

‘Extensive and convenient, elegant and comfortable’: an 18th-century countermarked inn token from Worcester

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The recent sale by St. James’ Auctions of treasures from the Baldwin’s vault has provided a welcome opportunity to get re-acquainted with a long-lost Worcestershire token.⁽¹⁾ Offered as part of a mixed lot of countermarked silver and bronzes, the piece in question can be described as follows:



Obv. GVLIELMV[S] I[II DEI GR]A, laureate and draped bust right.
Rev. [MAG BR FRA ET HIB REX], cross of armorial shields worn flat and countermarked with ‘FIELDHOUSE / Crown Hotel / WORCESTER’ in three lines, separated with spacers.
Edge: OCTAVO.
Silver; diameter 32mm; weight 13.63g.

Though mostly worn flat, surviving traces of the obverse and edge legends and the bust unmistakably belong to a London halfcrown of William III, dated to the period 1696–1698. This undertype, coupled with the reverse countermark, match the specimen with an identical, and apparently unique, countermarked William III halfcrown first noted in 1871 by the Worcester antiquarian Richard Woof (1821–1877).⁽²⁾ While Woof never described the token’s whereabouts, it was recorded a decade later by the Bromsgrove numismatist William Alfred Cotton (1853–1889) among the collection of Charles Williams of Moseley Lodge, Birmingham, and its subsequent location has long been unclear.⁽³⁾ The rediscovery of the token in the Baldwin’s vault marks a satisfying chapter in its collection history, and also provides a welcome opportunity to consider wider issues surrounding its dating, attribution, and wider historical context.⁽⁴⁾

As previously noted, the Crown Hotel token is countermarked on the reverse of a well-worn halfcrown of William III, and is distinct for its mixture of incuse text and spacer motifs rendered in upper and lower case serifs. While similar types of countermarked token were produced throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, by far the closest stylistic

parallels for the Crown Hotel piece are the Abergavenny and Kidderminster tokens of the vintner Thomas Massey, which were overstruck on Restoration- and Georgian-era halfpence and have been recently redated to the 1780s and 1790s.⁽⁵⁾ Stylistic evidence might therefore suggest that the Crown Hotel token also dates to the late 18th-century, an inference that otherwise fits well with our knowledge of the longevity of Williamite coins in a century of irregular and declining silver output.⁽⁶⁾ Evidence from the Redmire (North Yorkshire, *TPQ* 1770), Ripple (Worcestershire, *TPQ* 1775), Mill Street, Stafford (Staffordshire, *TPQ* 1775), and Hampton Place, Exeter (Devon, *TPQ* 1798) hoards, for example, shows that halfcrowns and shillings of William III made up a not-inconsiderable portion of England’s silver currency well into the reign of George III, and by this time many pieces – including, very probably, the specimen reused for the Crown Hotel token – were nearly worn flat after decades in circulation.⁽⁷⁾

The numismatic evidence for a late 18th-century date is a significant clue towards the token’s historical attribution, which is otherwise complicated by a three line countermark that can be read in two different ways: either horizontal to circumferential, i.e. ‘Crown Hotel, Fieldhouse, Worcester’, or top to bottom, i.e. ‘Fieldhouse, Crown Hotel, Worcester’. The first reading is locative, situating the Crown Hotel at an address in Fieldhouse, a small neighbourhood around Wyld’s Lane in the city’s south-eastern suburbs,⁽⁸⁾ while the second is proprietorial, attributing the token to an issuer named Fieldhouse based at the Crown Hotel in Worcester. Evaluating both options in light of the proposed dating allows us to discount the first reading: there is no documentary evidence for a ‘Crown Hotel’ in Fieldhouse, and evidence from George Young’s 1779 plan of Worcester shows that the neighbourhood was an undeveloped area within the enclosed Blockhouse Fields during the period in question.⁽⁹⁾ Conversely, written sources help us to identify an individual named Fieldhouse with late 18th-century links to a ‘Crown Hotel’: Benjamin Fieldhouse (c. 1761–1821), gentleman of Worcester.⁽¹⁰⁾

