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English pewter for the collector

The seventeenth century

RONALD F. HOMER

The seventeenth century probably saw the widest use of pewterware in British homes. A substantial proportion of the population was able to afford at least a few plates and dishes, and some measures for kitchen use. The slightly better-off boasted candlesticks, flagons and lidded tankards. The pewterers themselves were not yet feeling the competition from increasingly cheap pottery and tinplate, and in London over three hundred pewterers were working at any given time. The craft was prospering countrywide; in Wigan over two hundred pewterers are recorded between 1600 and 1699; York records a hundred and Walsall about fifty. Bristol, Chester, Norwich, Shrewsbury and Worcester were among other important centres†.

This period produced some of the finest

pieces which are likely to come the way of the collector. Their styling is elegant, their proportions satisfying, and the workmanship is usually of a high standard. The best of them will stand comparison with anything produced in silver. Particularly sought after are flagons, candlesticks, tankards and broad-rimmed dishes.

A few excavated examples apart, the earliest surviving pewter flagons date from the opening decades of the seventeenth century. These tall tapering vessels, with knopped lids and sturdy thumbpieces, were produced for both domestic and ecclesiastical use. Some bear the names of churches or of long-forgotten church wardens, as do many flagons of a later date. The style evolved with the passage of time and, by the reign of Charles I, though still of the same general

proportions, the typical flagon had a "bun" lid and a curving swan-neck handle. About the mid-century these forms gave place to the quite different "beefeater" flagon, so-called from the fanciful resemblance of the flat-topped cover to a beefeater's hat. In the latter part of the century flagons appeared with forms essentially similar to elongated tankards of the same date. Some representative seventeenth century flagons are shown in figure 2.

Early flagons frequently have the maker's mark struck on the back of the handle, or sometimes underneath the base. Later on, the touchmark may be found inside the base, and

Above, fig. 1. A 20-inch broad-rimmed charger engraved with armorials within Stuart mantling.

the drum or flat-topped lid may bear a set of hall-marks. Flagons vary from about 10 inches high to massive examples standing as high as 17 inches. Some at least of the very large ones were bell-ringers' flagons, as evidenced by inscriptions on them, and their capacity matched the thirst of their users!

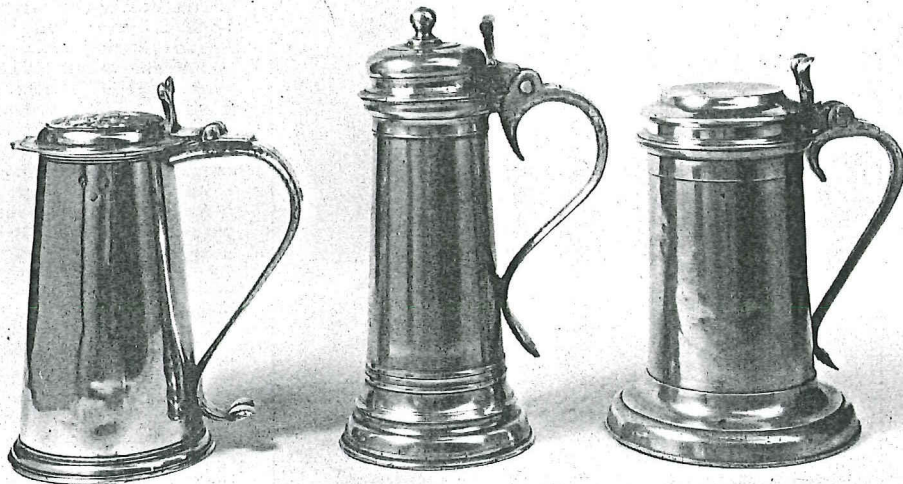
Flat-lidded tankards, analogous to those produced in silver, are known as early as about 1640, but they do not become common until some twenty years later. They continued to be made until about 1700. A fine example, dated by the engraving to c. 1688, is shown in figure 4. They can be dated by the style of the handle, the thumbpiece and the denticulations at the front of the lid. As early as the 1680s, the first dome-lidded tankards appeared in pewter. One is depicted in the touch of John Smith of London, which was registered in 1685. It is just possible that pewterers here led the fashion, for dome-lids in silver may not predate those found in pewter. Flat-lidded tankards were favourite objects for decoration

with wriggled engraving; more pieces thus decorated survive than unadorned examples. However, since the decorated ones may have been more carefully preserved than the plain ones, the relative numbers found today may not give a true picture. Be that as it may, good examples of both plain and decorated flat-lidded tankards command well into four figures at auction, a tribute to what may arguably be the finest examples of the pewterers' craft. Touchmarks are found inside the base and hallmarks on the drum or the top of the lid.

