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The Connoisseur

May 1911

p. 33-39

Notes on My Old Pewter By Walter Churcher

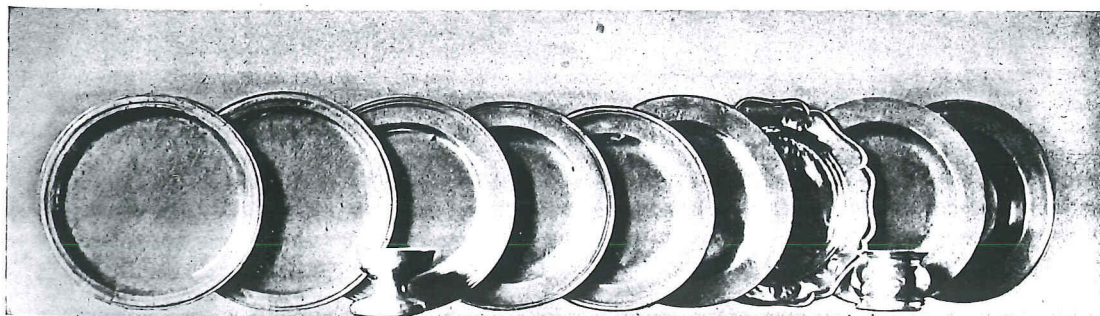
THE latter-day collector of old pewter-ware who commenced his quest during the last decade may not have been vouchsafed the opportunity of purchasing many of his specimens at so much a pound by weight, as were some of his predecessors; but he experienced the inestimable advantage of finding at his disposal sources of information on his subject not previously available. The collection of old pewter was not seriously taken up until some twenty years ago. Family garnishes of old plates and dishes, the pride of old housekeepers, were preserved on the dressers of old country houses; and many were the strange methods, destructive of makers' marks, used in the cleaning of them. But in many cases the old chargers, bowls and platters, which had been superseded by earthenware and china, were relegated to the lumber-room, or even to the fowl-house or kennel, ultimately meeting their fate in the melting-pot of the tin-worker or the pewterer, the former recognising in old plates excellent material for solder, while with the latter the recasting of pewter was a regular trade. Indeed many of the items I shall refer to were rescued from the weekly consignments of old metal received for re-melting.

At that time one found here and there an artist or architect who, appreciating the beauty of the subdued grey metal, requisitioned pieces for studio properties or decoration, but few regarded it as a subject for

systematic study and acquisition, and even early collectors had as vague ideas of values, dates and marks as the owners or dealers from whom they purchased them.

The subject was, to borrow Miss Miggs' imagery, "weiled in obscurity," for the illuminating works of Welch, Massé and the late Ingleby Wood were not yet available, while the Pewter Exhibitions at Clifford's Inn and Glasgow had not disclosed the enormous variety of articles produced in the metal.

When the owner of the collection under review set out, over twenty years ago, in association with a colleague, in quest of a complete service of table pewter each, with a view to giving dinners entirely served on the old metal, so little interest was taken in the matter by dealers, that enquiries elicited the reply that they had no demand for pewter, and most of the early purchases were made as a result of advertisements, which brought down a perfect avalanche of plates and dishes. Many of these were not of sufficiently good surface for the purpose they were required for, but in some three years some three hundred excellent plates and fifty dishes were obtained at prices which at the present time would satisfy the most exacting bargain hunter. Among the plates were many early specimens now promoted from the dresser to the cabinet. A few of these are shown in illustration No. i., the four on the left being by prominent seventeenth-century makers, such as



NO. I.—TYPES OF PLATES

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No. II.—PEWTER SNUFF-BOXES



No. III.—SHOE SNUFF-BOXES AND VINAIGRETTES

Nicholas Kelk, John Hicks and John Cave, and by reason of their being carefully preserved and tended in a Sussex mansion for generations, are in perfect condition. In this connection it may be recollected that it was the practice in many old Welsh families to place the pewter plates and dishes on the dresser with their backs outward, the cleaning of which resulted in many interesting marks being obliterated, a series of small plates purchased by the writer in North Wales for use as cheese plates, having the faces dull, and the marks of the maker, S. Duncumb, on the backs, almost worn away by scouring.

With the acquisition of sufficient plates and



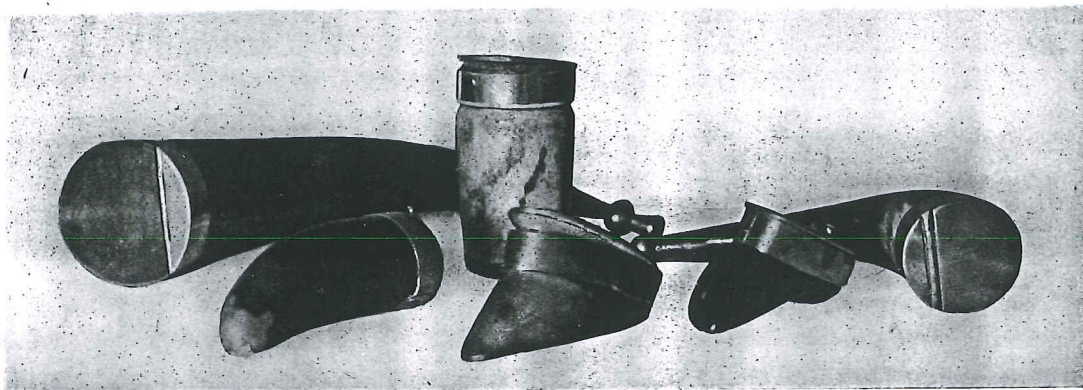
No. IV.—PEWTER SNUFF-BOXES

dishes, the projected dinners became possible.

Soup-tureens, soup-plates, ladles, deep dishes for vegetables, pies, and to act as voiders for the skins of potatoes in jackets—which are a feature of these feasts—salts, pepper-casters, candle and taper sticks, wine-cups, tankards, decanter-coasters, and the appropriate pewter-handled scimitar-bladed knives and three-pronged forks, followed in rapid succession, and a series of pewter dinners initiated, which are still periodically enjoyed by an intimate circle of artists, actors, and collectors.

The soup course was abandoned early in the history of the dinners,

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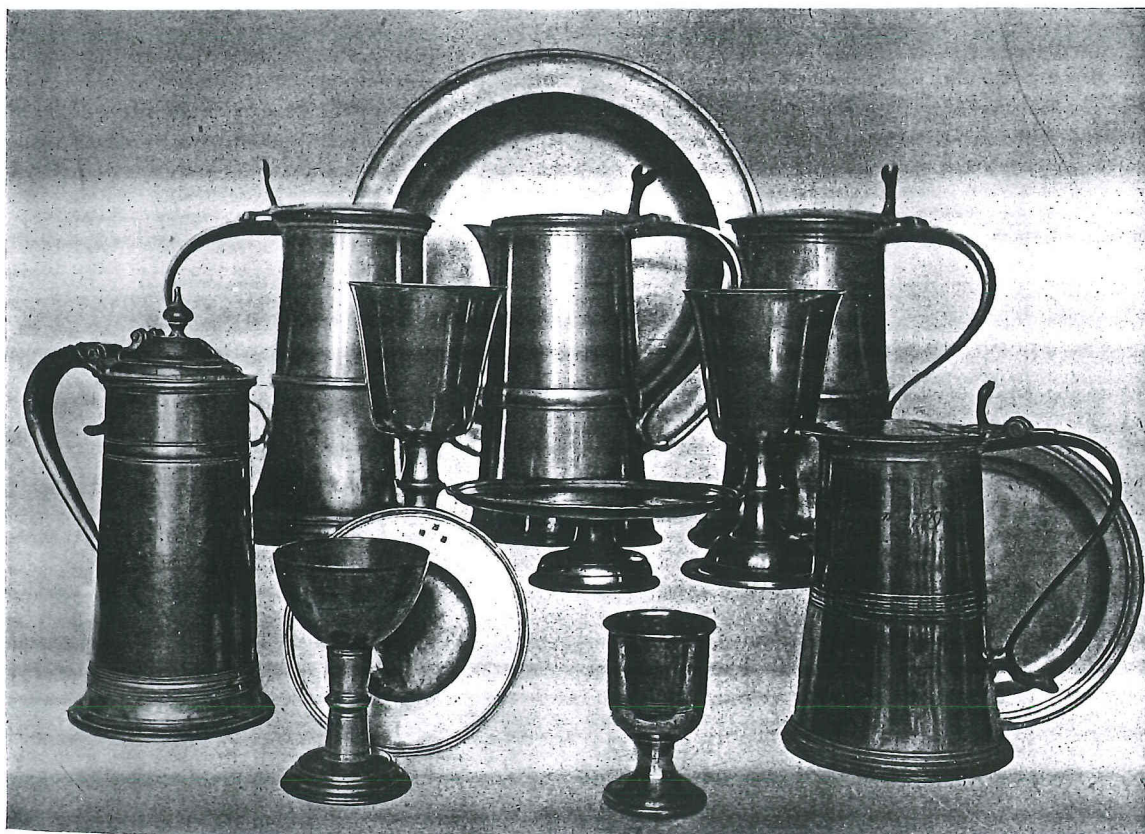