Benjamin Fieldhouse first arrived in Worcester in February 1792, fresh off a stint as master of the Angel Inn in Ludlow, Shropshire.⁽¹¹⁾ The move proved to be a defining moment in the young man’s life: by the end of the month, he had married his wife, Mary Nelmes, and taken up a new post as proprietor of the Star and Garter, a coaching inn on Foregate Street, the main road north out of the city towards Droitwich and Birmingham.⁽¹²⁾ Publicans like Fieldhouse plied a healthy trade in late 18th-century Worcester, an expanding county town whose economy rode the crest of the growing glovemaking and porcelain industries, and would have found a great deal of custom from the throngs of industrialists, farmers, merchants, lawyers, and clergymen that arrived in the city from the Midlands and Wales for business and leisure.⁽¹³⁾ However, Fieldhouse was not the only new arrival on the scene, and in March 1792 the *Berrow’s Worcester Journal* noted the arrival of Thomas Wells as the new proprietor of the Crown Inn in Broad Street, an old-established coaching inn on the city’s second-busiest

commercial street (Fig. 1).⁽¹⁴⁾ While Worcester's Georgian innkeepers naturally jostled for custom, Fieldhouse and Wells entered into an unusually fierce competition, which may have had as much to do with the personalities of the two ambitious arrivistes as it did with their traditional commercial interests. The latter certainly had a considerable degree of overlap: both inns were capacious and well-equipped properties on the main roads north and west of the city centre, and their proprietors would have vied for the attention of the same clientele of wealthy businessmen and travellers seeking provisions and rest. In the event, the *Berrow's Worcester Journal* records something of the rivalry that arose between the pair in this period, which was expressed through commercial tit-for-tat – as soon as one inn opened a staging post for an inter-city coach, the other began servicing a rival provider on the same route⁽¹⁵⁾ – and more than a little skulduggery: as early as July 1792, Wells could complain that certain 'persons in the Publick Line of Business' were spreading malicious rumours, and had started directing customers to competing inns.⁽¹⁶⁾



Figure 1: The Crown Inn, Broad Street.

Competition between Wells and Fieldhouse came to a head four years after both men had arrived in Worcester. In April 1796 rumours yet again circulated of Wells' intention to vacate the Crown, and by the end of the month had reached such a pitch that he was forced to issue a rebuttal in the local press.⁽¹⁷⁾ However, matters were not all as they seemed, and it is clear that he had fallen into a considerable amount of debt over the summer months. Dismayed by the turn of events, in mid-September Wells placed a notice in the *Berrow's Worcester Journal* notifying readers of his intention to quit the premises by the end of the month, 'much against his Will, and contrary to his

Expectation'.⁽¹⁸⁾ While there seem to have been plans to sell the property at auction, these were evidently rescinded within days, as a subsequent notice in the newspaper describes how Wells had now '*disposed of his Goods, Stock, and Business, by PRIVATE CONTRACT; and that the said Inn is intended to be newly fitted up and kept open by the Purchaser*'.⁽¹⁹⁾ The name of the purchaser is left unstated, but is made clear in the very next issue of the *Berrow's Worcester Journal*: Benjamin Fieldhouse, owner of the Star and Garter (Fig. 2).⁽²⁰⁾

Crown and Star and Garter Inns,
WORCESTER.

BENJ. FIELDHOUSE, of the STAR and GARTER INN, begs leave to acknowledge the abundant favors which his Friends and the Public have so liberally conferred upon him, and to be permitted to add that he would be wanting in his duty and respect to them, was he not to study every possible means for their best accommodation; with that view he informs them, he has taken the

CROWN INN, in BROAD-STREET,

which will be, immediately after HIS ENTRANCE UPON IT on the 29th Instant, elegantly and comfortably furnished.

Both that and the STAR INN will be under his own immediate Management, and nothing shall be omitted in either that can render them in every respect commodious to the Nobility, Gentry, Travellers, and others, who may be pleased to resort there.

He most submissively intreats a continuance of the favors of those who have hitherto honored the CROWN with their patronage; and with sentiments of sincere gratitude he returns his most respectful thanks to his Friends for the generous encouragement he has received at the Star and Garter Inn, where he still anxiously hopes to be favored with their future support.

20th September, 1796.

Figure 2: Notice in *Berrow's Worcester Journal* naming Benjamin Fieldhouse.

