

THE BOOK
OF THE
OLD EDINBURGH
CLUB

The Journal for
Edinburgh History



G. R. Dalgleish, 'Two Robert Adam Buildings Illustrated on Edinburgh Trade Tokens',
Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, New Series 1 (1991), pp. 28–33.

~~~~~

This article is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club**, *The Journal for Edinburgh History* ISSN 2634-2618

Content © The Old Edinburgh Club and contributors. All rights reserved.

For information about The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (BOEC), including contents of previous issues and indexes, see <https://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/boec>.

**This article is made available for your personal research and private study only.**

For any further uses of BOEC material, please contact the Editor, The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, at [editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk](mailto:editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk). The Club has a Take-Down Policy covering potential rights infringements. Please see <http://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/oec-take-down-policy>.



*Digitised by the Centre for Research  
Collections, Edinburgh University  
Library from the copy in the Library  
Collection*



# TWO ROBERT ADAM BUILDINGS ILLUSTRATED ON EDINBURGH TRADE TOKENS

G R DALGLEISH

TWO OF ROBERT ADAM'S FINEST creations are undoubtedly the General Register House and the Old College of the University of Edinburgh. They have been recognised as such virtually since their foundation stones were laid, in 1774 and 1789 respectively. Consequently, over the past 200 years they have been illustrated, reproduced and depicted in almost every artistic medium. Perhaps one of the most unusual examples of their representation occurs in numismatics. In 1796 and 1797 two trade tokens were issued in Edinburgh illustrating the front elevations of these buildings. Before looking at these fascinating architectural miniatures in detail, a word should be said about the issuing of such tokens in general.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the progress of the Industrial Revolution and the developing British economy produced an increased demand for low denomination coinage, with which to pay the workforce and buy goods. Unfortunately, however, the Government failed to issue an adequate amount of small change, causing serious hardship to a large number of the working population. One remedy for this was for traders and companies to issue their own token coinage. These tokens circulated in their local area and could be used to buy goods or could be redeemed for regal coinage.

It has been estimated that between 1787 and 1817 over 10,000 different types were produced.<sup>1</sup> A contemporary writer suggested that companies and individuals had spent as much as £300,000 on issuing tokens by 1797.<sup>2</sup> They were mainly in halfpenny or farthing denominations, although some pennies and even shillings were also produced. They varied in quality from very crude lead disks stamped only with the issuer's initials, to masterpieces of the die-sinkers

art, with vivid illustrations of industrial or commercial scenes. Such was the contemporary fascination with tokens that they immediately became collectors' items, and in fact some were issued solely for this reason.

The shortage of official small change was eased in 1797 when Matthew Boulton and James Watt produced their 'Cartwheel' issue of regal copper pennies and twopences at their Soho works in Birmingham. These were followed two years later by their halfpennies and farthings. Production of tokens tailed off at this time, although it revived again in the first quarter of the nineteenth century until tokens were finally declared illegal in 1817. Thereafter they were issued mainly for advertising, with very few intended to circulate as alternative currency.

## THE TOKENS

The first of the two 'Adam' tokens to be issued was that illustrating the Register House (fig. 1). Made of copper, 29 mm in diameter, the obverse shows the front elevation of the building as designed by Adam with central dome, two flanking turrets and the sweeping double stairway in front. A recessed panel beneath the illustration contains the name of the token's designer, 'WRIGHT', while 'REGISTER OFFICE FOUNDED 1774' appears in the exergue. It also carries the legend 'EDINBURGH HALFPENNY / 1796'.

