

cf. 'Causeries on English Pewter' by A.F. de Navarre. p.1/1, plate XVI

THE EARLIEST PEWTER CANDLESTICK?

by W. G. Mackay Thomas

HOWEVER certain one may be of the date of this candlestick illustrated in Fig. 1, there can never be surety that it has no rival. In fact, Cotterell in his standard work on pewter features a pricket stick attributing it to the 16th century, and states, "It was formerly in a collection and labelled '15th Century.'" Yet to the writer the label was correct.

The candlestick in question was once owned by a well-known collector of pewter as testified by a small label inside the hollow base and bearing his name. He wrote a *Causerie on Pewter*, and a search in the volume brought to light an illustration of the candlestick under the caption, "17th Century, Ecclesiastical."

While staying at a seaside resort the writer entered the shop of a dealer in antiques, and on seeing the candlestick immediately recognised it as of 15th-century origin, and purchased it for the sum of thirty shillings.

An ignorance of candlestick design on the part of pewter collectors is borne out by the description given in the catalogue of the sale at Sotheby's in 1929 of the Fieldhouse Collection of an important candlestick bought in by the owner for £52. Although described in some detail, no mention was made of the circular drip-tray, nor of the bell-shaped base, the two most important items governing its period.

Comparing the illustration Fig. 3 with that in Fig. 1, it will be seen they are present in both examples. Of their significance we shall see later, but a glance at Fig. 2 from the Victoria and Albert Museum Collection, featuring a Venetian candlestick of the 15th century, the bell-shaped base and the central drip-tray will be clearly seen. It remains then to discover what connection existed between England and Venice for designs of the latter to be adopted in this country.

From the Arabs and Persians the Venetians learnt the art of making candles of wax, and in the 15th

century, Venice, the meeting-place of East and West, became the chief mart for the whole of Western Europe.

As all the churches of the West were under the domination of the Pope, they conformed to the Roman Catholic ritual ordaining the compulsory

London during recent years has necessitated the removal of earth to a considerable depth in order to provide adequate foundations. Thus earth has been removed which has lain undisturbed for centuries, and from these excavated sites many relics of former times have been brought to the surface.

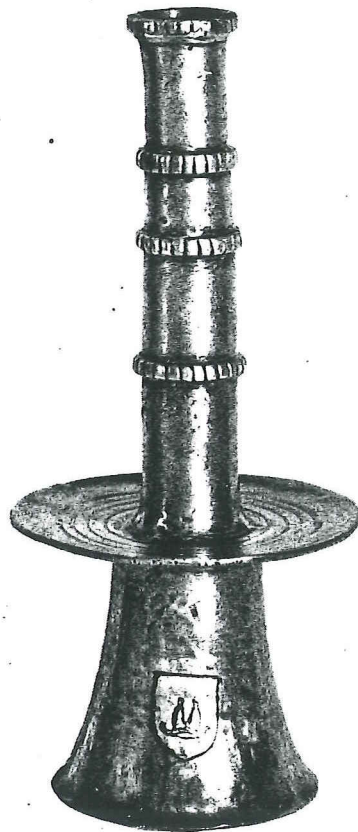
Among such relics are numerous candlesticks of earthenware mainly of the Tudor period, and over 90 per cent. of these are of Venetian design, having a cylindrical stem, a central drip-tray, and a bell-shaped base. This overwhelming majority conforming to the Venetian type indicates their use throughout the whole of the Tudor period, especially so as among the submerged tenth have to be included a different variety known as tray candlesticks. Hence some were produced in the latter part of the 15th century, and as they would have been copied from English metal sticks, these latter would date from a slightly earlier period, and our next concern is to prove our pewter stick is a 15th-century product.

The cylindrical stem in Fig. 1 is unlike the one shown in Fig. 2, but this is of little significance, as it is more Venetian in character, resembling one of the bell-towers or campaniles seen in various parts of Italy, and the stem in Fig. 2 would be too fragile to carry out in pottery.

