

Trade Token Tales I:

The Stories and Mysteries of Brisbane's Trade Merchants in the 1860s-70s



BY SEBASTIAN L. HARRIS

In the dusty streets of nineteenth century Brisbane, the smell of eucalyptus is mixed with the sound of bustling crowds, and a curious currency jingles in the pockets of shopkeepers, workers and customers.

By the early 1860s, Queensland had become an independent colony with a population of 25,000-35,000 people. Most of these people were British immigrants who sailed to Australia during the gold rush of the 50s but were left disappointed and decided to offer their trades in growing cities instead. Many became merchants, and with a shortage of copper and very few low denomination coins, they looked elsewhere for money and settled on stamped pseudo-pennies and half-pennies. These were not official coins; they were trade tokens: 'Brisbane's Legal Pre-Tender.' Of the four towns that dominated Queensland's 'token merchants' (Brisbane, Ipswich, Toowoomba and Rockhampton), Brisbane was the most prolific with six of the thirteen. So, let's look at some stories from the merchants who made these often-forgotten numismatic jewels?

The Cause of the Fire?

We Australians love to blame the English. While it is often tongue-in-cheek, sometimes it can be extremely

serious. This was an unfortunate case for the Englishmen who destroyed most of central Brisbane: Stewart & Hemmant (Gray 253/4). Alexander Stewart and William Hemmant were ex-miners who established a significant drapery business on Queen Street in 1860. While successful, their business was received with mixed reception, as they were constantly robbed by employees and racketeers, embroiled in several legal cases, and actively disliked for not "engaging Irish hands" and not supporting the draper's 'Early-Closing Movement.' One of these legal cases included another token merchant as a witness: Edmund MacDonnell of Flavelle & Co (Gray 72/3). However, within four years of their drapery business' opening, the Great Fire of Brisbane tore through entire blocks of Brisbane's central business districts on Queen, Albert, George and Elizabeth Streets. *The Brisbane Courier* found it "almost impossible to convey the editing and appalling scenes," but described the event as "one of the most disastrous conflagrations that ever-brought ruin and desolation on a town." According to reports, a total of fifty properties were

◀ Stewart & Hemmant (Gray 254) Roxbury's Auctions 110 (March 2022), Lot 1089

destroyed, including two banks, three hotels, four drapery establishments, and a considerable number of small houses, resulting in £60,000-100,000 worth of damage. For Stewart & Hemmant, their property was where the fire started.



Flavelle Brothers & Co. (Gray 73)
Roxbury's Auctions 110 (March 2022), Lot 1073

Five days after the fire had subsided, a trial and inquest were undertaken, and Stewart & Hemmant were the main suspects. During the trial, seven witnesses were questioned: the drapers William Hemmant and Alexander Stewart, porter John O'Brien, cashier James Macintyre, bookkeeper John Enderson, bystander William M'Fadyean and editor Thaddeus O'Kane. In their testimonies, Hemmant left early and returned only to find the cellar on fire and knew nothing was salvageable, Stewart was the last to leave the premises but made sure everything was secure and turned off, and the other three workers all claimed to have closed shop properly. As for the others, M'Fadyean explained that he called for the firefighters, while O'Kane was called out by the jury for "knowing nothing whatsoever about the origins of the fire." After ten minutes deliberation, the jury returned and explained: "the fire had originated in Stewart and Hemmant's store, but there was no evidence to show." Ultimately, the Police Court found no clear cause, and with no substantial evidence, they were not charged. The drapers later advertised for masons to help build the foundation and basement walls of their new premises, but Hemmant would later pursue a political career in Brisbane (1868-1876) and London (1876-1916), and Stewart would open another store in Rockhampton, which is still trading as Stewart's Department Store.



Stewart & Hemmant (Gray 253)
Roxbury's Auctions 147 (July 2025), Lot 261

The Importing Powerhouses

While there were many merchants in Brisbane, there were only two that could qualify for the title of 'Powerhouses': the ironmongers W & B Brookes and importers Merry & Bush. The Mancunian brothers William and Benjamin Brookes migrated to Australia and established themselves as "shopkeepers" in 1858. They were revolutionary in their commencement of the 6pm closure initiative and advocacy of the eight-day movement in 1862. As a business that was slowly becoming more valuable, they financed a "spacious" new three-story, 25-metre ironmongery shop on Elizabeth Street in 1864. This site was described by *The Brisbane Courier* as a "handsome" building that was "unsurpassed as regards extent and solidity in the older colony of New South Wales." They advertised their products as being "purchased directly from the manufacturers" in Birmingham, which may suggest why their token (Gray 32) was minted by Heaton & Sons in Birmingham. It is also believed that the earlier Brooks coins (Gray 30/1) were minted for the same William Brookes.



Brooks, W. & B. (Gray 32)
Roxbury's Auctions 112 (July 2022), Lot 566 (part of)



Brookes (Gray 31)
Roxbury's Auctions 114 (October 2022), Lot 410

At the same time in 1863, Thomas Frederick Merry and an unknown Mr Bush started an importing business at 678 Ann Street in Fortitude Valley. Merry worked as a draper's assistant in Tasmania, before establishing *The Valley Drapery Mart* with Bush. They sold goods that were purchased in England and ran an importing business, with extensive shipment documents to support. In the Valley, where "most of the enormous mercantile transactions of this place are carried on," their business was described as one of two "superior" stores. The tokens bearing the Merry name represents both their Brisbane (Gray 184) and later Toowoomba (Gray 185/6) shop, though no evidence has been found of the latter, and were both imported from the same Heaton & Sons. Although little is known about the physical running of the store, they are ironically remembered for being agents for an insurance company that handled businesses and goods that were lost to fires, so hopefully they were usual for the great fire that swept through Brisbane's high streets in 1864.



