The PEWTER COLLECTORS' CLUB of AMERICA

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MEETINGS SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF BULLETIN NO. 5
1938

October 19, 1938. Guests of Mr. and Mrs. Melville T. Nichols at their home in Medford, Mass. The members first visited the Royal house, after which Mr. Nichols led the discussion of a series of examples of Continental pewter brought in by members. The Nichols collection of American pewter was displayed on a table set for a dozen guests, and included many rare items.

November 30, 1938. Harrison Gray Otis House. Mrs. Eaton H. Perkins read a paper on American exhibitions of pewter, and auction sales of American pewter, with prices. She also called attention to the Club's display of teapots in a case in the building in which we met. Dr. Madelaine R. Brown spoke briefly on the current exhibition of pewter in the Whaling Museum at New Bedford. Several members of the Club contributed to this display.

1939

January 25, 1939. Hotel Miles Standish, Boston, Mass. Annual dinner and election of officers. The retiring President, Dr. Rushford, told of his experiences during the year 1938. Dr. Madelaine R. Brown gave a paper, with lantern slides, on early American pewter. Joseph Copeland and Lawrence Langworthy were especially stressed.

February 15, 1939. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Mass. Mrs. Yves Henry Buhler spoke on "Pewter Forms in Silver," illustrating her talk by specimens on exhibition.

March 18, 1939. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. The Club had the privilege of seeing the finest exhibition of American pewter yet assembled, and of hearing Mr. Laurits C. Eichner speak on the making of pewter from the 18th century to the present day.

March 22, 1939. Hotel Sheraton, Boston, Mass. Fifth birthday dinner, already described in Bulletin No. 6.

May 3, 1939. Museum of Fine Arts, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. Mrs. Helen Bullock, archivist of Williamsburg, Inc., described, with lantern slides, the restoration of Williamsburg, Va.

May 6, 1939. Hotel Sheraton, Boston, Mass. Luncheon meeting, attended by invitation, by members of the Clock Club. Mrs. Bullock repeated her talk for the benefit of those who could not go to New Haven, and gave records of the use of pewter at Williamsburg.

June 28, 1939. The College Club, Boston, Mass. Mr. Edward E. Minor of Mount Carmel, Conn., described, with illustrations, his remarkable collection of tankards and mugs.

July 19, 1939. Guests of Mrs. John B. Jameson at her home in Concord, New Hampshire. Mrs. Jameson displayed and described her excellent collection of American pewter.

August 23, 1939. College Club, Boston, Mass. A discussion of Boston pewterers by the President and Dr. Raymond. Curiously enough, not a single piece was brought to the meeting.

September 20, 1939. Old State House, Boston, Mass. Mrs. Eaton H. Perkins led a discussion on ecclesiastical pewter in general, and American communion sets in particular. The tables were crowded with specimens and several members took part in the discussion. Mrs. T. Ferdinand Wilcox of New Canaan, Conn., described her visit to the collection of our honorary member, Captain A. V. Sutherland-Graeme.

November 1, 1939. Wayside Inn, Sudbury, Mass. Professor Percy E. Raymond spoke on pewter candlesticks, illustrating his talk with a diagram drawn by Mr. Paul J. Franklin, and some of the numerous sticks displayed by the members.

November 22, 1939. College Club, Boston, Mass. Luncheon meeting. Mr. Worth Bailey of Mount Vernon, Va., spoke on "The Use of Pewter in Virginia During the Seventeenth Century," illustrated with lantern slides. He described, among other things, the excavations at Jamestown, Va., and gave the story of the oldest known piece of pewter made in America, the Chuckatuck spoon.

HOW DOES ONE TELL BRITANNIA FROM PEWTER?

by LAURITS C. EICHNER

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In answering this question, it is necessary to keep clearly in mind the distinction between the material itself and objects made from this material.

Britannia Metal is actually pewter of a good grade; no more, no less. This becomes clear when we remember that pewter is not a definite term but is the name given any alloy of metals having tin as the principal ingredient. Tin, like silver, is too soft in its pure state for common use and must be alloyed with other metals to give it hardness and strength. When silver is so alloyed we continue to call it silver, merely using such qualifying terms as "fine" and "sterling." For some reason which is obscure, in English, tin similarly alloyed is given a new name—"pewter." It is an interesting fact that in most languages it remains "tin." Note the German "zinn," French "étain," Swedish "tenn" and Danish "tin." In the late 18th Century, when china was replacing the use of pewter as table ware by the middle classes, the formula which became known as Britannia was adopted by the pewterers in England as part of an attempt to revive a dying industry. It was actually an excellent alloy, and the very name Britannia was given it in an effort to dramatize its superior quality.

