

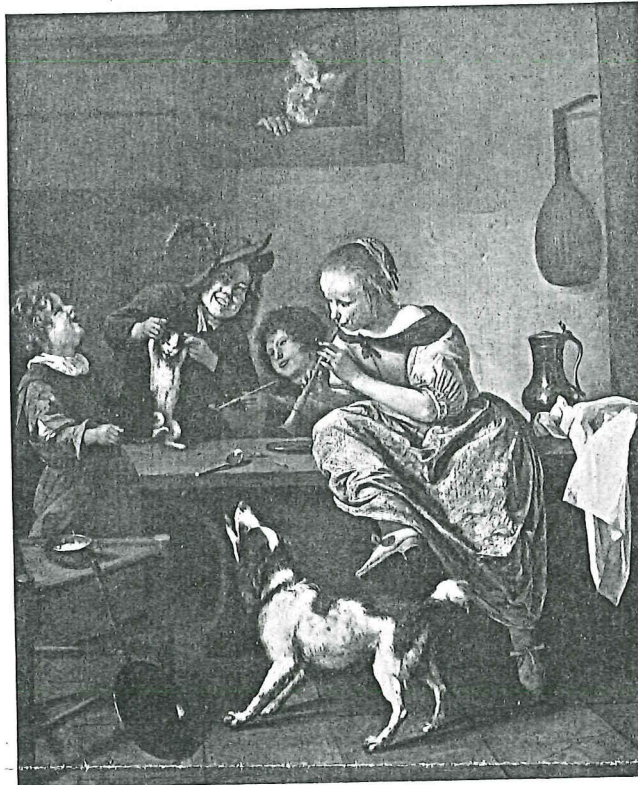
OLD PEWTER SPOONS

By G. BERNARD HUGHES

AMONG the most ancient of the English crafts was that of the spoon-maker or spooner, who worked in metal, horn or wood. Spoons of precious metals were wrought by the goldsmiths for ecclesiastical purposes, but apparently it was not until the 12th century that silver spoons were introduced as articles of domestic table-ware. The pewterer was making spoons for household use at least five centuries earlier and analysis has shown the alloy to have been prepared by a formula no different from that laid down by the Craft of Pewterers in 1348.

One of the five specialist groups of pewterers was that of the spoon-makers, who were also fork-makers from the 1630s. The method followed by these craftsmen was to make a flat casting approximating to the shape of a spoon with a round stem. This was hammered to shape; the stem became first oval, then, with further hammering, hexagonal. Square and rhomboid stems were formed in the same way. The bowl was beaten to shape over a form of hardwood. This ceaseless hammering made the metal hard-textured and compact enough for the spoon to withstand the stresses of everyday use. A decorative knob was cast separately and soldered into the end of the hammered stem. The knob might afterwards be gilded: from about 1600 the entire spoon might be gilded. Although the length of these spoons almost invariably ranged between six and seven inches, weight might vary from $\frac{3}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ oz. A single touch mark, much resembling a silver hall-mark, was struck inside the bowl near to the stem junction.

At first the bowl of a pewter spoon was shallow and fig-shaped, wide near the rounded end and tapering to merge into the stem. Such spoons were designed to lift food from a porringer rather than to scrape up liquids. Soft foods were known as spoon-meat until Cromwellian days: as late as 1639 O. Wood was advising his readers to "Eat neither Milke, Broathe nor spoone meat." Potage was one of the most popular spoon-meats between the 14th and 17th centuries and according to A. Borde (about 1450) consisted of "the licour in which fleshe is sod in, with puttynge to, chopped herbes and Otmell and salte." Hugh Rhodes's *Boke of Nurture* (1577) prescribed that the spoon should never be filled full when being lifted from porringer to mouth, and never left



1.—THE CAT'S DANCING LESSON, BY JAN STEEN. On the table is a pewter spoon with the slipped-in-the-stalk stem and egg-shaped bowl of the mid-17th century

in the porringer or leaning against its side. When finished with it was to be licked clean.

The back of the stem-bowl junction was strengthened with a short, pointed tongue. The earliest stems were of diamond section to prevent their twisting in the fingers when in use. They tapered slightly towards the end, and were scarcely thicker than a wheat stalk. This style was succeeded by a slender irregular hexagonal stem, still tapering but slightly flattened at the bowl junction. From about 1550 the upper and lower surfaces of the hexagonal stem tended to be broader and flatter than the sides, which thereupon suggested faceting. In the late 16th century these narrow edges might be rounded until the stem became oblong in section. By the time of Charles II it had become broad and flat.

