

AMM

The Fascination of Pewter

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It is an honour to be asked to write an article for this issue of the *Tinkoerier* and so contribute towards closer relations between De Nederlandse Tinvereniging and the Pewter Society.

However, sad to say, relations between our two countries over pewter were not always so friendly. In 1646 John Sweeting, later to be Master of the London Pewterers' Company, published a leaflet in which he wrote,

Foreign states having a supply of tin, in their wisdom for the good of their own people, as Holland, part of France and Flanders, prohibit the bringing in of [English] wrought pewter... and do set to work their own nation and supply many parts of the world with debased false metal, bringing without control great quantities into Scotland and Ireland, striking this kingdom's Rose and Crown upon it. A mark known in foreign parts to testify the just goodness of pewter according to the laws of this land. By means whereof our English nation is greatly abused...

The alarm of the London pewterers can be well understood. Tin was becoming increasingly available from the East Indies and the mines of Cornwall no longer had a monopoly on its supply. Competition from the Netherlands increasingly threatened their export markets.

Despite this nationalistic outburst, and stringent regulations which forbade members of the London Company from working abroad, there is a little fragmentary information suggesting that there was some working contact between the pewterers of our two countries. Dubbe, in *Keur van Tin*, notes that three English pewterers who were apparently working in Amsterdam were married there in the 17th century. In the previous century a note of c.1540 in the archives of the London Pewterers' Company gives the names of two master pewterers, one journeyman and an apprentice who

were 'yonder the sea' in Antwerp. This apparent contradiction needs explanation and future research, perhaps by members of the Nederlandse Tinvereniging, may shed some light on the matter.

What then is the fascination of this base metal which once raised such passion in John Sweeting's mind? It is sometimes black, often dull, sometimes damaged and increasingly expensive. It has none of the colourfulness of pottery and none of the intrinsic value of silver, why then do we collect and study it? Every collector has his own reasons. Maybe it is because it is associated romantically in our minds with 'the good old days', with the pleasures of eating and drinking, or because it should be preserved and valued as the product of a once universal, but now extinct craft, or because it tells us something about how our forefathers lived and worked. Craftsmen in their workshops, apprentices learning their trade, the Guilds laying down the law, and people furnishing their homes with what has been called in England the poor man's silver. The price of pewter in the 17th century was only about one hundredth of that of silver and all but the very poorest owned and used it in abundance. We have a responsibility to seek out, preserve and research the tiny fraction which has survived.

Pewterware from the Netherlands shares with that of Britain, a simplicity of form and a harmony of proportion which, to my mind, is lacking in that of some other countries. Flagons, drinking vessels, measures, plates and dishes from the Netherlands are pleasing to the eye and feel good in the hand, yet for some reason they are not usually collected in Britain. I suspect that many Dutch collectors are similarly uninterested in British pewter. Most of us, it seems, collect those things which we can most easily put into the familiar historical setting of our own country and which tell us something of its social history. And research is, of course, infinitely easier in one's own country. Over forty years ago, when I began to collect pewter, the emphasis was entirely on collecting, and collectors were intent on the acquisition of an array of pewterware which was better than that of their fellow collectors. By 'better' was meant more

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extensive, rarer, more valuable or earlier in date. Collecting was a competitive sport, and the hunt for superior pieces savoured of the thrill of the chase. Of course we still get that thrill when something exciting falls into our hands, but the emphasis, at least in Britain, has changed. The shortage of the rarer pieces and their cost has led many collectors to find their satisfaction in researching lesser pieces and investigating the history of the age-old craft of pewtering. A common piece with little obvious merit can become a valued and valuable item if it adds something to our knowledge of a maker or a place, or provides evidence for the dating of a style.

Our knowledge has increased enormously in recent years. Much information has come from the patient searching out and reading of innumerable ancient documents; an occupation which can be a fascinating and rewarding one for a serious collector. Thus twenty-five years ago little was known about those English pewterers who worked outside London. Now we know the names of many hundreds of provincial pewterers who worked in over 200 English towns. Much personal information has been discovered about some of them, some of their touchmarks have been identified and local styles in pewter can now be identified. Both in Amsterdam and in London many fine and excellently preserved pieces of medieval pewter have recently been excavated which have opened up new fields for historical research in a previously unknown area. Large numbers of children's pewter toys dating from medieval times to the 18th century have been recovered from the mud of the River Thames and many are identical to examples found in Amsterdam and which appear to be of Dutch manufacture. Who were their makers, and was there trade in them between our two countries? We know little of the local trade between individual pewterers. To what extent did they share their expensive moulds or cast unfinished items for one another? Is a touchmark necessarily that of the maker, or might it be only that of the finisher and seller? In a different field the development in recent years of non-destructive methods of analysis has given us a better understanding of the composition of the alloys used by pewterers over

the centuries and enabled some misconceptions to be corrected. Notably, English 'fine metal' has been found to contain 1-3% of copper (not 20% as long repeated) and some medieval 'pewter' artefacts, badges, tokens and cruets, have been found to be made of pure tin. Much more analysis of old metal is needed.

Another source of invaluable information is the pewter recovered in recent years from shipwrecks, many of which can be precisely dated. The most important of these from the English collector's point of view is the *Mary Rose*, one of Henry VIII's warships sunk in 1545. It yielded a wide range of pewter artefacts, some quite unique, but most interestingly several flagons or measures which have a close stylistic resemblance to similar items made in the Netherlands. Dutch collectors have doubtless learned much from the wreck of the *Utrecht*, sunk off Brazil in 1648 which yielded an impressive array of pewterware, which has, alas, been retained in Brazilian museums. The East Indiaman *Amsterdam*, buried since 1749 on an English beach, has also yielded some pewter. The English slave ship *Henrietta Marie*, wrecked off Florida in 1700, has given us insight into the use of pewter trade goods in the West African slave trade. The ship carried numerous London-made basins, spoons and tankards and records show that a slave could be bought on the Guinea Coast for about thirty pewter basins. We now know why they were called 'Guinea basins' in the Pewterers' Company records. These are but a few of the shipwrecks which have widened our knowledge of antique pewterware and sometimes provided examples of artefacts which have not survived on land. New fields for investigation and discovery present themselves all the time. Interest is where you find it and every collector can contribute something to our pool of knowledge.