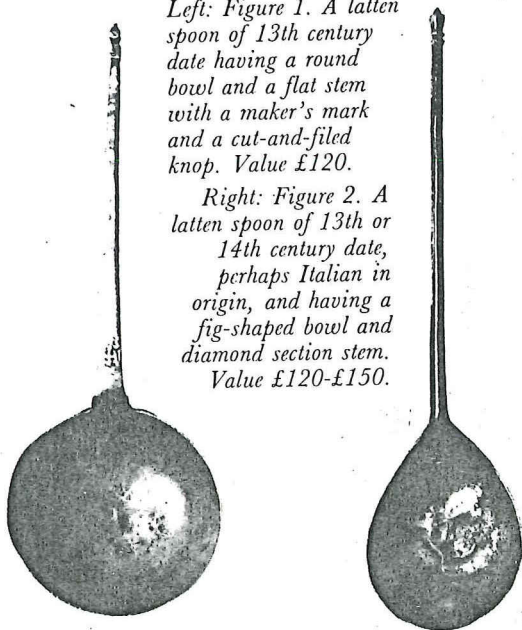




# BASE METAL SPOONS

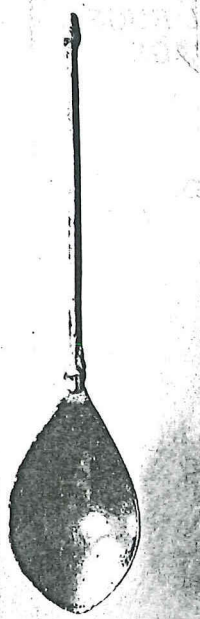
by  
**Ronald F. Homer**

*Left: Figure 1. A latten spoon of 13th century date having a round bowl and a flat stem with a maker's mark and a cut-and-filed knop. Value £120.*



*Right: Figure 2. A latten spoon of 13th or 14th century date, perhaps Italian in origin, and having a fig-shaped bowl and diamond section stem. Value £120-£150.*

*Figure 3. A very rare pewter spoon c.1300 with leaf-shaped bowl, diamond-section stem and acorn knop. Note the animal's head between the stem and bowl.*



Spoons of metal, or ones made from more transient materials such as bone, horn, wood and shell, have been used for at least seven-and-a-half millennia. Roman spoons of silver, bronze or pewter have been recovered in considerable numbers from excavations all over the Roman world. In Europe, however, little survives from a period of some six or seven centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire. Although Roman spoons are collected as antiquities, this article is concerned with those spoons of pewter and latten which were made or used in Britain from medieval times to the early 18th century.

The post-Roman domestic spoon appears in the 12th century and at that time was a prized personal possession of the rising middle class of yeomen and merchants, distinguishing them from their peasant forebears. By the end of our period it was the universal necessity of every household. Pewter of this period is an alloy of some 95% tin with a small amount of copper and/or lead, and latten is an early brass made by smelting together copper and zinc ores in the presence of charcoal. The collecting of spoons is one of the few areas where a collector of modest means has the opportunity to acquire

a range of pieces covering a period of many hundred years in an evolutionary sequence of diverse and datable types and styles.

Silver spoons, because of their intrinsic value, were seldom lost by their owners or thrown away when worn or damaged. They were melted down and the valuable metal recast, or they were carefully preserved as heirlooms. Base metal spoons, on the other hand, had little intrinsic value and were frequently discarded to the rubbish dump or lost in drains and under floors. Large numbers of early base metal spoons have therefore survived for accidental reasons and have been excavated in recent times. Medieval base metal spoons are much commoner than those of silver, though from the 1600s onwards the reverse is true.

The casting of pewter spoons, normally in moulds of bronze, was a simple process and, as well as established pewterers, there were no doubt many itinerant tinkers and tinsmiths who cast to order at the local fair. The working of latten was less easy and the craft was probably more centralised. Latten was not made in Britain until the 1560s, but was imported, worked or in sheet form, from the Low Countries. It is open to question whether latten spoons were

made in this country before the second half of the 16th century, though they were certainly used here for several hundred years before then.

