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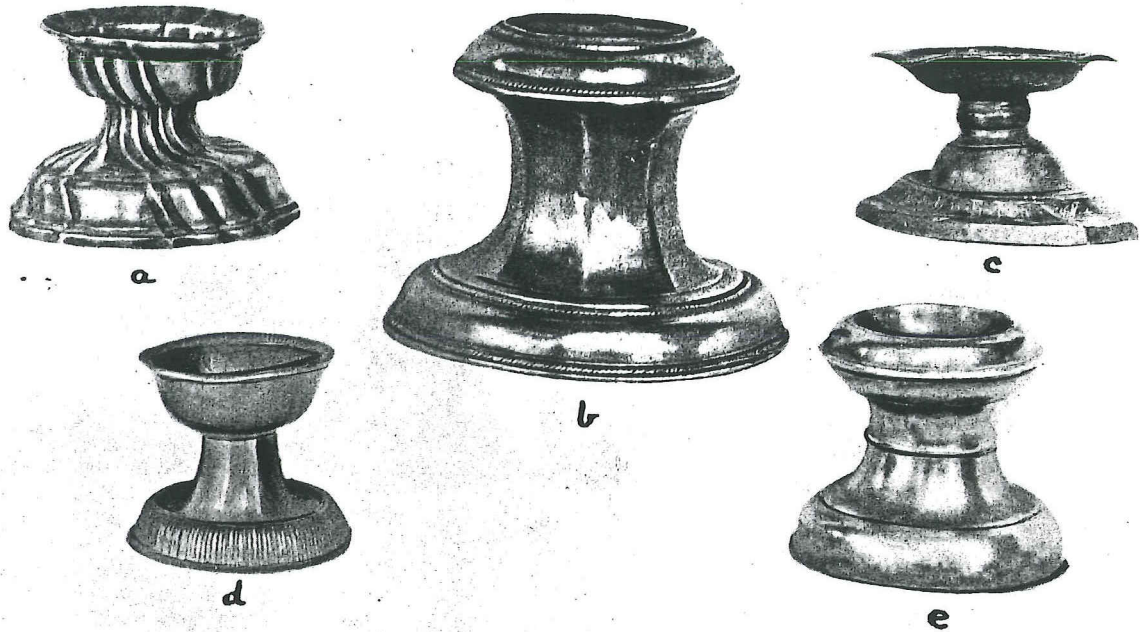


Fig. 1 (a) German salt spirally fluted; 18th century.
 (b) Tall salt of the "capstan" type; French, early 18th century.
 (c) Salt with octagonal base; French, 18th century.
 (d) Cup-salt; German, circa 1700.
 (e) "Capstan" salt; German, 19th century.

PEWTER SALT-CELLARS

By EDWARD WENHAM

THIS writing is the outcome of a pleasant evening at an erstwhile farmhouse, now the home of a retired business friend who is more interested in antiques than in farming. The Georgian sectional dining-table was extended to its full length to accommodate the rather numerous company expected, and its soft polished surface made an attractive background to the silver and glass with the handsome epergne in the centre.

But the final survey which every hostess makes of her dining-table revealed a sad shortage of salt-cellars. This was ultimately remedied by removing the silver salt-cellars and replacing them with some of the pewter examples which, with an appreciable amount of other early pewter, had been part of the furnishings taken over when

the house was bought. For long, that pewter had rested almost unnoticed and certainly unused on the tall oak dresser in the farmhouse kitchen; but the new owner, being a keen admirer of old pewter, had removed it and the dresser to the beamed dining-room.

After being vigorously rubbed with a soft cloth, the pewter salt-cellars assumed a soft brilliance which, if not so bright, seemed to blend with the silver on the table. Admittedly the pewter salt-cellars were of various shapes and their use was remarked upon by several of the enthusiasts present; and during the subsequent conversation, the question arose as to whether there were any pewter salts similar to the elaborate silver standing- or master-salts of bygone days.

(Illustrations by courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.)

PEWTER SALT-CELLARS

These imposing silver salts are now very rare and keenly sought by collectors. But they call for a fairly elastic bank balance. One bearing the London hall-mark for 1549-50 brought the large sum of £5,700 at Christie's in July, 1945. But we know of no similar salt made of pewter, the only type of this metal associated with the early tradition of the salt being the tall spool-shaped, some of which have the three brackets on the rim.

It is perhaps of interest to mention that the term salt-cellar is actually an English corruption, the "cellar" being the anglicised form of the French *salière*, meaning salt-box or salt-holder; consequently our use of the prefix is superfluous. Incidentally, too, the word "salary," denoting payment for services, is another relic of the former value and importance of salt. In early Roman times, soldiers and servants received an allowance of salt known as *salarium*, and when the ration of salt was replaced by money, the latter retained the original name.

Many explanations, wise and otherwise, have been advanced as to the old-time significance of the standing-salt. That significance survives, even if unrecognised, to the present day: in mediæval times and later, the master of the house and his guests dined with the servants and retainers in the great hall. The table at which the master and his principal guests were seated was raised on a low dais and was known as the high table. This was placed across the end of the hall, the other tables being at floor level along the sides—an arrangement repeated to a large extent at public banquets and similar gatherings in our time. And according to the social status of each so is he seated at the high table or elsewhere.

Another survival remains in the word "chairman," for in earlier times, the master occupied the only chair—others having to be satisfied with benches or similar seats. The standing-salt was placed in front but slightly to the right of the "chairman" and the distance of each guest from the salt indicated his social

standing. Thus, as is the present custom, the principal guest was placed on the right of the host so that he was as near the salt as the host, the rest of the company being seated to the left and right in order of precedence.

