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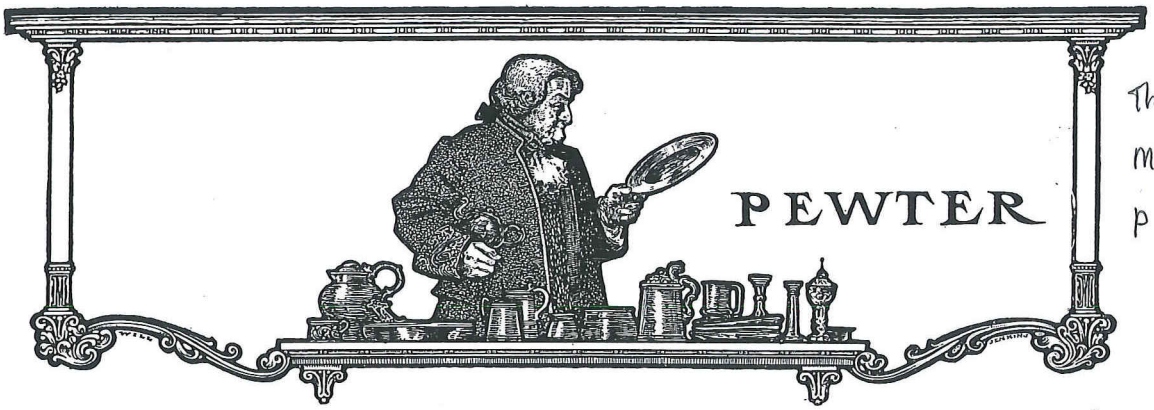

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Old Pewter or Britannia Metal?

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To every collector of old pewter has come at some time that terrible bogey, how rightly to distinguish it from Britannia metal, and though I do not purpose going into the subject as a whole at the moment, I do desire to roll aside what I am tempted to believe may have been one of his greatest stumbling-blocks, the connection between Messrs. James Dixon and Sons, of Sheffield, and the pewter industry.

That the matter is in some quarters still regarded as *sub judice* is indicated by the correspondence at p. 61 of THE CONNOISSEUR for September, 1920; and as I have but recently—in connection with my book, *Old Pewter: Its Makers and Marks*, which Messrs. Batsford will shortly be publishing—been corresponding with Messrs James Dixon and Sons on this very matter, and as they, with their unfailing courtesy, have once more gone very carefully into the question, I feel I may, with their entire approval (the MS. of these notes having been submitted to them), and therefore with full authority, set the considered facts before your readers.

The correspondence referred to above arose out of a review in the July CONNOISSEUR of a book entitled *Collecting as a Pastime*, by Charles Rowed, wherein the author states, at p. 57:—

> "Next I obtained a short history of the firm of James Dixon & Sons, and found they did make pewter in their early days."

Unfortunately, this is true in so far as the writer's statement goes. Unfortunate, because the little booklet to which he refers had a wide *free* circulation in the form of a centenary souvenir of the firm's foundation, published about the year 1906; and again unfortunate because the statement in the booklet is based on no actual fact, for Messrs. Dixon are quite at a loss to know how the paragraphs crept in, and they say that "the fact that the word *pewter* appears in the souvenir must be regarded as an error." At the same time, they reiterate and confirm their letter at p. 156 of THE CONNOISSEUR for March, 1918, wherein they state that there is absolutely no trace of their ever having made pewter wares, no moulds, no recollection amongst their oldest employees, nor can any whose forbears have worked there for three or four generations call to mind their fathers or grandfathers having mentioned pewter.

In a letter from the firm, dated July 27th last, they say: "In *Pewter-marks and Old Pewter Ware*, by C. A. Markham, published in 1909, is illustrated, at p. 119, the mark DIXON & SON. 1749. This has no connection with our firm, which did not begin business until about 1806; but it may have something to do with the confusion at present existing amongst pewter connoisseurs. In the same book, on pp. 47 and 54, are given illustrations of *pewter* articles which are undoubtedly our own Britannia-metal productions."

I think Messrs. Dixon have called attention to what may well be the beginning of the confusion, and the point was of so much interest that I determined to prosecute it further.

