EGI

Three lots which appeared in Sotheby's July 25 sale – a rare Scottish pear-shaped half-gallon measure, 10¼ inches high (left), which made £400; a 7-inch William and Mary tankard, c. 1790, with the maker's mark "I.B." (£250); and a good flat-lidded flagon by "W.W", c. 1690 (£540). A world record was created at this sale when an important Charles II Commonwealth charger made an astonishing £5,800.

BY J.R.W. JENNINGS

Pewter tankards – not easy to get hold of

THE END is easily foretold;
When every single thing you hold
Is made of silver or of gold,
You long for simple pewter.

PEWTER today, however, is far less "simple" than it was when W.S. Gilbert penned the lyrics for *The Gondoliers*. Good antique pewter is in short supply, and not infrequently it would be substantially cheaper to buy modern silver; for the price of antique pewter has soared over the last couple of years, and current variations and fluctuations in price would make any attempt at valuation here nonsense. They would be out of date before the printing presses had stopped rolling.

Perhaps the easiest – if not the fairest or most accurate – method of indicating the tremendous increase in popularity of pewter is to examine the auction catalogues. For example, the highest bid for a pewter tankard at Christie's November 1971 sale was 180 guineas, bid in fact for a lot of two pieces. In their most recent sale at the time of writing, 450 guineas was bid for a single flagon – and while in all fairness it must be admitted that it was a vastly superior piece, more comparable lots, but individual measures, went for 380 guineas and 320 guineas respectively.

Three factors have contributed to this increase in popularity. The first is, of course, the desire of anyone with a few coppers to save to try to invest them in something solid, which will rise in value sufficiently to keep pace with galloping inflation. They have chosen pewter – among other things – as it appears steadier than, for example, silver did last time when so many people hitched their wagons to the cast candlestick star and found that in the long run it was an earth-bound meteor.

The second factor is the return to favour of old oak furniture. Pewter looks right with it. If you don't believe me, take any black oak sideboard or dresser. Try a couple of pieces of silver on it. No? Well how about a pair of brass church candlesticks – the type with the deep

A superb pair of Charles I flagons stamped with the mark of the maker "E.G." They measure 9 inches to their lip and date from 1635, about the time that pewterers began using "hallmarks". The pair were secured at Sotheby's last October for £820.

hollow foot, designed to accommodate a bell clapper so that the priest using bell, book and candle for exorcism (or excommunication) needed only two hands. Yes, it looks better, but now try a pewter paten and a couple of tankards. Now you see what I mean.

The third factor is quite simply that people have begun to rediscover the beauty of pewter itself. Pewter is a delightfully warm, friendly alloy. If champagne should always be drunk from a silver tankard, then beer should be drunk from a pewter one, ideally with a glass bottom, so you can see if any enemy comes through the door while you are drinking; or, as another version has it, so that if the recruiting sergeant or the press-gang leader drops the monarch's shilling into your mug you will spot it before you finish your beer and will not find yourself an unwilling conscript.

The first English pewter is Romano-British and dates back as far as the year 400 B.C. Then suddenly, for no apparent reason, this delightful alloy, comprising 90 per cent Cornish tin and 10 per cent lead, copper or antimony, fell out of favour and did not make its re-appearance until the 14th century. Pewter tankards started to put in an appearance during the 16th century.

Charles II, as one of his many methods of acquiring wealth without recourse to Parliament, took to annexing the silver of his nobles, who tended to replace it with pewter, rather than risk losing the replacements the next time the King came to dinner. It was, however, some years before the merry monarch ascended the throne, about 1635 in fact, that pewterers began to use marks, in addition to their own touchmarks, which resembled silver hallmarks – causing thereby much wrath and no little litigation on the part of the Goldsmiths' Company.

Tankards, flagons and similar items are, however, datable by shape, any markings providing confirmation and additional information. As a matter of fact, the touchplates recording the touchmarks of pewterers before 1666 were lost in the Great Fire of London of that year.

The earliest tankards were squat, straight-sided and tapered upwards, with flat lids, usually hinged with ornamental thumbpieces, although even more desirable pieces were made at the same time with cylindrical instead of tapered form. Towards the end of the 17th century, lidless tankards also put in an appearance, designed for ale-houses, and many of those which survive today carry engraved on the body the name of the hostelry they adorned.

A century later an American living in London recorded that it was possible to send to the pub for beer, which would be brought by the servant of the "tap-house", complete with pewter mugs bearing the owner's name, and that each morning the same servant would go from house to house collecting the mugs, which he strung on a leather strap for ease of transport.

A wine flagon ("Kelchkanne") by Jacob Valin of Geneva, the collar surmounted by a heart-shaped cover with a twin-acorn thumbpiece. This mid-17th century piece (height 9¾ inches) changd hands at Phillips on June 19 for £200.

A 10¼-inch cylindrical lidded flagon with scroll handle and open-shaped thumb piece and domed cover, bearing the rubbed touch-mark on the handle of "G...E...". It dates from the first half of the 17th century and made 450 gns at Christie's on July 19. The bulbous shape of the measure next to it suggests its 18th-century date; this item, which went for 170 gns in the same sale, bears the touch of a rose with "H,, RITT(?) ROOSTIN 1719" above it. It is probably German.

Returning, however, to the earliest tankards, the flat covers were often embellished with saw-tooth serrations at the front, and when the domed cover came into vogue at about 1690, this practice was continued, and remained until the beginning of the second decade of the 18th century.

