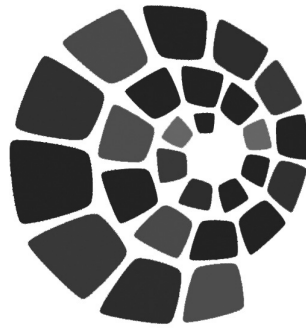


A TOKEN FOUND AT LYME REGIS, DORSET,
ENGLAND, APPARENTLY ASSOCIATED WITH
MARY ANNING (1799–1847), FOSSIL COLLECTOR

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A token found at Lyme Regis, Dorset, England, apparently associated with Mary Anning (1799–1847), fossil collector

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Abstract

A lettered metal disc bearing the date 1810 and found on the beach at Lyme Regis appears, but cannot conclusively be proven, to be a childhood possession of the young Mary Anning (1799–1847), later the famous fossil collector whose name and age it bears. An alternative, but problematical, possibility is that it is a retrospective commemorative token produced for sale to tourists in later years.

Introduction

In April 2014 Mr Phil Goodwin found, on the beach at Lyme Regis, Dorset, the object described here, and kindly donated it to the Lyme Regis Philpot Museum (LRPM accession number 2014/34). Its inscription links it to Mary Anning (1799–1847), fossil collector of that borough and a person of considerable public interest today (Torrens 1995; Oldroyd 2013). We publish this puzzling token, as we call it for want of a better word and without prejudging its function, in the interest of rapid reporting of Mr Goodwin's find and its assessment for the Museum's curatorial and educational work. We hope that this account will bring to light comparable items to clarify that association.

Location of discovery

The token was found by metal detecting on the beach below Church Cliffs to the east of Lyme town centre. This is a plausible location for Anning, or indeed some other owner, to have lost the token while on the beach. However, the token could just as easily be derived from slumped or dumped material, of any date, from above the intertidal zone. There has been considerable erosion of the Church Cliffs area over the centuries, and recently some of the contents of the town dump on the Spittles, just above East Cliff to the east of Church Cliffs, fell to the beach, notably in the 2008 landslide (Brunsden 2002; Gallois 2009), though this last landslide is possibly too far east to be a source of the token given the generally eastwards longshore drift. The action of this drift raises the possibility that the token came from the stretch of coastline running eastward under Lyme town to Church Cliffs and including the mouth of the River Lim, and therefore

also from deposits within the town itself which were eroded by the Lim and washed down to the shore. It is relevant that the Anning family home was on the site of the present Museum, just above Gun Cliff a little to the east of the Lim.

Photographs and records in LRPM also raise the possibility that the token was lost on the house site and dumped over the seawall with other debris around 1888–1901, during which this area was cleared for the building of the museum, and the adjacent seawall was breached and rebuilt.

More generally, the stretch of coast from the Lim to Church Cliffs was much disturbed during nineteenth-century quarrying and by successive coastal defence works, most recently during the last decade of the 20th century to form the modern sewage pumping station under Gun Cliff, and by the rebuilding of the Church Cliffs defences, which was in progress at the time of the find. Moreover, the winter of 2013–2014 was one of severe storms, which largely removed the sand on the lower levels of the beach east of Lyme, reducing the level by some 1.2 m in places and exposing more of the rock ledges underneath. All this would have churned up the beach considerably. The experience of local geologists is that items with relatively high specific gravity, such as metal objects and loose pyritic fossils, can survive relatively unabraded when buried in the beach for many years. Indeed, Roberts (1834, 248–9) noted the role of dumping, land-slipping, and the River Lim in bringing metal objects such as coins and tokens to the beach, where they accumulated, especially in the lower layers of sand.

Description

The token is a disc of metal some 25 mm, or in the units in use at the time of its making, one inch, in diameter. It is about 1 mm thick, weighs about 3 g and appears to be of brass or a similar alloy. It is not corroded or coated in concretion, although it has a patina of age, with a brassy shine showing through, perhaps from cleaning by the collector or by abrasion within the active marine environment. Some letter impressions retain a very small amount of pale corrosion product or concretionary material. The decorated edge is finely

