

Gloucester and Berkeley Canal Token

Mike Smith November 2023

A shortage of low value copper coins in seventeenth century Britain restricted trade to an extent that worried many traders and their customers. Businessmen and local authorities minted their own copper coins, or trade tokens, as they were known, simply to give change to their customers.

This continued to be a problem throughout the eighteenth century and into the second decade of the nineteenth. Eventually the government issued sufficient low value copper coins to make trade tokens unnecessary and their use became illegal from 1st January 1818.

This meant that trade tokens were produced during the early years of the industrial revolution and the canal age.

A total of six canal tokens were issued at the end of the 18th century and the one most familiar to GSIA members, and one of the most common, is that issued by the Thames and Severn Canal in 1795. Another of our local canals, the Gloucester and Berkeley, also produced a trade token in 1797, and that is the subject of this article.

My main source of information on trade tokens is a book published in 1971 entitled "Trade Tokens – A Social and Economic History". It was written by J.R.S. Whiting and the author, when describing the Gloucester & Berkeley, Canal token, informs us "5 cwt of the token were struck so is fairly easy to find". The author's understanding of the phrase "fairly easy to find" is very different to mine. I had been searching for one for several years and finally found a very good one described by the vendor, a respected specialist dealer, as "extremely fine".

The obverse (front) of the token features Gloucester's West Gate, the 12th century West Gate Bridge and the words "SUCCESS TO THE TRADE AND COMMERCE OF GLOCESTER 1797". Note the 1797 spelling of "Gloucester".

The reverse of the token features a typical sea-going sailing ship of the period and the words "GLOCESTER AND BERKELEY CANAL ACT OBTAIN'D 1793". The diameter of the token is $1\frac{3}{16}$ inches (30mm) and its face value is one half penny.



The watercolour of West Gate Bridge is from Gloucester City Museum's collection of paintings. It was painted in 1806 by I.Harris, nine years after the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal issued their token.

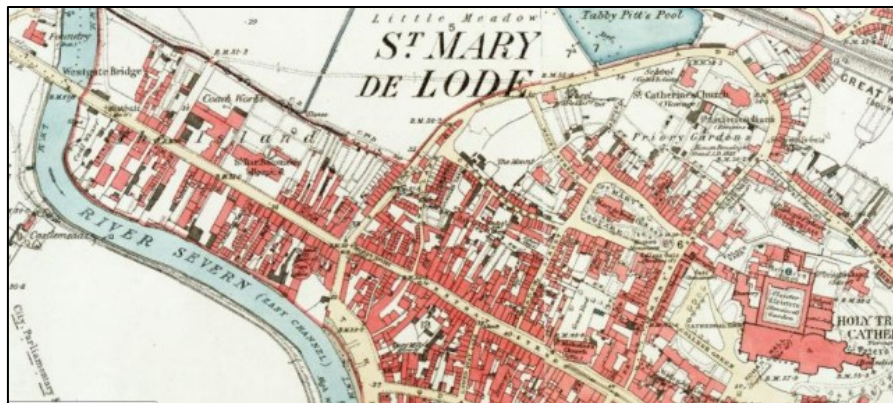
The bridge was built in the 12th century but replaced in 1809, so Gloucester's West Gate and its 12th century bridge were demolished before the invention of photography. We have to rely on the work of I.Harris and

other artists to show us what the original bridge looked like. The 1809 bridge was replaced in 1974 as part of major road improvements carried out at the time.



The pictures of the bridge, as portrayed on the token and the 1806 painting, were made from roughly the same position, from the bank of the River Severn on Alney Island, north of the bridge. Gloucester Cathedral can be seen on the left and the right hand church spire belongs to St Nicholas Church in Westgate Street. The church spire seen in the distance between that of St Nicholas Church and the Cathedral is probably that of St Aldgate's Church in St Aldgate Street. St Aldgate Street still exists but its church was demolished many years ago.

The map is a small section of the first edition 25 inch Ordnance Survey map. The 12th Century bridge had been replaced by the 1809 version when the map was published, but the road layout remained unchanged.



The two images of the bridge are very similar, showing very few changes between 1797 when the token was issued and 1806 when the painting was produced.

The bridge consists of two arches and a beam bridge to allow the passage of shipping. The painting shows a Severn Trow under sail, heading north, having just passed under the beam bridge. The token also shows a Severn Trow, but this time heading south and preparing to lower its mast before passing under the bridge.

The ship shown on the reverse of the token shows the type of vessel the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal hoped to attract when it was completed. Construction of the canal started at Gloucester in 1794 and had

reached Hardwick by 1799. The basin at Gloucester did not open to traffic from the River Severn until 1812, so when the token was issued in 1797, the canal was still under construction.

Financial problems and the Napoleonic wars meant the canal took much longer to build than expected and it was not completed until 1827, 33 years after construction started. It never reached Berkeley, of course, and heads south from Gloucester for 16 miles to Sharpness. Despite that, the company was officially known as the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal Company until 1935 when it was finally renamed the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal Company by Act of Parliament.