

# THEY MADE THEIR OWN MONEY

BY BOB LYALL

MAKE YOUR OWN MONEY? WHY NOT?  
 LEGALLY? OF COURSE.  
 WHAT KIND OF MONEY? TOKENS.



Tokens from J.N. Reynolds's company and the West Caicos Sisal Company. Turks & Caicos National Museum collection.

BRIAN RIGGS

Tokens look a bit like coins and are made from brass, aluminum, or even plastic. They have been and still are used worldwide. In the West Indies, tokens have been used to:

- Pay for deliveries. Customers purchased tokens, sometimes at a discount, then used them to buy ice or water from a delivery man. The tokens saved the delivery man from problems of confusing his own cash with his employer's cash.

- Control cash sales in shops. Customers purchased tokens from a cashier, then used them for the desired goods. This practice allowed fewer people to handle the real money, thus reducing the opportunity for employee theft.

- Tally bananas. Carriers received tokens for every stem of bananas loaded. Remember *The Banana Boat Song* (also known as *Day-O*) in which Harry Belafonte sang, "Come, Mr. Tally Mon, tally me banana"? Tokens were also used to tally coal carried onto coal-fired ships, but "tally me coal" doesn't have the same Caribbean rhythmic ring as Belafonte's song. Workers redeemed the tokens for cash wages at the end of the day.

- Replace small change when low value coins were hard to come by.

- Pay wages. Employers paid employees with tokens rather than cash for economic advantages discussed below.

These are but a few of the uses for tokens. Often the only memento remaining of a long gone business is a brass token in an old purse or drawer. This is the story of their use in the Turks & Caicos Islands from the later half of the 19th century into the early years of the 20th.

## JOHN N. REYNOLDS

The earliest user of tokens in the Turks & Caicos Islands was John N. Reynolds. I have traced his use of tokens to 1865, but he may have traded earlier. He issued three tokens valued at 25 cents, 12 1/2 cents, and 6 1/4 cents, U.S. currency being the normal currency of account for Turks & Caicos merchants.



J.N. Reynolds company tokens valued at 12 1/2 cents and 25 cents. From Lyall's collection. Objects scanned by Neil Paisley.

Reynolds paid his workers in tokens rather than in cash. This practice had a distinct advantage for Reynolds. His workers were only able to spend the tokens in the store Reynolds owned. He would thus enjoy the extra profits generated by his store from the "tied" trade of his employees. Typically, but certainly not proven for Reynolds, this "truck" system enabled unscrupulous employers to overcharge and make a larger profit than might be normal in stores without such "tied" customers. Indeed, it may well be that Reynolds was something of a paternalistic employer, supplying his employees with food and other essentials when there was no work.

Reynolds owned interests in East Harbour (now called Cockburn Harbour) on South Caicos. These interests included Victoria salina and a

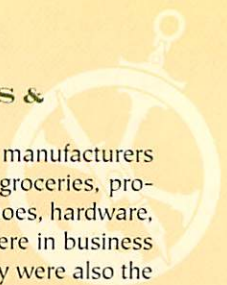
store. By 1882, Reynolds was seeking to sell these interests. According to Reynolds's correspondence with Alfred Stubbs, the latter offered \$11,000 to purchase these businesses, but Reynolds rejected the proposed price. Eventually, however, the two came to a financial agreement: Reynolds privately financed Stubbs with a mortgage,

repayable at \$800 per annum at 5% interest beginning January 1883. Reynolds also supplied Stubbs with goods obtained from Haiti and the Dominican Republic for the store in East Harbour. In return, Stubbs gave Reynolds the right to sell all his salt except 20,000 bushels per year. Reynolds sold the salt in the U.S.

Within two years, friction had developed between them. As Reynolds was the selling agent for Stubbs's salt, he could estimate the profits. Reynolds suspected Stubbs was selling salt to H. T. Jones, another exporter. He also accused Stubbs of falling behind on payments. Stubbs denied the allegations. Correspondence from Reynolds sometimes had annotations such as "nonsense" angrily scribbled across the page. Relations deteriorated further. The original friendliness degenerated into letters starting with statements such as "I am surprised at the whole tenor of your letter of the 11th inst. [September 1885]"

Reynolds was also receiving grievances from his U.S. customer, Alex Kerr Brothers & Company, Philadelphia. The company complained that the vessels in which the salt was shipped were overloaded; consequently, the salt was wet. Kerr Brothers claimed that although they had agreed to pay 6 1/2





cents per bushel, the going rate was 6 cents. It seems they did not know their business very well or perhaps were "trying it on."

Reynolds blamed Stubbs for the overloaded ships and wet salt, but Stubbs argued that the end customer was using such excuses to try to get a lower price. Stubbs declined to be responsible for shipping the salt in the following year claiming Reynolds must regard him as "drunk, stupid, or dishonest." Reynolds claimed that Stubbs's brother, who supervised some loading, was an unfit person. Needless to say, his comment was not well received.

By December 1885, the relationship had deteriorated so far that John Reynolds had gone to his solicitor and offered arbitration over their difficulties. I know of no further letters, so presumably they resolved their problems. In 1897, Alfred Stubbs was still a salt manufacturer with a store selling dry goods, groceries, boots and shoes. In 1917, documents refer to the Victoria salina as belonging to the estate of Alfred Stubbs, indicating he had died by then.

**ORDINANCE N° 3 OF 1881**

Reynolds's practice of paying wages in tokens redeemable only in the company store seems to have been an accepted custom for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although the system allowed for employers to provide essentials for employees when there was no work, the arrangement must have been prone to abuse. In 1881, the Turks & Caicos Legislative Board passed Ordinance N° 3 (see sidebar) prohibiting the payment of wages in goods or anything other than the current coin of the Turks & Caicos Islands. The penalty was a fine of £10, half to go to the informant. Given that protest would have cost the informant his job, it would have been a brave, or foolish, person who complained about his employer paying him in tokens.

It might be of interest to see the value of these tokens when compared to wages, for in 1895, records reveal that the "wages in Grand Turk are very high for the West Indies, three shillings a day, twice or three times the wages of a Jamaican labourer." The wage is stated in English shillings at a time when the Turks & Caicos had a dual coinage of U.S. dollars and British pounds. A dollar was quoted as equal to four shillings and two pence, there being twelve pence in one shilling.

Ordinance N° 3 of 1881.  
Public Records Office, Kew, England.  
Colonial Office 302, 5676.

An Ordinance of the Legislative Board of the Turks and Caicos Islands. To prohibit the Payment of Wages in Goods or otherwise than in the Current Coin of the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Whereas it is necessary to prohibit the payment of Wages in Goods or otherwise than in the Current Coin of these Islands. Be it enacted by the Legislative Board of the Turks and Caicos Islands as follows:

1. That in all Contracts hereafter to be made for the hiring of any workman in any Trade, the wages of such workman shall be made payable in the Current Coin of these Islands and not otherwise and that if in any such Contract the whole or any part of such wages shall be made payable in any manner other than in the Current Coin aforesaid, such wages shall notwithstanding be payable in such Current Coin.

2-9 [Not of direct or specific interest other than to say that the penalty was a fine of £10, half of which would go to the informant.]

signed R. B. Llewelyn, President  
Passed the Legislative Board this  
27th day of May A.D. 1881

Despite the 1881 ordinance designed to prevent employees being forced to make their purchases at their employer's store, a 1936 report says that employees were expected to purchase their food and other requirements from the stores of their employers. The salt raking companies had their own stores and purchases were advanced against earnings during employment. Employees admitted that if they insisted on money payments they would get no future employment in the salinas. On the other hand, they were assisted during the off season. No one had ever been prosecuted as a result of Ordinance N° 3 of 1881.

**FRITH BROTHERS & COMPANY**

Frith Brothers were salt manufacturers and sellers of dry goods, groceries, provisions, hats, boots and shoes, hardware, lumber and wine. They were in business back to at least 1897. They were also the managers of West Caicos Fibre Company discussed below.

In 1917, Frith Brothers & Company owned allotment rights in the Town Pond salinas and Red Salina in Grand Turk. They shared these rights with several other salt raking businesses. Frith Brothers & Company also worked North Salina in Grand Turk.

Local lore has it that inhabitants used Frith buttons for small change. I know of three types of buttons, which are inscribed:

- FRITH BRO<sup>s</sup> • TURKS ISLANDS
- or
- FRITH BROS • T. I.
- or
- FRITH • BROTHERS

These buttons have been found in shallow water near places where lighters were loaded with salt. Perhaps they were used as labour tallies, one given for each bag of salt loaded onto a lighter. Perhaps some of these button tallies slipped out of the pockets of the loaders. It is also possible that as sellers of dry goods, Frith Brothers sold clothing with Frith Brothers buttons. These buttons could easily have been lost off clothing as the wearer loaded salt.

Any reader who remembers anything about Islanders using Frith Brothers buttons for small value coinage or for tallying loads of salt should con-



Frith Brothers buttons. Were they used as small change when other coins were unavailable? Were they used as tallies for loading salt? From Lyall's collection. Objects scanned by Neil Paisley.

tact me or the museum. (Contact information is supplied at the end of this article.) Any information about how these buttons were used would be of great interest as an addition to local history.