During the second half of the 17th century, the separate dining-room was introduced for the master and his guests, the servants dining in the hall as formerly. And it was from this time the large standing-salt gradually went out of use, the tall elaborate salts with covers being replaced by a plain salt-holder with a spool-shaped body.

Pewter salts of this type (Figs. 1 (b) and (e)) are among the earliest that have survived. Like the silver prototypes, they were made both circular and octagonal and quite plain except for gadroon or cable bands round the rim and base. Some of them are 4 inches high, though the heights vary, the base being considerably wider than the rim and broader than the height. These salts appeared in England after the Restoration, most of the English examples having the scroll brackets on the rim, the purpose of the brackets being to support a napkin or, as Pepys suggests, a dish to protect the contents from dust.

Neither silver nor pewter examples with the brackets are numerous outside important collections such as that in the Victoria and Albert Museum. There is, however, another tall pewter salt of similar outline which is perhaps more frequently met with. Often referred to as "capstan salts" (Fig. 1 (b)), these were popular in continental countries during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Their construction differs from the English spool-shape: Instead of the continuous curve from the rim to the base and the flat rim, the line of the body of the French capstan salt (Fig. 1 (b)), for example, is broken by a small member at the base and continues as a domical foot. Similarly the rim, instead of being flat, is formed of a deep convex member with the salt-well in the centre. This applies also to the German salt (Fig. 1 (e)), but with this the well is formed of two convex members joined.

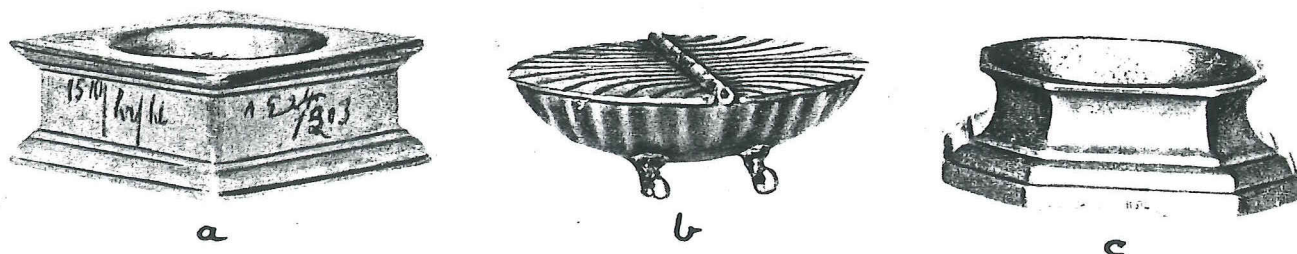


Fig. 2 (a) Lozenge or diamond-shaped trencher-salt; Swiss, 18th century.
 (b) Spice box on feet; South German, 18th century.
 (c) Octagonal trencher-salt; Swiss, 18th century.



Fig. 3. English pewter salts of the second half of the 18th century. The centre example (b) with stem and spreading foot is engraved with the cipher of George III.

Tall pewter salts of varying heights remained popular in some continental countries throughout the 18th century and, in fact, were made until pewter table-ware went out of fashion. In some instances, ornamentation was introduced by the use of spiral fluting as in the German example, Fig. 1 (a), and the small vertical flutes round the base of the 19th century salt (Fig. 1 (d)). The latter type was made from about the middle of the 18th century by English pewterers and is referred to as a cup-salt.

Many styles of small trencher-salts were made by the early pewterers, though few, if any, exist dating before the second half of the 17th century. In the days when the ceremony of the standing-salt was observed, these small salts were placed on different parts of the table, each guest helping himself with his knife and placing the salt on his trencher—much as we do today, except that our ancestors used their fingers instead of forks to dip the meat in the salt.

Triangular trencher-salts by English pewterers were copied probably from models brought from Germany, where they were in use during the 16th century; but any English examples date no earlier than about 1650. The collector who owns or acquires a pewter trencher-salt made before the early 18th century is to be congratulated and even those of the 18th century are to be reckoned among the rarities.

Occasionally one or possibly a pair of the attractive octagonal shape shown in Fig. 2 (c) make an appearance and another interesting, if rare, type is lozenge or diamond shape (Fig. 2 (a))

which are sturdy little pieces with particularly fine mouldings round the rim and base. Then, too, there is the circular type, not unlike the top section containing the salt-well of Fig. 1 (b). These are quite small and almost insignificant, often being less than 1 inch high, but that in no way detracts from their interest.

Another early shape found among pewter salts is rather like a miniature bowl with a slightly spreading foot, about 2 inches high. During the second half of the 18th century, the bowl was raised on a low stem and foot (Fig. 3 (b)) and variations of this form continued to be made by provincial pewterers for some time after the introduction of the small bowls on three feet, of which several are illustrated (Fig. 3).

These were obviously copied from the silver salt-cellars which were popular after about 1750. In fact, it is noticeable that where a new style appeared with the silver for the dining-tables of the wealthy, similar changes soon appeared with the pewter-ware intended for the servants' hall and the farmhouses.

The salt-cellars with three legs illustrated are obviously copied from the silver ones introduced during the rococo period. Each has a similar circular bowl, and the rococo influence is evident in the lion's head and shell-like form, where the legs join the bowl and in the gadrooning of the rims of Figs. 3 (d) and (e). Pewter salts of this period are not difficult to come by, and with the simple pepper casters which are also obtainable, they bring a pleasant old-world charm to a small dining-table.

SALI
CELLARS,
TOWER

Wentham, Edward