

THE PEWTERER: HIS TOUCH MARK

The "Hall-mark" of Old Pewter and Its Meaning



1600-1650



1650-1695



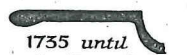
1670-1705



1670-1705



1700-1750

1755 until
decline of
industry

The expert can tell the date of a pewter plate by the style of its rim. This diagram will serve as a useful guide to the amateur collector.

During the 16th and 17th centuries that pewter attained the height of its popularity, though it was in general use throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Genuine pewter is an alloy of pure tin and pure lead, in the proportion of four parts of tin to one of lead. This alloy polishes and shines almost like silver, but it has a distinct bluish cast. Experts are able to recognise real pewter by its weight, colour, and feel.

One of the first things a beginner must do is to become familiar with the feel of the metal. When buying plates test them for resonance. A pewter plate when struck gives a pleasant sound like a gong.

Pewter articles were manufactured by casting, and were finished by turning on the lathe. Plates and dishes were also hammered, to give additional strength and solidity. Shapes for domestic use were nearly all cylindrical in order that the utensil could be easily cleaned and repaired. The chief pewter manufacturing centres were London, York, Exeter, Newcastle, Bristol, Birmingham, Bideford, Barnstaple, Bewdley, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dublin, and Cork.

Pewterers were organised into a guild known as the Worshipful Company of Pewterers. In the reign of Henry VII, they made compulsory the old voluntary system by which all reputable pewterers signed their work with "touch marks." The touch mark, which is to pewter what the hall-mark is to silver, is one of the surest means of dating a piece.

An Act of Parliament made it compulsory for pewterers to register their marks. The touch mark may be the name of the maker or the name accompanied by some emblem such as a rose, a figure, or an animal. The earliest marks were very small and were initials only. The best quality metal was marked with a rose surmounted by a crown bearing an "X," the "X" standing for richness of metal; the second quality was marked with the maker's name.

When a date appears on a touch mark it refers to the date the touch was struck on the touch plate at Pewterer's Hall. Pewterers were not allowed to alter their touch once it had been struck upon the Hall plates, except by special permission secured by a general order of the Court. Once

PEWTER, a darkish silvery metal spelt of old in a variety of ways from peautre on the one hand to pedvre on the other, exerts an enduring fascination upon those who collect it. Every variety of article has been made of pewter, from ecclesiastical ornaments down to the commonest of household utensils including plates, dishes, soup tureens, soup plates, ladles, deep dishes for vegetables and pies and to act as voiders for potatoes, salts, pepper casters, candlesticks, wine cups, tankards, handles of scimitar-bladed knives, and three-pronged forks.

Collecting pewter is a rather expensive hobby, but occasionally "lucky finds" cross one's path. For the most part, however, fair prices must be paid for pieces worth possessing. It was during the 16th and 17th centuries that pewter



This Old English Church flagon of pewter belongs to the George III period.

a date appeared in a pewterer's touch, it appeared during his whole career and is, therefore, no guide as to the year the piece was made.

Touch marks are usually found, in the case of plates, on the rims, in the case of jugs and tankards just under the lip; but sometimes they are stamped, rather indistinctly, at the bottom. Touch marks seldom appear on measures, it being the trade custom not to mark them. Pewter measures were evolved from the leather black jack which they resemble in shape.

Unmarked pewter can be approximately dated by remembering that the earlier the date of manufacture the simpler the outline, as the ware was designed for use, not display. Straight or slightly curved lines preceded swelling curves, and plain flat top tankards were in use long before those which are curved and possess knobs and crests.

THE design of the handle of a tankard, drinking cup or jug is another point to study. Where the lower joint of the handle is set flat on to the vessel, it shows an earlier construction than if set with a short intervening strut. Tankard handles of the Stuart period had whistles in them to summon the drawer. Puzzle handles were very popular during the 18th century.

Candlesticks of pewter were made in huge quantities. During the 16th and 17th centuries, they were squat in appearance—merely a socket mounted on a short neck with a heavy base. After 1670 they grew taller and for the following forty years a grease ledge was placed somewhere on the stem. The design of later candlesticks closely followed the silverware of the period.

Salt cellars of the 15th century were shaped something like an hour glass. By the 16th century the sides became straight; at the end of the century they became concave and ball feet were added. After 1700 the pewter salt cellar was simple in form, quite small in size and shaped like a trough.

Pewter spoons are always being offered to the collector. The early specimens up to 1650 have irregular ovate bowls, slightly curved upwards and frequently with hexagonal stems.

With the arrival of the more practical shaped spoons, the spoon-makers varied the knobs or tops of the stem in shapes known as acorns, diamond-pointed, maidenheads, horned head-dresses, hexagons, apostles, written balls, lions, balusters, seal-tops, and strawberries. The marks on pewter spoons are usually very small.

THE earliest pewter inkstands are of the 16th century. They are round and low. A little later moulding was added to the base and a lid was supplied with a couple of holes for the pens. Next the base was developed as a tray. At the end of the 17th century sand-box and wafer box were added, the whole thing beginning to look important. Then in the 18th century ball feet or claws were added, being replaced with lions' heads about the middle of the century.

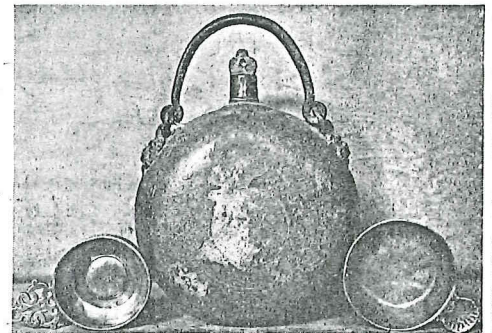


A varied group of old pewter pieces, including a fine charger

Snuff boxes of pewter are comparatively rare. Most of them are rectangular, with the corners either rounded off or cut off so as to make the box octagonal. Circular and oval boxes are very uncommon.

Older examples often show traces of gilding covered with transparent lacquer on the inside. In more recent boxes, gold paint was used.

It is a recognised fact that the pewterers followed the designs of silversmiths. It is, therefore, frequently possible to ascertain the probable date of a piece of pewter by comparing it with a similar piece of silver and deciphering the hall-marks on the silver.



A pewter water bottle and two bleeding bowls

Garnishes of old pewter plates and dishes were the pride of old-time housekeepers. They were displayed on oak dressers with their backs facing outward. This resulted in the touch-marks being obliterated by continual cleaning. It was customary not only to wash the pewter and rub it vigorously after each meal, but also to submit it once a month at least to hard scrubbing and polishing with oil, rottenstone or sand, and rushes.

A PEWTER plate is a trencher 8 in. to 10 in. in diameter from which food was eaten, as distinguished from large circular or oval dishes on which viands were brought to the table. The sketch shows the various types of rims by which pewter plates may be dated. There were other shapes, of course, but they are only occasionally met with, and were merely the passing whim of individual pewterers. The broader the rim, the older the plate.

A garnish of pewter consisted of twelve plates, twelve dishes, and twelve saucers. They were sold by the pound, costing during Queen Elizabeth's reign sevenpence or eightpence the pound.

Pewterers usually issued trade cards to advertise their wares.

The original owners of the pewter we collect frequently made contracts with the pewterers to clean their ware, but this is an impossibility today. The cleaning should, however, only be done by someone who understands the rubbing movement, which is round and round in the same direction. Any other method produces small scratches, difficult to remove.

The oldest and dirtiest piece can easily be cleaned, first by boiling in soda and water, lightly scouring with fine pumice powder, inside and out, then polishing the outside with a good paste metal polish, and lastly finishing off with whitening.

There is a peculiar fascination and rare beauty in pewter which is seen at its best when illuminated by mellow candle-light. Then it glistens like old silver. It needs, too, a background of old oak in order that the decorative value of its particular tone may be fully exploited.

There is a pleasant homely quality about pewter which makes it suitable for the adornment of the simplest rooms, and imparts an intimacy such as few antiques can give. Moreover, it is so serviceable that it can well be used without risk of serious damage. It is a somewhat soft metal and is liable therefore to dent, but is equally easy to straighten again. And since beer drunk from a pewter tastes better and cooler than from any other container, it seems a pity that pewter mugs should languish unused on shelves.

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