Adam began building the new home for Scotland's public records in 1774. It was the first important Government building since the Horse Guards in London, and was built on ground given by the City of Edinburgh in an attempt to encourage the development of the embryonic New Town at the north end of the new North Bridge.<sup>3</sup> After a chequered building history, involving a series of long delays caused by





Fig. 1. Register House token, 1796. (a) Obverse showing front elevation of Adam's Register House. The flaw in the die which eventually resulted in it breaking is clearly visible on the left. (b) Reverse showing Britannia. (*National Museums of Scotland.*)

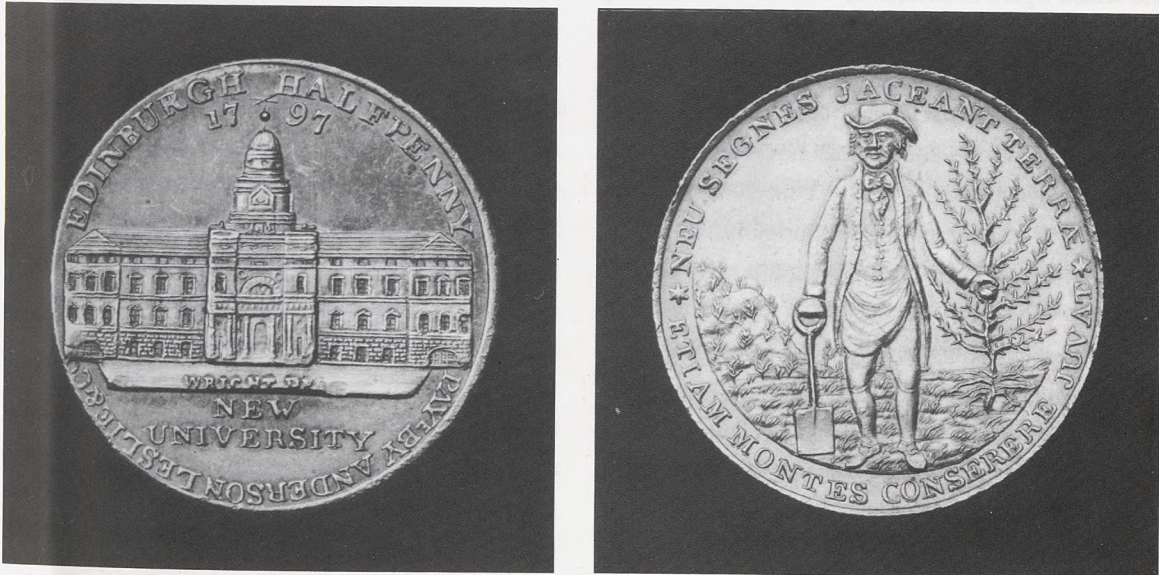


Fig. 2. University token for Anderson, Leslie & Co. (Dalton and Hamer, variety 8), 1797. (a) Obverse showing front elevation of Adam's University design. (b) Reverse showing a gardener. (*National Museums of Scotland.*)



underfunding, the Register House's front elevation, dome and side elevations were more or less complete by 1791-92. The start of the wars with France in 1793 brought the project to a complete halt (as it did to the University building, see below). It was not until the 1820s that the north elevation was completed. Throughout the nineteenth century, Adam's majestic setting for the building was radically changed by alterations to the pavement and street layouts, caused by the widening of Leith Street. This ultimately resulted in the original staircase scheme being replaced with the present one, much further back towards the front of the building. The token therefore illustrates Adam's building both as he originally designed it and much as it would have appeared when the token was issued in 1796.

The designer of the token was James Wright, junior, of Dundee. The dies were struck by Wyon of London and it was manufactured by Peter Kempson, a medallist and button manufacturer in Birmingham.<sup>4</sup> Only about 100 were struck before the obverse die broke, and indeed a very prominent flaw appears on the left side of some of the tokens. The reverse shows the seated figure of Britannia, with the bow of a ship to the left. Although there is no issuer's name present, it is possible they were circulated by John Wright, a draper and hosier in the High Street.<sup>5</sup> It is also possible, however, that this token was never intended to circulate as currency, but was conceived from the outset as a collectors' item. Certainly, its rarity, whether forced or not, ensured that this soon became the case.

The second token, illustrating the University on the South Bridge, was issued a year later, in 1797 (fig. 2). The new University building was intended to replace the old clutter of buildings of the Town's College which existed on the same site. Some of these were in a dilapidated state and none could adequately reflect the importance and prestige of the institution. Adam produced his preliminary design in 1785, and it was

intended that the money would come from the profits the City hoped to make from the development of the new South Bridge scheme.<sup>6</sup> As was so often the case with the various stages of Edinburgh's architectural development, the project was bedevilled by funding problems from the outset until its eventual completion in the 1830s. A new design was produced and work began in 1789 but, as with Register House, it was suspended again for many years on the outbreak of the war in 1793. Further complications arose from the death of Robert Adam in 1792, the year before the death of his cousin and main proponent of the University scheme, the Principal, William Robertson.

The token, again of copper, 29 mm in diameter, exists in three separate variants.<sup>7</sup> On all, the obverse shows the front elevation of the University as designed by Adam, with its monumental entrance portico surmounted by a relatively small-scale dome, flanked by advanced end bays with hipped roofs. Beneath this illustration in the first variant, in a recessed panel, the name of Wright, the designer, again appears, while around the rim is the legend 'EDINBURGH HALFPENNY / 1797 PAYE BY ANDERSON LESLIE & CO' with 'UNIVERSITY OF / EDINBURGH' in the exergue.