The earliest spoons to have survived in any numbers from our period are made of latten and exist in two main types: those with round bowls and flat stems which have been cut and hammered from the flat sheet; and those with more or less elongated fig-shaped bowls with diamond-section stems which appear to have been cast. Although these have been excavated in Britain in considerable numbers, they are probably French or Italian in origin respectively. In common with later latten spoons they were almost certainly originally tinned all over to obviate the taint which brass alloys may give to food. Those with flat stems bear marks on the front of the stem which resemble the town marks on early French silver. The earliest have a crude knop or finial filed in the end of the stem (the so-called "cut-and-filed" knop), and these date from the 12th/13th century. A little later cast finials, often of an acorn or related form, appear. Pewter round-bowl spoons with cast knops also survive, but in less number than those of latten. This form of spoon is illustrated in figures 1 and 2.

Apparently contemporarily with these spoons there existed a very rare form in both pewter and latten, having a leaf-shaped bowl similar to that found on a small group of early silver spoons (excavated on Iona and elsewhere), which are generally dated as late 12th century but which may be earlier. A somewhat later pewter spoon, probably of the late 13th century, is shown in figure 3. This has an acorn knop and the very rare feature of a grotesque dragon's head at the junction of the bowl and stem.

By about 1400 the shape of spoon bowls had become standardised in the universal fig-shaped type typified by the examples in figure 4. This style, with a stem which in pewter was hexagonal in cross-section and in latten was either diamond or hexagonal in section, persisted for some 250 years until the mid-17th century. During this period we find a fascinating and wide diversity of knops which give early spoons their charm. Many base metal styles follow those of silver and are thus broadly datable by comparison with the known dates of hall-marked silver examples. However, pewter and latten outdo silver in the variety of knop types which are to be found.

The much admired horned head-dress knops and the rare and desirable pewter apostles, maiden-heads and lions sejant of the 16th

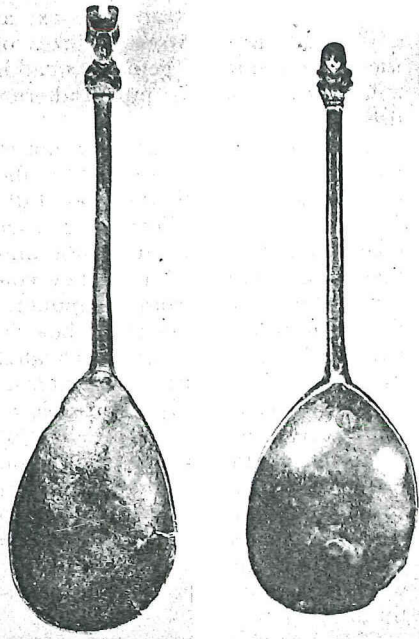
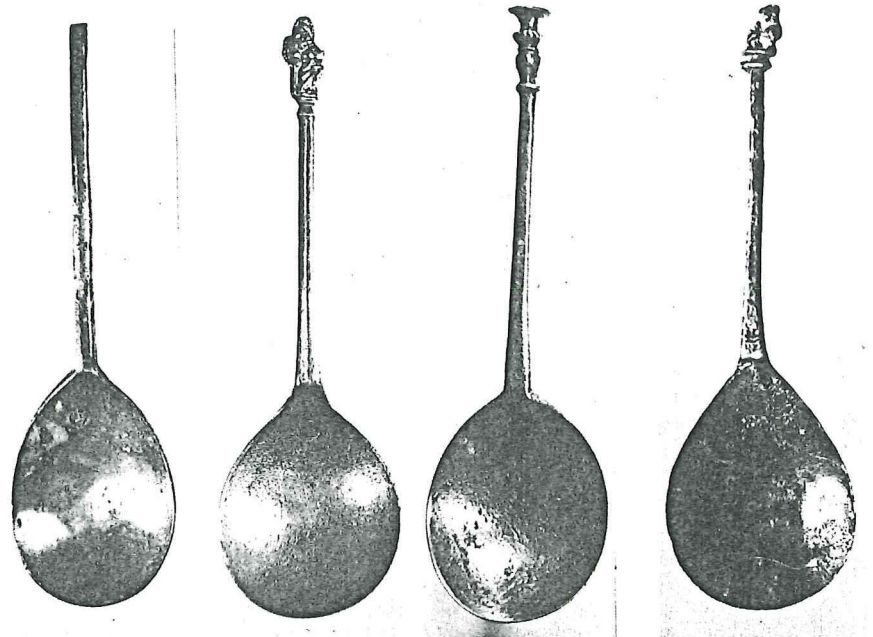


