. This produce was of great benefit to not only Sydney (some 30 km to the east) to which Parramatta had access via the Parramatta River but also to the whole growing Colony.

With the increase in population came the need for a church. Religious services were held there out of doors by the Reverend Richard Johnson until 1794³, when Samuel Marsden arrived and a temporary church was opened in 1796.⁴ The first permanent church building was commenced sometime from 1797 to 1799⁵ and the Parish of Parramatta was constituted 'by the Governor' in 1802.⁶ April 1803 saw St John's Church officially opened by the Reverend Samuel Marsden⁷ (Fig. 1).

Members of the London Missionary Society had taken refuge in New South Wales to escape the native hostilities at their Tahitian mission. They had originally left England in 1796 on the *Duff* to start the mission in Tahiti. Some of these evangelist refugees were to become prominent pioneers of Parramatta. Rowland Hassall, Francis Oakes, John Eyre and William Shelley were to become involved with St John's Church, and at the end of their lives they were all interred in the St John's cemetery.⁸

From 10 April 1803 until 18 August 1809 St John's was the only church building in the Colony⁹, as the first church building in Sydney had burned down in 1798 and it was not until 1809 that services in Sydney resumed in the rebuilt church in Lang Park at the corner of York and Margaret Streets.



Fig 1. St John's Church, Parramatta opened in 1803 by the Reverend Samuel Marsden.

(Drawing, 1820; Arrowsmith,

p.19)



Fig 2. Hassall House. This building, Hassall House, 5 George Street, Parramatta, demolished circa 1885, was used to conduct the first Sunday School in 1813. SAG, James Houison glass slide collection 5/5288

First Sunday School

Rowland Hassall's son Thomas had accompanied his parents to Tahiti. Growing up in Parramatta he received the best education available.¹⁰ In May 1813 at his father's house at 5 George Street, Thomas established and conducted the first Sunday School in Australia¹¹ (Figs 2 and 3). Thomas was no doubt inspired by The Sunday School movement founded in England in 1780 by Robert Raikes.¹²

So popular was this newly established Sunday School that on 1st December 1815 Thomas Hassall's father Rowland, the Reverend John Eyre and others formed the New South Wales Sunday School Institution.¹³ The pamphlet 'Requirements and Rules for Persons engaging themselves as Teachers in the Parramatta Sunday School' was printed the following August at the Missionary Press, located in the home of Rowland Hassall.¹⁴ One of the rules, that 'only the Old and New Testaments were to be used',¹⁵ made it possible for adherents of different religions to cooperate.

Permission later from the Reverend

Samuel Marsden allowed St John's Church to be also used for the Sunday School classes. The first class attracted one hundred and thirty children.¹⁶

The Sunday School was open to children of all ranks and classes, including Aboriginal, who were taught to read and write as well as being given religious instruction.¹⁷ In the formative years the Senior Chaplain Samuel Marsden examined the children annually—books and medals were given to the best pupils who would then parade through the streets of Parramatta carrying the Sunday School banner¹⁸ (Fig. 4). While 'books, tracts and other appropriate awards' would have delighted the young recipients there is little doubt of the value attached to winning a silver medal in the early years of the Colony.

The medals

Four engraved silver 'Reward of Merit' medals from St John's Sunday School have been recorded, some located in areas far removed from their place of issue.

The first of these is dated 1821 and was



Fig 3. Foundation plaque. This plaque, on the site of Hassall House, commemorates the foundation of the first Sunday School in Australia in the Parish of St John's in Parramatta.

awarded to R (or F) Cameron; it was found in South Australia (Fig. 5). The second, awarded to Ann Hassall and dated 1822 is now in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. The date of institution on this medal, 1814, is puzzling, as the Sunday School was first held in 1813, while the NSW Sunday School Institution was established in 1815 (Fig. 6). The third, awarded to Susannah Oakes, is undated and is now in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (Fig. 7). The fourth, awarded to James Staff, is dated 1834 and is recorded as having been discovered at Kempsey, New South Wales in 1962, but its present whereabouts is unknown.