NO. V.—SCOTCH PEWTER MOUNTED SNUFF-MULLS BY DURIE

as its association with pewter plates was not quite successful, and the tureens, ladles, and the interesting soup-plates from Staple Inn were henceforth relegated to the cabinets. These soup-plates, which bear the dated touch of John Redshaw, 1733, are of unusual shape, and bear the name of the Inn and its wool-sack crest. They were acquired some fifteen years ago, about the time the Inn was purchased and restored through the generous and timely action of the Prudential Assurance Company. On the occasion of a conversazione a few years since, these plates, with

dishes and other plates purchased with them, were temporarily restored to the old carving buffet which still exists in the hall of the Inn.

The ultimate departure of one of the joint collectors for America, with a half share of the spoil, necessitated further acquisitions, and incidentally led to an extension of the quest to articles other than table pewter. Perhaps one of the most interesting of these additions is a series of nearly a hundred pewter snuff-boxes, dainty little pieces, admirably designed and almost invariably well made in good metal. They mainly



NO. VI.—FROM CHURCH AND KIRK

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NO. VII.—ENGLISH BALUSTER-SHAPED MEASURES, 1740-1826

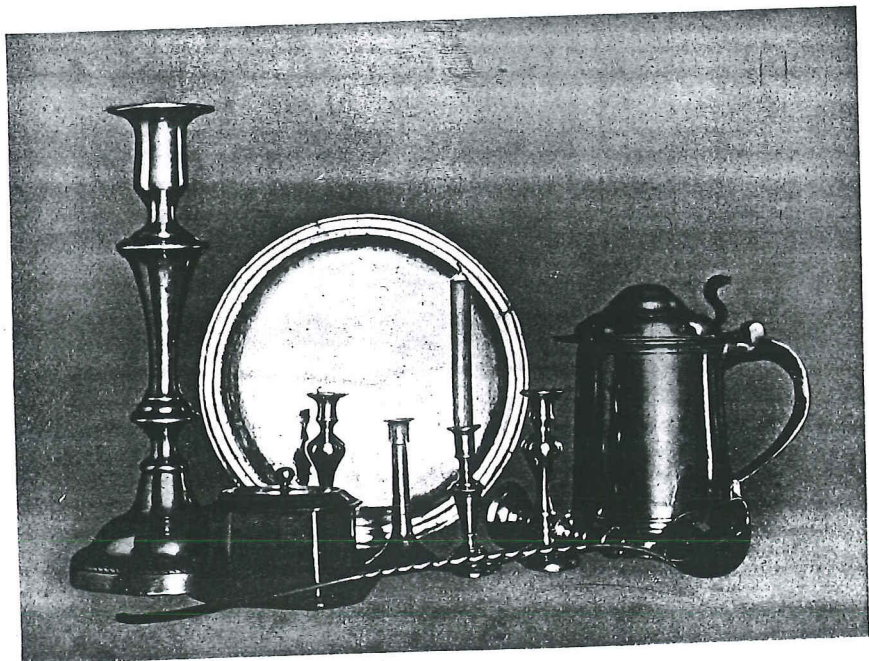
date from the first half of the nineteenth century, although a few are much earlier, and their form and decoration largely follow that of contemporary silver boxes, and from the illustrations shown it will be seen that the devices include sporting, classical, and topographical subjects, while the conventional ornament with which some specimens are decorated will compare favourably with that of many more ambitious latter-day productions. Certain of the boxes take the form of horses' heads or pistols, and are of a weight suited to the pockets of a Wardle or a Squire Western. Specimens are scarce, and are now only acquired with difficulty. Although they must have been commonly used at one time, few seem to have survived, and one of the best of those illustrated was found on a bar counter to which it was nailed, in order to discourage any applications for its loan on the part of customers.

In another illustration (No. v.) will be found

varying patterns of Durie's Scotch snuff-mulls, in which the pewter mounts and lids are fitted to hoofs and horns with great skill. The Durie manufactory has never been located; but the late Mr. Ingleby Wood was of opinion he was an Edinburgh maker.

