

EDM

A PEWTER RINGERS' FLAGON

(THE ONLY EXAMPLE KNOWN, IN PEWTER)

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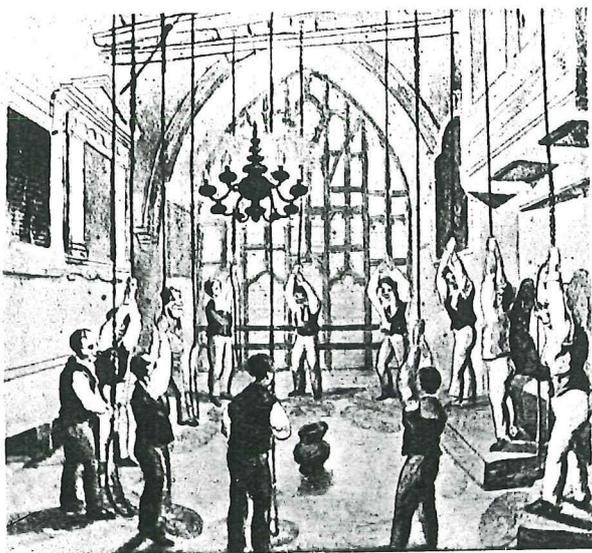


Fig. I. THE RINGING CHAMBER OF ST. PETER MANCROFT, NORWICH, FROM AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DRAWING

IN 1932 I wrote about a fine early baptismal bowl which had been rescued from the bottom of a well and restored to its former home in the church of East Worldham, by Alton, Hants. To-day I write about an equally distinguished treasure in the neighbouring county of Dorset, which, though not actually lost, has only been rescued from an even worse fate in the nick of time, for it was slowly disintegrating through lack of attention over a long period of years. It takes the form of a "ringers' flagon," and emanates from the church of St. Peter, Dorchester.

It may well be asked at the onset, "What is a ringers' flagon?" and, but for the appearance of two informative articles in a contemporary by the well-known authorities Ernest Morris, F.R.Hist.S., and John R. Nichols, I could not have supplied so full an answer as, through their co-operation, I am now able to do.

It appears to have been the custom in years gone by—and may be to-day for aught I know—for a well-filled flagon, usually of from four to six gallons capacity, to occupy a position of "some importance" upon the belfry floor, and from which the bell-ringers imbibed periodical revitalization during their strenuous labours!

I got into touch with the writers of the above-mentioned articles, and they have most kindly loaned to me two very interesting pictures, which, by their courtesy and that of Messrs. Chapman and Hall, Ltd., the publishers of their respective works ("The History and Art of Change-Ringing" and "Bells Thro' the Ages"), I am enabled to reproduce here, and which will drive home the point more clearly than columns of text.

They have lent to me the cliché for Fig. I, but their photo-print of Fig. II, being not very clear, I have made a wash drawing from it—as faithful a copy as I could—so as to bring out the details of the ensemble with greater clearness.

Fig. I shows the ringing chamber in the famous church of St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich, from an eighteenth century water-colour drawing by Ninham, and Fig. II shows my wash drawing from a faded photo-print, of an equally faded old inn sign, painted in 1828 by W. Fothergill, for the Ring O'Bells Inn at Kendal.

These two illustrations give a good insight into belfry life, each showing the ringers' flagon, ready to contribute its quota as, and when, required!

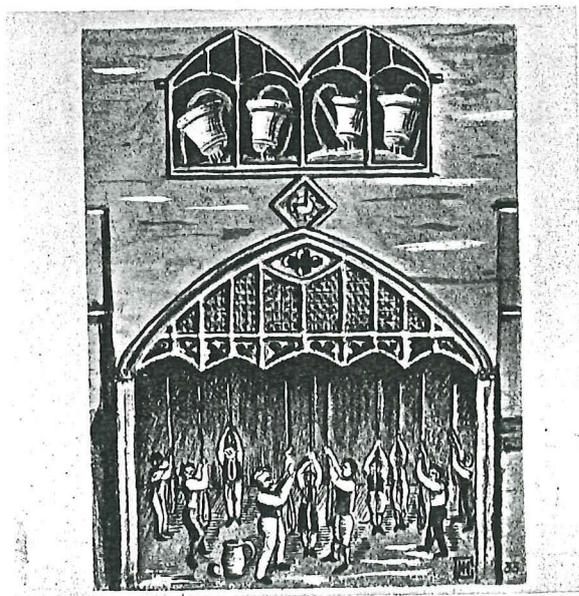


Fig. II. DRAWING OF AN OLD INN SIGN, AFTER A PAINTING BY W. FOTHERGILL IN 1828

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Fig. III. THE DORCHESTER FLAGON. ORIGINAL STATE

Turning to the Dorchester example—for my first introduction to which I am indebted to my friend Mr. Cyril C. Minchin, of Reading—it is, so far as is known—to use a horribly misapplied word—unique. Neither Mr. Morris nor Mr. Nichols, who have devoted many years to a study of the subject, show anything so early in the articles mentioned, nor yet do they mention another example in pewter, and we all hope that the publicity given to the subject in these notes may be the means of bringing others into the light of day.

Let me illustrate two pictures of the Dorchester flagon, taken at an interval of *less than six weeks!*

Fig. III was taken by Mr. Bernard Griffin, the official photographer to the Dorset County Museum, in mid-November, and shows the large initials "R. D." covered with black scale (*i.e.*, corrosion), while Fig. IV was taken by Messrs.

A. H. Isher & Son, of Cheltenham, into whose capable hands I had entrusted the piece for restoration.

Within the short interval which had elapsed between the taking of these two photographs—less than six weeks—the scale had flaked off and almost obliterated the visibility of the initials "R. D." from the side and from beneath the upper scroll of the handle, which shows why the need for immediate treatment was so urgent. Where the black scale had flaked away a second layer of corrosion—in the form of a hardish grey powder—had already developed, and so it would have continued until crumbling point had been reached.

