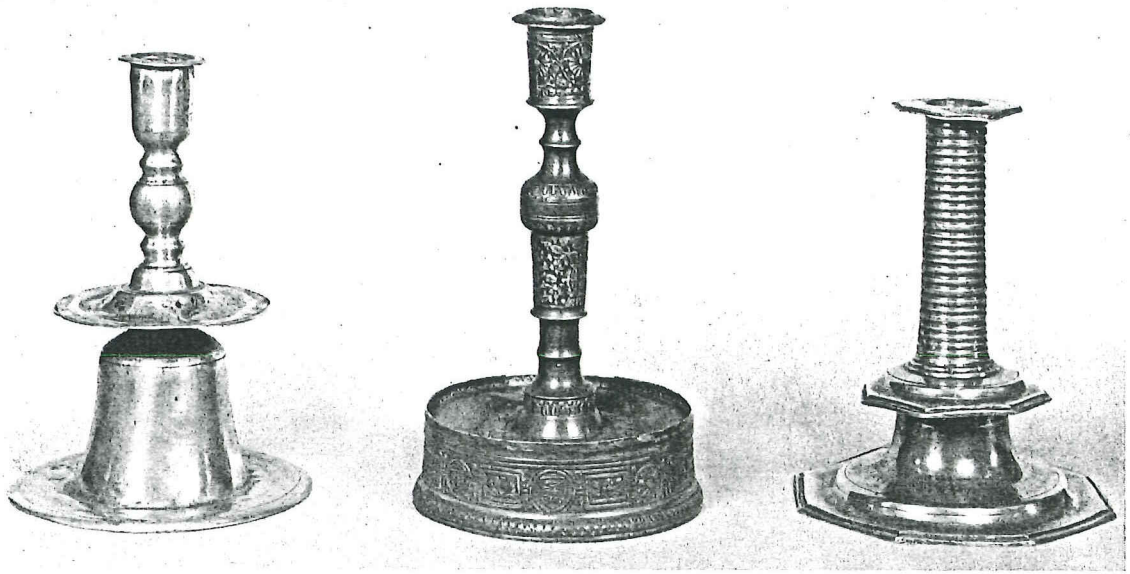


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ANTIQUES FOR EVERYMAN: by C. G. L. DU CANN



Three English 17th century pewter candlesticks. One on the left has maker's touch and initials SB over a star within a diamond; centre one bears arms of Pewterers Company, 1616; and third is unmarked

# Collecting Pewter and Pinchbeck

SOME scholarly and enthusiastic collectors of pewter may feel a trifle affronted at the idea of pewter and pinchbeck being bracketed together. It would be adding insult to injury to defend their conjunction by remarking that both are an amalgam of base metals.

Pewter is of most ancient lineage and in both ancient and medieval days it was, so to speak, a high member of the aristocracy. Whereas pinchbeck, though it also had its hour of glory, dates only from the 17th century, and undeservedly has come to be a term of reproach, indicating a false and low imitation of the real thing.

Both indeed have fallen from their highest estate. Yet both have their loyal collectors and admirers.

How old is pewter? Ancient China and Japan knew it and in Britain it was known to the Roman occupation. It succeeded leather, horn and wood for making vessels, utensils, plates and dishes. In medieval times pewter was possessed only by wealthy nobles and ecclesiastics; as time went on it became so used that there was scarcely any utensil in the ordinary church, tavern or house not made of it.

In England the detailed records of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers go back to 1348, the time of Edward III, so there is plenty of scope for research. Therefore it is hardly surprising that collectors of English, as well as Scottish, French, Flemish, German or American pewter are a numerous band. The cult is world-wide, for the charm of the satiny-grey metal is very real and it attracts in the course of years a *patina* that is most pleasing.

Even those — the majority — who prefer silver or Old Sheffield are not always impervious to the different aesthetic quality of pewter in a suitable setting. In a cottage or tavern with a background of old oak, pewter looks exactly right; and that no doubt is why modern pewter finds a ready market.

