

## ***Lejos de casa: a Latin American token from Victorian Warwickshire***

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Metal detecting sometimes leads to unexpected numismatic discoveries, and in June 2023 a West Midlands detectorist had the fortune to unearth a particularly interesting token on farmland at Curdworth, Warwickshire.<sup>1</sup> The token can be described as follows:



Obv: SAT<sub>NO</sub> E UNZUE, Horse advancing left.

Rev: ESQUILA / UN VELLON, Sheep standing left.

Copper alloy; diameter 45mm; weight 20g; die axis 180°.

The Curdworth find belongs to a series of tokens produced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for use on the *estancias* of Latin America. These large ranches are common in the *pampas* districts of Argentina, Uruguay, and southern Brazil, and were an essential part of the wool-, meat-, and grain-based export economy that characterised the region's 'Golden Age' (c.1860–1930).<sup>2</sup> The obverse legend identifies this token with the wealthy *estanciero* Saturnino Enrique Unzué (1826–86), one of Argentina's largest 19th-century landowners and the proprietor of two large *estancias* at Mercedes and Ramallo in Buenos Aires province.<sup>3</sup> Unzué's business interests were centred on livestock farming, and his involvement in the horse-rearing and woollen industries – the latter a major source of income after 1854, when he established the Sala de Comercio de Frutos del País distribution firm in Buenos Aires – are clearly reflected in the obverse and reverse designs.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary sources show that *estancia* tokens functioned as part of a tally system that operated during the sheep-shearing season, which takes place between October and early December in the southern hemisphere. The nature of this system is memorably described by the British-Argentinian landowner Sir Herbert Gibson KBE, 1st Baronet of Linconia and Facombe (1863–1934):

*The sheep are driven into the yard and caught by men whose whole duty is to attend to this department. They tie three legs of the sheep together, and place the animals*

*conveniently near the shearers, the legs being tied with a thong made of teased rags or sheep-skin. The men are paid from 12d. to 15d. per hundred, and one catcher is supposed to be sufficient to supply ten shearers. The shearers are paid from 7s. to 10s. per hundred. Operations are begun at the shoulder, after which the neck wool is removed, and the shears work back over the ribs and quarter; the belly wool is left until last, and removed separately. Each shearer should have a small pen, capable of holding from 15 to 20 shorn sheep, and as he finishes the shearing of an animal he turns it into this small enclosure. When the pen is full he calls the overseer, who revises the shorn animals, and if they are all carefully clipped, free of cuts, and all the leg locks neatly removed, he counts them out, giving the shearer tokens for the number. If he finds any badly shorn he reprimands the man; if the offence is repeated he discounts the badly-shorn animals; and if carelessness continues he dismisses the shearer...Payment can either be made by cheques upon some neighbouring store, or in cash. It is a rule only to pay out on Saturdays, and never to allow a labourer to withdraw more than 50 per cent of his earnings until the whole of the shearing is concluding and the hands paid off.<sup>5</sup>*

While these tokens were therefore never intended to perform a direct monetary function, Gibson's piece rates of 7s. to 10s. per hundred fleeces (*vellon*) shorn would suggest that the Curdworth token had a wage equivalent of roughly 1d., and therefore represented a fairly trivial sum to a 19th-century farmhand.

Exactly how and why an Argentinian farm token found its way to the Warwickshire countryside remains something of a mystery, but three potential routes of entry can be suggested. The first possibility is that the token arrived in Britain during one of Don Unzué's frequent business trips. Like many Argentinian *estancieros*, Unzué is known to have stocked his ranches with imported British pedigree livestock, and in 1860 he was responsible for the introduction of long wool Romsey sheep to the Pampas region.<sup>6</sup> These commercial ties continued beyond Unzué's death in 1882, and by 1889 his family are recorded as having purchased prime Derbyshire racehorses for stud in Buenos Aires.<sup>7</sup> The possible links with commercial livestock farming are particularly interesting, as the pastoral districts of the West Midlands are known to have sustained important 19th- and early 20th-century sheep and horse breeding industries, and stud farms operated in parts of Warwickshire throughout Unzué's lifetime.<sup>8</sup> A second possibility is that the token might have arrived indirectly with a returning British businessman or emigrant, perhaps one of the many thousands of Englishmen who moved to Argentina in the 19th century seeking fortune in the farming industry.<sup>9</sup> The third possibility, however, is that the token had in fact never travelled very far at all: given Curdworth's proximity to Birmingham, one of the global die-sinking capitals of the 19th century, we might reasonably wonder whether the token was in fact made to order in the West Midlands, but somehow slipped itself out of the manufactory.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of which scenario most closely approximates reality, there can be little doubt that the token would have been of limited use in a British context, as it was at one too broad, too heavy, and too stylistically distinct to reasonably pass as the equivalent of any current Victorian coin.<sup>11</sup> The Curdworth token, therefore, is perhaps more likely to represent a misplaced keepsake or a discarded piece of ephemera than an accidentally lost fragment of circulating currency. Nevertheless, its discovery in a Warwickshire field provides an important illustration of the commercial and social ties that joined rural England to the wider world in the Victorian era, as well as a novel example of 19th-century numismatic exotica.

## References

1. I am grateful to the finder, Scott Bevan, for sharing photographs of this token, and for allowing me to publish it in the *TCSB*.
2. E. Elena, 'Commodities and Consumption in "Golden Age" Argentina', in W.H. Beezley (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History* (Oxford, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.357> [accessed 18 June 2023].
3. M. Sáenz Quesada, *Los estancieros: Desde la época colonial hasta nuestros días*, 3rd ed (Buenos Aires, 2010).
4. V. Fidel López, *Buenos Aires desde su fundación hasta nuestros días, especialmente el período comprendido en los siglos XVIII y XIX* (Buenos Aires, 1902), 341.
5. H. Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry in the Argentine Republic* (Buenos Aires, 1893), 72–4.
6. Gibson *op. cit.*, 278. On the economic and cultural links between British farmers and Argentine *estancieros* in the 19th and early 20th centuries, see R. Hora, 'Britain, the British landed class, and Argentine landowners', *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 30 (2005), 9–54.
7. *South Wales Echo*, 12 January 1889, 3.
8. H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England, being an account of agricultural and social researches carried out in the years 1901 & 1902* (London, 1906), 422; *Nuneaton Advertiser*, 1 March 1884, 1; 19 May 1888, 1; *Harborne Herald*, 20 April 1895, 4.
9. C.E. Solberg, *The Prairies and the Pampas: Agrarian Policy in Canada and Argentina, 1880–1930* (Stanford, 1987), 86.
10. R.N.P. Hawkins, 'Minor products of British nineteenth-century diesinking', *BNJ* 30 (1960), 174–87, esp. 177.
11. By contrast, some other 19th-century foreign coins and tokens seem to have successfully circulated in Britain as equivalents of domestic currency: M. Andrews, 'Canadian tokens in 19th-century Britain and Ireland', *TCSB* 14:3 (2023), 111–12.