Sometimes an artefact can throw light on things we now take for granted. It's a commonplace to say that we 'clock in' to work without really thinking about what the phrase means. This token, issued by the Coleman Foundry Equipment Company Limited in Letchworth during the 1930s, is a reminder of the physical act of 'clocking in'.

As the factory system developed in England from the eighteenth century on, employers wanted to know exactly how many hours each worker had been on site so that they could calculate their wages accurately. This was especially important on production lines, where staff had to be in place on time. It also enabled employers to know about people absent from work.

In the earliest factories, a 'time office' was set up next to the gate. Workers would report there on arrival, and the timekeeper would write their name and the time into a ledger. The system works well if the workforce is small, but as factories grew to enormous sizes, with hundreds of workers, this register system became too slow.

The earliest solution to the problem was to have a numbered token for each employee. When they arrived at work, they would take it from the board where it was kept and put it into a box. Most were pierced to hang on hooks, but some, like this one, were not. The timekeepers would lock the box or take it away to the office as soon as a shift started, so that latecomers would have to report directly to them. In this way, the wages department would know exactly how much to deduct from wages to reflect how late a worker may have been. In some factories, even being a minute late would result in losing half a day's pay. Tokens left on the board obviously belonged to absentees; managers would sack those who were absent regularly.

To speed up the process further, Victorian inventors came up with several mechanical devices to record time keeping. In 1855, John Adams of Aldwincle (Northants) invented the first time check machine, although those patented and made by William Maberley Llewellin (1849-1930) in 1881 and Frank Brook (1853-1929?) in 1889 are better known. They were clockwork devices that contained a large drum divided into segments driven round by the clock. As each worker arrived, they would put their own token into the machine and it would drop down a chute into the drum segment currently underneath it. The timekeeper would remove the drum once everyone was due to be at their work, and record which workers were in each segment (often representing ten or fifteen minutes). They would then put the token back on the board where it was kept. Workers would repeat the process when they left for the day, 'clocking off'. In some factories, each worker had two tokens of different metals (usually brass and copper), one for arrival at work and the other for departure. William Llewellin was from Bristol and was born into a family with an established brass

foundry, set up in 1832. He studied at university in Glasgow, where he received a Certificate in Engineering Science (1872). His first patent, in 1881, was for a modified version of John Adams's original time check machine. He set up his own company, the Llewellin Machine Company, in 1883, with branches in Bristol and Glasgow. As well as making his own design of time check machine, the company also made clocks and other mechanical devices. He continued to develop his time recording machines, taking out new patents until the 1920s. Frank Brook was born in Huddersfield, where he worked as a weaver. He also had a watch repair business. The mill manager began researching ways of recording workers' attendance, which was a source of conflict between them and the timekeeper. Brook worked with a Swiss clockmaker, Ulrich Fischer, to develop a mechanical time recorder about 1888. Although the machine was a success, it was unpopular with Brook's co-workers, so he left the factory to develop the machine further. He eventually patented his first device in 1893 and he formed the Brook Time Check Company in 1896, which began to manufacture it under the trade name Paragon. The company was not successful and went into liquidation in 1899. He continued developing his machines while selling those made by the American company Bundy as the British licensee for their products. In 1907, he partnered with J J Stockall to found another short-lived company, which collapsed in 1911. Success finally came with his partnership with Arthur Gledhill in 1912, and the Gledhill-Brook Time Recorder Company continued in business until 1964.

The Coleman Foundry Equipment Company Ltd was established in Letchworth Garden City about 1933, on the corner of Icknield Way and Norton Way North. It was perhaps a small operation, as most large factories had moved over to a card stamping timekeeping machine by this time. We know little about the company, which had moved to Stotfold by the end of the decade and continued in business there until 1959. During the Second World War, it provided materials to the Ministry of Supply and Aircraft Production.

Tokens like this one were already old-fashioned when the Coleman Foundry Equipment Company set up its factory in the Garden City. They had no financial value and as utilitarian (and unpopular) objects, they rarely survive. This one entered Letchworth Museum as a gift from J R Castledine, one of the founder members of the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society. It is now on display in the Living in North Hertfordshire gallery of North Hertfordshire Museum.

This sort of object has broader implications for how we interpret the past. While they were familiar to a certain segment of the population – factory workers – they would not have been to other people. A London banker or a Hebridean crofter would have been mystified by such a token. What is an everyday item in certain situations is completely meaningless in others. These tokens have no 'value'; nor does coinage, except as a symbol of financial worth. Archaeologists have traditionally lumped all the contemporary artefacts found in a specific region together and used them to define 'archaeological cultures'. Our experience of the contemporary world shows that this is too simple. Sometimes, archaeologists have looked at different sets of material culture in economic terms (following Marxian analysis) or ethnic terms. Even this oversimplifies reality. Human societies consist of overlapping subsets. For

instance, élites are easily identified by their expensive jewellery and so on, early Christian communities had distinct metalwork, and the Roman military is instantly recognisable as different from other provincials.

We should think of these subsets as 'subcultures'. The definition of subcultures is associated with the so-called 'Birmingham School' of sociology and particularly with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. The Centre emphasised the role of youth subcultures and became prominent during the second half of the 1960s.

Stanley Cohen's 1969 doctoral thesis on juvenile delinquency for the University of London proved seminal in setting the agenda for later studies. Most later researchers followed his focus on working- and lower middle-class male youth, particularly their participation in gang cultures. The media created and maintains this perspective.

However, the roots of subculture theory are in the Chicago School of sociology from the 1930s to 50s, which invented the term 'subculture'. They regarded subcultures as deviant, an assumption full of unstated. By definition, the 'mainstream' cannot be 'deviant', so it has never been analysed in subcultural terms. However, it is entirely appropriate that this type of analysis be extended across all social groups, including the 'mainstream'. The objection to calling subcultures 'deviant' is the implication is that there exists a 'wider society', as if there is a single behaviour pattern to which the majority of the population subscribes, even if it does not always conform.

This is a view that can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and for which there is no empirical support. Very few individuals fit the pattern of behaviours that are supposed to define 'wider society', either completely or in any but the most superficial ways. People within a society will follow most of its rules, but not all of them, and not all at the same time. So-called 'wider society' must be broken down into smaller subsets, all overlapping, but nevertheless distinctive. This fits the lived experience of individuals and the complexity of society as well as the patterning of archaeological data much better than normative models. It virtually compels the use of subcultural analyses of society.

What we are looking at with this token, then, is an example of an artefact associated with a specific subculture, that of the factory worker in the first half of the twentieth century. Even in such an unusual place as Letchworth Garden City, where urban design was supposed to break down the barriers of social class, different social groups – which we can regard as archaeological subcultures – used different forms of material culture. These differences range from everyday items such as clocking in tokens up to the design of homes.

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