

MONEY OF ANGLESEY
or,
THE LAST TIME I SAW PARYS¹

The relationship between Matthew Boulton and Thomas Williams was both close and complex. The two men were rather too similar to be close friends each was an entrepreneur, interested in seeing where the dawning Industrial Revolution might lead him. Of the two, Matthew Boulton is perhaps the more appealing, possessed of an idealistic streak absent in his Welsh competitor. But Williams has an interest for readers of his journal, for he it was who began the production of eighteenth-century British provincial tokens.

He did so because of location, ability, and the profit motive. Williams was part owner of the Parys and Mona Mines on Anglesey, the island located immediately off the North Welsh coast. These copper workings were highly productive, and Williams busied himself in selling their metal all over the world - and in undercutting the wares of the Cornish Metal Company (one of whose principles was a gentleman named Matthew Boulton). Williams strove to expand the market for his copper - and one way in which he might hope to do so was in supplying the material (and perhaps the manufacturing base) for a new issue of halfpence and farthings for Great Britain. Matthew Boulton had his eye on the same possibility, but Williams made the first move, lacking orthodox money to pay his host of miners (North Wales was almost devoid of banks in those days, and communications with the rest of the British Isles were execrable, even by the undemanding standards of the eighteenth century), but blessed with the raw material from which a kind of money might be made, Williams set up a mint to strike copper tokens. They would be heavy, containing a generous amount of metal. They would guarantee payment in 'real' money at his offices in London, Liverpool, and Anglesey. They would be as artistic as he could make them. And they would circulate as a penny, a handy denomination at the time, and one which had never before been struck in copper.

Williams set up shop in the bustling town of Holywell, in Flintshire. Coinage appears to have begun at the very start of the year 1787 - and the handsome 'Druid coppers' had become known in London by March 1787, where they were eagerly embraced, a welcome transfusion into the anemic British minor coinage system. By late March, Williams' Holywell mint had begun striking tokens for another pioneering entrepreneur, John Wilkinson. Like Thomas Williams, Wilkinson was strong-willed, and he and Matthew Boulton were as frequently competitors as they were allies. Williams' coppers for Wilkinson featured a portrait of the self-described 'Iron Master' on the obverse, a man at a forge on the reverse. Like the Parys Mines pieces, they were struck in collar, and they were also tariffed as pence - at least at first. Wilkinson found that they circulated more readily as halfpence, however, and lowered their value accordingly.

By the end of March 1787, Matthew Boulton had a major competitor, in two senses: Thomas Williams vied with him for the regal copper-coinage contract (and he could very likely underbid him, because Anglesey copper was cheaper to produce than Cornish copper); and Thomas Williams was also demonstrating, every day, what his mint could do, while Matthew Boulton was still attempting to wheedle a few halfpenny patterns out of his balky-if-gifted ally, Jean-Pierre Droz. But time was on Boulton's side. He would eventually secure the copper coinage contract for his own (if not in alliance with Droz). And he would someday find himself coining copper tokens for Thomas Williams - and for John Wilkinson as well.

Williams kept himself and Wilkinson supplied during 1787 and 1788 - although he moved the mint from out-of-the-way Holywell to Great Charles Street, Birmingham, around the middle of 1787. Williams kept the new site running at full production through the remainder of that year and all of the next. By the end of 1788, he had struck 250 tons of pence and fifty tons of halfpence² for Parys Mines alone - a total of nearly thirteen million tokens. If one added the pieces manufactured for John Wilkinson, the output of this private mint would amount to at least fifteen million pieces, around two-thirds of them struck in a single year, 1788. By the standards of the day, Thomas Williams' coining enterprise was a spectacular success but its days were numbered.

The Welshman had set up his mint, at least in part, with the same hopes and for the same reason as those harbored by his Midlands competitor: the Crown simply *must* address the shortage of official copper coinage - and when it did so, it would likely turn to a private contractor for assistance. But Williams saw month after month pass without governmental action of any sort whatsoever. Nothing seemed forthcoming, and what had

once been seen as a stairway to profit began assuming the appearance of a liability Matthew Boulton had encountered the same official inertia - and indeed, he would continue to encounter it for the better part of a decade. But Boulton was afire with the possibilities of a new idea, whereas Williams was simply out to make a profit. And so the latter came to a momentous decision: he would sell his unwanted coining apparatus (which was of the traditional, preindustrial variety) to Matthew Boulton. The latter had no particular use for it - but he wanted Williams out of the coining business. And so a deal was struck, sometime in the early spring of 1789. Williams agreed to 'entirely relinquish the Coining with my Presses', proposing that our common friend J. Wilkinson be invited to act as arbiter and set a fair price.³ In the end, Matthew Boulton agreed to pay L. 105 each for Williams' five presses - L.525 which he could ill afford at the time, for machines which were of no earthly use to him 'as they are not in any degree applicable to my improved mode of coining [;] besides my present apparatus is sufficient to make the Money of Europe'.⁴ Payment for the old presses would be deferred for several years, and it would be rendered in a curious fashion.

