

Pewter plain and simple



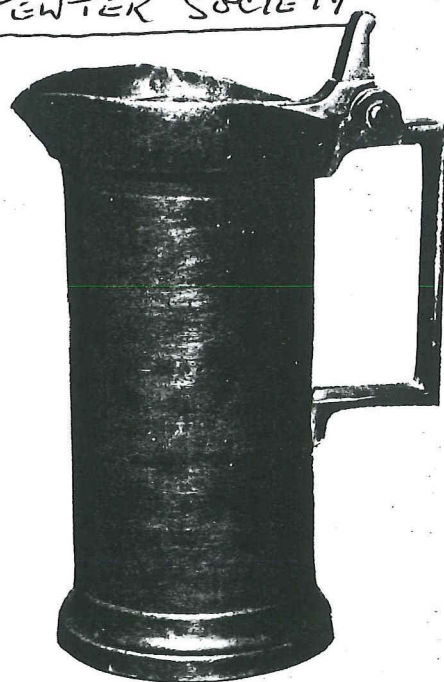
An excellent English polished pewter pub spittoon, dating from 1750. By 1700 there was hardly a vessel — from altar-plate to chamber-pot in church, home or ale-house — that was not made in pewter.

Courtesy Robin Bellamy

PEWTER holds an honoured place in the antiques world of today and still sells well in its modern form. From its satiny-grey colour pewter, once seen, can always be recognised at a glance, even by a Lord Macaulay's schoolboy. To a host of

followers, it is both distinctive and attractive, whether it be English, Scottish, Continental or American.

This seems to be true both of modern pieces bright and shining, fresh from the factory, displayed in shop-windows; and of antique period pieces, dulled by



A French pewter flagon of c.1800. The plain charm of pewter is quite different from the sophisticated appeal of silverware. Here is unaffected simplicity, with the emphasis on line and proportion.

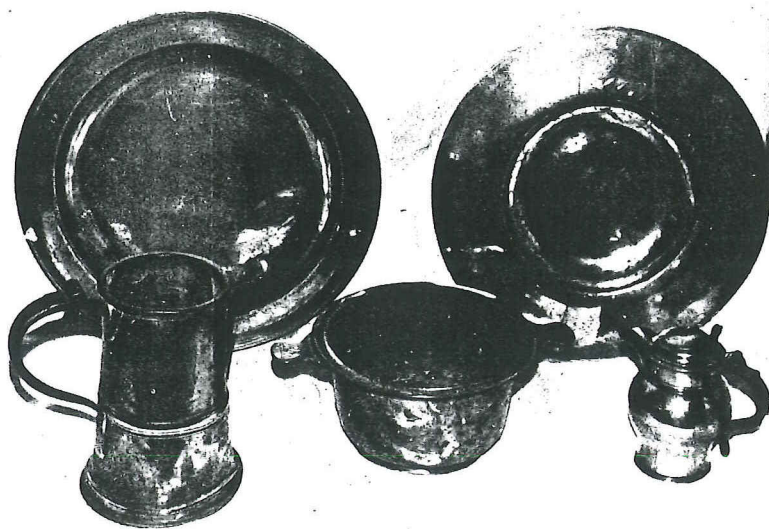
Courtesy Robin Bellamy

oxidation and abstinence from cleaning in order to preserve *patina*. Incidentally, you will pay for a modern pewter mug today the price a Georgian silver mug cost you a very few years ago.

Collectors of gold or silver articles tend to be impervious to the charm of pewter and if you place any pewter piece beside its silver fellow, you will see why. Beside silver, pewter seems sad, dull and heavy-looking, very different from its appearance against a favourable background of old oak panelling in a country-cottage or old-fashioned country pub.

Antique pewter has a long and tightly organised history both in England and Scotland. The records of the still-flourishing Worshipful Company of Pewterers in the City of London go back to 1348, during the reign of Edward III. In Scotland, the Hammerers' Guild of Edinburgh took trade-union care of its pewterers from 1580 to 1760. These bodies governed the craft with — so to speak — a rod of iron, prescribing what it might and might not do.

