

Basic Detail Report



00040473

Title

Convict love token

Date

1770-1820

Medium

Copper

Dimensions

Overall: 1 x 28 mm

Name

Token

History

Between 1788 and 1868 over 160,000 men, women and children were transported to Australian colonies by the British and Irish Governments as punishment for criminal acts. Although many of the prisoners convicted were habitual or professional criminals with multiple offences recorded against them a small number were political prisoners, social reformers, of one-off offenders. Transportation of these convicts to the remote colonies of New South Wales, Moreton Bay, Norfolk Island, Van Diemen's Land and Western Australia during the late 18th and first half of the 19th century caused much human loss and anguish. For although sentences in most cases were for seven or fourteen years, the isolation of the colonies and the high cost of the passage out to or back from the colonies was prohibitive. This meant separation, except for a lucky few, was for life. By engraving low denomination copper coins, like this British half-penny, convicts under sentence of transportation, in prisons or onboard the hulks, could write of their sorrow using rhyming couplets, by engraving images of themselves in chains, along with women, by engraving signs of their life in freedom (houses, bottles, flowers, hearts, arrows, anchors and Masonic symbols) or by engraving their names or initials alongside those of their loved ones on the token. These tokens, also known as 'leaden hearts' were then left with their loved ones as mementoes. Their purpose was to comfort the recipient, and to keep alive the memory and relationships of a convict transported to the far side of the world. The tokens' very tangibility both as the voice and personal belonging of a convict makes them unique as a record since most other convict associated material was produced by the system that caught, tried, jailed, transported and in some cases reformed them. It is a sad fact that convict love tokens remain one of the few classes of items convicts made, or had made, purely of their own volition not as part of their punishment or sentence and as such they are unique in their humanising of a class that the convict transportation system did its best to isolate and dehumanise. Although some inscriptions were quite elaborate most of the messages express a simple regret at leaving their family and their homeland, and indeed many of the inscriptions are repeated time and time again on different tokens. The inscription

"When this you see/Think on me/When I am in a far country" (and slight variations of it) is one which occurs with particular frequency. This repetition and the fact that many convicts were illiterate and unable to write themselves has led numismatists such as Tim Millett and Michele Field (Convict Love Tokens: The Leaden Hearts the Convicts Left Behind, Wakefield Press, England, 1999) to conclude that workshop-like conditions may have existed in the prisons or onboard the hulks where the tokens were produced and tokens were probably produced in large numbers (although few survive today) by a tradesman or even a skilled fellow-convict, who filled in the names or initials as required.