Unfortunately for the future reputation of the metal, its appearance in the industrial world coincided with the introduction of stamping, spinning and, somewhat later, electro-plating. As the new methods replaced the old, facility and cheapness gradually triumphed over good taste, and many thin and ugly forms were produced. Pewter became elaborate in design and electro-plating was the final step in the process of turning it into imitation silver.

Because we very properly look down on the shapes and craftsmanship of this period, a feeling of contempt has come to be associated in many minds with the metal itself. Even among collectors there are some who cling to the erroneous belief that they are able to distinguish in this metal some inherent lack of quality which does not exist. These same collectors might be surprised to learn that some of their most prized pieces are made of the despised material, as it is undoubtedly true that much Britannia Metal found its way into the old molds and is honored pewter today. It should also be said that while much recognized Britannia is obviously bad, some pieces are well designed and well made and are finding their way into discriminating collections.

To sum up, we do not tell a piece of Britannia from a piece of pewter because of any characteristic of the metal itself, but rather by the use to which it has been put. In the last analysis, the question resolves itself into how to tell a good piece of pewter from a bad one. This depends partly on our knowledge of techniques and our ability to recognize their use, and partly on our feeling for form and line which comes through study and familiarity with all that is recognized as best in the craft.

PEWTER OR BRITANNIA?

by MERTON H. WHEELOCK

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Elsie Englefield, in her "Treatise on Pewter," answers the question concisely thus: "The great and all-important difference is that Pewter is *cast* ware and Britannia-metal is *spun* ware." That is the way practical pewterers understand it, for Miss Englefield is a practical pewterer, one of the managers of Englefields, a Company which traces back through Townsend and Compton (1785) to Thomas Scattergood (1700). From a continuous succession of firms they have inherited the gun-metal molds, tools, recipes, and traditions of two centuries, and know whereof they speak.

As an alloy, Britannia is a superior grade of pewter. It has to be, otherwise it could not be handled satisfactorily on the lathe. During the spinning, the metal is made to flow under the pressure of the tool so as to reach the desired thickness while its shape is being changed. A poor material would stretch unevenly and crack, so as to produce an imperfect product. Almost any sort of alloy can be cast, although, as a matter of fact, the poorer grades are rather easier to use in this way than Britannia.

One may, perhaps, put it this way. A high grade pewter, made from tin, antimony, and copper, is rolled in sheet form. In that state it is still pewter. A piece of it is spun into the form of a bowl, and it becomes Britannia. Why? Because the work done upon it has changed some of its physical properties. It has become harder, as all pewter does when worked upon, and, since it is purposely spun thin, it is lighter in weight than a cast bowl would be. If another piece of the same sheet were melted and cast, the physical properties would again change somewhat, for there would be some volatilization of components of the alloy, and cooling would produce a crystalline structure quite different from that of the spun piece. Perhaps we shall have to call in a metallographic microscope to answer the question as to whether a given piece is Britannia or pewter. It would tell at a glance.

Just now, Britannia is out of favor, and pewter is in. But back in the first half of the 19th century, pewterers had to call pewter Britannia in order to sell it. All would agree that the Brook Farm lamps are pewter, yet we know from books published by persons who remembered the experiment at Roxbury, that the few products of the short-lived industry there were called Britannia by their makers.

PEWTER *versus* BRITANNIA

No question is more frequently asked than: "Is it pewter or Britannia?" The editor has asked two skilled pewterers for their answers to this query. Their replies are printed herewith. Although the writer shares the views thus expressed, he feels that an experienced collector can generally distinguish a difference between the two.

There are some general rules which have few exceptions.

1. Anything made in the United States after 1830 is probably Britannia.

2. Anything marked "Dixon," or any combination with that name. or marked "Sheffield," is probably Britannia.

3. Anything on which a catalogue number is stamped is probably Britannia; even if not Britannia, it is probably not very old.

4. Anything which is cast in a mold, rather than spun, can be called pewter; many Britannia mugs have pewter handles. Care should be taken to distinguish between spinning and skimming or turning. Cast articles, such as plates, porringer and other bowls, and the drums of drinking vessels, are put on the lathe and skimmed to remove the rough surface. In spinning, a sheet of metal is pressed into shape against a form, the "chuck." Since such pieces were finished by burnishing, they show less traces of the use of turning tools than do the skimmed pieces.

5. Most vessels made from thin hard metal are Britannia. This includes chiefly beakers, handled "cups" without feet, tea- and so-called "coffeepots," and most American communion services.

These generalities will settle no arguments. They are merely suggestions for those who wish to learn from experience. It should be remembered that for the collector of American pewter, there is no stigma attached to the term Britannia.

