EKC

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Dealer and

The Gleam of Pewter

Sheila Stuart

A selection of 18th and 19th century pewter, left to right, top: two early 19th century quart tankards. Middle: early 19th century tavern measure, early 19th century salt cellar, pint tankard. Below: two 18th century spoons, 19th century engraved snuff box, pint lidded tankard. Courtesy of King and Chasemore, Pulborough, Sussex

OLD PEWTER is one of the most exciting things to collect. It is still fairly plentiful and not too far out of reach for most of us. Its quiet sheen places it in a class by itself, in a different category from the more elegant metal, silver, nor can it be compared with poorer metals such as tin, though there is a superficial similarity between them.

From a practical point of view pewter stands alone, in that of all metals it requires very little cleaning. The regular and frequent polishing of silver is essential, particularly in a town, but even in the country any degree of neglect causes it to turn brown and dull in a very short space of time. Pewter on the other hand can be left alone, without more than a rub with a duster, for several months.

Antique pewter also possesses the rare attributes of decoration and usefulness, with each design equally charming. The tavern pieces have a special appeal and there are few of the smaller measures which are not in constant demand.

Of the larger pieces the tappit hen should never be overlooked. This is a lidded measure of a pint or possibly more. It was formerly used to hold liquor, probably in private houses but possibly sometimes at inns. Nowadays it has almost vanished as a tavern piece but is occasionally to be found displayed on a dresser with other pewter.

The tappit or topped hen is a Scottish piece, slightly waisted above and protruding below and falling straight to a slightly reeded bottom. Usually the lid is flat and the handle and thumb-piece are interesting. The tappit hen is recognised as one of the most desirable measures in Scotland.

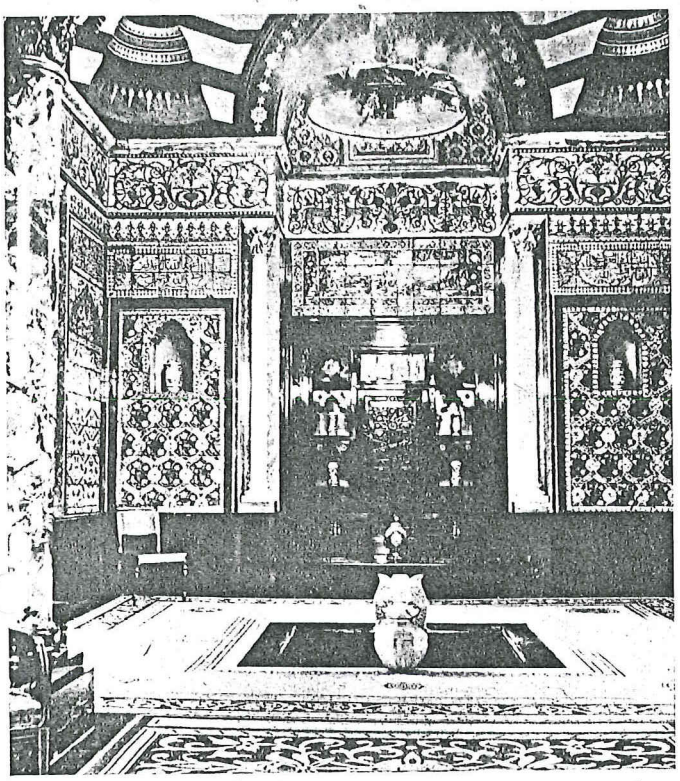
Antique pieces originating from old inns are almost invariably pleasing but the domestic types, which one might have expected to be well designed as they were produced when workmanship was consistently good, lack the fine lines which were a feature of that period.

It is illuminating to study some of the smaller items, such as pepper pots, salt-cellars or inkstands. Inkstands, for example, were made in a profusion of shapes and sizes. Some were mounted on pin hinges and cup feet, while others were fitted with a long lower centre button by which to pull the inkpot out. Aesthetically, they have little to commend them but the one advantage of these old inkstands is that they are heavily weighted and are therefore not easily upset. Unfortunately, domestic pewter seems to have been rarely made from the best quality so instead of having a silvery appearance it tends to be dull and grey.