Figure 5. Two rare pewter spoons. On the left a horned head-dress knob c.1450 and on the right a maidenhead knob c.1600. These spoons would probably fetch some £250 at auction.

Figure 6 (first three spoons). Commoner base metal spoons. Left to right: a pewter slip top c.1600; a latten apostle (St. Jude) c.1670 and a latten seal top c.1650. Value £50-£75.  
Figure 7 (far right). A rare pewter lion statant spoon c.1450-1500 with a wire reinforced stem and the knob threaded on the end of the stem.



century exemplified in figure 5 may command £200-£300 at auction. On the other hand the equally attractive and commoner latten seals and apostles, together with slip tops in both metals (see figure 6), may be had for considerably under £100. In between, acorns, diamond points, ball and hexagon knobs, melons,

balusters and a host of others may be found (with patience) in the main London auction rooms or in the hands of specialist dealers.

Where there is no silver counterpart, close dating by style requires considerable experience. Bowl shapes may help with dating. Early fig-shaped ones tend to be less oval in

form with the shoulders leaving the stem at a relatively more acute angle, as may be seen by reference to figures 5 and 6, but the changes are subtle and not necessarily conclusive. The broad dates of the commoner knobs are as follows:

Acorn . . . . .	before 1300-c.1570
Apostle . . . . .	c.1475-1670
Ball . . . . .	15th century-c.1525
Baluster . . . . .	1550-c.1610
Diamond . . . . .	15th century-1570
Dog nose . . . . .	1695-
Hexagon . . . . .	1475-1575
Lion sejant . . . . .	15th century-c.1625
Maidenhead . . . . .	1480-1680
Puritan . . . . .	1640-1670
Seal top . . . . .	1550-1670
Slip top . . . . .	1480-1680
Trifid . . . . .	1660-1700