If you decide to collect antique pewter, there is so much of it available that some sort of selective principle is forced upon you. You might choose "sad ware" — the pewterers' name for plates, dishes and chargers. Or you might choose "hollow-ware", the term for flagons, tankards, beakers and such like pieces. Or again, you might confine your collecting to either one period, or to one article, such as spoons.

Alternatively you might prefer a diversity of old pewter pieces such as candlesticks, inkstands, salt

cellars or spoons. There is plenty of variety to choose from. You might specialise in ecclesiastical pieces like chalices and patens; or go in for tavern or domestic pieces. Perhaps the most popular single article collected today is the tankard.

Antique pewter differs a great deal in its composition. Pewter, of course, consists of tin mixed with an alloy of other metal, generally lead. There is a simple way of testing the quality of your pewter, merely by rubbing it with a clean white piece of paper.

If no mark is made on the paper, that is excellent pewter probably of 90 parts of tin to 10 parts of lead or other alloy. If faint marks are made the proportion is some 75 parts of tin to 25 of alloy. The heavier the mark, the less proportion of tin, and of course the more tin, the better the pewter quality.

Disinterred Roman pewter has lead for its alloy. But improvements later crept in and "fyne pewter" had brass in it and later bismuth, copper, and antimony. From the end of the 17th century, the great vogue of pewter declined steadily as glass and china took its place.

In England and Scotland in olden days, each pewterer had his "touch" or private mark which was registered, and the guilds of pewterers used strictly to regulate their craft. Consequently collectors can often find the approximate date and maker by familiarising themselves with the marks. Which is excellent so far as it goes.

Unfortunately however the various enactments compelling a definite "touch-mark" were often ignored or evaded, so all too often the collector has to rely on experience in distinguishing the old from the new.

Therefore the beginner needs to go cautiously at first. He should study a sound handbook on the subject, such as Mr. A. V. Sutherland-Graeme's *Old British Pewter (1500 to 1800)*. He should also study collections in museums and chat with specialist dealers.

What points should the beginner look for?

Pewter quality, proportions, functional fitness and state of preservation should be regarded as well as *patina* and the marks (if any). Pewter being utilitarian and therefore often subject to hard usage, it follows that there are many battered, damaged, broken and repaired pieces about.

There is a kind of debased pewter, a cousin of the real thing, known as Britannia metal. Hard, dull, and cold-looking it has none of the *patina* of the genuinely old pewter. Set a piece of it side by side with antique pewter of quality and you learn the difference for ever. But it is often over-priced in the shops.

There may be zealous collectors of Britannia metal but if so I have never met one and I should not think there could be either much profit or pleasure to be got out of collecting specimens of it. Perhaps durability and appropriateness to purpose were its chief attractions in its heyday, but compared to antique pewter it has little appeal.

Coming now to pinchbeck, the present fashion of revived interest in Victoriana has led to a new appreciation of this English discovery. This is ironic because, contrary to what many people believe, pinchbeck is Georgian and not Victorian at all though some Victorians, as also the Swiss makers, gleefully strove to copy it. At its initiation pinchbeck was a great success; then it passed through a period of depreciation until its very name became a synonym for vulgar false pretence; but now it is recognised as a lost art.

What exactly is pinchbeck? In the reign of George III and earlier the two Pinchbeck brothers, Christopher and Edward, were making what were called "toys", not for children but for adults. Christopher had made a new and original discovery: how to make a cheap alloy that closely counterfeited gold. It was known that he used copper and zinc, but the exact secret formula is unknown.