Both bodies had a marking system of "touch-marks" which had to be compulsorily registered, on similar lines to the gold and silver systems of hallmarks. Touch-marks, impressed and never engraved, are as important to pewter-collectors as the hallmarks are to other collectors. They run into four figures and are too numerous to be included here. They can be studied in the standard works, R.F. Michaelin's *Antique Pewter in the British Isles* or Welch's *History of*



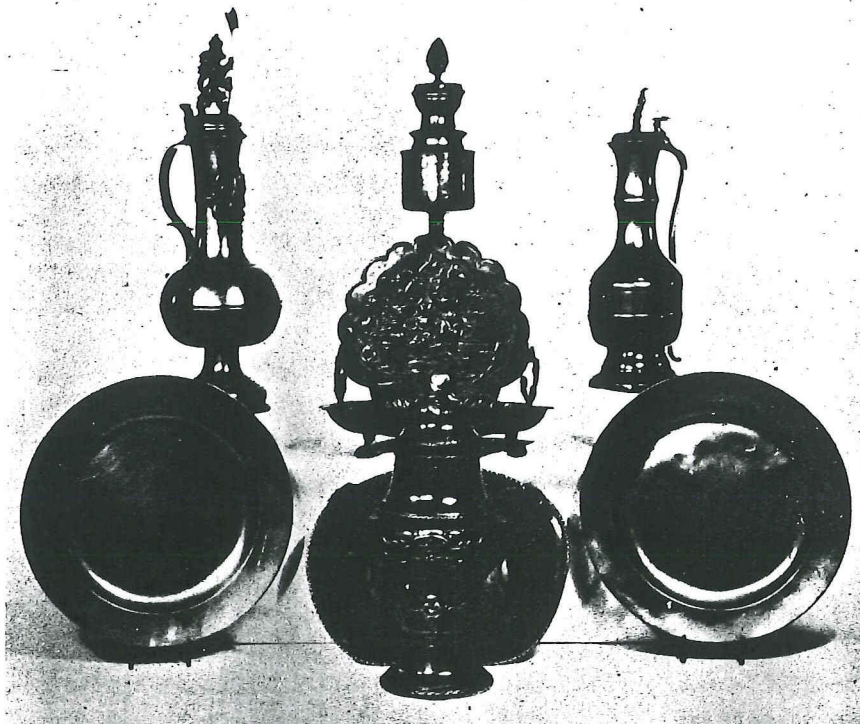
A selection of "Sad Ware" and "Hollow Ware" pewter which will be in the March 15 sale of Burrows & Co of Ashford, Kent, to be held at the Kempton Manor Hotel, Hothfield. There are two alms dishes (14½ and 14 inches respectively), a chamber pot (centre) punched with an arrow mark and "B.O.", a 6 inch jug (right) and a half-gallon measure.

the Worshipful Company of Pewterers (2 vols). But it will be necessary to say something more of such marks as excise marks and export marks later in this article.

In England pewter is far older than its Pewterers' Company, for it was known even in the Roman occupation, although none of this pewter survives. The Anglo-Saxon, Norman and early Plantagenet societies used wood, leather and horn for their utensils and when pewter was introduced again only the rich nobles, knights and the greater ecclesiastics such as abbots, bishops and cardinals could afford it; as their riches grew they abandoned it for silver and then gold.

Following the Great Plague, the Great Fire of London in 1666 destroyed Pewterers' Hall and its touch-plates and all records. But by 1668, the Company was able to re-impose its despotism upon the craft to great effect. For by the end of the 17th century there was hardly a vessel or utensil of any kind from the most lordly sacramental altar-plate to the lowly chamber-pot, whether in church, home, or ale-house, that was not made of pewter.

For a time pewter had a virtual monopoly. But not for long. Precious metal such as silver and base metal such



Above — Pewter which appeared at Christie's on February 22. Top row — a 20 inch early 19th-century German flagon; a Continental cistern and shell-shaped basin, the shaped back-plate cast in low relief with a scene of Susannah and the Elders, the traces of the touch-mark indicating a German origin, early 18th century; another flagon, 18th-century and probably German. Lower row — a fine pair of plain circular chargers, the rims engraved with a crest, by Jonas Durand and dating from the late 17th/early 18th century; in the centre is a German copper-and-brass urn and basin which appeared on the same day.



Left — An early 19th-century lidded pewter tankard. This Continental example is engraved on top of the lid with the initials "W.Z.", these probably referring to its owner rather than its maker. It is 6 inches tall.

as brass, and later artificial metals like Sheffield plate, competed strongly — and to a large extent supplanted it. Never has it regained its supremacy. Of course, it is itself an artificial metal not found in nature.

