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THE FAMILY OF HUGH PECK, TOKEN ISSUER

by Len Henderson

The fortunes, and family, of this Melbourne trade token issuer can be traced back a little over two hundred years. He was born and raised in Cambridgeshire like his parents and grandparents.

Hugh's grandfather, John Peck who died in 1812, spent his childhood at Newton and from an early age he started to keep diaries. Fortunately a number of his diaries have survived and are housed in a local museum. From these old hand written notes, as well as his sons' diaries, we have an insight in the daily lives of the token issuer's forebears and we learn much of Hugh's work ethics and cultural luggage that he brought to Australia.

About the time of John Peck's marriage to Elizabeth Ream of Newton his address was Tydd St Giles. They had eight children, three boys and five girls, of whom two of the girls died at an early age.

Hugh's father was also named John Peck (1787-1851), and he was educated at Tydd St Marys's School. In 1808 John the elder's family moved to Parson Drove¹ and by April 1811 they moved to another house in the same village. This has been identified as Inham Hall, which stood near the Butchers Arms on the main road.

Incidentally about the same time in nearby Wisbeck, Thomas Anderson may have helped shaped the attitudes of the Peck family regarding human rights. It was Anderson who co-founded the Anti-Slavery Society and was its first

President. To what extent their attitudes were influenced by Anderson is unclear, but they were certainly religious, educated, publicly spirited, and many people in England with a similar background in those times supported the movement.

John (the elder) died the following year, leaving John (the younger), then aged twenty five, as head of the family. From the diaries it seems his sister Sarah, next to him in age, may have been his house-keeper before she married Daniel Culy of Levington. John set up his brother Joseph as a farmer at Bevis Hall, Wisbeck St Mary. Susannah another sister married a cousin, John Ream, and died at the age of twenty seven after childbirth. The youngest Pecks, William and Mary Ann, were still both unmarried and living in the village at the time of Johns death in 1851. Little is known of the other surviving sister.

In 1817, John Peck, (the younger) married Elizabeth Ulyatt and they had a family of seven sons and a daughter. All their offspring lived beyond childhood which was a rare thing in those days.

Hugh's father was a successful farmer and had built up his four hundred acre (one hundred and sixty hectare) farm by a system of yearly rentals with land in Tydd Fen that his father had farmed. He also rented land at Parson Drove Fen and St. Edmunds. Sheep were kept for their fleece rather than meat. He also kept cattle and pigs for fattening, and he had a team of about twenty working and riding

horses. His main arable crops were wheat, oats and beans: with potatoes, turnips and clover for feed stock. He also farmed coleseed (rape) and mustard seed crops. In his early years he hired any heavy machinery which was needed- *The hire farmer to find his own hands and horses* was the usual term for this, and when he became richer he bought his own. He ran the farms with a small force of eight workers and hired extra help as needed in the heavy seasons. A worker in the 1830's received two or three shillings per acre and free beer.²

Peck took the opportunity to buy the freehold of his house and farmland in 1843 when his landlord was declared a bankrupt. However he was apprehensive in tying up his money and his fears were justified. The Government's Free Trade Policy flooded the market with cheap imports and this led to a long depression. He experienced the Potato Famine of 1845-1847, which destroyed so much of Ireland but England was also affected badly by the Potato Blight. The blight was so virulent that even to this day there are some areas in England, notably around East Anglia, where potatoes can not be grown because the soil still carries the disease.³

John, (the younger), was able to survive the disaster of the Potato Famine because of his diversification in his rural pursuits as well as his other activities; the family diaries give the impression he never slept. He was sworn in as a constable in 1816 and held the position until his death; he was a local tax assessor and valuer, and was often employed as arbiter in disputes. He was a vigorous campaigner for better drainage of the Fen Lands, To this end he served as Commissioner for the Leverington and Parson Drove District and the Wisbeck North Level, working in

close association with the hydraulic engineer Tycho Wing. He was instrumental in getting his district waterways linked to the main drain.⁴

His enthusiasm was behind the building of the Clough's Cross Bridge and watergates which were a feat of nineteenth century engineering and they still stand today. Also associated with his thoughts on control of water, the area owed to him its first fire engine, the replacement of silt-covered cart tracks with gravelled roads, and a network of drains and culverts that cleared the land and brought in a steady supply of useable water from the new river.