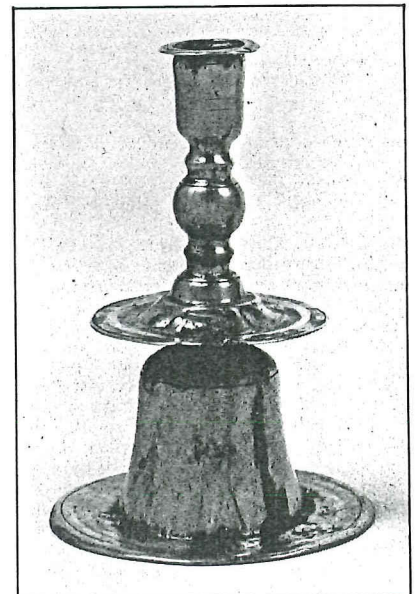
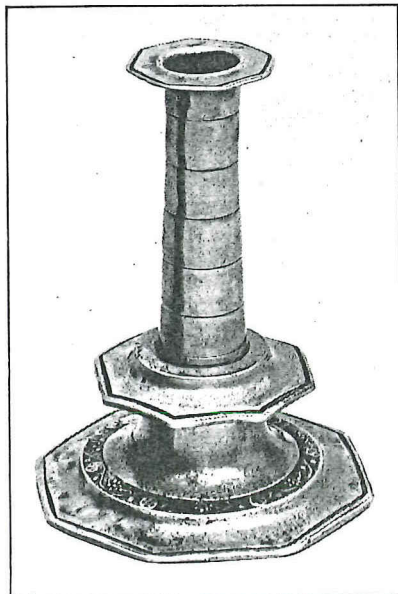
By comparison with tankards, pewter candlesticks are scarce, and equally costly. Nevertheless we have many examples in pewter where none appear to survive in silver. The earliest have knopped upper stems, central drip pans, and stand on a high domed foot (figure 5). In the mid-century, trumpet-based forms appear, identical to those found in brass. At about the same time two other styles emerged; one with a central ball-knop

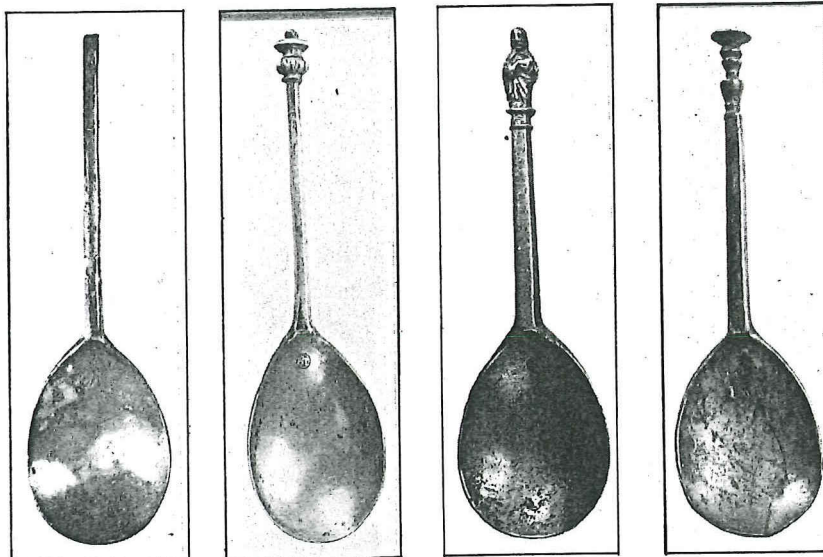
on the cylindrical stem and the other of the magnificent octagonal-based variety with a central drip pan, frequently with both the base and the pan decorated with a cast running-vine motif (figure 2, right). The designs frequently differ from those found in brass. The whole subject is fully treated in R. F. Michaelis, *Old Base Metal Candlesticks* (Antique Collectors' Club, 1978).

The earliest seventeenth century plates and dishes have gently curving booges and centrally domed wells; they are the so-called "bumpy-bottomed plates". The rims are in varying widths and may be enlivened with incised reeding at the edge. Some time before the middle of the century, the classic English broad-rimmed plate had developed, to become the predominant style until c. 1680. The width of the plain rim is typically about one fifth of the overall diameter, though rarely it may be as much as one quarter. Sizes range from 9 or 10 inches to (uniquely) 36 inches across but the commonest are in the



Above, fig. 2. Three 17th-century flagons. Left to right: a flat-lidded flagon, c. 1690; a Charles I flagon, c. 1640, with a knopped lid; a typical beefeater flagon with twin-cusp thumbpiece and broad flared foot.
 Left, fig. 3. An octagonal-based candlestick with running vine decoration, c. 1690.
 Below, fig. 4. A fine flat-lidded tankard with the busts of William and Mary engraved in wriggle-work and flanked by birds and foliage, c. 1688.
 Right, fig. 5. A rare candlestick, c. 1600, with a knopped stem and high-domed foot.