The illustration certainly does not show the building as it existed at the time. When work was suspended in 1792-93, Adam's dome had not yet been built, and indeed the present more massive dome, the work of Robert Rowand Anderson, was not added until 1887.<sup>8</sup> Nor is it likely that the complete east front roofing scheme had been finished, leaving parts of this majestic building open to the ravages of the elements for many years.<sup>9</sup> James Wright must therefore have based his token design on Adam's original designs, rather than on the building as it stood. Indeed, a pair of prints of Adam's drawings had been published in 1791 to help with the appeal for subscriptions toward the cost of the project.<sup>10</sup>

The reverse shows a gardener, wearing a hat and an apron, with an uprooted bush in his left hand and a

spade in his right, set against the background of a planted hillside. The rim legend reads 'NEU SEGNES JACEANT TERRAE - ETIAM MONTES CONSERERE JUVAT'. This is a paraphrase of a well known passage in Virgil's *Georgics* which may be translated as 'Lest the land lie idle, there is joy in planting out even the mountains'.<sup>11</sup>

As we have seen, this token, like the Register House one, was designed by James Wright, with the dies again struck by Wyon and manufactured by Peter Kempson. Unlike the Register House token, however, this definitely seems to have been a genuine trade token, struck for fairly extensive circulation. It bears a denomination and, of course, the imprint of its issuer. Anderson, Leslie & Co. were seedsmen, nurserymen and florists at the 'head of the Fleshmarket Close' in the High Street.<sup>12</sup> Dalton and Hamer have suggested that the reason for the use of the University on the obverse was the link between it and the botanical interests of the issuer, in that a botanical garden and collection of plant specimens was connected with the University; furthermore Britain's first Chair of Agriculture had been founded in Edinburgh University in 1790.<sup>13</sup> A more straightforward and likely explanation, however, may simply be the designer's deep interest in important architectural subjects. As we shall see below, he created a large number of tokens illustrating buildings which had no obvious connection with the issuers of the tokens.

Only about twelve examples of the first variant of this token were struck before the obverse die broke (Wright seems not to have had a great deal of luck with his dies). A new obverse was produced, very similar to the original, but with the designer's name no longer in a recessed panel and with 'NEW / UNIVERSITY' in the exergue (fig. 2a). Two new reverses (distinguished by differences in the spelling of TERRA / TERRAE: fig. 2b) were used with this new obverse, producing three variants in all. Overall, some ten hundredweights of all three versions were produced, a figure which would

undoubtedly suggest that the tokens were intended for a reasonably wide circulation, rather than for the specialist collector.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE DESIGNER

The designer of both the above tokens, James Wright, junior, was the son of a Dundee merchant and ran an ironmonger's business in the Overgate there. He had a considerable interest in numismatics and in the design, issue and collection of tokens in particular.<sup>15</sup> He wrote 'Observations on Coins' as an introduction to the *Virtuoso's Companion*<sup>16</sup> and his preface to Conder's *Arrangement of Provincial Coins*<sup>17</sup> was published posthumously. In both these works he set out his view of the use and importance of a token coinage. He made a clear distinction between two basic classes of token, those intended for circulation, as pledges of value, and those made for sale to collectors.<sup>18</sup> He also commented on the variable quality of tokens which had been and were then being produced, and made a plea for the improvement in design of all types and for careful selection of the subject material. One of his own major interests was the recording of important buildings, historic and modern: 'Pieces have been struck bearing exact representations of almost every public building in London, Coventry, Birmingham and Dundee ... thus a general view of the state of Architecture in Great Britain is exhibited; the preservation of which ... must be of extreme utility and value to posterity.'<sup>19</sup> He waxes somewhat lyrical on this theme, maintaining that not only can architects consult and make use of 'accurate though minute elevations ... of hundreds of edifices throughout the Kingdom' but that this could not otherwise be done 'but at great expense'! He concludes that the 'study [of tokens] might be rendered advantageous to the meanest artificer, from the variety of models and designs to be drawn from its objects'.

As well as the two Edinburgh tokens described above, Wright also designed a large number of tokens issued in Dundee and Angus, including the Dundee



Shilling, the Dundee Penny and halfpennies issued by Alex. Mollison, John Pilmer and Alex. Swap & Co.<sup>20</sup> He also designed tokens issued in Perth, Montrose and Forfar as well as several private tokens.<sup>21</sup> His interest in recording architecture, noted above, is amply illustrated by his tokens, virtually all of which represent locally important buildings. These include ancient structures such as Dudhope Castle, the Old Tower and the Cowgate Port in Dundee as well as buildings relatively contemporary to Wright, such as the Infirmary (founded 1794), the Trades Hall (1776), the Glassworks (1788) and St Andrew's Church (1772), all in Dundee. Considering the number of these important buildings which have disappeared, Wright's comments on the desirability of preserving 'a view of the state of Architecture' are undoubtedly borne out.

