

EFQ

# English Pewter Flagons

by Ronald F. Homer



Figure 1. Left: a fine James I flagon dating from c.1620 with a later inscription gifting it to a church (see text). Right: a typical mid-18th century spire flagon with solid chairback thumbpiece and double-curved handle.

Apart from a very small number of fragmentary museum examples which have been excavated, and which date from perhaps the 15th or 16th centuries, the earliest English pewter flagons which have survived intact as collectable items date from the opening years of the 17th century. They thus include the earliest pewter vessels available to the collector. The hope that the large amount of pewter recovered from the "Mary Rose" might include English flagons from the 1540s has unfortunately not been realised. Those salvaged from the wreck are closely paralleled by known Dutch examples and appear to be of Dutch origin.

Flagons made by English pewterers for both domestic and ecclesiastical purposes from the reign of James I until the latter part of the 18th century survive in surprisingly large numbers. Their evolving styles are both pleasing and diverse and a few examples form a satisfying nucleus to any collection of old pewterware. They are essentially simple, robust and well-proportioned items, and are devoid of the applied decoration and elaborate contours which are frequently found on their Continental counterparts. In size they vary from about 10ins. to (exceptionally) over 17ins. in overall height, but they were not made to conform to any particular capacity. At least some of the very large church examples were used as containers for bellringers' ale and one such, with an appropriate inscription, is illustrated in "Bellringers' Jugs" by Barbara Payne and Maurice Ridgway in *Antique Collecting*, Vol. 16, No. 7, page 45. Most frequently, however, they are of the smaller proportions, 10ins. to 12ins. high, and were used as vessels for church wine, or for use at domestic meals where they made an important centrepiece to the table. Unlike their contemporary drinking vessels, none is known with an inscription relating to an inn or tavern.

Of those used in churches many are inscribed with church wardens' names,

and sometimes the name of the church. They may also be dated. Other church pieces may be found with the name of a donor who presented the flagon to his parish church. One of these is illustrated in figure 1 (left). The flagon itself is of the earliest commonly found type, frequently called a "James I" flagon, and dates from the period 1610-25. However, it was later gifted to a church, perhaps on the death of the original owner, and bears the inscription "Ex dono Johannes Peele, decimo sexto Aprilis Anno Domini 1671". These early flagons are of heavy construction and practical design with bold upright thumbpieces. The bottom of the body is hemispherical in shape and sits in the hollow surrounding skirt. They seldom bear a maker's mark. When one does appear it



Figure 2. A pear-shaped flagon with a domed lid, tall finial and swan-neck handle, c.1610-20.

is usually found stamped on the handle, though rarely it appears under the base. At this date the maker's touch, with very rare exceptions (one of which will be mentioned later), cannot be attributed to a known pewterer because of the loss, in the Great Fire of London, of the touch plates bearing the marks of makers before the mid-century.

Figure 2 shows a very rare type of pear-shaped flagon, standing on a domed foot, which was for a long time held to predate the James I type — an assumption based on the similar examples which are known in silver, some of which date from the latter part of the 16th century. This particular example came many years ago from Woodeaton Church, Oxfordshire, and is now in the collection of the Pewterers' Company. Recent research, however, has disclosed the existence of four other examples, at least three of which have long spouts springing from the "belly". A pair in the Byloke Museum in Ghent have provided evidence both of the English provenance of these rare pieces, and their date. An account book in the Ghent archives records the purchase of the Byloke pair and reads (in translation) "paid ... the sum of 24 shillings for the purchase and delivery of two English pewter jugs ... already in the treasure for some years and used annually to serve hypocras (spiced wine) to milords the government's inspectors of these towns". The entry is dated 1628 and the reference to their having been in the town's treasure for some years suggests a c.1620 date for them. They bear a maker's mark which is believed to be that of Edward Glover who was active as a London pewterer between about 1610 and 1630. These two flagons have brass rims applied to the foot and lid, brass finials to the lids and tiny brass lids to the end of the spouts. This brass decoration was probably added in Belgium after their purchase.

