

# Going 'Round In Circles

by Charlie Catlett

A token from the Isle of Man came up at auction recently, and it was instantly one of those “I have to have that!” coins. It features the triskeles on the obverse, running counterclockwise, with the inscription, “Isle of Man Races.” The reverse is a mirror image of *both* the motto and the triskeles (now running clockwise). All sorts of fantasies are conjured when contemplating the possible significance: A three-legged race? A race run backwards and forwards? Was it a human footrace or something more sublime?



To begin with, there is something about the symbol of the Isle of Man that has always seemed intriguing. The triskeles, the three legs perpetually running around in circles, originated in neolithic times as three spirals and is an ancient Celtic symbol. It has been used numismatically since the earliest Sicilian coins and on those of Lycia, in Asia Minor. Syracuse, on the island of Sicily, used the symbol in ancient times, and it is still used on the Sicilian regional flag.



The symbol's use on the Isle of Man dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps originating from Viking settlers. Viking King Anlaf Cuaran's reign in the 10<sup>th</sup> century included the Isle of Man, and one of his coins featured a triskele symbol. The motto associated with the island's symbol since its inception is “Whithersoever you throw it, it will stand.”

The first coin minted on the island was a tradesman's token known as “John Murrey's pence” in 1668. The first legitimate coinage was



issued in 1709 by the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby in pence and halfpence denominations. The island was and still is a self-governing British Crown dependency. Later coins issued by the English Crown for the island were undervalued, particularly during the reign of George III, causing much of that copper coinage to flow to the English mainland (for a profit). Isle of Man, or “Manx” coins and a variety of tokens still circulated on the island until 1839. After that, British coins were the only circulating legal tender until decimalization occurred in 1971.



The token's description in the auction catalog answered some questions and presented some new ones. It was minted circa 1870 and is now considered to have been a pass for the horse race meetings at Camlork, Braddan (on the Isle of Man) in the 1870s. It measures 38mm and weighs 5.52, with a provenance dating to a Baldwin sale in 1941. But what were the Isle of Man Races?

The first racecourse on the Isle of Man, described in 1687, was started by James the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby. He gave a cup as a prize to the winner of the races, establishing the “Manx Derby”- the precursor of “The Derby” run at Epsom, England since 1780. Those early races could only include the Manx small horses either born or bred on the island. And yes, that is how the name “Derby” became associated with races elsewhere, like the one in Kentucky.



There were horse races at Peel and Douglas (two different towns on the island) from about 1811 to 1815. The next racecourse was established in the town of Strang, within the parish of Bradden, in 1870. This would be the Isle of Man Races that the token represented. About 1000 pounds was given in prize money, considerably more than was brought in through ticket sales and betting. Within two years the racecourse closed. Finally, the Belle Vue Racecourse, pictured here in the town of Douglas, was established in 1912. It initially proved a bit more successful, but its popularity dwindled, and it closed in 1931 when on-course betting became illegal. The site is now the location of the Manx National Sports Center.

But that was not the end of racing on the Isle of Man. On the contrary, it has become world famous for motorcycle racing with the Isle of Man TT (Tourist Trophy). The racecourse is a grueling 37.73-mile course on the island's twisting public roads. Each race is three to six laps around the island, depending on the class of motorcycle. And the island, home to 80,000 inhabitants, welcomes 40,000 or more visitors each year for the event.

The Isle of Man TT is possibly the deadliest motorcycle race in the world. Since the first TT race in 1907 until 2019, there had been 260 fatalities. In 2005 alone there were eleven fatalities. Why? For a distance of up to 226 miles, the motorcycles are racing at speeds averaging 120 mph or more. The fastest average speed over the course was 135 mph! And there is no professional racecourse with special pavement: Remember, the TT is run on country roads around an island. There is not even a speed limit outside of town anywhere on the Isle of Man throughout the year! During Sunday of race week, visitors to the island get a chance to ride the race circuit. It is called Mad Sunday because thousands of bikers push their motorbikes to the limit.



The Isle of Man has produced numerous modern coins and medals featuring the Isle of Man TT races, Manx cats, and many other topics. There just seem too many to try to collect, and I am satisfied with the historical Manx items in my collection. From a tiny island in the Irish Sea between England and Ireland, these coins, with running legs, horse races, and motorcycle races, may make you wonder if the Manx are always going 'round in circles.

#### Bibliography

[chiefacoins.com/Database/Countries/Isle\\_of\\_Man.htm](http://chiefacoins.com/Database/Countries/Isle_of_Man.htm)  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/isle\\_of\\_man\\_TT](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/isle_of_man_TT)  
[www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook](http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook)