

A LONDON PEWTERER'S WORKSHOP
IN 1551

By Ronald F Homer, FSA

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A three-leaf fragment of an unidentified London pewterer's business records, covering some three months of the year 1551, has been found among the archives of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers and is here transcribed together with a discussion of its contents. It provides an inventory of the pewterer's stock, describes the alloying and casting of over a ton of tin to produce a wide range of pewter flatware, and itemizes the sales and loans of pewterware to named customers. These include other pewterers and Alderman Richard Lambert. The manuscript provides a unique insight into a sixteenth century pewterer's workshop practices. Speculation into the identity of the pewterer has proved inconclusive.

THE MANUSCRIPT

The second volume of the 'Court Book' of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers,¹ which contains the Court minutes for the years 1561 to 1589, has bound in at the end several leaves which are unrelated to the book itself and which have been incorporated into it during a nineteenth(?) century rebinding. Three of these leaves were recognized by the writer as forming a detailed record of the day-to-day activities of a London pewterer's shop during the months of May, June and July 1551. One leaf sets out the stock in hand in May 1551 and goes on to describe the melting of tin, its alloying, and the casting of large quantities of many types of pewter flatware. Two other leaves, which are consecutive, provide details of sales during the same period, naming customers and describing the individual wares sold, their weights and their cost. These also list the wares hired to 'Mr Lambart', alderman, for use in the 'mayor's feast'. The fragment forms a unique and valuable record which, despite consisting of only three leaves, sheds much detailed and quantitative light on the craft and the business of a pewterer at a time when this is otherwise undocumented. The only other known pewterers' business records date from the eighteenth century.²

The leaves are on the same paper with the same watermark (a ewer) as the body of the Court Book which, according to a calligraphic inscription at the beginning, was presented to the Company in 1562 by the then Master, John Royston. They have been reversed to read from the end of the book and comprise in random order, a page of pen-trials reading 'This is the Accompt of ...', the three leaves described here, a leaf with an undated inventory of weapons, and a leaf with a receipt for a loan from one Robert Plomer to a James Skinner in 1554-55, all interspersed with a few blanks. The indications are that two of the three leaves which concern us are opening leaves from two separate books, one from a workshop book and one, numbered 'folio 1', from a sales book. There is thus no possibility that they represent an earlier (though unlikely) use of

2-pound dishes
 Narrow bordered dishes
 Great 'hats' and small 'hats'
 Great, middle and small trenchers
 Great, small and wrought saucers
 Spice plates
 Jelly (*jelle*) dishes
 Ear dishes
 Great and small French dishes
 Great French platters
 Great and small French saucers
 'Genewaye' saucers

The workshop evidently had a stock of moulds, which would have been made of bronze, for casting all of this considerable variety of wares. However, it did not produce any hollow-ware and though 'pottle pots' were sold from the shop these must have been bought-in from another maker. There is abundant evidence that many pewterers specialized in flatware or hollow-ware only and traded with each other to supplement their stock for sale. Indeed, several pewterers were among the customers of this shop.

The workshop's activities were on a surprisingly large scale. On 25 May five pieces of Cornish tin weighing in total 1,298 pounds (at 100lb per hundredweight⁷) were melted, alloyed with forty-five pounds of 'temper', and subsequently cast to produce 604 items of pewterware. It is known from analyses of sixteenth century pewter flatware that it consists of tin alloyed with typically 1–3 per cent of copper and 0.15–0.35 per cent of bismuth. That from the *Mary Rose* mostly falls within this range.⁸ Copper does not readily dissolve in molten tin unless the tin is heated to a high temperature, which is both wasteful of fuel and leads to excessive loss of metal by oxidation if the whole mass of the tin is superheated to incorporate raw copper into it. To avoid this problem it was customary to produce a copper-rich premix known as temper containing perhaps 30 per cent of copper and 70 per cent of tin as a separate operation. This was readily incorporated into tin at a much lower temperature. The premix used here, by inference, must also have contained the bismuth as there is no separate mention of it. It seems likely that the production of the premix was a specialized operation carried out elsewhere and that temper could have been an article of commerce in the trade. The inevitable wastage of metal due to oxidation is noted in the weight of the 'ashes' which formed a scum on the surface of the molten metal. Ashes were collected and reprocessed to recover the tin and this specialized operation was organized for its members by the Company. The Pewterers' ordinances of 1455 note the appointment of a 'necessary man' as a freeman 'to wash all the ashes that metal is in and melt and fine the metal'.⁹ Only eleven days later, on 5 June, a further 890 pounds of tin plus 175 pounds of old metal and 28 pounds of temper was melted and cast. The casting on 25 May produced 1,266 pounds of assorted wares and that on 5 June a further 1,040 pounds. Smaller meltings and castings were made using the 'tiges', 'flotings' and 'soones'¹⁰ salvaged from the larger operations and also from comparatively small quantities of fine metal. Fine metal was a lead-free pewter made from a tin/copper alloy and was prescribed by the Pewterers' Company for flatware. The cheaper lead-containing 'lay metal', which does not figure here, was allowed by the Company to be used for pots and measures. Table 1

quantities of pewter for the mayor's feast, was Alderman Richard Lambert. His tombstone, noted by Stow, recorded that he was a grocer, a Merchant Adventurer and 'free of Muscovia and Russia'. He died in 1567, the year of his shrievalty.¹¹ Stow also tells us that one of the oldest houses in Crooked Lane 'is now called the Swanne in Crooked Lane, possessed of strangers, and selling of Rhenish Wine'.¹²

