

A Naval Occasion in Pewter

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IN *The Connoisseur* for June, 1942, I described a series of engraved pewter chargers commemorating the marriage of King Charles II to Catherine of Braganza, and engraved *VIVAT REX CAROLUS SECUNDUS BEATI PACIFICI 1662*; and, since further somewhat dubious examples had begun to appear, I warned readers to make very careful examination of any charger purporting to commemorate any of the memorable events of the seventeenth century which might be offered to them.

Since that time I have seen chargers with engravings illustrating the Great Fire (1666), the trial of the seven Bishops (1688) and even the Judgment of Solomon, all of which were clever but spurious imitations.

Recently, however, a further charger came to my notice which is indeed a piece of contemporary history engraved upon pewter: and both charger and engraving are entirely genuine. When I first saw it the charger was so encrusted with corrosion that the engraving was, in parts, unrecognisable. Since coming into my possession, however, it has been carefully cleaned, without more of the 'rust' being removed than was necessary to reveal the picture. The result appears in the illustration (No. 1).

The charger is 20½-in. in diameter and is completely covered with 'wriggle' and line engraving. The well is filled by a spirited picture of a man-o'-war of three masts, which has just fired a broadside at a ship alongside, invisible but for a mast to the right beyond the billowing smoke. On her starboard bow are two other large ships, locked together in combat. The man-o'-war flies the following flags, fore to aft:

1. Sprit topmast—the Jack.
2. Foremast—the Admiralty Flag.
3. Main—the Royal Standard.
4. Mizzen—the Squadron colour.
5. At the stern—the Red Ensign.

The whole scene is somewhat similar to that cast upon a medalion which, however, commemorates the Restoration. Above the main vessel is a portrait (No. 2) of James, Duke of York. The features are much as would be supposed from Lely's portrait. Round the booge of the dish runs the inscription, in large lettering somewhat difficult to read, *JACOBUS DUX EBOR ET ALBAN DOM MAG^N ADMIRALLUS ANGLIAE 1665*. James was appointed Lord High Admiral of England on 16th May, 1660, and was in command of the fleet at the battle of Lowestoft in 1665. Obviously it is this victorious action which is here commemorated.

The second Dutch war had begun in March, and the Duke joined the fleet at the Gunfleet, leading the Red Squadron in the 'Royal Charles' (ex 'Naseby'), presumably the ship shown here. The flags she is flying are such as would be expected in these circumstances and at this time.

On 1st June the Dutch fleet under Admiral Opdam in 'de Eendracht', appeared off Southwold, and battle was joined on 3rd June, 14 miles to the north-east of Lowestoft. James engaged Opdam and after a four-hour duel, blew up his ship. The Dutch thereupon retreated, having lost their commander and twenty ships. The British lost one ship. In spite of the escape of the rest

of the enemy fleet owing to disregarded orders, this was accounted a great British victory and was so acclaimed by Samuel Pepys. Parliament voted the Duke the sum of £120,000 'in token of the great sense they had of his conduct and bravery in the late engagement'.

So much for the commemorative side of the charger's history, about which there can be, I think, no doubt.

The original ownership of this memorial is a question of considerable interest. I have in the past referred to the custom which appears to have prevailed in the seventeenth century, even amongst those classes which, one would have thought, normally used silver for such a purpose, of commemorating notable occasions of their lifetime on base metal. This seems to be a case in point.

The wide rim, typical of seventeenth-century flat-ware, is covered with a decorative design of oak leaves and acorns such as one would expect to find in an age, which lasted for the best part of two centuries, when English country gentlemen, and particularly former sailors, went about with their pockets full of acorns. These they would poke into the soil on their travels, that England might never lack for wooden walls long after they themselves had been gathered to their fathers.

At the top appears the 'Foul Anchor' (No. 3), the emblem of Admiralty, about which are grouped the ownership initials T^{MA} in the triangle formation indicating on the left the husband's Christian name, on the right the wife's, and the surname.

The *Dictionary of National Biography* refers to one Sir Thomas Meres or Meers (1634-1715) a citizen of Lincoln, son of Dr. Robert Meres, Chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral. Certain milestones in his career seem to point to him as the owner. He was knighted by Charles II at the Restoration, and though there is no information about the services which brought him this mark of royal favour, he was evidently a person of some importance and was for many years Member of Parliament for his native city. Nearer the mark is the fact that he became active in Admiralty affairs, though the nearest that this can be traced to the date of the battle is 1673—some eight years later—when he was in communication with Williamson, Secretary of State, about the ships 'Bona Esperanza' and 'Bonadventure'. When we add to this the fact he became a member of the Board of Admiralty in 1679, his naval connections appear to be reasonably strong. And, finally, he married a daughter of Sir Erasmus de la Fontaine, whose Christian name was Anne, this accounting for the whole of the triangle of initials.

A good deal is mentioned in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and other histories about Sir Thomas's later political activities, yet nothing relative to our subject.

That Meres had a liking for decorative metalwork is proved by the magnificent brass chandelier which he presented to Lincoln Cathedral, and which hangs there today. This is engraved: *ST MATT 5th CHAP 14th 15th 16th VER EX DONO THOM MEERS MILITIS 1698* (it will be illustrated in the 1958 *Connoisseur Year Book*). Meres died in Great Russell Street, London, in July, 1715. There are faint indications of a maker's touch on the back of the rim, and the same triangle of initials has been punched by him on the face.

1. Round the boogie is the inscription: 'JACOBUS DUX EBOR ET ALBAN DOM MAGⁿ ADMIRALLUS ANGLIAE 1665'.

2. A rubbing taken from just above the main vessel: that of James, Duke of York.

3. On the rim at the top: a further rubbing showing the 'Foul Anchor', the emblem of Admiralty.