Having vanquished his competitor, Fieldhouse turned his hand to the refurbishment of the new premises, and by October 1797 he was publishing advertisements for the newly improved 'Crown Inn and Hotel' in a range of provincial newspapers. These boasted of the quality of his establishment – '*the extensive and convenient scale of the house, the elegant and comfortable manner in which it is furnished, its numerous and commodious offices – the circumstance of there being no stage coach to or from it in the night time – and its central location*' – as well as its new endowments, including '*a Coffee-Room, where the Irish, London, and Provincial Papers are taken in*'.⁽²¹⁾ The publicity drive clearly worked, and within a few years both of his premises at the Crown and the Star and Garter would find recommendations in popular traveller's guides by John Cary and Daniel Paterson.⁽²²⁾ While the business prospered under his direction for a decade, by 1808 Fieldhouse had relinquished direct management and refocused his attention on the Star and Garter; however, he retained close ties to the Crown, and remained a major shareholder in the inn until his death in 1821.⁽²³⁾

Given the details of Fieldhouse's career, it seems likely that the late 18th-century numismatic dating of the countermarked Crown Hotel token should be refined further to c.1796–1797, i.e. the period of his acquisition, improvement, and advertisement of the 'Crown Inn and Hotel'. If, as seems likely, the token was intended primarily as an advertisement for Fieldhouse's new premises, the decision to strike the countermark on a halfcrown might represent a peculiar form of 'audience targeting': with a moderate face value of 2s. 6d., these silver coins were particularly liable to circulate among upper- to middle-income coin users, including the Crown's principal clientele of 'Nobility, Gentry, Travellers, & others'.⁽²⁴⁾



Figure 3:

The proposed dating of the Crown Hotel token prompts speculation on its relationship to the series of countermarked halfpenny tokens issued by the vintner Thomas Massey at Ludlow, Kidderminster, and Abergavenny in the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s. These tokens, and particularly the Kidderminster varieties (Fig. 3), share many stylistic traits with the later Crown Hotel token, and none are attributed to locations especially distant from Worcester: the nearest, Kidderminster, lies just 22km to the north in the same county, and the furthest, Abergavenny, is roughly 70km to the south-west.⁽²⁵⁾ It is not inconceivable that Fieldhouse had himself encountered the Massey halfpence in circulation, perhaps as beer money passing over the counter of the Crown or Star and Garter, and took them as an inspiration for his own token series. This possibility becomes ever greater when we acknowledge Fieldhouse's documented history as an innkeeper in Ludlow – Massey's base of operations until the early 1780s – as well as Massey's own career selling wine and spirits across the Welsh Border. Given the overlap of dates, locations, and businesses, it is entirely possible, and perhaps even likely, that the men had some kind of personal or business acquaintance. These two complementary series might, therefore, offer a rare glimpse of the dissemination of countermarking traditions in time and space, facilitated in this instance by overlapping business interests and geographical proximity.

