

EAR

Apollo  
Jan June 1947

## COLLECTING OLD PEWTER SNUFFBOXES

BY RONALD F. MICHAELIS

"HE who is not a friend in a pinch is not worth a snuff" is the inscription on one of the XIXth century Scottish snuff mulls contained in the collection which is commented upon here, and, in one respect at least, it is profoundly true.

Snuff-taking is a habit developed in the late XVIth or early XVIIth century, and which has persisted right up to the present time. It started shortly after Jean Nicot first introduced tobacco to France, and Sir Walter Raleigh brought it to England, when both ladies and gentlemen of the Court found (or thought they found!) that there were wonderful benefits in the newly-discovered herb which, when rasped and pounded, mixed with certain essential oils, and snuffed delicately up the nose, was a cure for many ills. It would seem that, even in those far-off days, tobacco in one form or another was used as a means of soothing the nerves, for Samuel Pepys, writing in his Diary in 1665 (having just seen two or three houses marked with the red cross indicating the plague) says:

"It put me into an ill conception of myself . . . that I was forced to buy some roll-tobacco to smell to and chew, which took away my apprehension."

Whether by the term "smell to" Pepys meant *sniff at* the pounded tobacco, or snuff, is a matter for conjecture; this quotation, however, goes to show that tobacco-taking in one form or another was an accepted habit at that time, since our diarist, without further comment or apparently considering it an unusual thing to do, bought tobacco with which to relieve his uneasiness.

Such a valuable aid to health and the constitution having been discovered, it was to be expected that the jewellers, goldsmiths and silversmiths soon began to exercise their ingenuity in devising a suitable container to enable the "tobaccoist" (as both snuff-taker and smoker were then called) to carry round a sufficient supply, both for himself and to offer a pinch to his friends. As snuff began to be available to others than the very rich, snuffboxes were made in a very wide range of materials from the more humble horn or pewter to the beautiful gold, enamelled or jewelled boxes popular at the Courts of France in the days of Louis XV and XVI.

To attempt to form even a representative collection of boxes in all the precious metals and materials which have been used would probably strain the resources of a rich man. It is not, however, with these elaborate boxes that we are concerned here, but with the "poor relation"—the pewter snuffbox.

Pewter was one of the commonest and most easily worked metals and consequently was used in the making of practically all of the many utilitarian articles of the man-in-the-street and of the household. Few, if any, of the smaller articles in this metal have such an attraction for the collector as those associated with the snuff-taker or smoker.

Only a few of the pewter snuffboxes which have come under the author's notice were made prior to the middle of the XVIIth century, and they seem to have been made prolifically up until at least the middle of the XIXth century. It is certain that many were made in pewter before the time mentioned, but, probably due to the comparative softness of the metal and the continual wear to which they would have been subjected in a waistcoat or coat-tail pocket, few of the earliest seem to have survived to the present day.

In many cases pewter boxes were made in exact replicas of similar articles in silver—in fact, there is little doubt that they

were purposely made in this fashion for those persons who were either unable or unwilling to expend the price required for a similar article in a rarer metal.

Examination of many of the earlier specimens will show traces of gilding either inside or out, or both; some even of coloured enamel or paint having been used to add emphasis to an intaglio design which has been moulded into the article or engraved by hand. Many and varied are the shapes and sizes of these charming little boxes, the most fascinating probably being those fashioned into the shape of a shoe or other familiar article. It has been suggested that some of the elongated types are possibly needlecases or matchboxes and, in fact, this may well be so. Of those shown in the first illustration, the long oval-section box with sprung hinged lid (the last item in the second row) is most certainly a matchbox, having clearly defined

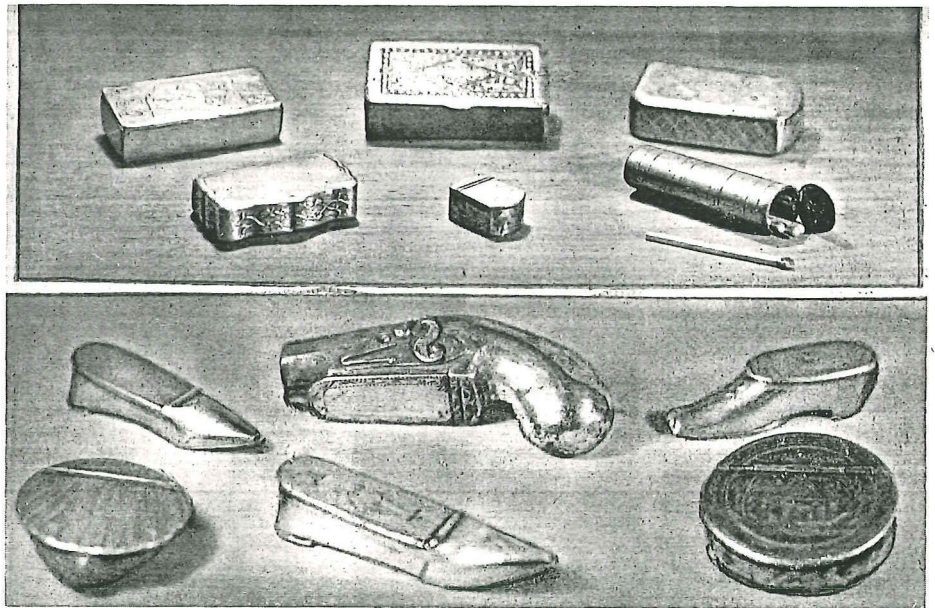


Fig. I

corrugations at the base upon which the vesta would be struck.

Other boxes which to all intents and purposes appear to be snuffboxes have also been found with ridges which would seem to be for the same purpose.

As matches came into general use only about the year 1830 it is clear that boxes for this purpose cannot be of any great age. It is thought that all the items in the first and second rows of the first illustration with the exception mentioned, and also the midget in the centre, are probably to be dated between 1800 and 1830. The tiny item in the centre is a steel box, 1 in. long, with a hinged lid. The lid has been superimposed with pewter which shows signs of having been engraved; this box is probably *circa* 1700.

The third and fourth rows of the first illustration show a representative selection of unusual pieces. The seventh and eleventh specimens are most likely needlecases, the smaller of the two bears the maker's name—R. WEBSTER, in the form of silver marks, as shown in Cotterell's *Old Pewter, its Makers and Marks*, No. 5020. The shoe opposite is hinged at the back of the lid, farthest from the camera. In the centre is a finely-designed double-barrelled pistol with snuff container showing clearly beneath the barrels. This is a heavy piece weighing  $5\frac{3}{4}$  ozs. and is  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ins. long.

The bottom row shows a neat little box in the form of a cockle shell and the last item is a circular box  $2\frac{3}{8}$  ins. diameter which is hand-made throughout, bearing a crudely engraved design of a cottage on the lid.

In the second illustration is shown a good variety of types;

the second piece in the top row is a fine early box, probably circa 1750, with a cast lid bearing a hunting scene design with a retriever in the foreground and a sportsman with gun in the bushes behind.

This particular design has been found on other boxes of rectangular shape. The third is a later box with an inset panel of brass, or pinch-beck, in basketwork design. The oval box in the second row is another early type, of heavy construction; this bears the original owner's name, "C. Parker," engraved on the lid.

Of the articles in the second row of the illustration the standing piece is a pewter pipe-stopper, modelled into the likeness of a seated dog. These small implements have been used for pressing down the tobacco, or half-smoked dottle, in pipes for over 300 years, and the practice has continued, but in the form of a more utilitarian article, to the present day.

