



Aylesbury Anti-Slavery Mystery

It was in 1787 that Granville Sharp and his friend Thomas Clarkson decided to form the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Although they were both Anglicans, nine out of the twelve members on the committee were Quakers. Influential figures such as John Wesley, Josiah Wedgwood and William Wilberforce also gave their support to the campaign as well as former slaves Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana. All over Britain there began agitation to abolish slavery. Slave trading was abolished 200 years ago, in 1807, and finally in 1833 slavery itself was abolished.

As far as we know an Aylesbury group was the first to broadcast this noble sentiment in the form of a local coin. Thus, this is one of the earliest pieces of anti-slavery memorabilia and although weakly struck, is much rarer than the tokens based on Josiah Wedgwood's ceramic cameo of a kneeling male slave in chains with the slogan, "AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?"

The token was issued in 1796, when there was a shortage of small coinage. Although George III was then on the throne, on the front is a bust of King William III with a laureate wreath¹. Immediately under the bust is the name "James" who would have been the diesinker. Around the edge are the words "TO THE FRIENDS FOR THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY." On the reverse is the Phrygian Cap of Liberty above the nations' flags². Around the Cap of Liberty is written the words "AYLESBURY TOKEN" and the date 1796.

Little is known of the issuer of this token. It appears to be a genuine tradesman's token but this is very doubtful as it exists in such small numbers. It is very likely a private issue for an anti-slavery society in Aylesbury. We know that such a society was formed 30 years later, in 1826, by George Nugent Grenville, MP for Aylesbury³ and local church ministers, but can find no records of an earlier society in 1796.

Two tokens have been donated to the Town Council and we hope to loan them to the Bucks County Museum, where they may be viewed during the Black History Month in October 2007.

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Footnotes:

1. William III was a beneficiary of the slave trade as a major shareholder in the Royal Africa Company, founded by Charles II's brother the Duke of York, later James II. The company had a monopoly on slave trading and gold from West Africa until the market was opened up to all in 1698, when William III was king, and then the market greatly expanded. So to Anti-slavery campaigners William III, although many constitutional reforms were introduced in his "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, may have deserved his horns, which is how the laureate crown appears when the coin becomes worn.

2. The Phrygian cap was worn by freed slaves in ancient Greek and Roman times and this symbol of liberty was appropriated by John Wilkes and the American Revolutionaries and later by the French Revolutionaries.

3. George Nugent Grenville's sister-in-law, the wife of the 1st Duke of Buckingham and Chandos inherited two plantations in Jamaica from her mother, but his uncle George Wyndham Grenville was prime minister in 1807 when the slave trade was abolished.