

The Moorcock of Lancashire

By: S. Abel de Valcourt

In the winter of 1884, among the whispers of snow and bitter winds of Bolton-le-Moors in the north of England a young man and his sweetheart took a long walk to sing Christmas carols across Lancashire.

While on their romantic adventure the pair looked up at a grand house near to Astley Bridge known as Sharples Hall. He held in his hand the small and loving hand of Emma, the woman he very much wanted to marry.

Sharples Hall was an old building, rumored to date at least in part back to the 1500s, a grand house with a series of grand residents and visitors. The old house surely had to have been a monument to greatness among the residents of Bolton-le-Moors.

At age 22 John Holden was not what any in the upper classes of Victorian society would have called a man of excellent prospects. He was a hard worker and the 3rd generation in a family of operative cotton spinners. John could very much have eked out an average life of toil and hardship, his finances and life spent hand to mouth as so many of the common people did in those days.

However, with Emma's hand in his, he looked up at that old house and saw his future. He asked her honestly and without a hint of sarcasm, "Should you consent to marry me, as my vow I promise to buy you this fine house for ourselves and our children." It was promise he intended to keep.

Over the next thirty-five years, John Henry Holden rose from the average son of a cotton spinner to the manager at Firs Mill, then Managing Director, then twice the mayor of Leigh. He was even considered for Parliament if his poor health had not prevented it.

In 1919, John Henry Holden became Sir John Henry Holden, 1st Baronet of the Firs. The hereditary knighthood was bestowed upon him by King George V in response to a positive introduction and in recognition of his contributions to the booming textile industry of the United Kingdom.

The event must have been a grand experience for Sir John, having been just raised to a knighthood, purchasing Sharples Hall, the house he had promised to Emma, and planning for the building of Holden Mill.

Being a self-made man, and now a British Baronet, Sir John Henry Holden commissioned James Fenton, a silversmith in Birmingham, to manufacture a very special set of Livery Buttons for his household staff.



For two centuries, most livery buttons created for the livery uniforms of those serving the aristocracy were made of copper or other common metal. Their custom designed crests were minted much like coins, using a planchet¹ and a set of dies. Afterwards, they were plated in gold or silver, and the color deliberately chosen to match the primary tincture of the Coat of Arms of the associated family. Exceedingly rarely were buttons upgraded into precious metals, as they were always in the hands of service staff. Hand engraved examples of livery buttons were almost unheard of in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Sir John, justifiably proud of his accomplishments, commissioned a set of sterling silver and hand engraved livery buttons for his household in celebration of his successes.



The buttons are grand and each slightly unique. The motto "Deo Omnia Debeo" or "I owe everything to God" is delicately engraved on a banner below the crest. In heraldry, the crest is described as, "On a wreath of the colours, in front of a rising sun in its splendour or, a moorcock sable, jelloped and wattled gules."² The set of ten buttons would have adorned the coat of a livery uniform worn by service staff, such as the coachman, a valet or a footman, who attended upon Sir John Holden, his family and his guests,



The button back, showing the Birmingham marks.

By another decade or two having household livery servants would be very much out of style, both economically and practically. Certainly by World War II the practice had been all but abandoned. As history will attest, World War I, World War II and the times between them were extremely difficult for the nation of the United Kingdom. I am told that the Holden family did not escape these difficulties and the 2nd or 3rd Baronet Holden probably sold the buttons, as they were solid silver and, although an heirloom, probably an extravagance in a time of what must have been true need.

Eventually the buttons found themselves in the hands of an antiques dealer in Sweden, where they were purchased in 1969 and brought to America and put in a private antiques collection in Belfast, Maine. In 2015 they were sold again to myself, a young collector who had just started collecting livery buttons. At the time I had little clue as to how very special these buttons actually were, the story they would tell and the adventure on which they would take me.

These ten buttons would soon inspire an entire collection, and multiple writings.

I made multiple attempts to contact the most obvious descendant of Sir John Henry Holden in regards to the buttons, and had not met with much success. However, while doing further research for this article I abandoned the search for contacting the 4th Baronet Holden, and

found that Anthony Holden³, a British author of importance and popularity, was also a descendant of the 1st Baronet of the Firs.

Anthony has been very kind in both his appreciation for the subject matter and correcting a few of my Americanized assumptions.

Among the anecdotes imparted by Mr. Holden is that of a handsome cigar box which was a gift by the loyal household staff to the First Baronet, Sir John. The cigar box is still in the family and is stored in an area of prominence below a period watercolor of Holden Mill.

Sir John Henry Holden and his wife Emma had many children. He died in the same house about which he had made that ambitious promise at the beginning of their shared life. Upon his death, the 13th of May, 1926, it was written of his funeral:

“Upon the coffin of Jacobean Oak reposed the dead Baronet's court hat and sword and the bearers were the chauffeurs and gardeners from Sharples Hall. As the coffin was placed on its last resting place the vault was covered with a profusion of floral beauty - more than 120 wreaths surrounding the carved stone columns”.

Across the street, his monumental creation known as Holden Mill was the last great cotton mill built in the area, and was the first to be run entirely by electricity. The building is now a historical listed building in the United Kingdom and has been converted tastefully into a series of apartments which have managed to keep the original spirit of the building.

The buttons are a highlight of my collection, but in thanks for the help of Mr. Holden in uncovering some history of these buttons, I expect to gift several of these heirlooms back to the family very soon.



Holden Mill as it appears today, transformed into upscale apartments.

¹a flat disk of metal ready to be stamped as a coin, medal, or button. The process of making a metal disk into a planchet is complex. During rolling and blanking press operations the blanks have been hardened and must now be reheated to approximately 1400°F, changing their crystal structure to a softer state. The annealing ensures that the blanks have reached a suitable hardness so that they can be struck to capture the full relief of the designs of the working dies. The blanks are then "frozen" into that state by a water quench bath. The next step is an upsetting mill, which raises a rim around their edges turning the blanks into planchets.

²*Jelloped* is the comb and wattles of a bird. In heraldry, *gules* is the color red. In engraving, it is sometimes depicted as a region of vertical lines

³*Anthony Holden* (born 22 May 1947) is an English *writer*, broadcaster and critic, particularly known as a biographer of artists including Shakespeare, Tchaikovsky, Leigh Hunt, Lorenzo da Ponte and Laurence Olivier, and of members of the *British* Royal family.

Bibliography

A special thanks to the Holden Family, specifically Anthony Holden and his brother Robin.

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