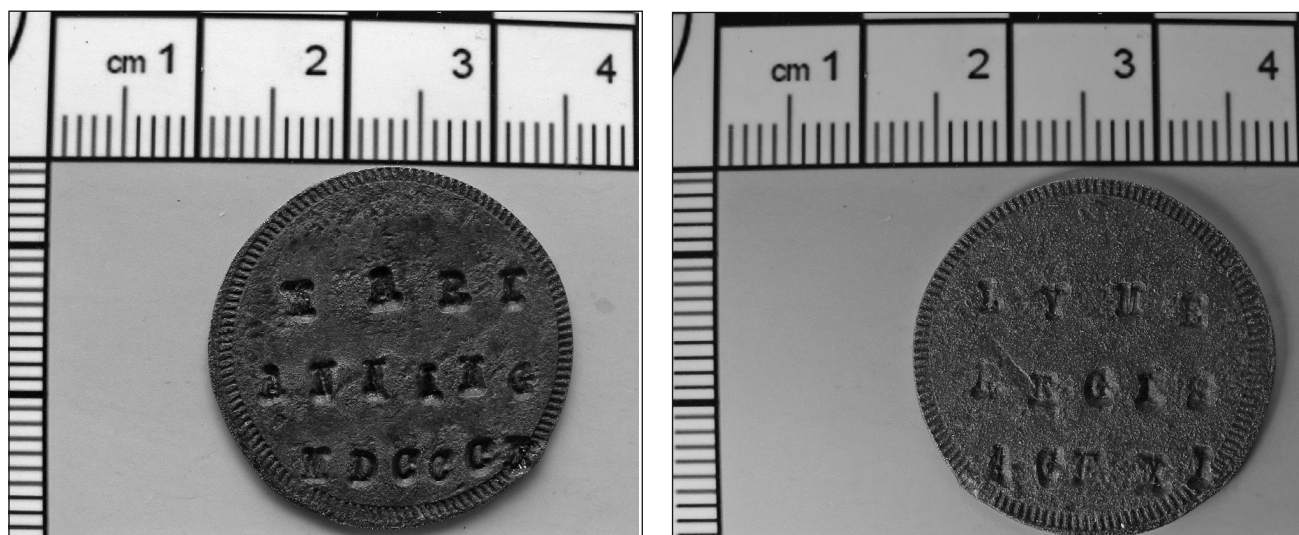


Figure 1. Photographs of obverse and reverse of token by Mr Mike Applegate, courtesy also of the Lyme Regis Philpot Museum (Acc. No. 2014/34). The token is 25 mm (1 inch) in diameter.

applied on each side and probably impressed from a die because the striking is not quite centred on the disc. The lack of any sign of a prior design suggests that this is not a rubbed-down coin. The token is not perforated for attachment to a chain or as a tag. On it is stamped the following text:

Obverse: MARY / ANNING / MDCCCX

Reverse: LYME / REGIS / AGE XI

The lettering has been crudely stamped using metal letter punches in an apparently unskilled manner. It appears to be lettered onto a pre-formed blank, with the lettering running into the edge decoration, showing that lettering was done after the decoration. The stamping of the letters is notably uneven in level and spacing and although some attempt has been made to centre the text laterally, this has not been entirely successful. This suggests that the letters were stamped individually rather than as a set. The rough alignment of the lettering is perhaps evidence against fabrication by a specialist craftsman, but could simply indicate rapid production for cheapness.

We have not located a similar piece in the collections of the LRPM, or in the Dorset County Museum (David Ashford, pers. comm. to MAT, 30 Dec 2014), or in preliminary inquiries to several specialist numismatists. Peter Preston-Morley (pers. comm. to MAT, 14 Nov 2014) suggested tentatively that it appeared to have been made much nearer to 1810 than, say, the other landmark date of 1847 when Anning died (the presumed earliest date for commemorative tokens for reasons set out below). He noted that the original blank disc is well enough done not to be the product

of a jobbing blacksmith or similar, but more likely of someone familiar with the way in which coins and tokens were produced at the time. This production is unlikely to have been local to Lyme or even Dorset. In the early nineteenth century, many tokens were being made by manufacturers whose main trade was making buttons, particularly in the area of Birmingham, which was the pre-eminent city for the manufacture of tokens at that time. Robert Thompson (pers. comm. to MAT, 13 Nov 2014) noted that the denticles around the rim are reminiscent of some nineteenth-century silver tokens (e.g. those illustrated by Dalton 1922, 7; reprinted in Mays 1991, 176); the relevant silver tokens date mainly from 1811–12, and some were struck in brass — these silver tokens happen to be attributed to Dorset issuers, but presumably coincidentally, as the tokens were not produced locally, and as some have been reattributed to Kent (Thompson 1972). This perhaps suggests a dating for the new find, or at least for the basic stamped disc.