About the time that these serrations fell from favour, the plain drum of the tankard gained the embellishment of a fillet moulding about two thirds down its body, and this ornamentation remained when, at around 1725, the straight-sided tankard began to be replaced in public favour by the bell and tulip shapes.

These shapes were especially popular in the West of England, and Howard Cotterell's *Old Pewter, Its Makers and Marks* (published by Batsford, London, in 1929 and reprinted in 1963), which has been regarded as the pewter-collector's Bible for the last 44 years, remarks that 80 per cent of early tulip tankards examined by the author bore the touch-marks of pewterers from either Bristol or Exeter.

It did not take long for these new shapes to catch on, and although the domed lid fell out of use at about 1775,

the tulip and bell remained in favour right through the 19th century, getting even more swag-bellied as time passed. Glass bottoms appeared about 1895.

Richard Munday is both a collector of and dealer in antique pewter who has built himself a reputation as one of the world's leading authorities on the subject.

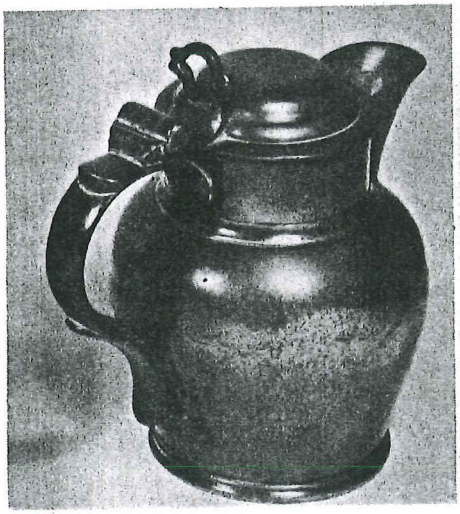
He also has the distinction, as a fellow of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, of having been almost solely instrumental in arranging the only occasion on which a ruling monarch has ever crossed the portals of that august body. The monarch in question was King Olaf of Norway, a long-standing customer of Mr. Munday.

His Chiltern Street, London, W.1, shop carries a vast and beautiful stock, although some of the pieces are strictly "not for sale".

His views on the somewhat vexed question as to whether old pewter tankards should be cleaned are very simple and logical. If it is going to be used, it has to be cleaned. If it is purely for ornamentation it is not necessary – and with a really old piece it is downright foolish. Major cleaning jobs, by the way, should be done by experts.

This can, of course, lead to some mis-understandings. While I was talking to him a party of American tourists entered the shop looking, it appeared, for cheap souvenirs. They seemed rather dissatisfied to discover that gleaming tankards prepared for functionally minded customers were in reality just as old as their grey-black neighbours.

As regards to the future, and the present less wealthy collector, Victorian pub tankards, with the name of the pub usually engraved on the bottom, though once despised, are going up in price; and, by the same token, Mr. Munday points out that as the supply of pewter gets smaller, and correspondingly more expensive, Britannia Metal must surely become an "antique of the future" □



An English cider pitcher of rare pint size with domed cover, scroll handle and open thumbpiece. The price at Phillips on March 20 was £105.

Spurned spelter

...But it could catch on, says JANE HOLLINGWORTH

I'VE NEVER had the pleasure of meeting a spelter collector face-to-face, but I've always imagined them to be that breed of person who goes around in a deerstalker hat with a meerschaum pipe and a huge magnifying glass. For spelter is one of those fields which is collected by many, and yet researched by none.

About the only official reference to the metal comes in the Shorter Oxford Dictionary. Characteristically terse and to the point, spelter is described as "an alloy or solder of which zinc is the principal constituent, 1815". Presumably 1815 was the year in which the alloy was officially registered and patented, but that really is only conjecture on my part. And it comes as a surprise to telephone the Victoria & Albert Museum to find that nobody has heard of the stuff, that their library has no books on antiques which refer to it, and that neither has any other metalwork library in the land.

Yet, wander into any antique shop in the country, no matter how small, and there you're likely to find . . . yes, a few spelter figures. Go to a Phillips' auction and . . . yes, there'll be a few spelter figures. So what exactly are these figures? Who made them? When and why?

Well, going on the circumstantial evidence, as they say in all the best detective novels, they probably first appeared around the 1850s. In effect, these early ones are cheap reproductions of the most famous animalier bronzes of the time. There were about 6,000 founders working round the clock in Paris producing the expensive originals, and it seems more than likely that they were the ones who also decided to capture the cheaper end of the market at the same time. Just as gift shops up and down the country were flooded out with cheap plaster-of-Paris reproduction Greek sculpture after the last war, so the English 19th-century gift shops suffered a positive tidal wave of spelter reproduction animaliers. All the traditional figures were made – raging stallions, prowling tigers, predatory bears, and so on, and the alloy was also cast in the form of huge Renaissance-style vases and ewers, and for the cases of large clocks.

Judging by the vast amounts still on the market in this country it would seem that every small cottage and hamlet in the country had one or two displayed in pride of place on the mantelpiece. Certainly they were mass-produced, probably being cast from rubber moulds taken from the originals.

The great thing about spelter from the modelling point of view was that it was so soft and malleable, and with a relatively low melting point, so that our French cousins could churn the stuff out at a quite awe-inspiring rate. Presumably, though, the English were not slow to see the potential profits to be made, for, in

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