About two centuries ago when the middle classes were just beginning to appreciate the advantages of the personal letter, and having few outside interests to distract them, endless hours were spent in correspondence. So it is not surprising that so many inkstands still survive. It is just a pity that they and other like pieces are so destitute of beauty.

English pewter is notable for its lack of ornament, whereas Continental pewter is frequently decorated with the initials of the owner. Continental plates may also have a kind of buttonhole edge, while English have little beyond a touch of reeding. According to English taste pewter is not improved by decoration, though this is not to say that good quality pewter will not stand a modest amount of good engraving. It is rather that engraving does not seem to blend with the background. This modest metal is most effective when the design is made to stand alone.

Large pewter plates made for use in the church or in the home are effective on a broad shelf or the floor; never should nails be put through the rims to hang them on the wall. This will ruin



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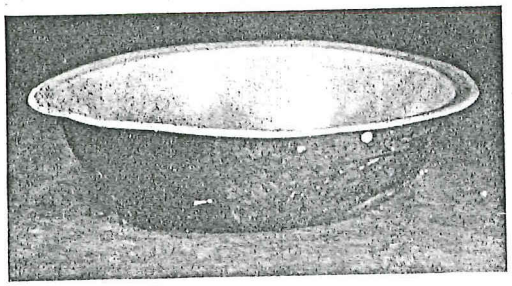
School, like Theodore Rousseau, whose work has in the post-War period become so popular.

Many of the small oil sketches by Leighton are of views in the Middle East, where he travelled extensively. This introduces another aspect of the character of the man. It is very much in evidence at Leighton House. Leighton loved that part of the world so much that when he built his house he ensured that its main feature was 'The Arab Hall.'

This is still one of the strangest rooms in London. It is largely based on drawings made by Aitchison of the remains left in Spain, and particularly in Granada, of Arab occupation, while most of the fittings are genuine. The tiles, which are mostly of the 16th century, come from Damascus, Cairo, and elsewhere, and other details, like the screens on the windows, which are from Cairo, are also genuine. The whole conceit strikes an exotic note. With the water playing in the fountain this is a strange room, strange in the full sense of the word, far removed from the bustle of Kensington.

It suggests much about men like Leighton, for that he was not alone in his preoccupations is amply proved at Leighton House. In addition to his work, the collection includes paintings by Ford Madox Brown, Millais, Poynter, Watts, Burne-Jones, and others. Also instructive are the examples of De Morgan pottery. De Morgan revived the art of lustreware, which was brought to perfection in Persia in the 12th and 13th centuries. Revived the technique he may have done, yet the brassy, hard quality of his work, falling so far short of what was achieved in Persia, symbolises much of what is least attractive about Victorian art.

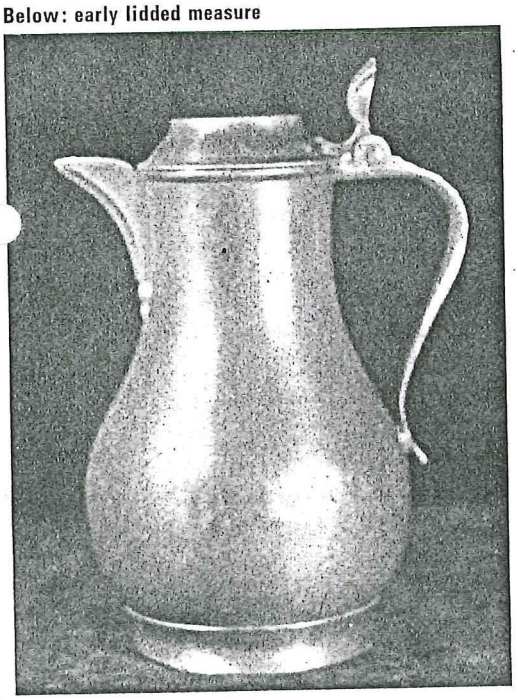
Yet the final impression at Leighton House is of the range of one man's talents and interests. Grand Leighton may have been, but his home also proves he was very human and, on a tiny scale, he could paint directly and with splendid vigour. □