Taking these considerations into account, it seems likely that the basic blank disc was made elsewhere, perhaps at one of the specialist manufacturers, and imported to Lyme for some now unascertainable purpose, perhaps as a label or tag blank. The lettering was almost certainly added in Lyme, as its content and relative crudity suggest.

Identification of the person named

Genealogical sources show very few Mary Annings in Lyme Regis around 1810 (www.ancestry.co.uk and www.familysearch.org checked Nov 2014; Lyme

Regis Philpot Museum records; Torrens 1995). These are the famous-fossil-collector-to-be, born on 21 May 1799 and therefore matching the token inscription by becoming 11 on 21 May 1810; her mother Mary or 'Molly' (c. 1764–1842); and her elder sister, also called Mary (c. 1794–1798).

Gracia Anna Maria Anning (c. 1794/5–1846), baptised in Lyme Regis on 13 January 1795 and presumably born there or nearby, maiden surname Davey, and Maria Anning (c. 1797–1882), born in Wyke Regis, maiden surname unknown, were both about the right age. However, they can be ruled out as they only took the surname Anning when they successively married Simeon Anning, baker of Lyme, in, respectively, 1825 in Lyme and, probably, in the Weymouth district in 1848.

This strongly indicates that the Mary Anning of the token was indeed the famous fossil collector, but this cannot be rigorously proven. In the decades before regular census data, it would be easy to miss incomers who were neither born nor married in the borough, and who died elsewhere.

Possible functions

We now examine several possible explanations for the token in the context of the history of the Anning family as set out by Torrens (1995):

A gift for a child as a novelty and keepsake:

This is strongly suggested by the inscription's emphasis on name, age and place. It could have been an eleventh birthday present, perhaps inspired by finding a tradesman's token on the beach, with its characteristic combination of issuer's name and place (Roberts 1834, 249–50). If it had any function at all, it might have been a personal identification piece to keep in a purse in case this was lost. A more modern equivalent is perhaps the product of coin-operated machines seen at main railway stations in the 1950s and 1960s. These would stamp the user's name, letter by letter, on a base metal blank. Mary's father Richard Anning (c. 1766–1810) was a cabinetmaker and might have had the necessary letter punches as well as a supply of stamped blank discs as used, for instance, for labels (Paul Robinson, pers. comm. to MAT, 7 Nov 2014), or escutcheon blanks to provide the protective surround for a keyhole. So perhaps the token was made by father and daughter together. Joseph (1796–1849), Mary's elder brother, might have made it for or with

her; he was an upholsterer's apprentice, possibly by 1810 when the token was made. Another possibility is that the token was made by a metalworker of some type such as a Lyme tradesman, itinerant specialist, or stall operator at a local fair.

Administration of poor relief:

Richard Anning died in November 1810 and the bereaved family were on parish relief by 1811, raising the possibility that the token was used to indicate entitlement to out-relief such as handouts of bread. However, no such tokens are known in the operation of the poor law in Lyme (David Tucker, pers. comm. to MAT, 14 Aug 2014), and none exists in the local collections of the Lyme Regis Philpot Museum. They seem unnecessary in a small town whose inhabitants would have been well known to each other and to the Poor Law Overseer in the years when poor law was dealt with on a parish basis before the New Poor Law of 1834. The newly-found token is also crude by the standards of poor law tokens elsewhere, which tend to be proper die-struck coin-like pieces. If the token had to be carried to indicate entitlement, one might perhaps also expect it to have been perforated for such things as a cord around the neck or wrist, or a lapel chain, belt or pin. This also rules out similar functions such as a collar tag for Anning's dog Tray.

Independent Chapel at which the Anning family worshipped:

There seems no obvious purpose for such a token. Similar arguments as for poor law administration tend to rule out use to indicate, for instance, that Sunday school fees had been paid, or as a prize for attendance, as well as the lack of any mention of the chapel in the inscription. The same would have applied to any school which she attended. The various Presbyterian churches of Scotland (to which the Independent Chapel was perhaps closest in approach) did issue tokens to indicate eligibility for the periodic communion service. However, those were specific to, and inscribed for, each parish rather than the communicant.