Pewterware was sold at 11d per pound, discounted to 10½d for the 4 hundredweights sold on 29 June to Alderman Lambert. It is apparent that though the hundredweight ('C') used for tin and newly cast wares was of 100 pounds, the hundredweight used for sales was of 112 pounds as is seen, for example, from the sale of 'ijj C vij lb' (ie 343 pounds) at 11d per pound to Robert Raselles for £15 14s 5d on 7 June. It is worth noting here that in many cases weights and prices are unusually given in both roman and arabic numerals. Alongside the large sales are some small ones, including specially made items which were sometimes produced by reworking standard forms. Thus we have 'a deep basin made of a small French platter', another made from 'a great French platter', 'the bottom of a small still [made from] a small French platter' and 'an egg dish (*egdiche*) made of a spice plate'. The soft alloy readily lent itself to reshaping by simple cold hammering. In addition to finished wares, there were several small sales of fine metal (one in the form of powder) to the pewterers Allen Clarke and Richard Williamson, but these amounted to only some fifty pounds weight in total, and a single sale of three pounds of tin to an unspecified customer.

As well as purchasing pewter, an added later entry notes that Alderman Lambert hired thirty garnishes on 27 October 1551 in 'rowe [rough] vessel' for the mayor's feast. A subsequent entry notes that it was returned short of a 3-pound platter, a French platter and three saucers. Two entries elsewhere show that a garnish was two dozen, indicating that the number of pieces hired was probably 720. The hiring of pewter for large functions was common practice from at least as early as the fifteenth century until the early eighteenth by livery companies and other institutions. Eighteenth century pewterers, and presumably those in earlier times, carried enormous stocks of 'rough' ware for hiring.¹³ The meaning of rough is obscure, but appears to imply that ware for hire was less well finished than ware for sale, or perhaps that it was supplied 'as found' with the knife cuts and blemishes arising from repeated use.

Over the continuous period from 23 May to 18 July covered in these records, sales amounted to a total of over 1,800 pounds weight valued at about £82. If this is typical of the year as a whole the annual turnover amounted to 5–6 tons valued at around £500–550, which represents some £250,000 in modern money. As an aside on money, there is a note at the end of June 'All money received after the same rate as before the proclamation', doubtless a reference to the devaluation of certain debased silver coins in 1551.

THE IDENTITY OF THE PEWTERER

It is disappointing that there is no evidence in the manuscript of either the location of this large workshop or the identity of the pewterer. One might surmise from the fact that he hired out the pewter for the Mayor's Feast and dealt with Alderman Lambert that he was well connected. The use of arabic numerals, though not entirely fluent, alongside the roman suggests that he was well educated as does the curious use throughout of French in dates, as for example in 'le 22 jour May'. However, the names of the months

5. Made into a deep basin a small French platter weighing ijlb iijq
 6. Sold le 6 jour iijlb of tin price ijs vijd ob
 Sold to the vintner at the 'Swanne in croked lane' vj middle chargers weighing $15\frac{1}{2}$ lb, xvlb di
 7. Sold le 7 jour June vj trenchers iiijs
 8. Sold to Robert Raselles of Beverley (*Beverle*) a garnish of the iij pound, a garnish of the iij pound, ij garnishes of great French vessel, one garnish of small, xj small genewaye saucers, vj great French saucers all weighing 3C 7lb, iijC vijlb
 Price the pound xjd, sum xv li xiiijs vd
 9. Sold to Mistress Skinner le 9 jour a deep basin made of a great French platter weighing 3lb, iijlb and an egg dish (*egdiche*) made of a spice plate weighing $1\frac{3}{4}$ lb, ilb di q
 10. Weighed to Allen Clarke in fine metal vijlb
 Weighed more unto him le 18 jour June in fine metal ijlb
 Weighed some powder le 19 jour in fine metal $\frac{1}{2}$ lb, dilb
 Taken to make the bottom of a small still a small French platter at $2\frac{1}{2}$ lb, ijlb di
 Weighed to make iij 'billes' for master Lambert in fine $2\frac{1}{2}$ lb, ijlb di
 Made in dishes for him xiiij jelly (*jelle*) dishes
 Made more for him xij platters, iij of a middle platter, iij of a ilb di dish, iij of a ij pound French dish

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Le 29 jour June

Sold to master Lambert the alderman in vessel, one dozen of iij pound platters, iv dozen of great French platters, iij dozen of iij pound platters, iij dozen dishes, xij plates, all weighing iijC jlb
 Price the pound xd ob sum in money xix li xvjs xd
 Sold more unto him, vi dozen of trenchers weighing xllb q
 Price the dozen ix s sum in money liiijs
 Item viij pottle pots and iij 'sawet' (suet?) pots weighing $63\frac{1}{2}$ lb, iij^{xx} iijlb di
 Price the pound xjd ob, sum in money lvs vjd
 Received hereof in part payment le 2 jour July in money the sum of xij li xs

[In a different hand]

Received the last day of July 1551 xiiij li xijs vd
 All money received after the same rate as it was before the proclamation

[In the original hand]

Sold to Matthew Clarke le 12 jour July one garnish of the iij pound, a garnish of the iij pound, vij French platters, vij saucers all weighing ix^{xx}lbs q
 Weighed to Robert Crappwell iij trenchers weighing ijlb di
 Weighed to Mr Warwick in fine metal weighing $9\frac{1}{2}$ lb, ixlb di
 Sold to George Kirthe-forthe vj middle platters, vj ij pound dishes, vj narrow bordered dishes, vj genewaye saucers, viiiij French saucers all weighing xliiijlb

- four-and-a-half tons of loan stock in 1708. The Pewterers' Ordinances of 1455 (Guildhall MS 22, 156, see n 9) set out rules for hiring 'rough vessels'.
14. Guildhall MS 22, 179, Guildhall Library, London.

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