

One Potato, Two Potato

A lowly spud put the island of Jersey

on grocers' maps, as well as merchant tokens.

SOME 100 YEARS ago, a short series of tokens was issued for use on the Channel Island of Jersey. Though made of brass, the pieces were like gold to the farmers who grew Jersey's potatoes, long known as "Jersey Royals."

The island of Jersey boasts a light, well-drained soil. Seaweed (called "vraic" by local farmers) is harvested from the island's shores and serves as a natural fertilizer for the potato crops. The rough seas of the English Channel provide more than enough vraic for everyone.

► Potato farmers and laborers performed the heavy work, while merchants reaped the benefits by issuing potato tokens.

Actual Size: 26mm

Strange as it may seem, the potato's growing season on Jersey begins in November, when farmers plant their crop indoors, under glass. Two months later, the seed potatoes are transplanted by mechanical lifters to easy-to-reach fields. Those that find a home on the steeper slopes must be transplanted one at a time by hand.

Harvest runs from April through June. Workers are expected to put in a 12-hour day, but the intensive labor does not stop when the harvest is done. The fresh produce must be packed the same evening. By the next day, the potatoes can be found in grocery stores and supermarkets

throughout the British Isles.

In recent years, the most notable change in this centuries-old practice is the method of payment to the laborers. Nowadays, they are paid by check or cash, but a century ago they received tokens that could be redeemed only at a particular merchant's store. The brass tokens were issued in two denominations—sixpence and shilling—some of which likely passed among the pickers as

the pot, however, he showed them to a neighbor. Noticing the large number of eyes on the potatoes, de la Haye decided to set aside one that could be cut and used for seed the following season. He followed through on his plan and, at harvest, found that all his potatoes were the usual round variety save for one batch that was kidney-shaped. He dubbed the new variety the "Jersey Royal." Today, the Jersey Royal potato accounts for half of the



they played cards during their scant leisure hours.

Until 1878, the variety of potato grown on Jersey played a minor role in the island's harvest. That year, a potato farmer named Hugh de la Haye noticed two, kidney-shaped potatoes that stood out among the round specimens at a local market. He purchased them and took them home with the intent of cooking them for dinner that evening. Before dropping them into

island's annual income from produce.

Hugh de la Haye did not go unrecognized nor unrewarded for his agricultural discovery. His fellow Jerseyites honored him at a testimonial dinner and presented him with a purse of gold *sovereigns*. Unfortunately, I don't possess any of the gold coins, but I do have two, interesting brass tokens issued by potato merchant John Terry.

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