For relaxation he skated, played cricket, field sports such as shooting, hare coursing and fishing; he considered cock fighting, which was popular in his day, barbaric. He went to the theatre at every opportunity, read widely and was a member of a local literary society as well as a subscriber to a local museum.

He saw the coming of the railway to his part of the world, watched the ballooning craze of the 1820's, bought one of the earliest bicycles, and travelled to Wales, London and Paris. Also from his diaries we learn that he tried out the latest thing in medicine - quinine for Fen Fever.

Hugh's father had a mild heart attack or a stroke in 1850 and died on the 16th October the following year. He was buried in St. John's Church at Parson Drove with the Sermon given by a Reverend Frederick Jackson. A memorial plaque is on the wall of the church and from that we can assume that he was heavily involved with that church.⁵

He lived through a period of great change, from Waterloo to the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace, and today a number of his diaries which he wrote between 1814 and 1851 have survived.

Oral family history states that Hugh Peck brought at least one diary with him to Australia, and if he did their whereabouts remains a mystery.

The eldest son of John (the younger) was also named John. He followed his father in farming and later became a master-brewer of a local brewery. Six of John (the younger's) children married and while some of the descendants are still living locally it is the third son, Hugh who migrated to Australia.

Hugh Peck came to Australia on *The Great Britain* and arrived in Melbourne in November 1852. Incidentally Orlando Fenwick, another Victorian token issuer, was also a fellow passenger. Peck set up a wholesale hay and corn store in Fitzroy, which in those days was commonly called *Canvas Town*. This area was almost on the border of the eastern bushland with the streets mostly muddy.⁶ He soon abandoned this to become a general speculator, auctioneer, and a house and land agent. He conducted these activities from 67 Little Collins Street East, this was east of Elizabeth Street which was one of the main highways leading to the goldfields. In those days streets were numbered either east or west of Elizabeth Street and his business would have been on the north side about opposite the Victoria (Private) Hotel of today. There is a car park on the site now and it forms the back entrance of the Tivoli Arcade.⁷

From that address Peck moved to Collins Street (south side) where he had offices over the Commercial Bank, between Queen and Elizabeth Streets. He left there when the bank was being rebuilt, to occupy premises he had bought in Queen Street.

During his long and generally successful career, Peck made a considerable fortune and held some *valuable property*. However, as with so many others, he held on too long during the land boom and when the financial collapse came he lost heavily. For one piece of land with a frontage of only 52 feet (less than 18 metres) he was offered forty thousand pounds (eighty thousand dollars) but did not take it as city property in that area- Queen St-near Burke Street, was selling at almost one thousand pounds a foot (30 cms).⁸

Hugh Peck died at the ripe old age of eighty, and was survived by his widow and five daughters. He also had a son, an architect, who was an amateur yachtsman. In his cutter *Maysie* he made adventurous trips across Bass Strait and experienced the rough weather conditions while beating down to Hobart.

Peck issued three tokens with two being described in *Rennicks Catalogue* but all three varieties are gone into more thoroughly by Dr John Sharples in his article in Volume seven of this Journal. The tokens give the date of setting up business in Melbourne, 1853, but were not issued until 1862. Some of the tokens are upset with die axis at either 6 or 12 o'clock. The *H* in Hotel is re-entered and the *K* of Peck is miss-aligned. In *RENTS COLLECTED* the *LL* is dropped. They have a common Stokes Reverse, type number 6 of the so called Australian Arms but with Victoria and the date 1862.

For further references to the design see *Andrews Catalogue*, numbers 433 and 434 or Heyde numbers 203 and 204, or the more recent Sharples 121a, 121b, and 122.



Hugh Peck, token issuer.
Illustration courtesy of Dianne Blawer

REFERENCES

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 - ⁴ Wisebeck Museum, Op. Cit.
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 - ⁷ Weston Bate, *Essential But Unplanned, The Story of Melbourne's Lanes* State Library of Victoria, 1994.
 - ⁸ Frank Gardiner, *The Australian Traders' and Storekeepers Journal*, 1910