

EAST RIDING
MUSEUMS

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**Bite sized training: Coins, tokens
and other coin like things**



EAST RIDING
OF YORKSHIRE COUNCIL

This is only intended as a brief overview of some common types of coin/tokens found in the East Riding. You are more than welcome to leave items with Museums staff (who will provide you with a receipt) so that we can formally identify/record them.

For more information, see the book/website list at the end of this document.

Iron Age (“Celtic”) coins

The first coins in this country. The earliest coins elsewhere were in Lydia (western Turkey) in about 600BC and were made of electrum – a natural alloy of gold & silver.

Iron Age coins are rare finds in East Yorkshire. They date from about 50BC to 50AD. All hand struck and because conical pieces of metal were used rather than flat blanks, the resulting coins have a characteristic “dished” shape.

In East Yorkshire, you will usually only see gold “staters”, based on coins of Phillip II of Macedon (Alexander the Great’s father). They were made by the Corieltavi tribe who lived in what is now Lincolnshire (there is no evidence that our local tribe the Parisi made their own coins).

Abstract designs – the originals had a head of the Greek Sun God Apollo on one side and a horse and chariot on the other. Sometimes the convex side is blank.

Smaller silver coins are sometimes also found – again will mostly be abstract designs (some horses).

There will not be any lettering on these coins in most cases (a few later Staters do have abbreviated names on them).

The gold coins can be quite “coppery” in colour, as they were not pure gold.

Roman coinage

All coins were hand-struck, using two engraved dies, a flat metal blank and a lot of brute force! They will therefore often not be uniformly round.

In contrast to Medieval and later coinage, the portraits will generally be in slight relief, so that you can “rock” the coin on a flat surface. Early portraits are quite individual – big noses, broad necks, beards etc and may well be like the person they are meant to depict. Later portraits are very bland, so you have to date the coins by reverses, mintmarks etc.

Lettering will usually be in Latin (mostly running clockwise), occasionally in Greek, with a portrait of the Emperor on the “heads” side, generally facing right (sometimes left). Lettering will start with IMP on early coins, DN on later coins, followed by the name of the Emperor and various titles – Caesar, Augustus etc. Abbreviations are often used.



You can also tell something about the date of Roman coins by the head gear worn by the emperor. Remember, they weren't using our dating system, so you won't see 79AD or whatever on the back! (if you do, your coin is a modern reproduction)

The reverse is often a standing figure, which may be the emperor or symbolise a virtue like Peace, Abundance, Security etc. You may also get buildings, soldiers with standards, wolf & twins etc. Later coins can have abbreviated mintmarks at the bottom e.g. PLON, telling you where the coin was struck.

Roman coins were organised into denominations and you get gold (you'll almost never see these), silver and bronze/brass coins of various sizes ranging from old 2p size down to a couple of mm across for the latest ones.

In general, later Roman coins are smaller than earlier ones and less well-struck. This is due to political chaos (lots of short-lived emperors), barbarian invasions and general economic troubles – inflation etc.

You get a lot of contemporary copies of later Roman coins – often distinguishable by poor lettering (complete gibberish sometimes) or “matchstick men”. There are many modern copies / forgeries of Roman coins too – sometimes these are stamped to distinguish them.

Anglo-Saxon / Viking coins (7th-11th centuries AD)

Not terribly common finds in East Yorkshire.

In the 7th/8th centuries, small dumpy silver coins called “Sceattas” or “Sceats” were used. Can be very irregular and have abstract designs like a “porcupine” or an enclosure with a raised ring (annulet) in it.

Later Saxon pennies are broader and flatter and generally feature a small cross in the centre of one side. Lettering around edges can be the name of the king and/or the moneyer. Names mostly in English (followed by Rex – latin for king), but can be a bit hard to read as letter forms can be a bit odd.

The latest coinage may have a very basic “portrait” of the king, with his name and titles around the edge. The reverse of these will have a cross in the centre and the moneyer's name around it.

Medieval (1066-c1500)

All coins were hand-struck, using two engraved dies, a flat metal blank and a lot of brute force!

Unlike Roman coins, Medieval coinage tends to be very flat and thin.

The usual denomination you see is the silver penny. You also occasionally get the larger groat (4 pence) which is distinguished by size and by two lines of writing rather than one) and halfpennies. These are much smaller – often they may be simply be a penny cut in half!



Gold Medieval coins exist but are very very rare.

Lettering is again in Latin and dates are generally not used.

Pennies have a very basic portrait on one side usually facing forwards, wearing a crown and probably holding a sceptre in one hand. Portraits are not usually very realistic!

Lettering on the portrait side generally begins with a cross and then the ruler's name HENRICUS, EDWARDVS etc, sometimes abbreviated, followed by titles – e.g. REX (king). Usually runs clockwise. Note that numerals were not usually used after kings' names – so you won't see Edward I, Henry IV etc.

The reverse will have either a short cross within a circle or a longer cross that reaches the edges of the coin. Lettering probably in one of these forms:

Name of moneyer / name of mint (often abbreviated) e.g. WILLEM ON LVND (William at London), Or just the mint e.g. CIVITAS LVND (town/mint of London).

The cross on the reverse usually has four groups of three little raised pellets in the quarters.

Note that Richard I and John did not issue coins in England, they continued using coins produced under their father's (Henry II) name.

Tudor/Post-Medieval

Still hand-struck coins up to Charles I (1625-49) generally. From Charles II (1660-1685) onwards, nearly all coins were produced in mechanical presses (referred to as "milled" coins). From 1790, steam powered presses were used.

Lots more denominations, often distinguished by symbols/lettering by the monarch's head e.g. a rose, XII, VI.

Realistic portraits come back in from Henry VII (1485-1509) onwards and they now face either left or right. From Queen Anne (1702-14) onwards they alternate left or right from reign to reign.

Lettering still in Latin, running clockwise. Numbers begin to be used to distinguish monarchs with the same name – CAROLUS II, GEORGIUS I, GEORGIUS II etc

Dates will generally appear on the reverses of the coins.

Reverses combine the Medieval long cross with the royal coat of arms in many cases.

George III coinage particularly common due to his very long reign (1760-1820). The "cartwheel penny" (1797), recognizable by the broad border around the edge of the coin is particularly common.



Quite a lot of Scottish copper coinage circulated in northern England in the reign of Charles I. These are referred to as “turners” and can be distinguished by a thistle.

Modern

All milled coinage (probably with grooved edges). Still with Latin legends, but may well have numbers / lettering to distinguish denominations – 2d, 5p or whatever.

Dates generally at the bottom of the reverse. “Britannia” figure on many reverse – thought to have originated with a Roman coin of the 2nd century AD.

Portraits realistic, but note the young and old Victoria portraits – the latter was not brought in until 1895 when the Queen was already 76!

Tokens and other coin-like objects

Jetons

These were counting tokens, used on reckoning boards - the western equivalent of the abacus. Appeared from Medieval times down to the 17th century. English, French or most commonly from Nuremburg in Germany. The latter will have a name and a religious motto in German on them. Jetons generally do not resemble regular pennies in their design, though they are similar in size

Tokens

Generally of 18th or 19th century date (Medieval and 17th century tokens are seen, but less commonly). Are generally of brass/copper, though precious metal examples are occasionally seen.

Some tokens were issued by tradesmen as a form of advertising for their business, or as a substitute for coins, only redeemable in that business. Sometimes (illegally), used more widely as a form of small change where regular coinage was not available in sufficient quantities.

Early tokens often have a name and “His halfpenny” or “His penny” on one side. They may be strange shapes – some are heart shaped for example.

Tokens do not generally look like regular coinage – so avoiding charges of forgery. So if there is a royal portrait, it may look a bit odd and the lettering may be gibberish.

Some tokens were commemorative of events or buildings.

They largely disappear after about 1817 when George III banned them, although some shop tokens – Co-Op and Cussons for example survived into the 20th century.

Communion tokens (Presbyterian churches): generally oblong, of lead alloy. Probably 19th century.



Other possibilities include lead tokens given to pilgrims in Medieval times (usually fairly crude and with geometric design).

Some other possibilities

Lead sack seals:

18th/early 19th centuries. Connected with the Baltic flax trade. Will have names on them in Cyrillic (Russian custom officials), various numbers and possibly a date.

Commemorative coins/medals:

For example, for Jubilees/weddings. May have a regular looking heads side, with a royal portrait and the usual Latin inscription. The reverse will probably have the name of the local mayor / alderman. Given out as gifts to children and other local residents. They may have a ribbon attached.

Game tokens

Some of the older (Victorian) ones can look a little like coins, in that they may have a portrait. But the lettering will probably be in English and the design will otherwise be different from regular coins.

Clocking on tokens

Mostly blank bits of metal, possibly with a number punched into them. 19th/20th centuries.

Buttons

Can usually be distinguished by the remains of a loop on the back, unless this has broken off and totally worn down. Some buttons will have the maker's name and address in small letters on the reverse.

Some helpful reference books / websites

(This is not intended to be comprehensive, simply a list of some easily available resources. Some will be available in your local library)

- <http://finds.org.uk/> - The Portable Antiquities Scheme website. Contains a number of numismatic (coin identification) guides
- <http://esty.ancients.info/> - a guide to Greek & Roman coins
- <http://www.celticcoins.ca/> - The Celtic Coin Index, an online database of 28,000 coin records and images
- Coins of England & the United Kingdom (Spink, 2007)
- Roman Coins & their Values, Volumes I-III (David R. Sear)
- Identifying Roman Coins (Richard Reece & Simon James, 1986)
- Tokens & Tallies through the ages (Greenlight Publishing, 2003) Paragraph 2 example