About 1625 the mainstream type changes somewhat and the typical "Charles I" flagon appears. One is shown in figure 3 (centre). This has a bun lid, which may or may not have a finial, and the type persists until about the middle of the century. What are presumably the earlier examples have the top of the handle abutting squarely on to the top of the body, in the same way as the James I type, but soon an elegant "swan-neck handle", as fitted to the pear-shaped flagons described above, becomes standard. The thumbpieces are erect and have a heart-shaped piercing. Touch marks, when present, appear on

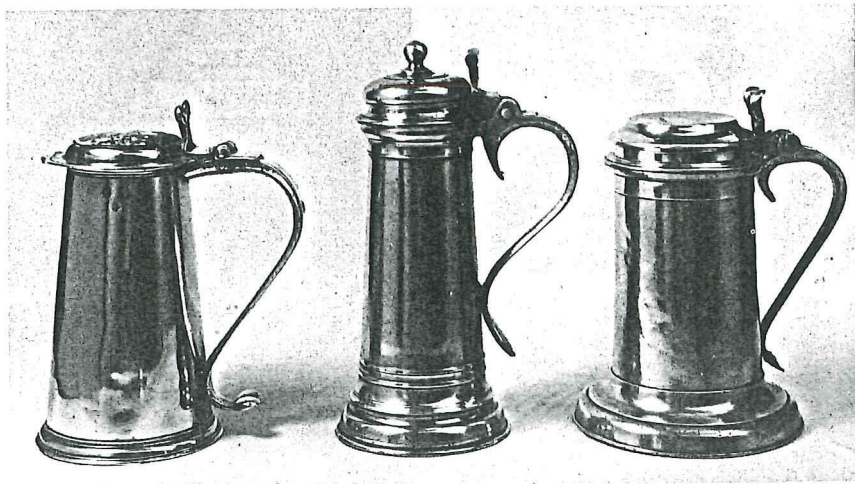


Figure 3. Left: a Stuart flat-lid flagon, c.1690, of typical form but with a twin-cusp handle terminal. Centre: a Charles I flagon with swan-neck handle and knopped bun lid. Compare the handle with that in figure 2. Right: a befeater flagon of c.1680 with twin-cusp thumbpiece.

the back of the handle or on the underneath of the base. This, in all but the earliest examples, is flat and sits directly on the table. A number of these flagons were made by a pewterer "EG" whose identity is unknown. (He probably was not Edward Glover.) His mark, which is illustrated in Cotterell, number 5614A, shows both the pear-shaped and this type, suggesting a period of overlap, albeit short.

Around the middle of the 17th century a third distinctive mainstream type of English flagon appears; the so-called "befeater", named from the supposed resemblance of the lid to a befeater's hat. This type, which is illustrated in figure 3 (right), persisted with minor variations of proportion until the 1690s. Many have known makers' touches inside the base and may also bear hallmarks on the lid. A befeater flagon provides the sole example known to me of a wriggle-decorated flagon which I illustrated in my article "Wriggleworked Decoration on English Pewter" in

*Antique Collecting*, Vol. 16, No. 10, page 5. A rare variant of this type has a very wide spreading foot and it has been suggested that this was to give stability for shipboard use. The thumbpieces are almost always of the twin-cusp variety or its flatter twin-kidney variant, though rarely others occur. A somewhat squat and solid variant of this flagon is associated with the name of John Emes of London (1676-1700). His flagons normally have the same twin-cusp thumbpiece as the conventional befeater, but that illustrated in figure 4 bears a thumbpiece of a twin eagle's head. It was reputedly used as a church flagon by the Huguenot refugees in Rye in the late 17th century and was presented to Rye church in 1860 by one of their descendants. An identical one in Little Bedwyn Church, Wiltshire, is dated 1682. A very few examples of flagons made by an almost exact contemporary of John Emes, Joseph Paxton, are of identical form but have a "bud" thumbpiece as normally found on late 17th century



Figure 4. A flagon by John Emes with a rare twin eagle thumbpiece, c.1680-90.

baluster measures. One of these is seen in figure 5 and an identical one is, or was some forty years ago, in St. Martin's Church, Looe, Cornwall.