**WEST CAICOS  
SISAL COMPANY**

Poor, dry, and rocky, the land in West Caicos is especially suited to the growing of the pita plant for sisal. The West Caicos Fibre Company, Ltd. was founded in 1890 and managed by Frith Brothers. They cultivated some 6,000 acres of pita. Just when the company ceased business is not clear, but several sisal businesses followed, all of which failed. One of these failed successors was presumably the West Caicos Sisal Company.

West Caicos Sisal Company—as the initials W.C.S.CO. on the tokens indicate—issued six values of tokens: two shillings, one shilling, six pence, three pence, one penny and one-half penny. Made by Quints & Sons of Philadelphia, the tokens all clearly show that they were for use in the company store.

pier 34, Brooklyn, New York, by steamers of the Clyde Santo Domingo line.

All production of sisal ceased in West Caicos sometime between 1909 and 1913. The last company passed out of existence in 1916, although the plant and buildings had become derelict some years before. The island has remained deserted since then.

**EAST CAICOS  
FIBRE COMPANY**

In 1895, a visitor to the Islands recorded going to East Caicos where 1,000 acres had been planted with pita or Bahamas hemp. The East Caicos Fibre Company had built a large factory there. The visitor observed that “men get two shillings and three pence a day and the women only one shilling for the same hours and the same work.” He also went on

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*Bob Lyall began collecting information on tokens, their use and their issuers in the mid-1970s. As a youth of 19, he was first enchanted with the West Indies while serving three months on H.M.S. Daring in the Caribbean. He began collecting old things at the tender age of three when his mother made him a “museum”—an orange-box painted with old green paint. While still a school boy, he began collecting coins. He expanded into researching the tokens and cut and counter-marked coins of the West Indies in 1971.*

*He has written many articles on West Indian cut/countermarked coins from the late 18th and early 19th centuries as well as the book, The Tokens, Checks, Metallic Tickets, Passes and Tallies of the British Caribbean & Bermuda. Mr. Lyall's interest in tokens extends beyond the West Indies to include tokens from all the smaller one-time British colonies.*

*He has accumulated a mass of late 19th- and early 20th-century paperwork on the Turks & Caicos Islands: archival material from the U.S., Jamaica and England; reports; letters; historical data from handbooks; and many other sources. If anyone finds tokens, Mr. Lyall will almost certainly have data on their issuers.*



West Caicos Sisal Company tokens: one shilling, six pence, three pence, one penny and halfpenny. From Lyall's collection. Objects scanned by Neil Paisley.

The Jamaican archives contain correspondence dated September 1902 regarding an application from a “Mr. C. H. Spicer, Manager of the Sisal Company of West Caicos asking that West Caicos be declared a Port of Entry in order to afford the Company every facility for the development of the industry.”

In 1907, the company in West Caicos had 70 employees, a manager, an engineer, and two overseers. The company facilities consisted of an oil-powered machine to extract the fibre from the leaves and a steam powered traction engine capable of carrying 15 tons. (This is probably the traction engine illustrated in the Winter 1998/99 issue of *The Astrolabe*.) Schooners took the fibre to Grand Turk from whence it was shipped to

to record he was “sorry to say that the truck system in its most objectionable form seems to be in force at Jacksonville. The Company seems to have such an abundant supply of labour that I am told they discharge those who decline to spend nearly all their wages at the Company's store.”

Were employees of the East Caicos Fibre Company paid in tokens? If so, I do not know of any.

**CONTACT ME**

I would be delighted to learn of “new” tokens or of any information you may have about their use or the use of Frith Brothers buttons as tokens. If you know of any Turks & Caicos tokens, please contact me:

The data for this article was drawn from the following contemporary sources, some published, some not.

- Capper, Thomas. A Visit to Turks Islands. *Journal of the Institute of Jamaica*, April 1895.
- Letters regarding a Sisal Company of West Caicos. Jamaican Archives, Spanish Town, Jamaica. C.S.O. N° 9414, 1902.
- Ordinance N° 3, 1881. Public Records Office, Kew, England. Colonial Office 302, 5676.
- Pusey, J. H. *Handbook of the Turks & Caicos Islands*, 1897.
- Report of the Salt Pond Committee. *The Gazette*, Turks & Caicos Islands, 24 March 1917.
- Letters of Alfred Stubbs and John Reynolds. Jamaican Archives, Spanish Town, Jamaica.