It had also been agreed that Matthew Boulton would strike a new issue of Anglesey halfpence for Thomas Williams; the latter would provide the copper for the project, in the form of left-over blanks, their edges already lettered. John Gregory Hancock, Sr. would provide the dies - and the whole would be turned over to Boulton by Williams' clerk, Wyatt. But the clerk proved balky and Hancock less-than-punctual; and Boulton does not seem to have begun minting Anglesey halfpence prior to the beginning of August 1789. We may assume that the order had been finished by the early autumn. Thomas Williams was charged L. 16.6.8 for each ton coined.

How many 1789 Anglesey halfpence did Matthew Boulton strike? Based on scant records from Soho, I conclude that Williams must have sent him some 28,350 pounds of copper for the purpose, all of it in the form of edge-marked blanks. Smithsonian specimens tend to bear weights corresponding to approximately thirty-five pieces in the pound; if we assume that something in that range was actually intended, we arrive at a figure of slightly under a million pieces for the 1789 issue.

As with the two other pioneer token issues from Soho Mint, these Anglesey pieces were literally hybrids, initiated in one era and completed in another. They were blanked by manually-powered machinery. Their edges were marked in a fashion which would have been familiar to Sir Isaac Newton. But they were struck by steam, in coining presses which Sir Isaac could not have imagined. Finally, they were hybrids in the sense that they were not struck in collar, an eventual hallmark of the Boulton minting technology. They could not be so struck because Boulton had not yet perfected that aspect of his machinery. But he would soon do so, and the Anglesey coinage would be the first to proclaim it.

Anglesey halfpence dated 1789 make up Dalton & Hamer numbers 354 through 377. The first and the last originated elsewhere (the former a pattern, perhaps by Westwood, the latter a simple counterfeit); lacking evidence to the contrary, I attribute the remaining tokens of that date to Matthew Boulton's Soho Mint.

The year 1789 ended and the year 1790 began. Matthew Boulton's people continued to tinker with his mint, but they were still nowhere near solving the problem of rapidly striking and ejecting coins in a collar. Matthew Boulton admitted as much when he secured his Patent in the summer of 1790.

the blank which was coined is pushed out & another is laid in between the
dies either by the person who attends it as usual in coining money or other
wise [sic] by some proper contrivance which does not relate to the present purpose⁵

Had he solved the problem at the time he took out the Patent, it surely would have reflected that fact.

Boulton took out his Patent because he was terrified of Jean-Pierre Droz claiming Soho's improvements as his own. The talented Swiss had been hired to bring his own ameliorations to coining - most especially a segmented collar which imparted a *raised* ornamentation or lettering to coins as they were being struck. Boulton invested many hundreds of pounds in Droz and his invention, but he finally concluded that he would have to look elsewhere for assistance in his enterprise. He and Droz had completely fallen out by the summer of 1790, and their differences were submitted to binding arbitration just as the Patent was being secured. Droz left Soho in the late winter of 1791. By that time, his erstwhile employer was hard at work on another coinage for Thomas Williams, and for Parys Mines.

Droz might have had a hand in it; in mid-May 1790, the Swiss had requested and received Boulton's

permission to create a new set of obverse and reverse dies for a new Pary's coinage, working on his own time; he was also to create special edge-marking tools for the purpose. But Droz proved no more enterprising in laboring for himself than he had in laboring for Mr. Boulton, and the project came to nothing. Several months would pass before another Pary's token was created. And another artist would be called in to create it.

This was a Parisian named Rambert Dumarest, with whom Boulton was in treaty by the spring of 1790. He set Dumarest to work, in Paris, creating the Druid die in which Droz had lost interest. Dumarest labored on the project until late in the summer, when Boulton finally enticed him to Soho. There he finished the die, and a few pieces from it were struck for the consideration of Thomas Williams and sent to him at the end of October.

They occasioned a speedy and candid response:

I have rec'd your Box of Druids -- I'm sorry to tell you we shld. be cursed for offering a large Quantity from this Die – it is universally condemned as not in Character & out of proportion the face being much too large for the rest of the Head which some critics say is in so small a compass it admits no room for Brains ... Some say your Druid's Beard resembles a run of Water more [than] a man's Beard – Your Letters on the Edge are so faint they are scarce legible – ⁶

Boulton's nephew Zack Walker had the unenviable task of breaking the news to the high-strung Dumarest. I think there is no doubt that the pieces sent comprised either Dalton & Hamer 379 or 380, whose Druids' beards rather *do* resemble waterfalls. But that reference to indistinct lettering is what interests me: it suggests that Boulton was still tinkering with his machinery, was still having trouble getting his collar and ejection mechanism to work properly.

His products featured incuse edge lettering for that type of marking could be applied in the planchet stage, pieces with it forced through a one-piece plain collar in the striking stage. And Boulton's collars were evidently too tight, which was why Williams complained about indistinct edge lettering. As Dumarest made a second attempt on the dies (producing Dalton & Hamer 378), Boulton's people tackled the collar and ejection problem one more time. And now they solved it. I have two Dalton & Hamer 378s, both with clear edge lettering, the first struck with a collar (the normal state for the variety) and the second *struck without a collar*. Boulton had a few pieces so manufactured, in order that Williams could see how the edge lettering *ought* to appear. And he thus bought a few days' time to bring the collar mechanism to perfection. My research suggests that this final obstacle was overcome during the first part of November 1790; and only after that point can we speak of a truly industrialized coining methodology at Soho.