In the late 17th century styles became more diverse and both flat-lidded and dome-lidded flagons which relate closely to contemporary tankards make their appearance. A fine and well-proportioned flagon with a flat lid is seen in figure 3 (left) and this dates from c.1690. It has a twin-cusp terminal to the handle which matches the thumbpiece and this distinctive feature is now known to appear on flagons made by the recently discovered Birmingham pewterer, William Wood. Two early dome-lids are shown in figure 6 and are of North Country make, probably York, but possibly Wigan. Both are c.1700 in date. At the same time a different style of flat-lidded flagon appears with a flared tapering drum and a quite flat lid. Of English make, it was in use for a brief period in English churches and forms the prototype of the typical Scottish flagon which



Figure 5. An Emes type flagon by Joseph Paxton with a bud thumbpiece, c.1680-90.

Figure 6. Two North Country flagons with dome lids. On the left with a heart-and-spray thumbpiece; on the right a typical York scroll thumbpiece; both c.1700-10.

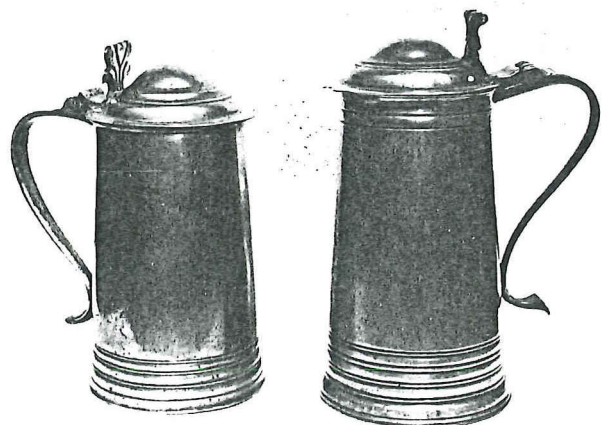




Figure 7. An English flagon of c.1700 with a quite flat lid. The prototype of the typical Scottish flagon.

was produced in large numbers, by makers both north and south of the border, for use in Scottish churches during most of the 18th century. The later examples, both English and Scottish, have a band of reeding round the drum and may or may not have finials on the lids. The example shown in figure 7 has the names of two churchwardens, Wal<sup>t</sup> Smith and James Tweddale inscribed on it in late 17th or early 18th century script. A generally similar flagon has been salvaged from



Figure 10. A typical mid-18th century York acorn flagon with York scroll thumbpiece.



Figure 8. A spire flagon of c.1710-20 with a fishtail terminal to the handle and a scroll thumbpiece.

that part of Port Royal, Jamaica, which was submerged in an earthquake in 1692. The spout on the illustrated specimen may be a later addition.

Early in the 18th century the first so-called "spire" flagons were made. These have a high domed lid with a finial, flared hollow skirts, and the earlier ones have a single-curved handle with a spade or a fishtail terminal. Later the handles were of the double-curved form with a ball terminal. Makers' marks are usually struck inside the base and hallmarks frequently appear on the top of the body. The type continued to be made during most of the 18th century and the thumbpieces evolve from a ram's horn on the early ones through scrolls, chairbacks and finally end with the open skeleton chairback. An early specimen of the type is illustrated in figure 8 and dates from 1710-20. A more typical example is shown in figure 1 (right) and dates from the mid-century. Also in the second quarter of the 18th century we find flagons adapted from the tulip tankard, from which they are distinguished only by a spout. One is illustrated in figure 9. These alone of flagons conform to a definite capacity, usually a quart, and are probably of West Country origin in many cases since the tulip form was popular there. Another rare and very distinctive type of 18th century flagon of regional origin is the acorn-shaped York flagon, an example of which is shown in figure 10. These were made over a long period. The earliest known is dated 1697 and late specimens with open chairback thumbpieces date from the 1780s. There are several of these flagons on view in York Museum.

