

Welsh druid tokens on the Potowmack canal in the USA –

Clive Reed

I picked up an old copy of the *National Geographic* magazine dated June 1987. My interest was drawn to the article on the Patowmack Canal, which had been the brainchild of George Washington in 1785. The canal linked the Potomac River at Georgetown (that later became the site of the capital Washington in 1800) and the Ohio River. The canal was later incorporated into the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and carried trade until the 1830s. I visited parts of that canal and Georgetown in 2008 on a holiday to the USA.

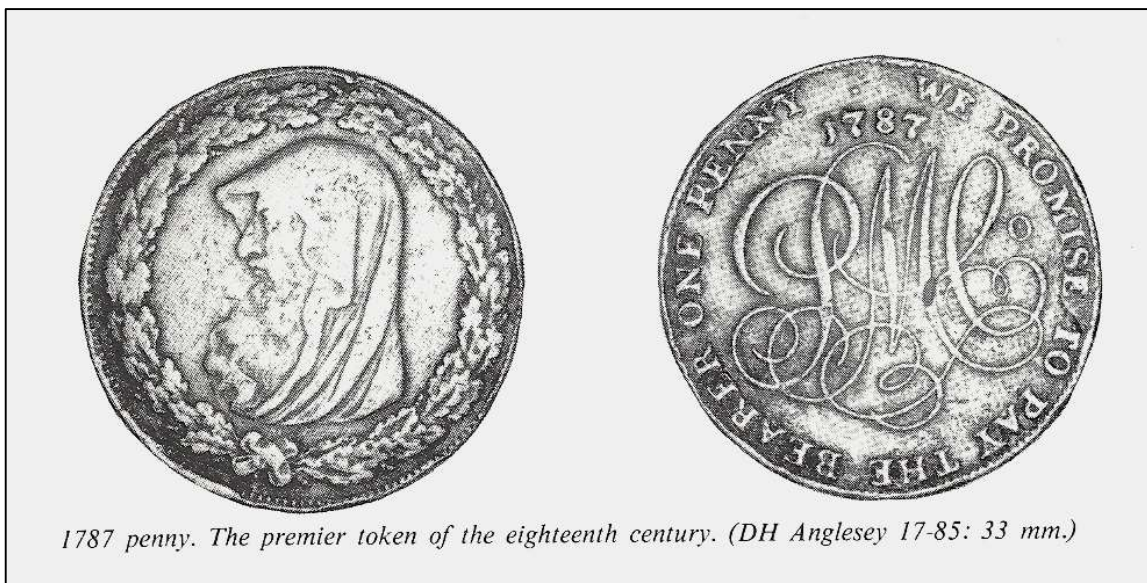
During archaeological excavations in 1982 at Matildaville, one of the settlements along the canal, large numbers of artefacts were uncovered including brassware, buttons, pig iron, clay pipes and pottery similar to that manufactured in the UK in the eighteenth century, and considerable numbers of coins. After the American Revolution in the eighteenth century when the original thirteen states broke away from Britain, the new United States of America did not have a currency of its own until later in the century and still used British and colonial coinage and currencies from other countries until the introduction of the dollar. When the Patowmack Canal was completed, the canal company initially required their tolls to be paid in foreign coins, the major hard currencies at that time.

Among the coins recovered in 1982 and made of silver were French six-livre coins, Spanish-American two-reale pieces, English shillings of

George III, and Portuguese 400 rei pieces. The copper coins recovered were French five-centime pieces, Spanish-American one-escudo pieces, Virginia halfpennies, and the surprise find of Welsh halfpenny tokens. The magazine described the tokens as Welsh halfpennies. It would appear that all major European currencies were accepted in the new USA.

The settlements and industries along the canal would have required substantial numbers of small value coins such as the Welsh halfpennies. No doubt numbers of those coins were taken to America by immigrants from Wales, but the surprise is that they were used as currency over a far greater area than previously imagined. The Welsh halfpennies were those of the Parys Mines Company, a copper mining company of Anglesey, north Wales. The Parys Mines coins were issued by Thomas Williams, an industrial magnate who owned copper mines on Anglesey, smelting works in other areas, and coin presses in Birmingham.

Williams began to produce his own copper tokens in 1787 and, in my own small collection of Welsh tokens, I have two Parys Mines halfpenny tokens dated 1789 and 1791, and a North Wales token dated 1793. All three have the druid's head on one side surrounded by a wreath of oak leaves. The reverse side of those dated 1789 and 1791 have the cipher of the Parys Mines Company – PMCo -- with the date above and the legend *The Anglesey Mines Halfpenny* around the circumference. The 1789 halfpenny has around



the rim the words *Payable in Anglesey London or Liverpool*. The 1791 halfpenny is identical to the 1789 token except for the wording around the rim which reads *Payable in Anglesey or London*. The 1793 token also has the druid's head on one side but with a harp on the reverse with the date above, and the legend *North Wales halfpenny*. Around the rim is the wording *Payable in London or Anglesey*. The Parys Mines Company also produced a copper penny in 1787 which is identical to the halfpenny in design.

Thomas Williams produced over 300 tons of his tokens, about 30 million pennies and halfpennies. They are finely engraved and produced of full weight. The Shire album, *Trade Tokens of the Industrial Revolution* by Jim Newmark states that they are the earliest large-scale issue of late eighteenth-century copper tokens produced. The publication is critical of the design in that the tokens lacked any representation of the process of industry or the place of work. My own view is

that the druid's head was and is an identity of Wales and that alone would identify the tokens as originating from Wales. The legend around the rim that the tokens were *Payable in Anglesey, London or Liverpool*, the latter two among the largest cities in the UK at that time and also the largest commercial centres in the UK made the tokens recognisable to many millions of people. The PMCo cipher was a recognisable image of the largest copper mine in the world at that time, and the vast number of tokens produced made them more numerous than official halfpennies. To find them in a 1982 excavation of early USA trade shows just how acceptable and recognisable the tokens were. Thomas Williams was an entrepreneur and one who understood the value of advertising. His Welsh tokens of the druid's head and the Parys Mines Company cipher ensured that his copper mining interests were recognisable by his own tokens. He also helped to make Wales more recognisable by those same tokens.

**© author and South West Wales Industrial Archaeology Society
Not to be reproduced without permission**