James Elder was a teacher in Edinburgh before he served in the Tahitian mission. On his way to the mission he disembarked in Sydney in 1800 and then sailed on to Tahiti a year later to serve in the mission there. After 1808 he returned to Sydney and married Mary Smith. He became a reasonably successful settler¹⁹ and it is possible that he was the donor of the medal presented to R (or F) Cameron in 1821.



Fig 4. Parramatta Sunday Schools inauguration banner, 1815. 'The banner is partly painted and partly worked in basic herringbone and stem stitches on a silk ground and trimmed with readymade fringe, probably imported'.

(Broadbent, p.156). Courtesy National Library of Australia

The Sydney Gazette reported that in April 1821 'several medals and adequate prizes were distributed to those that excelled'.²⁰ It does differ in style to the medal given to Ann Hassall in 1822.

The recipient of the second mentioned medal was Rowland Hassall's daughter Ann Hassall, born in 1808 in Parramatta. Ann married a Robert MacKay Campbell in 1830 and died at Burrawa, NSW in 1891. There were ten children from the marriage.

Ann's brother Thomas Hassall had returned to England in 1817 to study for the Ministry. He was ordained in 1821 and returned to preach at St John's in February 1822.²¹ In order to help celebrate the anniversary of St John's Sunday School



Fig 5. Reward of merit medal, 1821.
Obverse: PARRAMATTA / SUNDAY / SCHOOL / INSTITUTED / 1815.
Reverse: A / REWARD / OF MERIT / APRIL 24 / 1821 / JAMES ELDER / TO / R (or F; the Christian name initial is partly obliterated and unclear) Cameron. Silver, 49mm.

Noble catalogue No. 65, Lot 540)



Fig 6. Reward of merit medal 1822
Obverse: PARRAMATTA / SUNDAY / SCHOOL / INSTITUTED / 1814.
Reverse: A / REWARD / OF / MERIT / TO / ANN HASSALL / 9th April 1822.

Silver (57mm).

Courtesy Mitchell Library

This medal may have been made in England, perhaps explaining the difference in style from both the Cameron and the Oakes medals.

and take the opportunity to encourage the students he distributed appropriate medals that he had brought back from England:

*medals, books, tracts and other appropriate rewards, many of which were brought by Mr Hassall from England for the express purpose were profusely distributed amongst all ranks and classes of children.*²²

The close relationship between the families linked to St John's was further strengthened when in the same year of 1822, Thomas Hassall married Ann Marsden, daughter of the Reverend Samuel Marsden, the first Rector of St John's.²³

Francis Oakes, father of the recipient of the third recorded medal, arrived in Sydney in 1798. After leaving the mission in Tahiti he continued his trade as a shoemaker. He was made Chief Constable for the Parramatta District in 1805 and in 1806 he married Rebecca Small.²⁴ Their fifth daughter, Susannah Hassall Oakes was born in 1816.²⁵ Her medal is

not dated nor does it have a place name. The name 'Oakes' and the words 'Sunday School' help to identify it as having been awarded by the St John's Sunday School in Parramatta.

The close association of the Oakes and Hassall families is indicated by Susannah's second name, Hassall, and this helps to answer the question of the medal's origin as the Sunday School in Parramatta. Under this assumption we are able to establish Susannah's age at the time of the award as about thirteen, as the sixteenth anniversary of the school, established in 1813, would have occurred in 1829.

Following her life a little further provides information to a link with Tasmania: the marriage in 1837 at St John's Parramatta of Susannah to James Sprent, a surveyor.²⁶ James Sprent was born about 1806 in Manchester, England, the son of a publisher from Glasgow. He emigrated to Hobart Town in 1830 and in 1833 was appointed temporary assistant surveyor and assigned to a trigonometrical survey. It is possible he met Susannah through her sister



Fig 7. Reward of merit medal, (undated).
Obverse: ST. JOHN'S / SUNDAY SCHOOL / SIXTEENTH / ANNIVERSARY.
Reverse: REWARD / OF / MERIT / TO / SUSANNAH OAKES. Silver, 56mm. Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Mary Hutchinson, née Oakes who, with her husband the Reverend John Hutchinson, became Superintendent and Matron of the Female House of Correction in Hobart in 1832.²⁷ Following his marriage to Susannah, James directed his attention to the North West of Tasmania and was later to become Surveyor General and Commissioner of Crown Lands before his retirement. He died in 1863 but Susannah survived him and died in Hobart in 1907 aged 91.²⁸

The fourth medal, awarded to James Staff in 1834, has another story altogether. No photograph of it is available, indeed its whereabouts is unknown. According to the June 1962 issue of *Chequerboard*, in-house journal of the ANZ Bank, this medal was 'found buried at the rear of the premises' in Kempsey, their NSW branch, during extensive renovations. The report states 'the two inch silver medal is well preserved and the inscription reads':

Obverse: Parramatta Church Sunday School Instituted 1814. 1. John 30.7 to 9.

Reverse: Reward of Merit to James Staff, 1834 Love All Men.

The Macleay River Historical Society Journal of March 1992 gives more insight, or possible reason, for the medal's location:

The A.N.Z. Bank is built on the site of the old Methodist Church which succumbed to the inferno in Smith Street in 1907. The bank rose from the ashes, so to speak, in 1915 and was extended in 1962.

It is hard to accept that a silver medal 'buried' for many years would be 'well preserved'. James Staff certainly had a strong link to Parramatta. He was the son of John Foreman Staff who married Mary Sandle in 1824 at St John's. James Samuel Staff was born in 1825 and was baptised at the Wesleyan Chapel, Parramatta where his father was choir master and later, clerk, as well as choir master, at St John's.²⁹ In 1846 James Staff's sister, then aged fifteen, produced a 'needlework picture' of 'The Three-Decker' pulpit of St John's.³⁰ James was 'the first day boy' to enrol at the King's School in 1832; his family then lived in the cottage next door to the building, later to be called 'Harrisford', where the school began.³¹

James Staff farmed at Rouse Hill, married Mary Ann Chaplain in 1847 and reared twelve children. Several of the children moved to the Lismore District of NSW, the migration to the northern rivers beginning during the 1870s. Some of the family, on the way north, may have visited the then new Wesleyan Church in Smith Street, Kempsey.³² The James Staff medal may have been lost on this journey, or put aside and forgotten.

To commemorate the centenary in 1880 of the foundation of the Robert



Fig 8. Centenary of Sunday Schools medal, 1880. *Obverse:* Draped bust of Raikes left. Legend around, CENTENARY OF SUNDAY SCHOOLS 1880 / ROBERT RAIKES.

Reverse: A scene showing Christ blessing a child. In exergue, SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN / TO COME UNTO ME. White metal, bronze, 44 mm. This is an example of the many medal types manufactured in England and circulated in Australia to commemorate this event.



Fig 9. Centenary of Sunday Schools, Tasmania, 1880.

Obverse: Draped bust of Raikes ¼ left. Around top, ROBERT RAIKES.

Reverse: In the centre, JULY - 1880 / UNITED / SUNDAY SCHOOL / VICTORIA HALL / LATROBE. Around an outer border, CENTENARY OF SUNDAY SCHOOLS / TASMANIA. Copper, gilt, 31mm.

(Carlisle 1880/14)



Fig 10. Centenary of Sunday Schools, Victoria, 1880.

Obverse: Draped bust of Raikes ¼ left. Around top, ROBERT RAIKES.

Reverse: In the centre, JUNE / 1880. Around an outer border, CENTENARY OF SUNDAY SCHOOLS / VICTORIA. Copper, gilt, 31mm.

(Carlisle 1880/15)



Fig 11. Centenary of Sunday Schools, Brisbane, 1880.

Obverse: Draped bust of Raikes left. Legend around, CENTENARY OF SUNDAY SCHOOLS 1880 / ROBERT RAIKES.

Reverse: In the centre between two sprigs, BRISBANE / SUNDAY SCHOOL / UNION. Around, a wreath of two laurel branches tied at bottom. White metal, 44mm.

(Carlisle 1880/3)

(Figs 9–11).

Raikes Sunday School movement in England, medals minted in England were freely distributed to the children attending Sunday schools throughout Australia (Fig. 8). In addition, three medals, minted in Australia, were distributed specifically in Tasmanian, Victorian and Queensland Sunday schools to help celebrate this event

St John's Parramatta Sunday School participated in the celebrations of the crowning of Edward VII and Alexandra in 1902 with the issue of a gilt medal (Fig 12).

The Centenary of the Sunday School held in 1913 was commemorated with a silvered bronze medal (or badge) designed



Fig 12. Coronation medal, 1902.

Obverse: In a circle, conjoined, draped busts of Alexandra and Edward left. Around top, EDWARD VII and ALEXANDRA. Around bottom, CROWNED 26 JUNE / 1902. A crown above.

Reverse: EDWARD VII / KING AND EMPEROR / ACCESSION 22.1.1901 / CORONATION 26.6.1902 / GOD SAVE THE KING / ST. JOHN'S. Around bottom left, SUNDAY SCHOOL, and around bottom right, PARRAMATTA. A crown above. Gilt bronze, gold, 27 x 39 mm.

(Carlisle 1902/17)



Fig 13. St John's Sunday School centenary medal 1913.

Obverse: In the centre, front view of church. Around, ST. JOHN'S PARRAMATTA.

Reverse: In the centre, FIRST S.S. / 1813 / TO / 1913. Around, two laurel branches tied at bottom. Below, in minute letters, DMW. Brass, silvered, gold, 25mm, suspension loop at top.

(Carlisle 1913/6)

by Miss DM Watkins, a teacher at St John's, Parramatta (Fig. 13). Other Sunday Schools of the area were invited for the celebrations, held from Sunday 18th to 25th May. Those who accepted were St Peter's, Western Road, St Paul's, Harris Park and Westmead, all taking part in a grand concert, choral festival, picnic, games and sports, with a military church parade by the 18th Infantry and Light Horse accompanied by the King's School cadets.³³ A tablet dedicated to the late Mr Thomas Hassall as founder of the Parramatta Sunday School was unveiled. Each of the four hundred and forty-five students from the above Sunday schools were presented with the special commemorative medal. The Sydney Morning Herald of 26th May 1913 reports: 'The first one struck was in gold, to be presented to Miss Hassall, the daughter of the late Thomas Hassall'.

Conclusion

The four St John's Sunday School

'Reward of Merit' hand engraved silver medals dealt with in this article, awarded between the years 1821 and 1834, were among the first known examples of their type issued in Australia.

A 36 mm silver medal issued in 1821 by the Male Orphan School also fits into this category of early Australian hand engraved medals; its inscription reads as follows:

Obverse: MALE ORPHAN INSTITUTIONS
NEW SOUTH WALES / REWARD / OF
MERIT / JAMES FLOOD / FOUNDED
1819.

Reverse: PRESENTED / BY / HIS
EXCELLENCY / THE PATRON /
ANNIVERSARY / 1ST JAN'Y / 1821 /
FOR THE BEST SHOEMAKER (Carlisle
1821/1).

One other medal reported in the Sydney Gazette of December 1820 could

be added to this category. Its inscription is given as:

WESLEYAN SUNDAY SCHOOL
PARRAMATTA 1820, (not sighted by the author; *SG* Dec 30, 1820, 3a).

The Parramatta St John's Sunday School is still active today, providing religious guidance for young people with perhaps a more modern approach than that of over two centuries ago, when the Sunday School movement began in England. This article has plotted the history of the school through the various award medals it has issued over the years. The coming bicentenary of the school will be celebrated in 2013. This event will offer an opportunity to continue the school's numismatic history, perhaps by the issue of a commemorative medal celebrating the establishment of the first Sunday School in Australia, begun by Thomas Hassall at his father's house at 5 George Street, Parramatta in May 1813.

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Les Carlisle has had a life-long interest