Dalton & Hamer 378 may be regarded as a prototype; actual coinage of Boulton's second issue of Anglesey halfpence would not get under way until the early months of 1791. Between the end of March and the latter part of August, Soho struck some sixteen tons, one hundredweight, and ten pounds of copper halfpence for Thomas Williams. As the tokens were to be minted at thirty-two to the pound, Boulton must have struck around 1,151,000 of them.

They comprise Dalton & Hamer varieties 386 through 391, and the flat fields and precise edges tell us that here indeed, we are seeing a modern, mass-produced form of money. Proofs are known for this issue too – another suggestion that we are moving into modern moneying. Henceforth, Soho's proof coins and tokens will bear a distinctive, mahogany finish, created by means of a 'bronzing powder', applied to the surface prior to striking, bonded to the surface of by the pressure of the dies during striking.

You may recall that Matthew Boulton owed Thomas Williams several hundred pounds for his coining presses. He paid a portion of the debt during the 1791 coinage. Thomas Williams was supplying his own copper: as the self-described 'Copper King', he had plenty of the metal, even with the currently restricted production of the Parys and Mona Mines, which had seen their best days by the end of the eighties. Williams apparently delivered this copper in the form of sheets. Boulton blanked it, coined it, and sent it on its way in the form of halfpenny tokens. His normal demand for such work was forty-two pounds per ton, but he only charged Thomas Williams thirty-one. The difference was applied to what he owed on the presses.

There would be a final Boulton issue for Thomas Williams, and we have now come full circle: for the Welsh

entrepreneur had begun his coinage - and the entire token series – with pence, struck in part as an advertisement in pursuit of a regal coinage. Now his old competitor would strike pence *for* him - and in so doing, complete the Parys series.

Correspondence is spotty, but Williams was definitely thinking of placing another order by the autumn of 1791. He first thought of halfpence; sometime prior to the spring of 1792, he reconsidered. A curious type of Parys Mines penny, the last legitimate representative of that denomination, would be the result.

I initially assumed that Matthew Boulton had commandeered an old obverse penny die from the 1788 series and married it to a new reverse die for the occasion. But a close examination of the Druid's head on Dalton & Hamer 255 (the Boulton-struck coin, which bears a date of 1791) has convinced me that this die, too, was specifically created for the occasion. There are minor differences not previously seen, the most notable being the drapery at the Druid's shoulder. On earlier versions, the drapery comes to a rounded point; on Boulton's version, the point is interrupted by a dimple, directly opposite the lowermost inner acorn.

Thomas Williams provided his own copper blanks, some nineteen hundredweights' worth; at sixteen to the pound, they would have amounted to 34,320 pieces. The pieces were edgemarked in the usual fashion, promising payment ON DEMAND IN LONDON LIVERPOOL OR ANGLESEY. On or about 16 July 1792, Matthew Boulton turned the lot into penny tokens.

And that was the end of the Anglesey coinage - at least, so far as Matthew Boulton was concerned. But it was not the end of Matthew Boulton's association with Thomas Williams. The two remained in competition over copper and many other matters down to the time of Williams' death, in 1802 – and the Welshman could be relied upon to be a thorn in Boulton's side whenever the latter sought copper for coinage, driving up the price whenever he could.

But the Soho coiner had the last laugh. In 1797, he, and not Thomas Williams, secured the coveted right to strike regal copper coinage for the British Isles. Boulton would strike copper pence and twopence for anyone who wanted them – and one of his customers was the Parys Mines Company of Holywell, Flintshire.

R.G. Doty

NOTES

¹ I AM Sorry (R.G.D.)

² There is a suggestion that production of the halfpence commenced around the beginning of April 1788. See MBP368 (Williams, Thomas), Thomas Williams to Matthew Boulton, 5 April 1788, in which the writer encloses 'one of [John Gregory] Hancock's new halfpence --- The Engraving is far inferior to Your's [sic] tho' not to any of our Tower Productions & I believe Hancock might mend his hand'. Hancock had engraved the dies for the Anglesey pence, as well as those for the Wilkinson coins of 1787 and 1788. He would be active in token design and production for many years, and he would work for Matthew Boulton on at least two occasions.

³ MBP368, Thomas Williams to Matthew Boulton, 19 May 1789.

⁴ MBP 150, [Private] Letter Book Q, Matthew Boulton to Thomas Williams, 24 May 1789
Boulton's mint was not as far along as he claimed - but it would indeed be coming on line within a few weeks.

⁵ Birmingham Reference Library, Boulton & Watt Papers, Portfolio J 14, second part, Specification of Coining Mill (1790)'.
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⁶ MBP368, Thomas Williams to Matthew Boulton, 31 October 1790.

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