Mr. Markham, at p. 120, gives this *mark* as appearing on an inkstand in Mrs. Gerald Walker's collection.

Towards the end of 1919, Mrs. Walker's collection was dispersed at auction at Messrs. Sotheby's, and fortunately I was able to trace this inkstand to its present owner, Mr. W. D. Thomson, of Birmingham, who kindly sent it to me for examination. My surprise can better be imagined than described when I found that the "Dixon & Son, 1749" was not *impressed into the metal*, as those of every pewterer and Britannia-metal manufacturer were, but *engraved!!*

With the present owner's consent, I forwarded the inkstand to Messrs. Dixon for examination

and report. On August 12th last they replied as follows:—

> "We quite agree that the name Dixon & Son, *engraved* on the bottom of the inkstand, makes it impossible for this to be regarded as the maker's mark; we always *stamp* our name on the bottom of any article which we make."

What has already been said should clear away two wrong impressions. First, Messrs. Dixon *never* did make pewter wares; and, secondly, neither their firm, nor any other of the same title, so far as my knowledge goes, existed in 1749.

In all my years of hunting, I have come across the name of but one Sheffield pewterer, and from the connection, he was but a man in a very small way, whose name and date could neither of them be fitted in in the present case.

After all, the question of distinguishing between pewter and Britannia metal need not be a very tremendous obstacle, for the following amongst other reasons:—

First, collectors of old pewter, except in the case of something of quite exceptional interest, do not care for pieces so late as the end of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, at which time Britannia metal first came into existence. Hence, although in some instances the makers of Britannia-metal wares may have reverted to earlier types, in the main their productions have a distinctly more modern "flavour" than the pieces we look for as pewter.

Secondly, the total difference in outline and feeling of most of the Britannia-metal articles should save collectors of pewter from even a second glance; and again, the appearance of the names Dixon, I. Vickers, Wolstenholme, Broadhead & Atkin, Ashberry, or Colsman will of themselves settle the point, for none of them made pewter wares; as also should the small catalogue numbers one so frequently finds on the underside of salts, peppers, mustards, caddies, tea and coffee-pots, and cream-jugs. The pewter which the collector seeks was made before the catalogue era, as we know it. On the whole, and one may say it without bated breath, it is safer to treat every tea or coffee-pot and cream-jug as Britannia metal unless marked with a pewterer's "touch," and many salts, mustards, peppers, caddies, tobacco-jars, etc., etc., are made of the same metal. Whenever you are in doubt, err on the side of safety and refuse the piece.

The advanced collector prides himself that he knows by instinct, by the touch or "handling" of a piece, but such knowledge is only acquired by years of experience and through many failures.

In this connection, many useful hints would be obtained by a careful study of the many illustrations in Mr. Frederick Bradbury's *History of Old Sheffield Plate*, from which would be formed a good idea, generally speaking, of pieces which were *not* made in pewter. In my forthcoming book I hope to illustrate such pieces as *were* made in pewter, of undoubted reputation, and which can still be obtained if sought for assiduously and through the right channels.

As a final word, I would reiterate the advice one has given to so many beginners: "Why, when there is so much that is beyond suspicion, collect anything that is suspect?" It is far, far better to have a small and blameless collection than a large one with a good smattering of "packing," and the Britannia-metal bogey would then cease to perturb one's enjoyment of one's treasures. There is no need to smother fine pieces in an accumulation of second-rate and doubtful specimens; it does but give the impression that "bulk" rather than selection is the obsession of the owner.

If collectors would only bear this in mind, one would seldom hear, when discussing a collection with a friend, the all too frequent comment: "Yes, he has a *big* collection, but so frightfully mixed!"

One can call to mind but few collections, not excepting those of acknowledged status, that would not be improved by careful and constant weeding; two or three alone stand out in one's mind as beyond the pale of criticism in this respect.

It has been the writer's privilege to advise in this operation of weeding in more than one instance, and the elimination of some hundred pieces has invariably added more than a hundred per cent. to those that remained. Avoid overcrowding, and you will be charmed with the insistent, if mute, appeal which each cherished treasure will make, not only to its owner, but to the wider circle of its owner's friends and fellow-collectors.