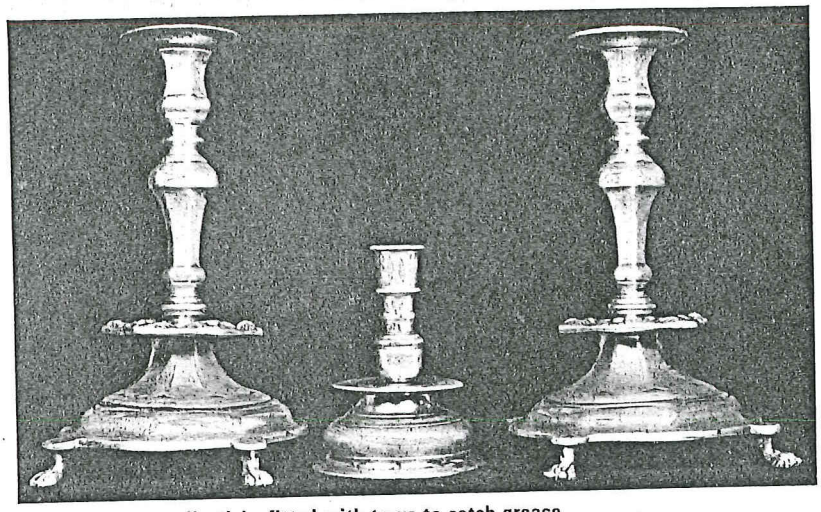


Above: early pewter christening bowl

All photographs on this page courtesy of John Bell, Aberdeen

Below: early lidded measure





Above: pewter candlesticks fitted with trays to catch grease

Below right: pot-bellied measure

Above: flat-lidded pewter measure with reeding and decorated thumb-piece

the metal, and will take away all the value from the piece.

In the 18th century it was the fashion when giving a wedding present to a couple to have their initials engraved on a triad on it. That is, the initial of the man's surname would be in the centre, slightly raised, with the christian names on either side. I have a plate which is marked on the base J D M. This might indicate John and Mary Dale. It should be noted that when a measure or a jug is marked with a capital X this denotes a superior quality of pewter.

Although a good deal of pewter has neither marking nor decoration, some Scots flagons have a single or a double line of reeding encircling the body near the handle, or there may be a single line of reeding near the bottom which can be very pleasing.

Pewter looks best in the company of its own kind, and it is not usually a success when arranged beside brass or copper. Its best background is a shelved dresser of oak or pine as the pewter lends a soft gleam to its surroundings, even in a dark room or entrance hall.

The question is often raised as to whether pewter should be polished or not, and it seems likely that the majority of owners do clean it in the belief that the housewives of two or three centuries ago were no less concerned with a shining background than those of the present day. But there are others who almost take a pride in having dull pewter on show.

The actual pieces to be collected must be an entirely personal choice, but small measures, either with or without lids and handles are most intriguing. Those with lids are generally most popular and their capacity varies from a gill to a pint. Lidless measures make most attractive containers for flowers.

Much can be learned about different pieces from a visit to a dealer's shop. If he is approached modestly he will be only too pleased to share his knowledge and give advice. Old pewter is still plentiful—perhaps more so than one might expect when one reflects on the softness of the metal, and how easily it can be destroyed by close proximity to heat. However, it is steadily rising in price.

When buying pewter, choose pieces that are silvery in tone. The more tin there is in the alloy the better the metal. However, it should not be polished until it looks like poor silver, nor should it have the dull greyness of Britannia metal, which never achieves anything but a dead look.

If pewter has a fault it is that it was copied from work done by goldsmiths and silversmiths whose designs did not always lend themselves to pewter. The beautiful tankards of the 17th century were imitated openly. Candlesticks are becoming scarce and have too often been ruined by the socket ends being carelessly thrust between the bars of a fire. Pewter cups, plates and teapots also often came to a sudden end through unexpected contact with heat.