What exactly is pewter? It is tin mixed with an alloy — in the older specimens lead. Before 1692, the Company recognised two qualities of pewter — trifle metal and lay metal. At about 1692 a new superior quality was put out, 50 per cent more costly than trifle. The Company called it "Extraordinary ware" and gave it the mark of a plain capital "X". At about 1750 what the Company called "Better than Extraordinary" appeared and this was marked with a crowned "X" and the word "Superfine"

But everything has an end — even super-excellence in pewter. A newcomer was launched in about 1790 called Britannia metal, but with several aliases. It was a mixture of 90 per cent tin, 8 per cent antimony and 2 per cent copper. On account of its hard and debased look I have always decried it, but it must be acknowledged, from the varied and numerous table and domestic ware made

of it, that it had a vogue. Most makers took care to impress their names as well as their mark upon its under-surface. "I. VICKERS" in small capitals is to be seen on many pieces and he is said to have been the first maker of Britannia metal.

In addition to makers' names and touch-marks, in 1824 an excise mark was added. This was intended not merely to raise tax but also to prevent what might be called "the short-measure evil". So that the drinker might not be cheated, drinking-vessels filled to the brim had to be of the purported capacity and certified as such throughout the country.

These further marks consisted of a local badge and the reigning monarch's monogram, "G.R.", "W.R." or "V.R.", with various letters and numbers to show the testing official and the date. In 1877 this system was improved by bringing in Board of Trade weights and measures inspectors to do the tests. As if all these marks were not enough, a rose and crown was put on to show that the piece was intended for export and as a sign of quality.

You see how complicated the marks on pewter may be. They make the hallmarks on gold and silver seem simplicity itself.

Beginners who aim at collecting pewter may find it necessary to be selective, since there are so many articles made from the metal. In addition to marks and technical terms, pewter has a classification all its own. For instance, the curiously named "Sad Ware" is given to domestic articles intended to hold food, comprising plates (up to 8 inches) dishes (up to 12 inches) and chargers (up to 18 inches). You may remember that for dancing to the pleasure of King Herod, Salome, the daughter of Herodias,

A varied and interesting group which came up at a pewter sale at Christie's last November. At the top — two from a set of 12 octagonal plates with moulded rims and engraved with a crest, made by Thomas Chamberlain, London, in the first half of the 18th century (700 gns the set). Second row — a cylindrical tankard from the late 17th century but with unidentifiable touches (120 gns), flanked by two from a set of 22 9/16 inch plates, also by Chamberlain (800 gns for the 22 plates). Below is a pair of larger plates in the same set (90 gns). The candlesticks are an 18th-century pair measuring 16 inches (170 gns). In the centre of the bottom row is a Swiss cylindrical "Glockenkanne" (bell jug) by Johann Wüger, the body incised with lines bearing a shield inscribed with initials "B.R.M.W." and the date 1735 (160 gns). It is 12 1/2 inches high. The others are slightly smaller and bear different initials in the shield (95 and 90 gns).

demanding the head of St. John the Baptist "on a charger".

Vessels for liquids in pewter are called "Hollow Ware". This class includes flagons, tankards, beakers, mugs, measuring-pots, bleeding-bowls, cruets for the wine and water of the credence table and the like. Another class, especially popular with collectors, is spoons, which needs no elucidation. Spoons have the special merit that some of them are among the earliest surviving specimens in pewter.

In its heyday, there is no doubt that the worker in pewter was the equal in skill and craftsmanship to the working goldsmith and silversmith. Unlike his brethren in other metalwork, he was little given to indulgence in decoration; he was always on the side of plain and unpretentious work. He gained the approval of his work not by decoration but by excellence of line and proportion as well as functional fitness. The most revered name in pewter is that of Francois Briot, who is as famous as any other artist in metal, not excluding the fame of his namesake Nicholas Briot, also a Frenchman and the loyal coinier of Charles I.

Those who wish to see a fine collection or to further their education in pewter should inspect the magnificent early pieces in the metalwork section of the Victoria & Albert Museum□



A lidded pewter jug of graceful line and the attractive patina endowed by the oxidation of the passing decades and by abstinence from cleaning.