Pinchbeck articles cover a wide range indeed. *Inter alia* it comprised cane heads, watch chains, coat buttons, shoe buckles, clasps, watch cases, boxes galore of every sort, étuis, chatelaines,



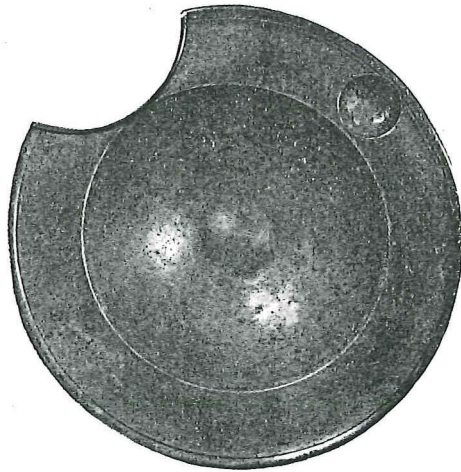
Early 18th century pewter mug bearing the maker's touch of William Hux, London, and (right) late 18th century pewter jug engraved WLW in monogram and having simulated silver marks with maker's initials RM

frames, rings, bracelets, necklaces, jewellery, salvers and similar objects too numerous to mention here.

Pinchbeck was introduced at the right time. England was highly prosperous; both male and female servants (then quite a large proportion of the population, unlike today) wanted ardently to be like their masters and mistresses in personal adornment. They could not afford gold but they could afford pinchbeck; and in those days who was to detect the difference at a glance?

Then too, the despised tradesmen wanted to ape their "betters", the strictly professional classes and the aristocracy. Pinchbeck enabled them to do just that. Students, would-be men about town and others anxious to be fine gentlemen, needy young women desirous of appearing fine ladies joined the throng of purchasers. Pinchbeck filled a deeply felt want in days when dress and personal adornment really mattered greatly.

So closely and skilfully and knowledgeably did the new pinchbeck imitate the real thing that it was an immediate success. But there was more than novelty and clever imitation in it, namely elaboration and artistry. The Pinchbeck brothers were craftsmen and they spared no pains.

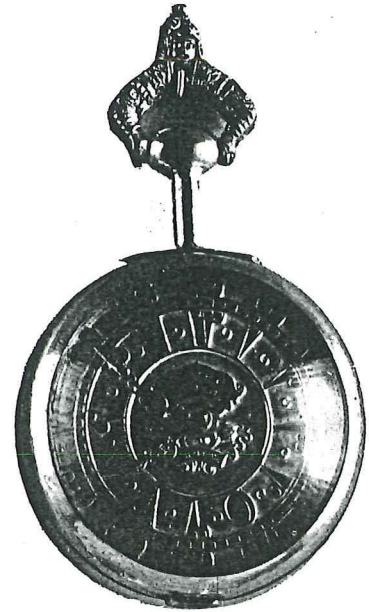


Late 17th century English pewter shaving dish with maker's touch IH within a shield

Thus it comes about that old pinchbeck remains worthy of collection today. If you cannot afford a gold or silver snuff box, patch box or vinaigrette upon a table or within a cabinet in your home, you may still do what perhaps some ancestor did, namely possess the antique substitute in pinchbeck. As a decorative object old pinchbeck can be very pretty — and its price, unlike its gold or silver counterpart, is not inflated.

Boxes in pinchbeck are specially worthy of attention. Frequently the tops, bottoms or sides are made of onyx or agate or moss-agate or cairngorm, and the metal frames are beautifully chased and decorated. Jewel caskets are often particularly good too; they are to be had in red or white agate, lapis lazuli, onyx and malachite, sometimes in a mosaic of such semi-precious stones.

The Pinchbeck brothers claimed that their



Pinchbeck watch with silver dial, engraved with Turkish numerals and signed George Prior, London. Late 18th century

metal was untarnishable — much of it indeed has remained untarnished to this day. A great deal of it, which perhaps is not real old pinchbeck after all but its imitation, has dulled, darkened and discoloured under the chemicals of polluted atmospheres for a century or more. There is no easy way of distinguishing real old English pinchbeck from its imitation beyond its apparent quality; the experienced eye is the judge.

Any collector might do worse than study and collect fine specimens of pinchbeck. From the aesthetic standpoint there is much to be said for it; but needless to say there is no fortune to be made out of it at the present day. That means that it is well within reach of the most modest purses, and although there is a lot of it about I should say that there is a future for fine, genuine specimens.

But there is always the chance that it might suddenly become fashionable . . . .



Pinchbeck case for watch above with oriental chasing of Diogenes and Alexander. Pictures by courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum