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# **A little piece of my heart...**

## **The Convict Love Token collection of the National Museum of Australia**

Rebecca Nason

A small worn penny engraved with the words 'When this you see remember me when I am far from the' evokes a highly emotive image of separation and loss, a desperate wish not to be forgotten. These simple words fixed upon a token of love are a tangible and poignant link between transportees and those left behind. This small 'token' belonged to Thomas Lock, a convict sentenced to 10 years transportation in 1845 for highway robbery.

Thomas Lock's love token was one of three acquired by the National Museum of Australia in 2006. Five more tokens were added to the National Historical Collection in 2007, and in December 2008 the Museum was successful in acquiring a collection of 307 love tokens bringing the total of its collection to 315. The tokens in the collection date from 1765 to 1853, spanning the whole of the transportation period to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. This highly significant collection provides us with a rich body of primary material for research and gives us an intimate insight into convict lives. It has also considerably added to the Museum's convict material holdings and contributes strongly to collections which relate to mementos of love and remembrance.

In 1998, Timothy Millett co-edited a book with Michelle Field titled *Convict Love*

*Tokens: the leaden hearts the convicts left behind*, which coincided with an exhibition of convict love tokens put on by the Powerhouse Museum at the Hyde Park Barracks. The book and the exhibition shed new light on the experience of transportation. This paper examines the National Museum of Australia's convict love token collection through existing research, and seeks to find new opportunities for the Museum to expand on this.

The context in which the tokens were created lies in the Transportation system, whereby convicted felons in England were banished to distant colonies to serve their sentences as a cheap labour force. The use of transportation in lieu of execution has its legislative origins in the 1597 English 'Acte for the Punyshment of Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars' and it is estimated that between 30,000 and 50,000 transportees were sent from Britain to her American colonies until the Declaration of Independence closed off that option in 1775.<sup>1</sup> The pressing need to empty her gaols in the wake of the loss of the American colonies is considered the major reason for Britain's establishment of a penal colony in New South Wales, which operated between Australia and England from 1788 until 1868, and in which the modern Australian nation has its origins.

The period from 1788 to 1868 also encompasses the years in which Britain was transformed from a predominantly rural to a largely industrial society. The long economic slump following the Napoleonic Wars, the addition to the labour pool of men demobbed from the army and navy, and the displacement of huge numbers of people from their traditional occupations and means of support by changes in agricultural and industrial production resulted in increased levels of crime and at the same time of political protest.

The distinction between crime in general and crime associated with political protest was not recognised by British law, and an estimated 3,600 'trade-union militants, machine breakers, food rioters, demolishers of turn-pikes, fences or workhouses, administrators or receivers of unlawful oaths, treasonable or seditious persons, armed rebels and city rioters' added to the ranks of criminals transported to Australia.<sup>2</sup> The rate of production of convict love tokens, as reflected in the collection, coincides with the rise in recorded committals<sup>3</sup>, with sharp peaks in the numbers of both committals and love tokens in the crisis years 1831 and 1838. Two tokens in the Museum's collection are by convicted Luddites, Thomas Burbury and Benjamin Sparkes, another is from the Welsh martyr and chartist, John Frost, and two other tokens were produced in support of the Welsh martyrs.

The majority of the tokens in the Museum's collection have been fashioned from 1797 Cartwheel pennies minted for the Crown at Matthew Boulton's Soho Manufactory in Birmingham for the 'express purpose of improving the quality of the country's small change'.<sup>4</sup>

Unpopular with the public, the pennies proved ideal for adoption as tokens as they were inexpensive, had very low relief portraits on the obverse and reverse, and were made from copper, a soft metal which could be easily ground smooth and engraved. The pennies were also large, their diameter of 36mm providing sufficient space for a message and image. Other tokens in the collection were made from Georgian halfpennies, the Cartwheel twopence, pennies from 1806, 1807 and 1826, and an 1816 sixpence. Trade tokens such as the Norwich halfpenny, the Bristol penny and the Isle of Man halfpenny are also present in the collection, as is a token made from a hexagonal disc; all of which have been made into convict love tokens.

The tokens have been either engraved or stippled (marked with a series of small pin pricks) with a message, and sometimes an image, entreating the recipient to keep alive the memory of the giver. Millett has classified the tokens in his collection into four categories based on their designs: those tokens that appear to have been engraved by a professional or trained hand, those that are copies or imitations of tokens by other engravers, tokens produced by less gifted amateurs possessing only limited technique and those tokens created without much 'skill or determination' containing little detail beyond an individual's name and sentence.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the convict tokens were engraved around the time of conviction, supporting the idea that a prisoner whose sentence had been handed down would then produce a token for their family, friend, or loved one. Evidence from the 'First Report of the Inspector of Prisons', tabled in the Parliamentary papers of 1836,

throws light on the production of convict love tokens, indicating that most of the tokens were made in gaols or on hulks:

*The more peaceably disposed found some occupation in making Newgate tokens, leaden hearts, and 'grinding the impressions of penny-pieces, then pricking figures or words on them to give to their friends as memorials' ... The initials or names of a loving pair were punched upon them, together with a heart or some symbol of affection; sometimes with a motto, such as 'True for ever', 'Love for life'. Those at large constantly wore them round their necks and treated them as amulets to preserve them from danger and detection.*<sup>6</sup>

The wearing of such amulets and devotional medals is common in many cultures; it is believed that they will provide protection or ward off evil to the wearer. The intimate contact between the token and the skin becomes a constant reminder of the giver and the promise of return.

Tokens produced by the same hand but for different convicts suggests that tokens could be commissioned from more capable engravers, of whom there was then no shortage in the prisons. Some convicts created or commissioned more than one token, with James Brooker giving virtually identical tokens to two different girls; and Millett reports the case of one prisoner who had 'seven penny pieces rubbed down, and verses written on them for seven different girls; all seven came to see him; three on one day, and four on another day'.<sup>7</sup> The greatest value was attached to these tokens by the criminal classes, linking them together as

a distinctive social group. The production of convict love tokens seems to have been confined to Britain as there are no examples of similar tokens made in Ireland, only by Irish felons convicted in England. While often the intended recipient of the tokens, few women seem to have produced or commissioned such mementos—a total of five tokens attributed to women are in the Museum's collection. It must be remembered that the act of defacing the head of the King was a criminal offence!

The tokens together with the detailed historical records provide us with a poignant, personal insight into the transportation system and to the convicts themselves. Using both the official documents and the first three tokens acquired by the Museum in 2005, we have been able to gain an insight into the lives of the convicts mentioned on them.

### **The Thomas Lock token**

Thomas Lock was sentenced to 10 years transportation on the 25th March 1845 at the Norwich City Quarter Sessions for Highway Robbery and Stealing 3 pounds from James Riches.

A native of Waddington, Lock was a groom by trade, a Protestant who could read and write. At the age of 22, Thomas was 5'6" with a ruddy complexion, brown hair and oval face with brown eyes and eyebrows. A short thick nose and medium chin completed his profile.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Lock was one of four sons and one daughter of William and Frances Lock. Thomas' brothers were William, James and Henry and his sister was Catherine. All of these names appear in Thomas' extensive tattoos as recorded on his convict indent by the Ship's surgeon.



Figure 1. Thomas Lock's convict love token, 1845.  
Photo: Dragi Markovic, National Museum of Australia

Thomas' token reads on the obverse: THOMAS / LOCK / AGED 22 / TRANSPORTED / 10 YEARS, and on the reverse: WHEN / THIS YOU / SEE / REMEMBER / ME WHEN / I AM FAR / FROM THE (Fig. 1).

Thomas arrived onboard the *Marion* (2) on 16 September 1845 and was sent to Darlington Station. During his sentence period, Thomas was constantly breaking the conditions of his sentence which resulted in his receiving various lashes and time in solitary confinement. In 1847, Thomas stole two ewes for which he was sentenced to life at Norfolk Island. By September 1852, Thomas had been sent to Port Arthur, and in 1855 he received his Ticket of Leave. This was revoked in May 1856 and returned in September 1856. He finally received a conditional pardon on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1858 (five years after transportation to Van Diemen's Land had ended). But what happened to Thomas after this date is unknown at this stage.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas' extensive tattoos are also interesting—just as it was important to leave an object behind to keep the memory alive, so convicts carried memorials with them on their journey to a new penal existence.<sup>10</sup> Linked upon his body were the initials of his



Figure 2. James Godfrey's convict love token, 1837.  
Photo: Dragi Markovic, National Museum of Australia

family, association to criminal groups and also his status as a criminal with handcuffs or bands marked on his wrists. Before the introduction of photographs, tattoos, scars and markings were documented in detail by officials as a means of identification in the event of an escape.<sup>11</sup>

### The James Godfrey token

James Godfrey was sentenced to seven years transportation on 30 January 1837 at the Central Court in London for Larceny.

A native of Grafton Street, Soho in London, Godfrey was a baker by trade. Little information is listed about Godfrey in the convict records other than that he was 33 years old at the time of his conviction and was 5'3" with a dark complexion, dark brown hair, oval face and grey eyes with no marks.<sup>12</sup> James' token reads on the obverse: JAMES / GODFREY / HANNAH / JONES / T. BOULTON / S. STEVENS, and on the reverse: WHEN IN / CAPTIVITY / TIME GOETH / VERY SLOW BUT / FREE AS / AIR / TO ROAM NOW / QUICK THE / TIME / DOTH / GO (Fig. 2).

James arrived on board the *Susan* on 21 November 1837, and was assigned to a





Figure 3. Abraham Lawley's convict love token, 1828.  
Photo: Dragi Markovic, National Museum of Australia

Mr J. Knight in Launceston.<sup>13</sup> However, due to a felony of stealing, he was discharged from his assignment with Mr Knight in October 1838. In February 1841, James received six months hard labour for being drunk and creating a disturbance. The government recommended a location in an interior district where he continued to be assigned to various masters. In August 1846, Godfrey left Tasmania a free man, bound for Port Phillip on board the *Shamrock*.<sup>14</sup>

### The Abraham Lawley token

The token from Abraham Lawley to Ann Pembottom is interesting for the imagery that is used. The token reads on the obverse: ABRAH / AM ? LAW / LEY 20 TR / ANSPORTED 14 A KEEP / ANN PEMB / UTTOM / 1828, and on the reverse: a hot air balloon with a love heart and their initials (Fig. 3: hot air balloons were first used in France in 1783 with the first crossing of the English Channel following in 1785).

At the age of 20, Abraham Lawley was sentenced at the Warwick Quarter Sessions on 13 October 1828, to fourteen years transportation for stealing a handkerchief. This was his second offence; he had previously served two years in prison for a former conviction.

A native of Birmingham, Abraham was a Protestant who could read and write. A polisher by trade, he is recorded as having a freckled complexion with brown hair and blue eyes, and several scars on his face and chin. He was single at the time of sentencing.<sup>15</sup>

On arrival, Abraham was assigned to a W. Shelly in Parramatta. According to the archival records 1828–1871, Abraham led a very visible life. At 63 years of age he was charged with four counts of larceny in Port Macquarie.<sup>16</sup>

Convict love tokens are an off-shoot of a much earlier tradition of exchanging tokens between lovers or family members who must part, which became increasingly popular from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the wealthy, such tokens might include painted miniature portraits or gifts of jewellery fashioned from finely plaited hair. Silver tokens were used to commemorate the birth of a child or for the women forced by misfortune to surrender their children to the Foundling Hospital in London (the tokens they left with the child were intended as a form of identification should their circumstances improve sufficiently to reclaim it).<sup>17</sup> The best known and most influential love tokens from the period were the Sailor's Farewell, a smoothed and engraved coin presented to a lover on the sailor's departure from port. Versions of the Sailor's Farewell decorate pottery, plaques and prints produced from the later 18<sup>th</sup> century for the mass market and often feature the motto 'When this you see, Remember me' and images of Poor Jack, the sailor who bids farewell to his true love, Polly. Popularised by the ballad of the same name penned in 1788 by Charles Dibdin (1745–1814), Poor Jack became a stock figure of cheery and

unflinching duty in British culture, and Dibdin received a pension from the Government in 1803 for the continued production of patriotic songs intended to 'Keep alive the national feelings against the French'.<sup>18</sup>

So strong is the influence of the Sailor's Farewell on the production of convict love tokens that it can be difficult to tell them apart, especially as both often feature the phrase 'When this you see, Remember me'. Sailor's tokens however, were usually made from a silver coin and often show a man in striped trousers, the stereotypical image of the British sailor. Convict love tokens sometimes have an added phrase referring to the vast distances separating the lovers such as 'when in a foreign country' or 'though many miles we distant be'. They also sometimes include images of a man in chains, or the phrase 'until I gain my liberty' and many have details of the length or type of sentence, including 'cast for death'. The final clue can be that the tokens show an attempt to remove the name or initials of the giver, indicating the desire to expunge the memory of someone whose behaviour has brought shame upon their family. The use of initials rather than full names, particularly on coins exchanged between unmarried lovers, is interpreted by Millett as a sign that the giver was worried that the memento, indicating that she was associated with a convict, might be a source of embarrassment to her.<sup>19</sup> Only in recent decades has there been a renewed interest in and acceptance of having a convict ancestor.

One strong theme found in the convict love tokens is the hope that the giver will return home once he has been granted his freedom. But few were pardoned, and by

Victorian times it was illegal for convicts to return to Britain. Despite the hopes of reunion expressed, most givers of tokens must have known their gift was a final goodbye, and the often hackneyed phrases in which their farewells are conveyed makes the emotional pain the convicts sought to convey more poignant. Convict love tokens are important primary documents in that they provide a significant body of evidence for the human sympathies of convicts in a punishment system that dehumanised them.<sup>20</sup>

Due to the relatively late foundation date for the NSW colony, and the central role played by Britain's burgeoning government bureaucracy in administering the colony and the convicts sent there, remarkably rich documentary sources exist for Australia's early European history. Views of 'the System' authored by those undergoing transportation, however, are much harder to find in the official records. The more complex and subtle understandings of the past to be gained by examining 'history from below', and the relative scarcity of convict-authored sources, has led to a growing appreciation of the value of convicts' personal artefacts such as these tokens. The role played by those in collecting, researching, exhibiting and writing about convict love tokens has significantly contributed to that appreciation.<sup>21</sup>

Nearly 400 convict love tokens, only a small fraction of those thought to have been created, are held by private collectors and in cultural institutions such as the Powerhouse Museum, the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, the British Museum, the Hull Museum and the National Museum of Wales. The acquisition of its collection makes the National Museum of Australia the

foremost collecting institution of convict love tokens, and will provide opportunities for extensive further research and exhibitions. The identity of convicts associated with 100 tokens in the collection is known due to the efforts of collectors, and the remaining 212 tokens provide an excellent opportunity for further archival work in which the Museum seeks to engage. The Museum is also seeking to add to the current knowledge of convict love tokens through scientific examination. In recent years, the National Museum of Australia has been very active in the undertaking a series of non-destructive analyses including X-Ray Fluorescence, which is used to examine the composition of the surface of an object, and Scanning Electron Microscopy, which allows the observer to discern differences in morphology and mineralogy of the object. Both forms of analyses have been used to examine historical objects made out of metal such as breastplates, to illustrate the development of early metallurgical processes, and the effective reworking of shipwreck fittings into functional objects in colonial Australia. The Museum hopes to engage both forms of non-destructive analysis to examine the love tokens. It is clear from visual inspection that some of the tokens have suffered from extensive wear and some corrosion, which is consistent with their historical nature and their extensive use. What we hope to achieve from examination of the tokens is a greater understanding and knowledge of their composition, their manufacture and their provenance through comparison with Cartwheel pennies that have not been altered and with other forms of engraved or stippled tokens of love. We are very

excited about the next phase of research and we hope that others will also find it interesting.

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*Rebecca Nason is a curator at the National Museum of Australia, specialising in early colonial and convict history. She has developed exhibits for both the new permanent 'Australian Journeys' and 'Landmarks' galleries, and is currently working on the new temporary exhibition 'Irish in Australia' which is due to open in March 2011. [r.nason@nma.gov.au](mailto:r.nason@nma.gov.au)*