— P. E. R.

PEWTER DISEASE

Collectors are all too familiar with the black spots and blisters which disfigure some of the most attractive pieces. Various explanations of them have been put forward, but only recently has the true solution been found. It was formerly the custom to place the blame on the antimony or other ingredients of the pewter alloy, but since it occurs on pure tin, this is obviously incorrect. Mr. Ritchie Kimball has called my attention to a report of the International Tin Research and Development Council on "Black Spots on Tin and Tinned Ware," by Sven Brennert, of Stockholm. Dr. Brennert learned how to produce the spots experimentally, and showed that they are due to an electrochemical process, in which the metallic tin is changed to an oxide. Being an electrolytic action, it takes place in the presence of moisture, dilute acids or alkalies, or salt solutions. Even milk initiates the action, and once started, very dilute solutions will keep it up. Tin-plated, particularly tin or copper, reacts more readily than pure tin; on the other hand, the effect can be prevented by keeping the tin in contact with a "less noble metal," such as zinc or aluminum.

Once in possession of these facts, several puzzling things become clear. They explain why specimens from excavations are in such bad condition, and why certain people bury pewter to "antique" it. Everyone has probably noted that the insides of really good old salts are badly corroded, and that the undersides of footed pieces are generally clean and fresh, no matter how spotted the other portions are. They explain why some of the pieces made from the best metal are in deplorable condition, whereas the softer and less desirable ones have a good surface. The best pewter, tin and copper, is most liable to decay if kept in a damp place; the lead probably slows up or prevents the electrolytic action in the poorer pieces. As one looks over his collection, he will probably note that the thicker, leadier pieces such as measures, Continental porringers, candlesticks, rat-tail spoons, and most American plates, have fairly good surfaces, whereas a large part of the Britannia and the finer 17th century pieces need, or have had, drastic cleaning.

— P. E. R.

THE USE OF ANTIMONY IN PEWTER

Who can tell us when antimony was first introduced into the composition of pewter? Probably someone knows, but the books I have consulted are very indefinite on the subject. It may be that antimony was not used to harden the alloy till the 18th century, and that Britannia is the metal which was produced when the proper percentage of antimony was at last determined.

The article "Pewter" by Malcolm Bell, in the eleventh edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, is the best summary on the composition of the alloys which I have found. He points out that the formulae set down in the first English ordinances, (1348) mention only tin, lead, and brass. It should be recognized that at that time, brass was probably an alloy of copper and tin, not copper and zinc as at present. Bell was not able to discover when bismuth was first added to harden the mixture, but states that by 1561 its use was looked upon as a matter of course. As late as 1653 the pewterers were ordered to use at least three pounds of the "tin-glass" (bismuth) with each thousand pounds of tin. Bismuth hardens pewter, but it also makes it brittle, and some time after 1653, some pewterer had the bright idea of substituting "regulus of antimony" for it. We know antimony was an ingredient of "Hard Metal;" and that the English pewterers who made this ware worked mostly in the last quarter of the 18th century, and later. Anyone familiar with the plates bearing this stamp will know how much harder they are than those made in the first half of the 18th century and marked "Superfine Hard Metal." This earlier alloy was actually the same as, or an imitation of, the "étain sonnant," brought into England by Jacques Taudin in the sixteen fifties, and hence called "French Pewter."

Massé states that Britannia was invented about the middle of the 18th century; Cotterell says it was not made till the very end of the century. Who has further information?

— P. E. R.

A volume on "The Arts and Crafts in New York, 1726-1776," published by the New York Historical Society in 1938, contains several items of interest to pewter collectors. Among them are the following advertisements from New York papers:

Bradford and McEven "lately set up a Pewterers' and Plummers' business in Peck slip," where they make and sell "Dishes, plates, basins, teapots, quart and pint mugs, tankards, porrengers, cream pots, sugar dishes, slop bowls, half pint and gill tumblers, cullenders, bed pans, chair pans, chamber pots, wine measures, table spoons," and many other articles — Aug. 27, 1772.

A nice line of goods, but what has become of all their wares? One does not have to ask this question concerning the following:

"Johanes Will, Pewterer, living in Smith's Fly, opposite Mr. Robert Livingstone — Has A Parcel of the best New-York distill'd Rum by the Hogshead, Barrel, or smaller in Quantity, not less than five gallons." 1756.

"Stopped a Pewter Quart Pot, mark'd in the Inside I W, and at the bottom of the Outside, A D. Whoever owns the same may know the person who defrauded them of it, by applying to the printer." *N. Y. Journal or Advertiser,* July 29, 1773.

Whoever now owns it may right this wrong by sending it to the Pewter Club.