This then traces the evolution of the main English flagon types over a period of some two hundred years. A number of less usual and transitional styles may



Figure 9. A mid-18th century tulip flagon, perhaps West Country.

however be found. Particularly is this so at the end of the 17th century and in the first few decades of the 18th century. Some provincial pewterers, who did not have expensive purpose-made flagon moulds, built up their products by joining sections of tankard bodies, or other available shapes, to form the drum, and supplied the long double-curved handles by joining the curved sections of two standard tankard handles. Some churches, perhaps the poorer ones, used conventional tankards as flagons and these can only be identified as flagons by the inscriptions on

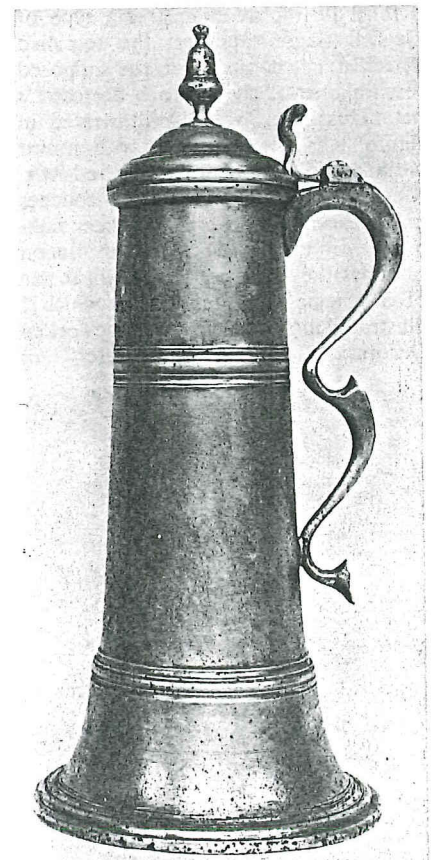


Figure 11. A tall and unusual spire flagon dated 1725.



Figure 12. A transitional early 18th century flagon with mixed features.

them. Three early 18th century variant styles are shown in figures 11, 12 and 13.

**Prices**

The price of pewterware, in common with many other antiques, is at present somewhat depressed from the peak of two or three years ago. This being so, acceptable examples of the mainstream types of flagon described here are available at auction for between £250 and £600, depending on age, and also related very much to condition. Of course exceptional examples will fetch much more, over £1,000 for a really desirable fine, large or early example. The only pear-shaped flagon to appear at auction, some two years ago, fetched the exceptional sum of £5,200 (and would be expected to command as much today), and a uniquely large James I flagon standing 17½ins. high sold for £2,200 in July 1981. Pairs, when found, command a premium, as does an interesting inscription.



Figure 13. A precursor to the spire flagon with a dome lid and swan-neck handle, c.1690-1700.

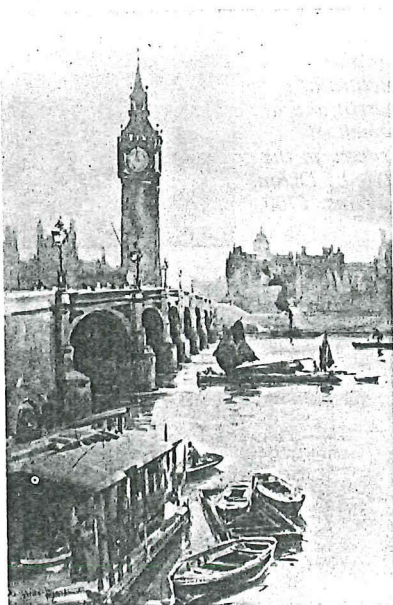
Illustrations are from the archive of The Pewter Society.

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