

Robert Orchard, grocer, tea merchant, and chocolate maker of London and Sawbridgeworth

Robert Orchard was a successful business man who had premises at 34 Greek Street, at the junction with Church Street (now Romilly Street), in Soho, Mincing Lane*, London, and Barkers (or Bakers) Lane, now Station Road, Sawbridgeworth, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Little is known of his private life or family and he is most famous for the trade tokens he issued from about 1790 to 1804 which are popular with collectors.

His tokens suggest that his premises in Sawbridgeworth were used for the manufacture of chocolate and cocoa, at this period an expensive and fashionable drink. The Greek Street building looks very much like a shop and probably not large enough for industrial use.

*Mincing lane was the centre of tea trading in the 18th and 19th centuries.



Portrait of Robert Orchard in the National Portrait Gallery NPG D5723, **Robert Orchard** by William Barnard, after David Gowers, mezzotint, published 1803.

Lettered(sic) beneath the image with the artist's names "Drawn by David Gowers", "Engraved by W. Barnard" and with text below with sitter's name "ROBERT ORCHARD" and his heraldic crest with three pears and ribbon with the motto "In God is my Trust", "No. 34 / Greek Street corner of Church Street, Soho, London / Grocer and Tea Dealer / And at Sawbridgeworth Herts / Manufacturer of Chocolate and Cocoa, on a new and improved Principle / Wholesale Retail & for Exportation / Published by Robert Orchard, May, 1803."



Robert Orchard. Late of Sawbridgeworth. Herts.
Engraved by J. Nagle from a model by D. Gowers.

(Unfortunately, undated)

Contributor

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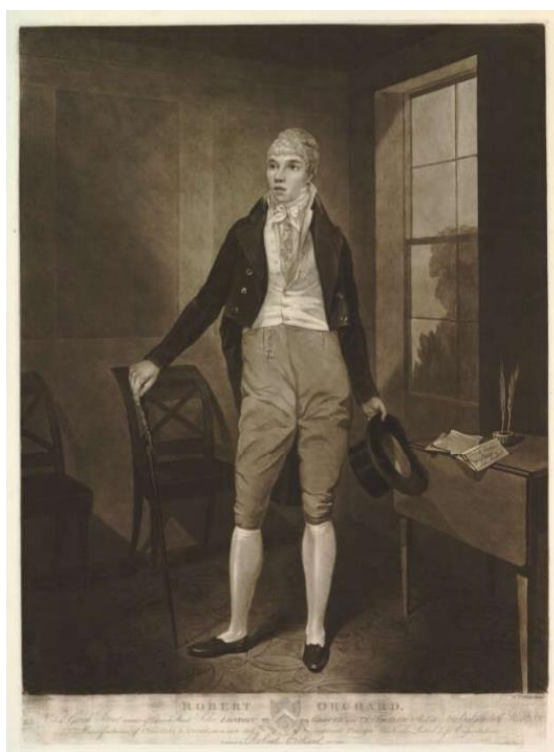
The following extract is from a 'Tregeagle Fine arts' document accompanying the sale of a Robert Orchard Mezzotint, presumably a copy of NPGD5723 shown above.

"Robert Orchard issued various trade tokens between 1795 and 1804 some of which bore his image. He lived at Orchard House, Sawbridgeworth and traded from Greek Street, Soho. Although he appears to have been a great self-publicist (as evidenced by this portrait print and the tokens he issued) very little biographical information is known about him. " A contemporary collector of tokens noted that Orchard was "apprentice to a grocer in St. John Street, Clerkenwell, whose vanity has induced him to have engraved several tokens with his bust".

Another exceptionally rare full-length portrait image of Orchard exists (see BM 1902,1011.10) which Challoner-Smith notes only a single impression and records:-*

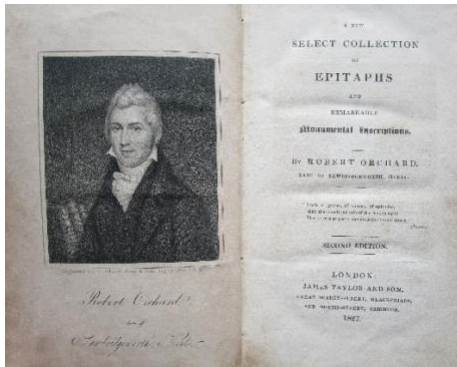
"A grocer who hangs out the sugarloaf in Dean Street, has actually caused three plates of himself to be engraved, one, a whole length, from which he has only struck off half a dozen impressions, and then destroyed the plates, in order to confer the title of "extra rare" upon these delineations of his sugar-plumb countenance."

* Could be John Chaloner Smith, 1827-1895, railway engineer and collector and historian of mezzotints. Author of the four-volume catalogue 'British Mezzotint Portraits' - 1883. (British Museum reference.)



Full-length portrait of Robert Orchard referred to above.