These pipe-stoppers are rarely found in pewter. This particular specimen is not unduly old, being perhaps circa 1820; it is, however, the only pewter stopper in a collection of approximately a hundred of these objects in the author's possession. It is not claimed that the item opposite the tobacco stopper has any connection whatsoever with the smoker or snuff-taker—this is a pewter dog whistle formed into the likeness of a hound's head and is another rarity in pewter, ivory or bone examples being more frequently seen.

The third and fourth rows of the second illustration show a selection of Scottish pewter mounted snuff mulls. The term "mull" is essentially a Scottish word and is not used elsewhere to denote the same thing. Some of those illustrated bear the maker's name, "Durie" (*op. cit.* No. 1477), whereas others, although they would appear to be by the same maker, are unmarked.

Unfortunately, in the case of Durie (and for that matter also in that of R. Webster, mentioned previously), nothing is known of the time and place of his manufactory, although the late Mr. Ingleby Wood, in his *Scottish Pewterware and Pewterers*, claimed that Durie was a Scot and, judging from the types upon which his name appears, there seems no reason to doubt the claim.

It is the exception rather than the rule for pewter snuffboxes to be marked at all. This is due probably to the fact that the majority of boxes are of comparatively late manufacture and were made since the time when the Pewterers Company held a tight rein on pewterers and insisted on the marking of all pieces with the maker's touch.

The marking of pewterware was obviously to ensure good quality work being produced, but, so far as snuffboxes are concerned, it was certainly not any feeling of ashamedness in their productions which accounted for pewterers not marking their pieces, for it is a remarkable fact that the metal used and the workmanship involved in the making of the majority of these boxes is of the highest quality. This is particularly true of the Scottish mulls in the second illustration, which of necessity were made by hand, due to the diversity of size and shape of the hoof or horn to be mounted.

The collection of snuffboxes under review, which in number totals about 60 items, was formed piece by piece over a number of years.

The only pieces included *en bloc* are some of the horn mulls, which were purchased recently from a well-known collection; it is believed, however, that many of the latter and also some of the former boxes were originally contained in the collection of the late Mr. Walter Churcher, whose name is legion among



Fig. II

pewter collectors, and came upon the market when his collection was broken up.

It is a difficult task to-day to find items worthy of acquisition and in fact a magazine review of a collection of pewter snuffboxes in 1937 read: "The collection of these delicate little pieces of the pewterer's craft was gathered together from the four corners of Britain—a feat almost impossible of achievement to-day."

Although written in 1937, this review related to a collection formed many years earlier and it was the remark referred to which was mainly responsible for the formation of the author's collection which, at that time, consisted of only about half-a-dozen specimens of pewter boxes.

#### PISTOLS

W. W. Gower, Manhattan Beach, Cal. In answer to your inquiry as to the origin of the mask butt on pistols, I would say, in the first place, that the term "grotesque" better expresses the appearance of these masks than the term "fiendish" which you use. The grotesque mask was a popular form of ornament in practically all branches of applied art, not only in post-Renaissance art but also during the Middle Ages. I consider therefore that the grotesque character of these masks was not due to any particular wish to develop a form of ornament which would stress the offensive nature of the weapon, but was a normal utilisation of an element from the common stock of ornament of the period. While the application of the mask butt was originally dictated by its convenient shape, its survival into the XIXth century was a consequence of the force of tradition. The steel pommel was presumably fitted in order to render the pistol effective as a club. In fact, however, the finer pistols were usually cut so thin in the small, and made of such short-grained wood, that they would not have stood up to such use without damage.

You do not quote my opinion quite correctly. During the XVIIth century the centres of firearms production were in Germany, France and Italy. There were few really skilled gunsmiths outside these countries. During the second half of the XVIIth century, emigrants from these countries came to the smaller European countries and set up workshops, so that by the end of the century we find national schools of gunmaking generally throughout Europe. An important factor in explaining the similarity between XVIIth century pistols produced in different countries is the influence of the French Pattern Books, which were used throughout Western Europe.

Your Italian pistol sounds very interesting, but without a photograph it is not possible to express an opinion.