Another type in Tudor earthenware has the socket fitting directly into the drip-tray, the stem being omitted and the example portrayed in Fig. 3 belongs to H. Willis, Esq., of Hendon. No example was known in metal until the writer chanced upon the specimen shown in Fig. 8, and a careful comparison, particularly of the upper rim of the socket, will be sufficient to show one was a copy of the other, or at any rate of a metal example from the same mould.

Having now both a metal and an earthenware specimen of our stemless candlestick, let us now turn to our pewter stick and see if we can find its replica in pottery.

On one occasion the writer happened to call at the Guildhall Library,



The earliest pewter candlestick? (1)

use of candles of wax at the High Altar and in the Celebration of Mass. Venetian galleys paid annual visits to these islands, and the value of imported wax between the years 1479 and 1483 exceeded £11,000. It is but natural to assume a number of Venetian candlesticks would be frequently included in these cargoes.

The erection of lofty blocks of flats and huge department stores in

and noticed a show-case exhibiting various pamphlets on matters connected with the Library and Museum. Amongst them was a postcard with illustrations of their collection of Tudor pottery, and one of the items illustrated was a candlestick. An enlargement of this is seen in Fig. 6. Not only has it the cylindrical stem with the raised bands spaced at varying lengths, but the unequal divisions of the stem in the one correspond with those in the other, the second division from the top being the shortest in each case.

How do we know the metal specimen was not copied at a much later date from the earthenware? So far as these particular examples are concerned it would be impossible as the pewter specimen formed part of a collection long before the one in pottery was unearthed.

There are slight differences in the design of the drip-tray and base, but these changes are due to the fragility of earthenware. The thin disk of metal forming the tray in the pewter would be too fragile if carried out in pottery. So the tray was made saucer-shaped with thick, upturned rims. And the same applies to the bell base, which is thickened internally so as to retain the overlap to the



A Venetian candlestick (2)



Tudor earthenware stick (3)

drip-tray, and has a greater flare with thickening of the rim. These changes are essential for utility.

Had the metal example been copied from the earthenware, the thickened rims would not be necessary, but the drip-tray would be saucer-shaped, and the bell base would have a greater flare.

But if we compare Fig. 1 with Fig. 2, we shall find the curvature of the sides is identical, showing the pewter stick was copied direct from a Venetian prototype.

Was it copied at a later date, say, in the 16th or 17th centuries? If so, it would have been copied from a 15th-century specimen, for in elevation the drip-tray and bell base consist of three unbroken lines, that is, with no convex moulding. Yet before 1480 the Venetians had modified this design and added a convex band for strengthening purposes, and they never again reverted to the Arabian model.

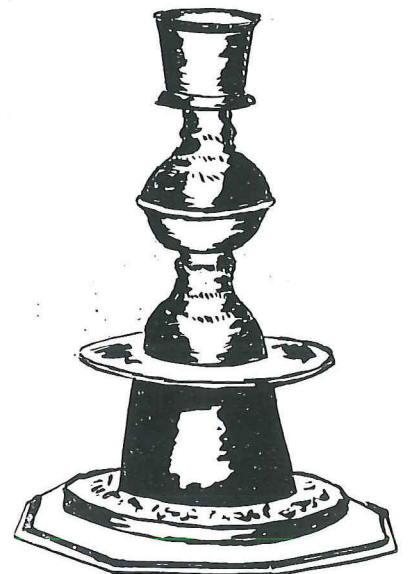
Ghirlandaio's picture of S. Jerome, painted in 1480, features a candlestick with a convex band to the bell base and a stem formed of a series of balusters, evidence that the Venetians were forsaking Arab influence, and were going to the glass-workers for inspiration, Fig. 7. The addition of a convex band to the base gave both strength and stability, and became a constant feature, so that the presence of the three unbroken lines in the elevation of drip-tray and base is the sign of a 15th-century product. As these changes date from 1480, and Venetians were annually visiting our shores, it is unlikely we should have adopted these early types at a later

date, and even in the early years of the 16th century baluster stems were used in English candlesticks.