Unfortunately for collectors pewter rarely bears the maker's name, and for this reason it is very difficult to date an old piece. It was used in the households of high dignitaries on the Continent as well as in England in the Middle Ages. Before 1300 Edward I owned over 300 pieces of pewter, including dishes, platters, salts and porringers, and in the 14th century it was used to a greater extent in high-ranking households than in those of lesser rank. □

Letter from America

A Lady with a Past

Man and Woman, by William Jennys, circa 1805. This painter worked in the vicinity of the Connecticut River and his sitters were merchants and others influential in the new republic. Courtesy of the American Museum in Britain, Claverton, Bath

AFTER SEVERAL protracted Continental visits I have become more than ever aware—particularly on my last visit to the United States—that Americans look on their past through a special window and with special vision. Unlike the Greeks viewing the Parthenon, the Italians the Coliseum, the French the Louvre, Americans do not look for monuments of former greatness and glory. Their quest is rather that of a people who feel that they have achieved much and expect to achieve more—but who want also to understand the roots of that achievement

No single place embodies that search as vividly as Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, the painstakingly restored former capital of England's oldest and most prosperous colony in North America. Truly the 20th century has rediscovered the cultural life of the American colonial period dominated by the British Crown, which is admirably manifested by the skilful assemblage of such superb collections as those housed in the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Henry Du Pont Winterthur Museum, and in the innumerable restorations of homes of planters and merchants, of village communities like Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, and in the imaginative Shelburne Museum in Vermont. This latter comprises 35 buildings set in a 45-acre expanse of farmland, containing more than 125,000 objects of Americana, collected during a lifetime by the late Mrs. Webb, the daughter of the American multi-millionaire Henry O. Havemeyer. The historic shrines, too, are tangible evidence of a yearning to recapture the chaste and pleasant elegance of an earlier day, as for instance, Mount Vernon and Monticello, the Virginian homes of the first American presidents Washington and Jefferson.

In New England, at Lexington and Concord, were heard the nation's earliest battle cries, as well as such names as Pilgrims, Minutemen, Bunker Hill and Paul Revere, the latter the great patriot and silversmith. This is still the land of quiet village greens, such as one sees in the old country which gave its name to this region of salt-box houses, lobster pots and maple sugar. And a nostalgia for the elegant era of the past still pervades the South.

From the earliest times European settlers and their descendants demonstrated their inventiveness, ingenuity and skill in the adapting of older designs to the necessities of life in the new country. In their household equipment, furniture, utensils and implements the tendency was usually towards simplification in the direction of utility; but that simplification resulted in clarity of design.

The first shelters at Jamestown and Plymouth were but the rudest of huts. However, only a mere eight years after the first landing at Jamestown, a British official reported that the settlers had already constructed 'two fair rows of houses all of frame timber, two stories and an upper garret.' The 18th century ushered in one of the most interesting periods in early American domestic history—the time when splendid new houses, both large and small, all in the new and handsome sophisticated Georgian style, were being erected in such far-flung localities as Tidewater Virginia, Philadelphia, Boston and Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

From Pennsylvania the new fashion in architecture quickly spread to New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland, modified here and there to suit local conditions and individual taste. This was the beginning of a bright new era in which —despite a brief interlude occasioned by the American Revolution half a century later—general prosperity brought wealth to many who celebrated their rising fortunes by building great houses and furnishing them in keeping with their new importance.

English cabinet makers were in great demand; Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Makers' Director* was much in use for American home furnishing. Occasionally colonial craftsmen developed artistic qualities peculiar to a locality, as in the 'Hadley' chests, so-called from the Massachusetts town where they were produced. Though carved chests were among the earliest pieces of decorative furniture made in the colonies, the evolution of desks, lowboys and highboys was an easy step. Such furniture was made in considerable quantities in Philadelphia, which had become a notable centre for all crafts.

Silversmiths prospered especially in Boston, Philadelphia and New York, Newport, Annapolis and Charleston. Some were very ingenious artists, who developed distinct styles and made American silver almost as popular as that imported from London. Noteworthy among the New England craftsmen were John Coney and Jeremiah Dummer, as well as John Hull, a Bostonian who was authorised by the colony to mint coins. But best remembered today is Paul Revere, noted for his famous midnight ride who, like some other silversmiths combined the