These two pictures will have shown something of the dignity of this wonderful piece, and



Fig. IV. THE DORCHESTER FLAGON SIX WEEKS LATER



Fig. V. THE DORCHESTER FLAGON, SHOWING INSCRIPTION ILLUSTRATED ON THIS PAGE

further, the unsightly masses of solder with which some inexperienced tinker had enclustered the junctions of the handle to the body, and the thumbpiece to the lid, in his efforts to repair fractures. But all this has now been put right, as will be seen in my concluding illustration.

Immediately I saw the photograph in Fig. III the whole seriousness of the position was revealed, and, with Mr. Minchin's co-operation, I got into touch with Mr. Charles S. Prideaux, F.S.A., the Curator of the Dorset County Museum—in whose custody the piece now is—and, as desperate situations call for desperate remedies, I at once offered that, if they would send the flagon to me for examination, I would—if it was possible to do so—undertake to have it restored by an expert, and return it to them at no cost either to the museum or the church.

The offer was duly considered by the rector and wardens of St. Peter's, and by the Dorset Natural History and Archæological Society, and accepted, and in mid-December it arrived at my home, where I spent an intensely happy night making friends with it!

The cover and the handle had at some time been broken off and most clumsily repaired; a puncture beneath the frontal inscription had been equally carelessly attended to, and the cover was twisted out of shape. In short, it was a very sick piece.

But the chief danger was the possible loss of the finely executed inscription upon the front—see Fig. V—of which I have made a full-size facsimile drawing—see Fig. VI—and which covers a space 8 in. in width, too large, I am afraid, for reproduction here at $\frac{1}{4}$ scale.

By greatest good fortune this inscription has not suffered so much as I feared might be the case, for it is deeper cut than one could see while covered by the black scale, which to some extent seems to have even preserved it. It is by far the largest English pewter flagon that has come under my notice, and the importance of its size may best be visualized by the size of the inscription.

The dimensions of the piece are as follows: Total height, to top of thumbpiece, $15\frac{1}{8}$ in.; to top of cover, 14 in., and to the lip, $12\frac{3}{8}$ in.; the diameter of the base being $8\frac{5}{8}$ in. and of the lip, $6\frac{1}{8}$ in. The weight, even now it has been stripped, is $10\frac{1}{2}$ lb., and the capacity, $1\frac{1}{4}$ gallons, *i.e.*, a pint each, for ten ringers.

Worthy of the piece which it adorns, the inscription affords a fine example of the stiffly conventionalized, Stuart mantling, into which the



Inscription on the Dorchester RINGERS' FLAGON, now in Dorchester Museum.

Fig. VI

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actual lettering cuts at two points, as I have indicated in my sketch. It reads :

"Feb. 7th. 1676. The Guift of Edward Lester, w^{ch} is to remaine for y^e use of y^e Ringers of Dorchest^r for ever." and beneath the mantling is cut "St. Peter".

In the centre of the cover are struck the "hall-marks" of the maker—Fig. VII—which, though much worn, are quite evidently the uppermost set, seen under Robert Marten (No. 3092 in my "Old Pewter: Its Makers and Marks"), probably those of Samuel Attley (No. 142, *ibid.*). The maker's touch is upon the handle, slightly above its centre, but here we are less fortunate, for the worst spot of tin-disease upon the whole piece has eaten away the upper part and, though guesses might be made, it is entirely impossible to decipher it, other than to say that it was a



beaded touch of the size of Robert Marten's, though it *cannot* have been his, for he died two years before the flagon was made.

Upon its sides are crudely incised, in various places, the initials "W. I.," "V." and the "R. D." already referred to. These I think must be interpreted as those of despoiling ringers, in moments of *dolce far niente*!

Fig. VIII shows another of Messrs. Isher & Son's photographs after they had finished their wonderful work of restoration, the necessarily high cost of which has been shared with me by a few friends, as follow: Mrs. Scott-Nicholson, Carlisle; "Anon"; Archibald J. Irving, Esq., Cardiff; Cyril C. Minchin, Esq., Reading; Alderman J. E. Pink, Cosham; and Major John Richardson, D.S.O., Torquay, and I have asked that a card, testifying to their public spirit, may be shown with the flagon.

We have in this case a practical, if very disquieting, instance of the ravages caused by allotropy, or tin-pest, the progress of which is so distinctly indicated in Figs. III and IV. These show that the first scale—which in reality is a disintegrated skin of the metal—has flaked off in large patches and already the second surface was attacked. *Is it too much to hope* that pewter in the keeping of museums, church authorities and others into whose care it is committed, should receive a little more thought? One so often hears it described as "that lump of old metal" and so on, but, on reflection, there is—quite

apart from its historical significance—a *very high* monetary value attaching to these pewter relics.



Fig. VIII

May I illustrate this with a story? A clergyman, arriving at the vicarage of his new parish, found—either in the house or outhouses—an old flagon. After a time, to get rid of it, he put it in a jumble sale, but no one fell in love with it. Towards the end of the day someone put it with a flat-iron and the two together sold for a shilling or two.

Within a short time a collector had paid £45 for it, *gladly*. And that is the value in many of your "lumps of old metal"! They are worth a deal more care than lots of things upon which a hundred times more care is lavished.

Pewter such as this is a *national treasure*, and it is a NATIONAL TRUST to those who are its keepers. NEVER let it stand upon, or near, cold stone. If it can be kept in a temperature of 64.4° Fahrenheit, or over, it is safe. Below that temperature, risk enters, and the lower below, the greater the risk.