

ALFRED CHITTY

A TRUE ANTIQUARIAN.

Alfred was the 7th cousin x3 of W Ross Clendond

The death of Mr Alfred Chitty on Tuesday last removes from our midst a man of unique personality, who, although his name was very little before the public, was highly esteemed by those who knew him, both for his own sake and for the sake of his achievements. Throughout a long and busy life he had made the collection of coins the chief hobby of his leisure moments with the result that in his old age he was recognised as a world wide authority on Australian medals and tokens and in addition his general numismatic knowledge was sufficient to secure for him the task of classifying and arranging the coin collections in the public libraries of both South Australia and Victoria. It was indeed a fortunate chance which placed at the disposal of the authorities of those two institutions the services of an expert who notwithstanding his advanced age retained the keenness of his faculties; a man in whom the enthusiasm of youth had developed into an absorbing passion for his subject and a loving and meticulous care in dealing with his material.

But this was not all. When community of tastes drew me into the circle of Mr. Chitty's acquaintanceship some 20 years ago I knew him first as a collector of early Victorian engravings and lithographs, and as I come to see more of him I found that he was a born collector of the antique.

Moreover he had discovered for himself by paths in which, if he was not the actual pioneer he had very few competitors. Who except the intimated few know any thing about "fire marks"? We may, when our attention is directed to it, find that we have a subconscious recollection of the custom that used to prevail among insurance companies of affixing a tin plate of distinctive design to the walls of buildings on which they had taken a fire risk. But who would dream of hunting out such of these old labels as remain and making a collection of them? Mr. Chitty not only did this but he also built up in interesting lore about Australian fire insurance companies, their origin, and their "fire marks," and in papers read before the Historical Society of Victoria he presented the results of his researches with a prefatory account of the beginnings of fire prevention in Great Britain, and the origin of fire insurance societies in the 17th century. This is only one example of the thoroughness with which he investigated every subject which claimed his attention. Again he was not content to collect a few examples of old English china. He must needs give even this branch of collecting a local application, and get together samples of "Australian church tokens and church china." I have myself delved a good deal into odd odd corners of Victorian history in the last couple of decades but I must confess that until Mr. Chitty brought them under notice I had no idea of the existence of specially manufactured chinaware for the use of certain Australian churches at tea meetings and similar social gatherings, or of "tokens" used at communion services with a similar special application. A few years ago Mr. Chitty made a holiday trip to Tasmania and came back with a new department added to his private museum. He had been collecting samples of handmade bricks manufactured by convicts, and bearing, in some cases, deliberately impressed thumb-prints of some of those unfortunates, this mark being

placed I understand on every hundredth brick! Not were his Tasmanian interests limited to brickbats. I remember that on the last occasion on which I saw him he insisted on playfully donning a short jacket plentifully adorned with broad arrows, which he has rescued as one of the relics of that grim period of our history.

It is easy, perhaps, to deride the “antiquarian spirit”: but the antiquarian is, after all, a man with a wider vision of the future than most of his fellows. The day will come when these relics of “the old colonial days” will have a hundredfold greater value in Australia than they have to-day. Mr. Chitty, before his death, presented a valuable collection of coins to the Public Library. Let us hope that the remainder of the results of his lifelong collecting will also pass into public hands, and so be preserved to the nation.

I have written these few hurried lines in the hope of giving some adequate idea of the little-known activities of a man who was himself a simple minded, lovable personality. Although a son of a famous lawyer of last century – what lawyer has not heard of Thompson Chitty the author of “Chitty on Torts”? – Alfred Chitty elected in his youth to follow outdoor occupations, and for some years after his arrival in Melbourne in 1871 he was a builder. Later he became a news agent, but, having acquired sufficient means to live in modest comfort, he had long lived in a retirement which was broken only by those calls to public service to which I have referred.

His work at the Public Library here was carried on until a couple of years ago, when advancing age compelled him regretfully to relinquish it and to those who found their way into the coin room

adjourning the National Museum he was ever ready to give the benefit of his wide and deep numismatic knowledge. As far as I know, his only published works, apart from his contributions to the Numismatic Society of Great Britain and other scientific societies were a catalogue of Australian tokens and a pamphlet on Australian Fire Marks

I like to remember him best is the collector at home by his own fireside, surrounded by the results of so many years patient searching – a hobbyist par excellence, always ready to descant on one of his favourite topics to a visiting friend.

There are few men who will leave behind them kindlier recollections than Alfred Chitty.

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Also see:

<https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/3399>