"He seems to have been preoccupied with ensuring his legacy. In 1813 he published "A New Select Collection of Epitaphs & Remarkable Monumental Inscriptions" with an engraved frontispiece of his image in profile. His bookplate is to be found in a copy of "Necrology: Being Memoirs of the Lives of Eminent and Extraordinary Characters. Including also various articles of Neglected Biography" [1805] in the National Library of Scotland. But, despite these glimpses into his character, Orchard himself seems to have almost disappeared from the biographical record."



A copy of Robert Orchard's book described above. (1827 edition)



Robert Orchard's house, originally known as Orchard House, now Orchard Cottage - an early 18th century house with extensive grounds. Located at the bottom of Station Road, Sawbridgeworth.



Orchard Maltings, adjacent to Orchard House, extensive, mid to late 19th century maltings built of yellow brick. Although this building is too modern to be Robert Orchard's factory, it is likely that an earlier building stood on the site. It would have been an ideal site for Robert to manufacture his chocolate and cocoa products, being next to his house and opposite the public wharf for loading and unloading of produce. from barges on the River Stort.

He was probably an early user of the Stort Navigation, which opened on the 24th of October 1769. The building was renamed Orchard Works later, and is now known as River Court.

Robert Orchard's trade tokens

Robert Orchard issued quite a number of trade tokens during his business career, between about 1795 and 1804. These tokens were issued in large numbers by many companies, businesses, and individuals to provide 'small change' for low value, everyday transactions, to compensate for the lack of official coinage from the Royal Mint. They were only produced in farthing, halfpenny and penny values. They also provided a useful means of advertising, political propaganda, and the commemoration of notable events such as the opening of new canals, bridges, factories etc. Prominent people of the time were also featured, military, business, politicians, and campaigners. The issue of these tokens gradually came to an end with the increase of official coinage provided by the Royal Mint during the first part of the 19th century.

The following images are not to scale but sizes are given if known.



This token is important as it records Sawbridgeworth as the site of chocolate and cocoa manufacture.

Robert Orchard token (probably a halfpenny but value unknown) with bold portrait bust and obverse inscription - 'ROBERT ORCHARD No. 34 GREEK STREET CORNER OF CHURCH STREET SOHO LONDON' '1803' under bust. No reverse design but inscription – GROCER & TEA DEALER WHOLESALE RETAIL & FOR EXPORTATION AND AT SAWBRIDGEWORTH HERTS MANUFACTURER OF CHOCOLATE & COCOA ON A NEW AND IMPROVED PRINCIPLE'



Robert Orchard trade token issued in 1795, an early type with a rather unflattering portrait showing die fault. The reverse shows his coat of arms of 3 pears and ribbon. Obverse inscription 'ROBERT ORCHARD', reverse inscription ' HALFPENNY 1795' Actual size-c.29mm.



Farthing token issued by Robert Orchard in 1796. the obverse shows him wearing a very large hat (fashion of the period?), the reverse has his 'RO' cipher. Actual size-21mm.



Farthing token issued in 1804. The obverse has a portrait of Robert Orchard similar to the Pittsburgh version. The obverse inscription reads 'ROBERT ORCHARD GROCER TEA DEALER No34 GREEK ST. CORNER CHURCH STREET. SOHO LONDON 1804'. The reverse inscription reads 'ROBERT ORCHARD TEA WAREHOUSE CORNER OF CHURCH ST. AND AT SAW BRIDGEWORTH HERTS.' Actual size-21mm.



Robert Orchard halfpenny token with an obverse image of Great St. Marys parish church, Sawbridgeworth. Reverse image shows a shepherd resting under a tree. Obverse inscription 'ROBT. ORCHARD SAWBRIDGEWORTH HERTS' No reverse inscription. Actual size-c.29mm



Robert Orchard penny token with an obverse, full face portrait, inscription 'ROBERT ORCHARD SAWBRIDGEWORTH HERTS' and reverse with book under a tree with Sawbridgeworth parish church in the background. Reverse inscription 'SAWBRIDGEWORTH PENNY TOKEN', 'PAYABLE.....1801' in exergue. Note damage at top caused by broken die.

This token was sold at Baldwins auctioneers on 7th October 2022 and is the rarest, and most expensive British trade token. This is the auctioneers report: -

"The star of the sale was an English penny struck by a Soho grocer who lived in Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire. He had an enormously deeply engraved die made to strike a coin for himself at Sawbridgeworth. Unfortunately, the fact that the dies were so deeply engraved meant that to make this large token, a great deal of pressure was needed in the strike. Unsurprisingly, the die broke after the fifth or possibly sixth strike – and only five examples are now known. This coin (lot 74) was estimated at £5,000-7,000 but hammered at £12,000."

It is a pity that more information about Robert's personal and family life is not available. Did he marry? Are there any Orchard relatives still in the area? One possible clue is a reference to a Mr Orchard recorded as a contributor to local charities in - 'Sawbridgeworth Ecclesiastical Charities'.

"In 1811 Mr. Orchard gave a sum of £25 stock, now represented by £25 consols with the official trustees, producing 12s. 4d. yearly, which sum is paid to the oldest widow in the parish."

NB. I found a reference to this charitable gift on-line but now can't find it again. This gave a name of Thomas Orchard as the donor.

(British History Online)

John Collier

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