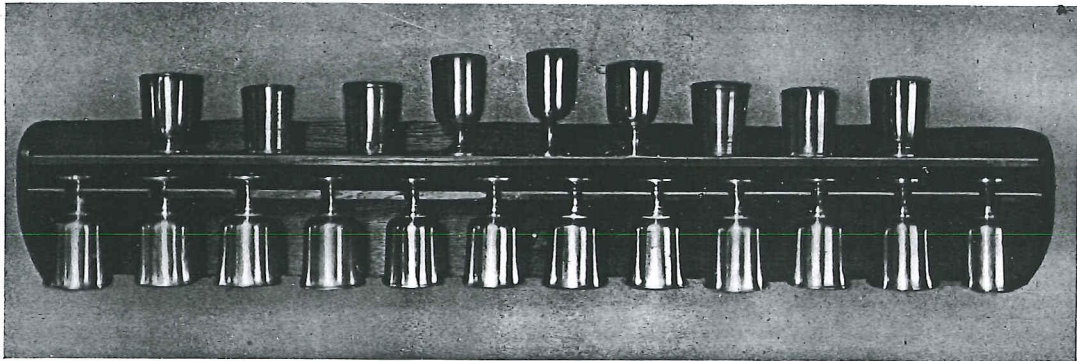
Turning from these small items to more important pieces, some of the ecclesiastical pewter, such as flagons, lavers, and patens, will be found illustrated (No. vi.). Perhaps one of the most interesting items in this group is the little paten on the left, which bears one of the earliest marks on the first of the surviving touch-plates at Pewterers' Hall, is of date *circa* 1663, and was found among débris of the fire

of London during excavations in the City. It bears distinct traces of fire on the back; but the front escaped damage. Before its age was ascertained from the touch-plate, it was used as a butter-dish. The pair of Scotch lavers at the back of the



NO. VIII.—TANKARD AND TAPER-STICKS

Notes on My Old Pewter



NO. IX.—SET OF CUPS WITH RACK

group are fine specimens, and are some fifty years older than that with a lip, between them, which is by W. Hunter, of Edinburgh, and of date 1750.

Of tavern measures, notwithstanding some transfers to museums, a goodly store remains. The tappit-hen type, without which no ambitious pewter collection is deemed complete, is represented by crested and uncrested specimens in various sizes, acquired long ago. The collector who buys these fine measures nowadays must have a care, or he may acquire expensive experience with them, as the high price they now bring leaves a good margin of profit for the faker. The tyro must also resist the blandishments of the dealer who offers Normandy jugs with acorn thumb-pieces as tappit-hens. For the pewter collector of modest means there are few more fascinating subjects for consideration than the old tavern measures which, with and without lids, are still to be obtained at moderate prices. Perhaps among those sets most difficult of acquisition, in good condition, are the late eighteenth century flat-lid baluster measures, which are here illustrated (No. vii.) in conjunction with an old leather jack, from which the shape was doubtless evolved. On rare occasions earlier specimens are met with, such as the pint measure shown next to the black jack in our illustration, and which bears the dated maker's mark — W. D. 1670, in a diamond, and the crowned "C" of Charles II. This and its half-pint companion are good and well-preserved pieces, but, of course, not comparable to the Buckmaster Henry VIII. specimen.

In seeking eighteenth-century examples, the smaller sizes, save the miniature half-gill, may be

found without much difficulty, but the huge gallon measure, weighing 9 lbs., is a rare piece. The writer has only met with five specimens in twenty years. In his quest, however, the collector will find the beginnings of other sets in many graceful patterns, and might do worse than specialize in such old-time tavern accessories, a comprehensive collection of which would be of the greatest interest, and ultimate value.

Apart from the church pieces previously referred to, the collection includes various lidded tankards, one of which, of the George I. period, is shown (No. viii.) in conjunction with some small tapersticks, a graceful twisted stem punch ladle with oval bowl, and one of a pair of domestic candlesticks of unusual size. Among the various cups is a set of twelve, which, with their rack, are shown (No. ix.). Although such cups are frequently described as chalices, they are domestic items of the early nineteenth century, and with the owners' initials on them were often given as children's presents in the old days. Many, inscribed WATERLOO, were sold as mementoes of the battle.

Of the many bleeding bowls, candlesticks, spoons, inkstands, salts, and other items in the cabinets, it is unnecessary to speak. One may envy the possessors of the De Navarro Stuart tankards, and church plate; of the Murray spoons; and of the fine general Buckmaster Collection; but the satisfaction gained in garnering the present collection has been emphasized by the knowledge that it has, as regards its domestic section, afforded the means for serving a succession of joyous repasts, and enabled its owner to see his friends enjoy both the useful and æsthetic side of his modest possessions.



NO. X.—BARREL-SHAPED BEER JUG