Pewter spoons better designed for liquids were developed earlier in the 17th century;

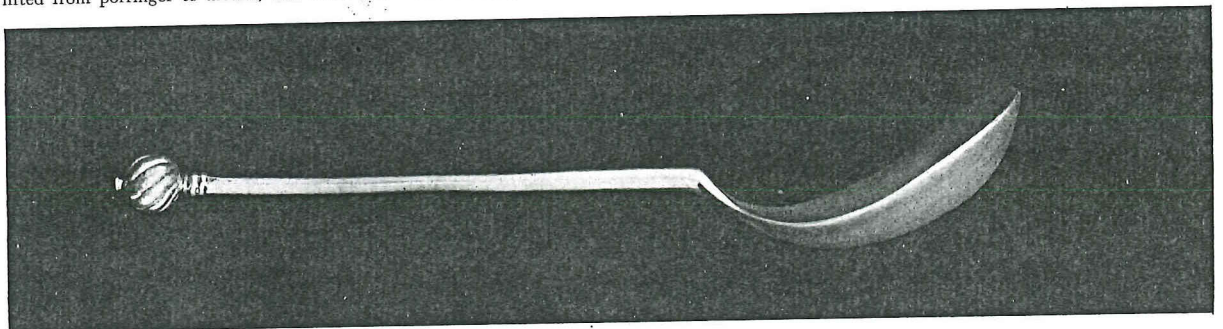
their bowls tended to be shorter, wider, deeper and more oval in outline. From the middle of the century the bowl outline was a true ellipse, and the curve was no longer related to the stem junction. The egg-shaped bowl, broad at the shoulder and tapering to the lip, dates from about the mid-17th century.

The knob finials which gave character to pewter spoons until after the 17th century include about a dozen standard patterns. Date letters in the hall-marks of silver spoons, always closely copied by the pewterers, have enabled the collector to place pewter spoons chronologically.

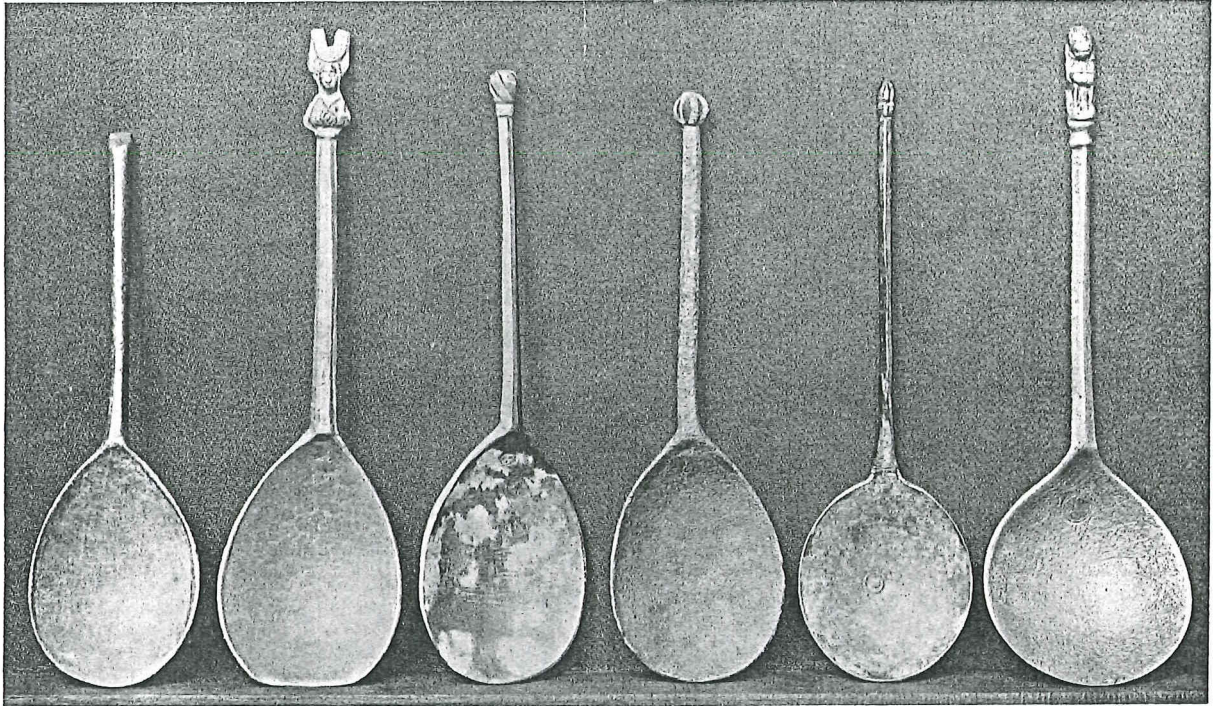
Among the earliest knobs was the diamond-point, a simple pyramid, which continued to be made until late in the reign of Henry VIII. The acorn knob appeared during the 14th century and was popular until James I's accession in 1603. These are usually found in association with bowls smaller than the average: finials often show traces of gilding. This design and the contemporary fir-cone prompted more formal patterns such as the written knob dating from about 1480 to 1550 and consisting of a ball marked with spiral twistings, and the ball with elongated ribbing known as the melon knob.

Pewter spoons were a recognised gift at christenings. It was, therefore, to be expected that the decoration would often assume a human form, associated with the saints whose stories were woven into the people's everyday lives. These spoons became numerous in the 16th century, but occasional specimens and references in wills indicate an earlier origin. Perhaps the earliest was the design termed the maidenhead, known in the late 14th century and specifically associated with the Virgin Mary as early as the mid-15th century. In early specimens the head forming the knob might wear the horned head-dress fashionable in the first half of the 15th century. Anne of Bohemia, wife of Richard II, had introduced to England that strange head attire with a two-horned outline which was some six inches above the wearer's head and about two feet wide.

Various other styles followed on maiden-head spoons, the most usual design showing the coiffure and dress of the Tudor period and based on a fleur-de-lys. Obviously many spoon-makers in pewter ignored the original intention of the design; the elaborately braided hair



2.—SIDE VIEW OF A 15th-CENTURY LONDON-MADE WRITTEN KNOB SPOON



3.—EXAMPLES OF 15th- AND 16th-CENTURY PEWTER SPOONS WITH FIG-SHAPED BOWLS

found on some specimens is a coiffure which the custom of the period restricted to married women. Maidenhead spoons are frequently mentioned in wills and inventories of the yeomanry during the late 16th century.

Only a little later came the apostle spoons, familiar objects in wills and inventories throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, but appearing occasionally still earlier. Typically the knob consisted of a representation of one of the Apostles standing on an architectural moulding with a large rayed nimbus surrounding his head and carrying appropriate emblems, frequently the instruments of his martyrdom, in his hands. Apostle spoons were sold singly or in sets of thirteen including the master-spoon bearing the figure of Christ in majesty, holding the orb and cross, and raising the right hand in blessing.

A very different spoon knob was the wood man or wild man, swinging a club or holding it against his shoulder. This was a favourite device with decorative craftsmen and appeared on spoons between 1450 and 1600. The moor's head was another alternative device in the 16th century.

Heraldry was another obvious source of knob designs. The lion sejant was contemporary with the maidenhead. This seated lion was a squat, big-headed creature: even when its body was placed across the top of the stem its head faced to the front of the spoon.

Seal-top spoons were made for two centuries from the 1560s. In this design the stem terminates in a baluster topped with a flat disc. Very occasionally from about 1600 the seal might be hexagonal. The seal was usually pricked with initials or a date. Other decorative knobs included the chanticleer, the horse's hoof and the strawberry.

What is known as the slipped-in-the-stalk spoon, with the stem ending simply in a slanting cut from the front of the spoon, was principally in fashion during the early Stuart period to about 1670. The earliest were slender-stemmed, widening only slightly, but thickening considerably towards the top. From the 1620s they were made longer and stouter. The owner's initials were sometimes impressed upon the bowl near the stem. In a late example initials might be pricked upon the slipped stalk.

From this developed the stump-end spoon with a hexagonal facet-sided stem, tapering

sharply to a point. By about 1650 the stem had broadened and flattened into the design known to collectors as the puritan, which was oblong in section and cut squarely across the top. This is found only with the almost elliptical bowl which the stem joins with a short V-shaped tongue. Ornament such as scrollwork in shallow relief might decorate the stem end.

The puritan stem marked a turning point in pewter spoon design. Thereafter, instead of an added knob the stem-end ornament consisted merely of some elaboration of the flat end itself. Immediately after the return of Charles II and his court from the Continent in 1660 the trifid-end spoon appeared; the stem-end was hammered into a semicircle which was cut vertically with two deep notches near the sides, dividing the terminal into three sections, with two small ones flanking a large central section. These are known to collectors variously as lobed, split-end, trefoid, trifid or sometimes *piéd de biche*, because of a resemblance to a hind's foot.

By 1675 the end was shaped into an elliptical form and given a slight upward curve. The notches were cut nearer to the centre, and the three resulting lobes were about equal. The strengthened rib on the back of the bowl was made deeper and longer, extending half or two-thirds of the way down the bowl, which now narrowed at the tip. This was the first of the well-known rat-tail spoons, which continued to be made in pewter for about half a century. Puritans, apostles, seal tops and other knobs now ceased to be made. The low relief scroll decoration on stems might now cover both sides. This surface decoration was produced on the hammered stem by steel dies cut at the expense of the Pewterers' Company and hired to spoon-maker members.

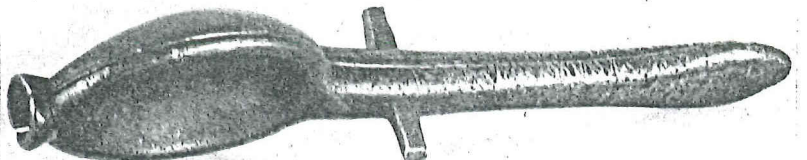
The expanded end of the spoon stem was no longer notched after the 1690s, but terminated in a series of small arcs, the central, larger one being given an upward curve. These are known to collectors as wavy-end, cat-head or shield-top stems. The bowl became narrower in proportion to its length and the ridge of the rat tail might be decorated with a series of diminishing beads.

Towards 1710 appeared the so-called Hanoverian spoon with a gracefully waisted stem and a less expansive end consisting merely of an unbroken semicircle which soon developed into a plain arc. The tip of the end was made rather thicker than formerly and given a forward curve. From it, nearly halfway up the front of the stem, a tapering central ridge was introduced resembling the rat tail on the back of the oval-shaped bowl. By 1750 the bowl was made egg-shaped, tapering towards the tip. This type of spoon, cast in gunmetal moulds, continued to be made for a century and does not fall within the collector's orbit.

Meticulous care was essential in preparing the mould for casting or flawed spoons might result. To prevent the metal from adhering to the mould its interior was coated with a mixture of red-lead and egg-white, the brush striations being visible on the surface of the rough casting. The molten pewter was poured from an iron ladle into thoroughly warmed moulds. Upon removal from the mould the spoon had a white frosty-looking surface. This was scraped, rasped, filed and finally burnished.

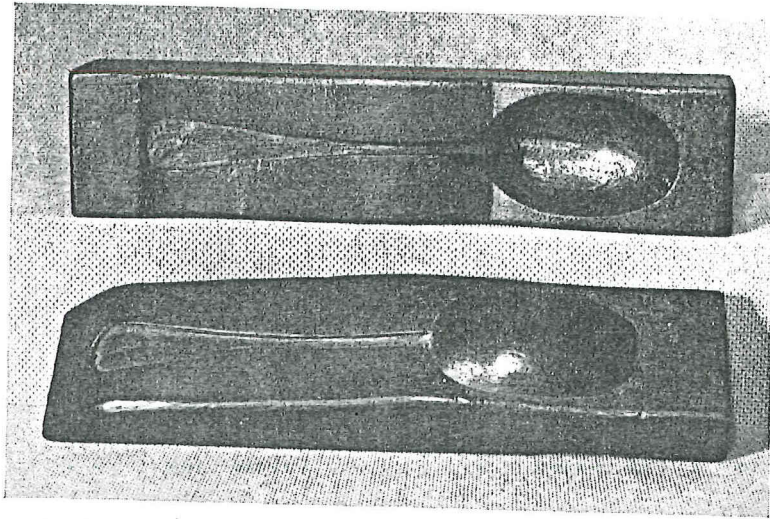
Pewter spoons were now seldom hammered and the metal contained an undue proportion of lead.

Illustrations: 1, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; 3, Victoria and Albert Museum.



4.—MID-18th-CENTURY GUNMETAL MOULD FOR CASTING PEWTER SPOONS

JANUARY 14, 1954



A PAIR OF MAHOGANY FORMS OVER WHICH SPOON BOWLS
WERE BEATEN TO SHAPE

See letter : Pewter Spoons

PEWTER SPOONS

SIR,—Mr. Bernard Hughes, in his interesting article on old pewter spoons (November 26, 1953), refers to the hardwood forms over which the spoon bowls were beaten to shape. The enclosed photograph shows a pair of these old beating forms, which were also used for re-shaping and removing dents from damaged spoons. Each form is carved from a single block of straight-grained mahogany. Although intended for beating the inside and outside of the same spoon, the blocks do not form complementary profiles, as in the halves of a mould.—
EDWARD H. PINTO, *Oxhey Woods House, Northwood, Middlesex.*