
Token Corresponding Society Bulletin Vol. 11 No. 9, DEC 2015 pp. 354-355 0269-0187

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 Deposited on: 5 January 2016
A token found at Lyme Regis, Dorset, apparently associated with the fossil collector Mary Anning

Michael A. Taylor(1) & Richard Bull(2)

In April 2014 Phil Goodwin kindly donated to the Lyme Regis Philpot Museum a token – as we call it here for want of a better word – which he had found on the beach at Lyme Regis (accession number 2014/34). It bears the name of the famous fossil collector Mary Anning (1799–1847). She is found in almost every book on fossils. Her story, as a working-class female geologist in a Regency seaside resort, at a time when science was dominated by upper-class males, has proved irresistible to many writers, such as Tracy Chevalier in her novel Remarkable Creatures.(3) Anning’s finds of extinct Jurassic sea reptiles, contemporaries of the dinosaurs, and other beasties came when modern geology and palaeontology were ready for them. Those finds were both scientifically ground-breaking, as one might put it, and fuel for the first fossil reptile mania.(4) So Mary Anning, and fossils more generally, are important themes in the Museum’s displays and activities, and the Museum was naturally keen to establish the nature of its new acquisition. Our full report has now been published and is available online.(5) We give an informal summary here.

The token is apparently of brass or similar alloy, 25mm or one inch across, about 1 mm thick, and weighing about 3 g, and bears the text:
Obverse: MARY / ANNING / MDCCCX
Reverse: LYME / REGIS / AGE XI
The lettering was crudely and unevenly stamped using metal letter punches at some time after the edge decoration was die-stamped.

Fig. 1. Photographs of the Mary Anning Token.(6)

The only candidate known from Lyme for that name, itself fairly uncommon, and age/date combination, is the fossil-collecting Miss Anning. The findspot is consistent: she hunted fossils on the beach even as a child, and her house was almost on the sea-front.

It seems most likely that the token was made for – or with – the young Mary as a novelty or keepsake, maybe a 11th birthday present. Her father was a joiner and conceivably had letter stamps, and blanks for key ring labels and escutcheons (for keyhole surrounds), and her brother was, certainly later, an apprentice upholsterer. No
other explanations, such as chapel token, poor law administration, or dog tag (no hole!), fit well. The tourist souvenir explanation is worth considering, but the problem is that, for anyone to cash in on the fame of the town’s foremost fossil-collector, Anning had to be famous in the first place – which she certainly wasn’t in 1810, for her first great fossil find (the head of an *Ichthyosaurus*) was not till 1812. Anning did become something of a celebrity later on, in the 1830s onwards, but even so, the inscription lacks any reference to fossils, and the token is so crude that this explanation does not convince us. Also, no other copy of this token has been found in the collections in Lyme Regis Philpot Museum or the Dorset County Museum (checked by David Ashford), or in preliminary inquiries to several numismatists. If it were a souvenir for people to take home, one would expect copies in various collections.

Peter Preston-Morley suggests tentatively to us that the token appears to have been made much nearer 1810 than, say, 1847 (when Anning died), and that the disc probably came not from a jobbing blacksmith but from a specialist manufacturer of tokens, buttons, and such items, of the kind concentrated in Birmingham. Robert Thompson points out to us that the denticles around the rim of the Anning token are reminiscent of some 19th-century tokens which happen to date from 1811-12, which would match the 1810 inscription.(7) So it seems likely that the blank disc was made elsewhere and imported to Lyme as a label or tag blank, and stamped with lettering there. We would be interested to know of any precise – and dateable – comparisons, such as another token which carries the same edge decoration.

### Notes, References and Acknowledgements

1. Corresponding author: Michael A. Taylor mat22@le.ac.uk
2. Richard Bull research@lymeregismuseum.co.uk
6. Thanks to Mike Applegate for the photographs, courtesy Lyme Regis Philpot Museum