Merry & Bush (Gray 184)
Roxbury's Auctions 104 (October 2020), Lot 303

However, over the course of three years, both merchants were caught up in petty and legal cases. In December 1864, Merry filed a complaint that ship agents for the Bayswater accidentally "delivered a case of soft goods" to Brookes, instead of Merry & Bush. This was solved as mislaid goods, but Brookes was involved in two further cases. In the first case against Stewart and Watson (April 1865), one of Brookes' regular customers "unlawfully obtained one roll of sheet lead by means of false pretences, with intent to defraud," while the second case against Harris and Another (October 1866) who failed to deliver goods on the *Flying Cloud* ship. Moral of the story: do not be too successful in 1860s Brisbane!

Dual Ventures

With the centralisation of most businesses in Queen Street, several merchants had to adapt to different markets and two were clever in the addition to their business: J. D. Sawyer and J. W. Buxton. Jesse David Sawyer was a wholesale and retail tobacconist on the lower floor of Morwitch's Minories in the 1860s but moved further east to Palace Tobacconist in 1877. East writes that Sawyer used "the upstairs apartment as a smoking room for his clients... [before] he converted it into a men's hair-dressing business, which he called the Palace Hairdressing Saloon" (2020, 318). Newspaper reported on this, recommending it for places to visit in Christmas, and describing Sawyer's Tobacco and Hairdressing Saloons as "an acknowledged boon." As his token (Gray 245) makes no clear reference to this aspect, a date of 1864 seems reliable. While both businesses were successful as it continued until 1885, information about Sawyer is scarce afterwards, but we do know



Sawyer, J. (Gray 245)
Roxbury's Auctions 112 (July 2022), Lot 567

he was nominated as an alderman to represent Brisbane's east ward but lost to the outfitter William McNaught in 1884.

Further west was the business of John Woodhead Buxton and his wife Matilda, who ran a bookselling, stationery and ladies' warehouse business. John was an agent for the Moreton Bay Courier in the early 1860s and was famous for his publication of a *Map of the City of Brisbane, Queensland* in 1863, while Matilda was described as an "enterprising wife" for independently running a warehouse. As a result, he requested a place in the new Town Hall, which he was denied. The business often received highly sought-after works (books, jewellery and clothing), and donations from government agencies, as well as regular appearances at auctions and exhibitions. Unfortunately, not all was smooth sailing, as John experienced deaths that caused him to lose interest in the business: his daughter Matilda Adelaide in 1862 and his wife Matilda in 1867 (aged 34). His business was bought out by the stationer Henry Shepperson, and his token (Gray 36) is the only memory of the joint business venture; the only marriage business featured on an Australasian token, even though Matilda is not mentioned by name.



Buxton, J. W. (Gray 36)
Roxbury's Auctions 112 (July 2022), Lot 568

An Interesting Discovery?

Finally, there are the drapers James Paul Larcombe and John William Pepper, who founded Larcombe & Pepper around 1862. There are only fragmentary records of these two individuals, so our knowledge is limited to the history of the business between 1864-1866. Purchasing a property in 1864, Larcombe & Pepper added an additional small one-story storefront to the building and began advertising their clothing as successors to the draper Edward Barton

Southerden. They advertised well-designed trousers for a guinea, sold products for both men and women, and even had a run-in with 'Blackie,' an Aboriginal man who frequently stole pants from local shops. All the while, they advertised themselves as *Larcombe & Pepper, Successors to E. B. Southerden*, so why do the tokens from Larcombe & Pepper only say: "Larcombe & Co?" In a notice published in *The Brisbane Courier* from 2 May 1865, Larcombe explained that "in consequence of the severe and continued illness of Mr. Pepper, [Pepper] has been compelled to retire from business" and it was dissolved, but Larcombe continued the business under Larcombe & Co. Andrews and Gray both place the creation of this token to the 1860s, but we can narrow it further as the business was eventually sold in 1866. Therefore, it is highly likely that these tokens were minted by the British medallist William Joseph Taylor in late 1865 or 1866.



Larcombe & Co. (Gray 157)
Roxbury's Auctions 114 (October 2022), Lot 403

Conclusion

Ultimately, we love to collect numismatic items and have studied these tokens since their 1880s, but we don't often know or complete the stories behind the merchants. No matter how small or insignificant an item might first appear, we should find a story for everything, like Stewart's Great Fire, Brookes' handsome shop, Merry's shipping debacle, Sawyer's hairdressing boon, Buxton's husband-wife success, and Larcombe's shop chronology. These merchants, alongside hundreds more, are what make Brisbane so successful as a business centre and inspired surrounding regions to follow: Rockhampton, Toowoomba, and Ipswich. These institutions will be the focus of the next *Trade Token Tales*. ■

References can be found on page 100.