Top, fig. 6. Left to right: a plain capstan salt, c.1680; an octagonal trencher salt, c.1700; and a gadrooned capstan salt, c.1690. The small, broad-rimmed plate in the background dates from the mid-17th century.
 Above, fig. 7. Four spoons of the 16th and 17th centuries. Left to right: a slip top, c.1600; a fluted baluster knob of the mid-16th century; an apostle, c.1650; and a spoon with a latten seal top, c.1650.
 Below, fig. 8. A cast decorated beaker bearing bands of running vine ornament and a roundel containing the Prince of Wales's feathers and the initials "HP", believed to refer to Henry, eldest son of James I, who died in 1612.

range of 15-20 inches (figure 4). Perhaps a dozen superb dishes are known with an engraving of the royal arms filling the well and legends such as "VIVAT REX CAROLUS SECUNDUS BEATI PACIFICI" accompanied by the date 1661 or 1662. Presumably they were decorated to commemorate the coronation or marriage of Charles II. One was recently sold for a hammer price of £4,500.

As the century drew to a close the rim width diminished and edge reeding reappeared, at first incised and later cast proud of the surface. Plates are almost always marked, hall-marks appearing on the rim from c.1630 onwards and the maker's touch on the underside of either the rim or the well. Owners' initials may appear in the form of a triad of three initials. The upper initial stands for the surname, the one on the lower left for the husband's Christian name and that on the right for his wife's Christian name.

Porringers, which had their origins over a



century earlier, were made in a multitude of patterns and sizes throughout the period. Salts, which are recorded in pewter from the fourteenth century, survive (with few exceptions) only from the latter part of the seventeenth. The very rare master salts, often cast in the same mould as the lower half of octagonal-based candlesticks, are unlikely to be found. However, the somewhat later capstan salts, originally plain but later gadrooned, and small trencher salts, from c.1690, exist in a variety of styles (figure 5).

Spoons were made in pewter at the end of the thirteenth century and survive in considerable numbers from the fifteenth century onwards. Their styles are more diverse than those of their silver counterparts. Before the 1660s, most pewter spoons had fig-shaped bowls and slender hexagonal stems which frequently bore decorative knobs. A number of examples, of sixteenth and seventeenth-century date, are shown in figure 6. Rarely, pewter spoons are found with latten knobs, imitating the gilt knobs on silver specimens. Soon after 1660, allusions are found to "new fashioned spoons", a reference to the trifold type which continued to be made into the early eighteenth century. Spoon collecting is a subject in its own right and the present author's *Five Centuries of Base Metal Spoons* (1975) treats this topic in detail. Tavern pots have been described in a previous article (*Collectors Guide*, February 1986) and similar twin-hooped drinking vessels were probably made throughout the seventeenth century. They have solid strap handles, rather than the hollow ones of the pots of the 1700s, but the earliest survivors, datable from inscriptions on them, are not earlier than the 1660s. A few, from c.1690-1700, are gadrooned on the lower half of the body. Baluster wine measures typical of the seventeenth century have wedge-shaped thumbpieces, usually surmounted by a ball or by a hammerhead purchase. Dating is by rather subtle changes in body shape and comparatively few have any makers' marks. The seventeenth century also provides a variety of two-handed loving cups. The earlier ones, from the mid-century, are of a straight-sided bucket shape, but later ones have more elegant flaring forms, sometimes decorated with gadrooning on the lower half.

Mention should finally be made of a rare group of cast-decorated pewter objects, all of which can be dated between c.1600 and 1620 and some of which carry the date 1616, the significance of which is unknown. A fine cast-decorated beaker in this style is shown in figure 7. Other pieces include small saucers, tall-footed wine cups or chalices, a footed plate and a candlestick.

The more desirable pieces of seventeenth-century pewterware have, unfortunately, been rather widely faked, either overtly, with the intention to deceive, or later by distressing pieces originally made as reproductions. There are also many fake spoons. Collectors should therefore buy from reputable sources and be wary of "bargains" (although these are to be found) until they are confident of their judgement. Condition is reflected in price to a marked extent, though many collectors to whom the interest of a piece is over-riding, will be content with a less than perfect specimen. Those who have some skill in repair and restoration will find rewarding opportunities which others must pass by ▲

† The history of the pewterers' craft in the West Midlands, Wales, and the Severn Valley is detailed in the recently published *Provincial Pewterers* by R. F. Homer and D. W. Hall (Phillimore, 1985).