References

1. St James's Auctions, 12-13 April 2023, lot 127.
2. R. Woof, 'Traders' tokens and the tokens of Worcester and Worcestershire', *Associated Architectural Societies' Reports & Papers* 11 (1871), 169.
3. W.A. Cotton, *The Coins, Tokens, and Medals of Worcestershire* (Bromsgrove, 1885), 141.
4. Notably, the piece did not appear in Whitmore's major work on Worcestershire inn tokens: cf. J. Whitmore, *Worcestershire Inn Tokens* (Malvern, 1988), nos. 6000-6760.
5. J.G. Scott, *British Countermarks on Copper & Bronze Coins* (London, 1975), 37-41, nos. 39.1 and 50.1; M. Andrews, 'Massey's countermarked wine tickets', *Token Corresponding Society Bulletin* 13:7 (2021), 244-248.
6. G.P. Dyer and P.P. Gaspar, 'Reform, the New Technology, and Tower Hill, 1700-1966', in C.E. Challis (ed), *A New History of the Royal Mint* (Cambridge, 1992), 433-434.
7. P.H. Robinson, 'The Dunchurch and Stafford finds of eighteenth-century halfpence and counterfeits', *BNJ* 41 (1972), 152-3; M.M. Archibald, 'Medieval and modern hoards: British and Irish', in M. Jessop Price (ed), *Coin Hoards. Volume 4* (London, 1978), 122, no. 402; R. Abdy *et al.*, 'Coin hoards from the British Isles 2012', *BNJ* 82 (2012), 245, no. 206; M. Andrews and E. Ghey, 'Coin hoards from England, Scotland and Wales 2020', *BNJ* 90 (2020), 254-255, no. 211. The prolonged circulation of Williamite silver was a boon to Georgian counterfeiters, and during the late 18th century Worcester newspapers periodically remarked on the appearance of low-grade counterfeit halfcrowns that had faintly struck obverses and near-flat reverses: *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 6 January 1774, 2; 14 June 1792, 3.
8. The eponymous Field House (NGR SO 8561 5459) is the site of a locally-listed Union Farmhouse: Worcester City Historic Environment Record, WCM99082.
9. G. Young, *Plan of the City and Suburbs of Worcester, from Actual Survey* (Worcester, 1779).
10. Kew, The National Archives (TNA) PROB 11/1654/177: Will of Benjamin Fieldhouse of Worcester, proved 4 March 1822; Worcester, Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service (WAAS) BA 4047/2 Ref 985.701: Burial Register of Claines, 1813-1835.
11. The Angel is a Grade II listed Jacobean inn on Ludlow's Broad Street. Still extant as a restaurant and wine bar, it formerly drew much custom from officials, lawyers, and litigants attending meetings of the Council of the Marches: M. Faraday, *Ludlow, 1085-1660: a social, economic, and political history* (Chichester, 1991), 100.
12. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 23 February 1792, 3; London, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) MS 11936/386/599324, Sun Fire Insurance Company Registers, 1710-1863; WAAS BA 3790/2 7959 Ref 985: Banns Register of Worcester St Nicholas, 1754-1804.

13. D. Whitehead, *Urban Renewal and Suburban Growth: The Shaping of Georgian Worcester* (Worcester, 1989). Notable calendar events of this period included the annual horse races on Pitchcroft and the Three Choirs music festival, which attracted large crowds from across England: *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 6 September 1792, 3; 24 July 1794, 3.
14. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 8 March 1792, 3. First recorded in 1560, the present building dates mainly to the 18th and early 19th centuries, but stands atop a medieval stone undercroft: A. Deeks, S. Robson-Glyde, and E. Darch, *Historic Building Recording and Archaeological Watching Brief at Crown Hotel, Broad Street, Worcestershire* (Worcester, 2005), 7-8; A. Brooks and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Worcestershire* (New Haven, 2007), 740; P. Hughes and A. Leech, *The Story of Worcester* (Almley, 2011), 52.
15. During the late 18th century the Crown was servicing coaches to Birmingham, Bridgnorth, Kidderminster, London, Oxford, and Shrewsbury, while the Star and Garter was servicing coaches to Birmingham, Bristol, London, Ludlow, and Oxford: *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 6 October 1774, 3; 1 March 1792, 3; 28 January 1796, 3.
16. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 5 July 1792, 3.
17. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 28 April 1796, 3.
18. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 15 September 1796, 2.
19. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 15 September 1796, 3.
20. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 22 September 1796, 3. While it was not unusual for notices and advertisements to be reprinted in two or three successive issues of the *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, Fieldhouse's notice was reproduced in an unprecedented nine issues over the following three months: *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 29 September 1796, 3; 6 October 1796, 3; 13 October 1796, 3; 20 October 1796, 3; 27 October 1796, 3; 3 November 1796, 3; 10 November 1796, 3; 17 November 1796, 3; 1 December 1796, 3.
21. *Dublin Evening Post*, 19 October 1797, 2. Work had evidently begun by the winter of 1796: *Bath Chronicle*, 15 December 1796, 2.
22. J. Cary, *Cary's New Itinerary, or, an Accurate Delineation of the Great Roads, both Direct and Cross, throughout England and Wales* (London, 1798), 484; D. Paterson, *A New and Accurate Description of all the Direct and Principal Cross Roads in Great-Britain* (London, 1799), 173.
23. *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 7 March 1808, 1; *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 27 October 1808, 3; TNA PROB 11/1654/177.
24. *Bath Chronicle*, 29 December 1796, 2. For a broader discussion of 'audience targeting' on coinage, see O. Hekster, 'Coins and messages: audience targeting on coins of different denominations?' in P. Erdkamp *et al.* (eds), *The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power* (Leiden, 2003), 20-35.
25. Andrews *op. cit.* in note 5, 244-245.