A commemorative token produced for sale to tourists at the time, 1810:

This can be ruled out as Anning was not famous in 1810: there was no celebrity to exploit. The first fossil discovery which helped to make her name was in 1812, when she found the bulk of the skeleton of a large ichthyosaur (often wrongly described as the first-known ichthyosaur), the skull of which her brother

had found in 1811 (Howe *et al.* 1981; Torrens 1995). She became better known after her discovery of the first *Plesiosaurus* skeleton at the end of 1823, and other major finds. George Roberts's 1823 history of Lyme did not name her in his account of her 1812 find, which he dated to that year, though he lists her as a subscriber. His expanded 1834 version finally made her name known to interested tourists, while giving an 1811 date, perhaps as a result of confusion over Joseph's initial discovery (Roberts 1823, 206; 1834, 288).

A commemorative token produced for sale to tourists at some later time, perhaps after Anning's death in 1847:

(David Tucker, pers. comm. to MAT, 14 Aug 2014; Hugh Torrens, pers. comm. to MAT, 18 Aug 2014). The first problem with this role is the 1810 date. As noted above, the most obvious answer is the 1812 ichthyosaur find. However, the commonest misattribution is to 1811, as in Roberts's history (1834) and in two editions of a later local guidebook of the 1850s (Brown 1857, 27; 1859, 60). Misattributions to 1810 and even 1809 do occur (Torrens 1995), but seemingly only in works from the 1970s onwards (Hugh Torrens, pers. comm. to MAT, 11 Nov 2014). So, unless the token is much less old than we believe, the 1810 date would be a 'one-off' error, presumably from confusion caused by the complexity of the story, or cross-confusion with the often-noted death of her father in 1810. This error also makes it unlikely that the token was produced for Anning or by a third party during her life. A perhaps rather improbable alternative is that it denotes the start of Anning's commercial fossil-collecting career, notionally just after her father's death (e.g. Roberts 1834). Be that as it may, the second, and more serious, objection is that the inscription fails to refer to any reason for Anning's celebrity. It does not, for instance, mention ichthyosaurs or other fossils. The poor quality and 'one-off' nature of the token also tend to militate against this option. They certainly suggest that it was not produced in numbers; even if such stamps were used rather than coin-type dies, the resulting token would be much quicker and better if some sort of jig had been used to set up the stamps in a neater spacing and for a single strike (although this would have needed three sets of letter stamps to do each face).

A 'one-off' made by some person unknown:

This remains a logical possibility, right down to, say, something made in a metalwork class at school in

recent decades, but there seems no obvious reason to create such an object other than just for the sake of it, while much the same objections apply as for the previous option. For the same reasons, and because of the obvious uncertainty that the item would be quickly found where it was discovered, we do not believe that it is a hoax planted by a third party, although the possibility cannot be totally excluded.

Conclusion and significance

On balance, we consider that the token is probably, though not provably, a possession of the famous fossil-collecting Mary Anning herself from 1810, as suggested by the inscription's content and quality (or lack thereof), and by a tentative comparison with trade tokens of that period, while being highly compatible with the locality in which it was discovered. This does not tell us anything very new about Anning, but it does establish the find as a useful addition to the very few items of likely or certainly known Anning provenance in the Lyme Regis Museum, and therefore helps with the Museum's work in public education and engagement.

An alternative interpretation is that the token was a much later and retrospective commemorative souvenir for sale to tourists. This would be an interesting development in the history of Lyme tourism and what one might call the evolution of the Anning story, which has continued to be told to the benefit of the local economy alongside Lyme's fossils (Buckland *et al.* 1857; Torrens 1995). This wider phenomenon is an unusual example in Britain of a geologist being used as an attraction, and may be compared to the use of Hugh Miller (1802–1856) to promote the tourist industry of his native seaside burgh of Cromarty in northern Scotland (Alston 2006). Concerning the token itself, we consider this option unconvincing because of the inscription's poor quality and lack of specific reference, but we cannot rule it out. However, this implies the existence of further copies, some taken home by their owners and perhaps ending up in numismatic collections elsewhere. The finding of such copies would be strong evidence for the second option, while the absence of such copies is consistent with, but not conclusive evidence for, the first option.

We would be glad to know of similar tokens, including those using the same type of blank but with different inscriptions, which might throw light on their dating and function and those of the Anning piece.

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