

EDP

COLLECTORS' CORNER

Cyril Braccigallo

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Pewter is an acquired taste; to some it seems dull and uninspiring, to others its sheen, though quiet and lacking the glamour of silver or porcelain, nevertheless has its own peculiar appeal. To the uninitiated the items illustrated here may present a sameness, but to the enthusiastic collector they all look very different.

Pewter is an alloy in which the major component is tin with lead, copper, brass, zinc, bismuth and antimony (later) added.

It was known in Britain during the Roman occupation but was not made in this country on any worthwhile scale until the mid-14th century, when the Pewterers' Company of London obtained control over a proportion of the Cornish tin deposits, and supplied it to its members and to provincial Guilds.

At first pewter was only within the reach of the wealthy. Flagon, tankards, plates and so on were to be found mainly on the tables of castle halls or in the kitchens of bishops and rich merchants.



Early 17th-century footed cup, English. Victoria and Albert.

By the 17th century its use had spread to taverns and, later, even to peasants' cottages.

The craft was rigidly controlled by the Guilds. Among their regulations was one to the effect that a master pewterer, on taking up his craft, had to invent for himself a mark, or touch, as it was more usually called, and to register this in the ceremony of striking it on a touch-plate at the Pewterers' Hall.

In the Great Fire of London in 1666 the Pewterers' Hall was destroyed and with it the touch-plates. In 1668, new touch-plates were made and all pewterers were required to restrike on this plate; this practice continued until the beginning of the 19th century. In that period almost 1,100 touches were recorded on five plates.

In Scotland, the Edinburgh Hammermen's Guild also had touch-plates, and recorded 143 touches from 1580 and 1760.

Touch marks are to pewter what hallmarks are to silver; however, they are not so accurate. In fact, a touch



Long range of bulbous, lidless tavern measures in Imperial sizes, circa 1826 to 1860, English. Worshipful Company of Pewterers.

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mark can only tell us that a piece was made between the year in which the craftsman registered his touch and the year of his death which can be ascertained from the records of the Pewterers' Company at Oat Lane, London, E.C.2. Sometimes a touch mark includes a date but this is the date of registration, not of manufacture.

Other marks used on pewter can be misleading to the amateur. These are quality marks, excise marks, deacons' marks, which appear on Scottish pieces, and small punch marks erroneously called "hallmarks" because they resemble those found on silver.

Punch marks are usually in sets of four, one of which contains the pewterer's initials, and were struck in defiance of the regulations of the Pewterers' Company.

In the 17th and 18th centuries pewterware was at the height of its fame and much was exported to Europe.

Its reputation abroad was mainly for the good quality of workmanship and the functional design: those stolid English craftsmen left the

"fancy" designing to the continentals.

Tavern pieces are much sought after by collectors and one of the favourite items is the tappit hen from the Scottish pewterers. This was a liquid measure holding 1 Scots pint (equal to 3 English Imperial pints), slightly waisted above and with a reeded base. The lid is generally flat.

The inkstand is another item that was made of pewter—often a low quality alloy—in a vast range of shapes and sizes. Decoration is unfortunately slight and collectors of pewterware are sometimes put off by the inferior quality.

Pewter tableware was always in great demand and for a long time it was fashionable to give a plate or a set of plates as a wedding present. These would generally be engraved with the initials of the bride and groom in a triangle.

The design of English pewter frequently lacks originality, partly because the craftsmen seem to have been content to copy conventional work of the silver and goldsmiths. The quality of the



English porringer with touch mark on handle, c. 1700. V & A.

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alloy also varies considerably.

American pewter dates from 1635 when Richard Graves opened the first pewterer's shop in Salem, Massachusetts; but little of the early colonial ware is available today outside museums.

A considerable demand for pewter domestic items grew up in the American colonies during the 18th century. Settlers moving west preferred the harder material for jugs, plates, bowls, spoons and so on, to the breakable ceramicware.

The colonial pewterers were, however, up against two disadvantages: there was no natural source of tin ore; and a customs duty on imported raw tin bars imposed by the British authorities, pressurised by the English pewterers guilds. Finished pewterware was imported free of duty. This confined the native craftsmen largely to reworking and recasting old pewter.

There was no compulsion on the American pewterer to mark his work, though many

of them abided by the English tradition and invented their own individual touches.

Unmarked pewter may be suspected of having American origins but this should not be taken for granted.

To add to the confusion, colonial craftsmen frequently struck the word "London" to show that their work compared favourably with the finest English product or to deceive the buyer into believing that the item was English made.

So much pewterware was made for domestic use that vast quantities have failed to survive the years, and it is not always easy to find well-preserved pieces.

Some collectors like to polish their finds in the rather fruitless attempt to get a near silvery gloss; others prefer to leave a piece in its natural dull state.

Prices of pewter vary enormously. An 18th-century tappit hen was sold recently for £100, a Georgian half pint jug for £7. A few years ago £460 was paid for a Charles I flagon! **Cyril Bracegirdle**



A loving cup, made c. 1702. Worshipful Company of Pewterers.

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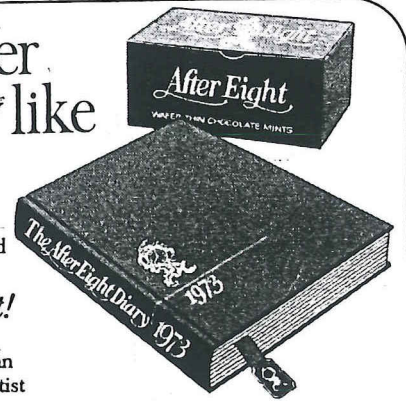
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