

**The Strachan and Co tokens –  
Were they South Africa's first widely circulating currency?**  
A quick summation.

It takes years to put together a clear picture of how things were nearly 150 years ago - especially in low population backroad areas like East Griqualand.

Scott Balson first came in contact with the Strachan & Co (S&Co) tokens in the mid 1970s while working at the small Barclays Bank agency in Umzimkhulu. As a numismatist his interest in these little known tokens resulted in the self-publication of the booklet "*Kence, the trade tokens of Strachan and Co*" in 1978 by Scott Balson and the late Prof Clive Graham. See: <http://www.tokencoins.com/story.htm>

Graham researched the company history by looking through records in Pietermaritzburg while Balson worked on the coalface spending several hours each night over six months counting, washing and categorising over 20,000 S&Co tokens as well as many hours face to face with Ken Strachan the grandson of Donald Strachan who first introduced the tokens at his stores in 1874. During the categorising process Balson discovered the second variety of *In Goods*. The date of release and their early area of circulation is the focus of this short article.

**When did the S&Co first circulate:**

Like most little known coin series dating back to the 1800s there are very few records or mentions of the S&Co.

In fact there are just four known direct references by Strachan family members and the Standard bank:

1) In a diary note Douglas Strachan, the son of Donald Strachan, refers to the S&Co being released shortly after 1870 and notes that they were accepted everywhere.

See: <http://www.tokencoins.com/sandco/1874.jpg>

2) During discussions with Ken Strachan, Balson was told the coins were first released in early 1874 when the Strachan stores first opened their doors.

3) The Standard Bank in their comprehensive 2003 booklet celebrating the Kokstad Branch's 125th anniversary refer to the S&Co coins being the only money in circulation in Kokstad in 1878.

See: <http://www.tokencoins.com/Kokstad125.pdf>

4) Ken Strachan in his 1985 booklet about the company refers to the S&Co being accepted everywhere. This detailed booklet was written 7 years after "Kence".

See: <http://www.tokencoins.com/book/d1.htm#ken>

The key diary note by Douglas Strachan, certified as true by Ken Strachan in the book "Kence", is supported by several independent sources presenting a watertight argument that the S&Co were first released in 1874 (points 1-3 above). (Douglas Strachan worked in and managed the S&Co stores in the 1800s and took over when Donald Strachan died in the early 1900s).

**How widely did the S&Co circulate:**

With regards to their circulation, the Standard Bank confirm that in 1878 they were the only currency in use in Kokstad nearly 100km away from Umzimkhulu. That is a large area of circulation covering several hundred square kilometres between the two remote communities in the 1870s.

This statement by the Bank makes perfect sense for many reasons including the following known facts:

**1)** the only, and very busy, oxwagon route to Kokstad from Durban ran through Ixopo and then directly past the S&Co store at Umzimkhulu drift. Most transport drivers stayed the night at the Strachan's hotel as it was an easy day's ride to Kokstad from that point. There is no question that those transporting goods to Kokstad would have come in contact with the S&Co (type A) tokens from the mid 1870s.

**2)** there was a critical shortage of coin of the crown around South Africa but especially in the fast growing and extremely remote township of Kokstad.

**See:** <http://www.tokencins.com/forgot.html>

**3)** in Kokstad there was a small but fast growing and active white population. Many had stores and the Strachan coins were the only money available to them. They fostered the understanding of what money was amongst the many indigenous people they interacted with resulting in the S&Co quickly becoming the region's currency.

**4)** furthermore, the partners in Strachan and Co were both highly respected and trusted with Donald Strachan being the Magistrate in Umzimkhulu in the 1870s as well as the leader of the African army known as the Abalandalosi, and George Brisley the secretary of the Griqua Raad (or Government) based in Kokstad up until annexation of the region by the British in 1878. (ie they were both well known, trusted and respected by all the people regardless of race across the region the coins circulated in the 1870s).

**5)** both Douglas Strachan and Ken Strachan (son and grandson of the founding partner of S&Co - Donald Strachan) state that the S&Co coins were accepted everywhere in the region.

**CONCLUSION:**

**The S&Co tokens were South Africa's first and widely circulating currency - their release in 1874 pre-dates the Kruger coinage by 18 years.**

Scott Balson  
November 2016