Most of Wright's tokens were manufactured by Peter Kempson of Birmingham who, along with Peter Skidmore, an ironmonger and stove-grate manufacturer from Clerkenwell, London, was well

known for his fine series of tokens illustrating historic English buildings.<sup>22</sup> Kempson undoubtedly shared Wright's views on the desirability of preserving a record of the country's architectural achievement and many of his tokens are very fine indeed. Although most suggest they were to be issued as currency, their production costs were so far above the token's face value that they can only really have been intended as collectors' items.<sup>23</sup> In this, they again share a feature of Wright's Register House token.

Despite obvious problems with the durability of the dies, the two tokens discussed above are finely designed and produced. They give accurate representations, in miniature, of Adam's intentions for his two great Edinburgh public buildings. Equally, they undoubtedly fulfil James Wright's desire to achieve an affordable means by which large numbers of people could view and appreciate the very best in architecture. It is no fault of his that posterity should not have preserved these buildings as if they were frozen in copper.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

I am very grateful to Drs Iain Brown and Andrew Fraser at whose suggestion this article came about, and whose deep knowledge of Adam's buildings have prevented some glaring errors appearing in print. Mr Ian Lerner of the National Museums' Photographic Section produced his unfailingly excellent photographs. I must also record my thanks to my colleague Mr Nick Holmes, who not only unstintingly provided references but also read over the paper in an attempt to save me from too many numismatic errors.

The tokens described above are both from the National Museums of Scotland's collections; other examples are held in Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections.

- 1 J. Newmark, *Trade Tokens of the Industrial Revolution* (Shire Album 79, Aylesbury 1981), p. 7.
- 2 James Wright's preface in J. Conder, *An Arrangement of Provincial Coins, Tokens and Medalets* (Ipswich 1798).
- 3 Henry M. Paton, 'The General Register House', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, 17 (1930), pp. 147-175; John Gifford, Colin McWilliam and David Walker, *The Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh* (Harmondsworth 1984), pp. 285-286.

- 4 R. Dalton and S.H. Hamer, *The Provincial Token-Coinage of the 18th Century, Part XII: Scotland* (London 1916), p. v; R.C. Bell, *The Building Medalets of Kempson and Skidmore* (Newcastle 1978), intro.
- 5 Dalton and Hamer, *Provincial Token-Coinage*, p. v; R.C. Bell, *Traders' Tickets and Private Tokens, 1785-1819* (Newcastle: 1966), pp. 222-223.
- 6 Andrew G. Fraser, *The Building of Old College: Adam, Playfair and the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1989), chapter 3, fig. 3.18; A.J. Youngson, *The Making of Classical Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1966), p. 111.
- 7 Dalton and Hamer, *Provincial Token-Coinage*, p. 419: D & H 6, 7 & 8.
- 8 Fraser, *Old College*, pp. 288-292.
- 9 Youngson, *Classical Edinburgh*, p. 130.
- 10 Fraser, *Old College*, chapter 4, pp. 103, 356.
- 11 Virgil, *Georgics*, ii, 37-38. I am indebted to Roy Pinkerton for identifying and translating the Latin text.
- 12 *Edinburgh Directory*, 1797; the *Directory* for 1793 recorded their address as 'opposite the Cross'. See also, for further details

- of this firm, Priscilla Minay, 'Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Century Edinburgh Seedsmen and Nurserymen', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, New Series, 1 (1991), pp. 7-27.
- 13 Dalton and Hamer, *Provincial Token-Coinage*, p. v; Ian J. Fleming and Noel F. Robertson, *Britain's First Chair of Agriculture at the University of Edinburgh, 1790-1990* (Edinburgh 1990).
- 14 R.C. Bell, *Commercial Coins, 1787-1804* (Newcastle 1963), p. 260.
- 15 'Dundee Copper Coins', in *The Dundee Advertiser*, 22 December 1897.
- 16 T. Pratten and M. Denton, *The Virtuoso's Companion and Coin Collector's Guide* (London 1795-97).
- 17 Wright's preface in Conder, *Arrangement of Provincial Coins*.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. viii
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. v-vi.
- 20 Dalton and Hamer, *Provincial Token-Coinage*, pp. 403-405.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 406, 407, 436.
- 22 Bell, *Kempson and Skidmore*, intro.; Newmark, *Trade Tokens*, p. 7.
- 23 Bell, *Kempson and Skidmore*, intro.