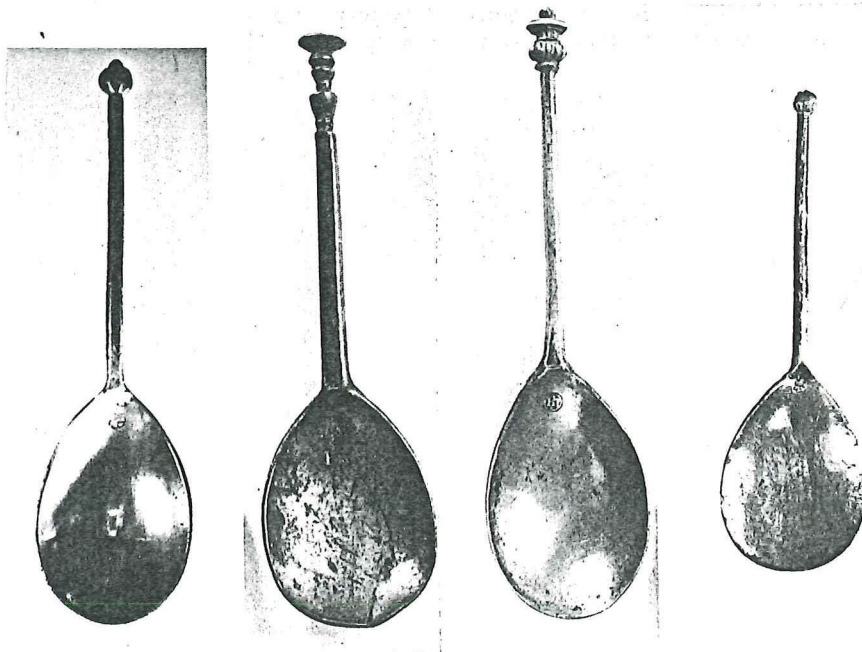


Figure 4. Left to right: a pewter melon knob spoon c.1500; a pewter seal top spoon with a latten knob c.1620; a pewter baluster knob spoon c.1550; an early pewter ball knob spoon c.1500 with a wire reinforced stem.

In silver, knobs are frequently cast separately from the spoon and soldered to the end of the stem. In base metals the knobs are cast integral with the stem except in the case of a few early pewter spoons of the 14th-15th centuries which have separately cast knobs slipped over the end of the stem and soldered in place, as in the rare lion statant knob shown in figure 7. Rarely pewter spoons are found with latten knobs, made originally no doubt in imitation of silver spoons with gilt knobs. Beware of deception here though; it is easy to marry a genuine old latten knob with a genuine pewter slip top to produce a superficially attractive hybrid.

It has frequently been remarked that pewter is an unsuitable material

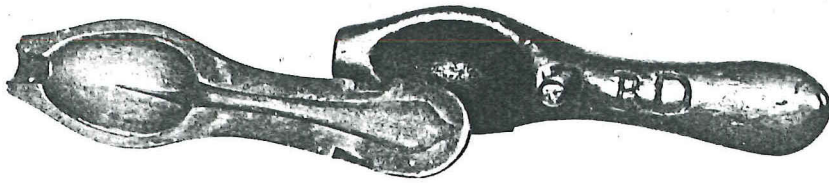


Figure 8. A bronze mould for casting pewter spoons c.1700.

for a spoon. It is soft and readily bent and worn and, of course, would melt if left on a hot stove. In an attempt to overcome the former disadvantages some, probably Continental, pewter spoons of the 15th century have an iron wire core embedded in the stem, the presence of which may be detected with a magnet. This useful innovation was not, however, persisted with. However that may be, pewter spoons were cheap — perhaps less than ½d each — and worth almost that as scrap for recasting. Recasting was simple and the life of a pewter spoon was probably very short. A bronze pewter spoon mould is seen in figure 8.

Most pewter spoons are marked with a maker's touch, originally in the 14th and 15th centuries on the front of the stem near the bowl, and later until the 1660s on the front of the bowl. The mark is read with the stem held towards the observer. Frequently the touch is a simple device, a fleur-de-lis, a rosette or the pewterer's initials. A typical example is shown in figure 9. A touch of a crowned rose with initials in the crown signifies Continental origin, frequently Dutch. Early latten spoons are seldom marked, save for the early French ones, though rarely a touch mark may be found on the back of the bowl near the stem. In the 17th century most latten spoons bear a touch in the bowl with one or more spoons as the device. Often this is surrounded by the legend "Double Whited", a reference to the quality of the tinning. Unfortunately there are no records which enable us to attribute these marks, or those on pewter before the mid-17th century, to identified makers.

At the time of the restoration the style of spoons changed suddenly and dramatically, and the trifold emerged. This style was mentioned as early as 1663 when it was termed "the new fashioned spoon". The bowl became egg-shaped (and later oval) and the stem flat with a flattened end cut into the typical trifold or *piéd-de-biche* shape. A more or less elaborate rat-tail extended from the stem over the back of the bowl. Owner's initials are quite often found punched or engraved on the flat stem end. For a brief period before the trifold emerged there was a transitional style known as the

puritan spoon having the egg-shaped bowl and flat stem, but lacking the flattened and lobed end. By about 1700 the trifold had given place to the dog nose style and spoons had become to all intents modern in shape. Latten spoons disappear at about this date, but pewter kitchen spoons and ladles of conventional form continued to be made until the mid-19th century. So far little noticed by collectors, examples of these may readily be found at a few pounds each.

The most interesting trifold spoons are those with cast decoration on the end of the stem and often also on the back of the bowl. Many of these are Dutch in origin (as are many plain trifolds), but undoubtedly English ones are to be found with cast portraits of William and Mary or Queen Anne which were made as coronation souvenirs. Even later, cast decorated Hanoverian style spoons may be found with portraits of George III and Queen Charlotte. Some of these decorated spoons are shown in figure 10.

Trifold and later spoons are marked on the back of the stem in imitation of contemporary silver spoons with three or four "hall marks" which can at this date be attributed to known makers. Plain trifold spoons may be

purchased at auction for £30-£50 and Queen Anne portrait spoons at £100-£150. But beware of fakes of these latter spoons; genuine moulds still exist and may be put to ulterior use.

Though latten spoons seem not to have been faked, due no doubt to the fact that until recently they were little sought after by collectors, pewter fakes abound. Many are crude and readily recognisable, but the new collector should buy from a reputable dealer or confine himself to heavily patinated and obviously excavated examples. The genuine hard oxide of old pewter is virtually impossible to reproduce, as is the delightful "nature's gilding" which is found on pewter which has been long buried in certain types of soil. Eschew also leady metal; the majority of pewter spoons, at least before about 1700, were made from good quality high-tin alloy.

Cleaning may improve the appearance of heavily corroded spoons; on the other hand it may reveal a rather unattractive pitted and holed underlying metal. Unless you are experienced in cleaning pewter and brass by chemical methods, it is best to be very conservative. In any case, to overclean your spoons may remove the very evidence of their authenticity.

#### Further Reading

- Emery, J. *European Spoons Before 1700*, 1976.  
 Hilton Price, F.G. *Old Base Metal Spoons*, 1908 (now a very scarce book).  
 Homer, R.F. *Five Centuries of Base Metal Spoons*, 1975.

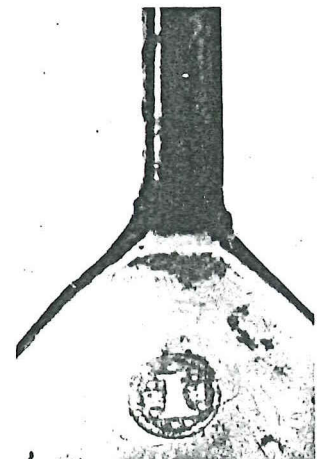
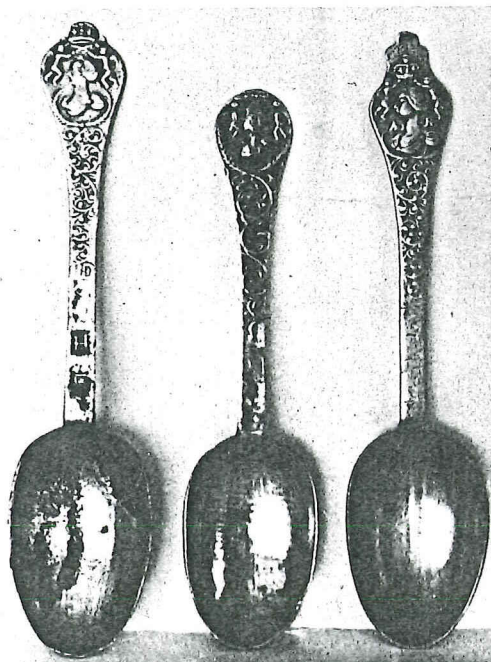


Figure 9. A touch mark, probably that of Richard Beaker of Bristol, c.1640.

Figure 10. Three pewter spoons with portraits of Queen Anne, c.1702. Probably made as coronation souvenirs.