Fig. 5 shows a sketch of a candlestick from "The Misers," painted by Quentin Matsys in the year 1500, and it exhibits a striking resemblance to our pewter example, but the base is more bell-shaped, and seems to imply the Dutch copied the Venetian design from English examples in bell-metal.

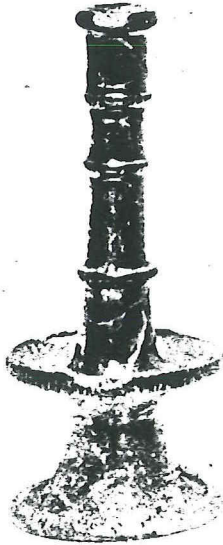
That the English made pewter sticks with a bell-base is clear from a statement in the London Pewterers' Records, where mention is made of one under the date 1489.

Massé, in his work on Pewter, informs us that the early pewter was called fine pewter, and was composed of tin and copper, making it exceedingly hard. In the example under discussion the pewter is so hard and durable that after all these years the shape of the bell base has retained its original form, though this is partly due to the hammering it received when fashioned. The hammermen were the best paid in the industry, and the mark on one side of the bell-base opposite the pewterer's touch consists of the letters WD, with the last letter turned horizontally and resting on the curved portion, and



Fieldhouse Collection.
Late Stuart Pewter.

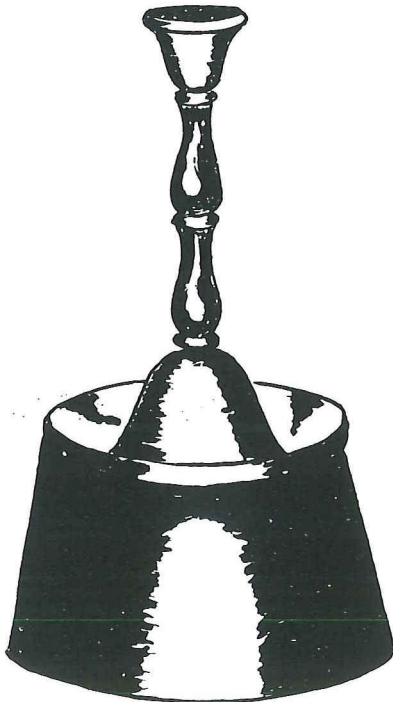
(4)



Tudor pottery stick (6)

was probably the initials of the individual hammerman who fashioned the bell-base.

Massé also states, "In early pewter



Ghirlandaio. 1480.

(7)

the touch is larger than in later issues." The touch on this specimen is nearly an inch in length, that is about double the normal size.

We are also informed by the same writer that in 1503, Henry VII passed an Act enforcing the makers of hollow-wares of pewter to use several marks in their touches. In this example there is no mark in the cartouche other than the figure of a mitre, from which we infer it was made prior to that date.

It was the custom of pewterers in their touches to use a device making a play on their names; the name itself being frequently omitted. So the use of a mitre signifies the name of the maker of this pewter stick was Bishop.

Unfortunately most of the early records of the London Pewterers were destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, and much of our information concerning the early pewterers is obtained from specimens of their work still in existence, but so far no candlesticks come into this category, and we can hardly hope to gain support for our claim by finding the record of a pewterer named Bishop working prior to 1480, and it was with some diffidence the writer once more consulted the records quoted by Massé.

He gives about fifteen names of pewterers working in the 15th century, and whose work in one form or another has come down to us, and amongst the select few is the name of a pewterer, Piers Bishop. Is it, now, mere coincidence for the earliest and latest examples of his work to be dated 1452 and 1479 respectively when our claim was that our pewter stick was made between the years 1450 and 1480?

To sum up the evidence showing the pewter candlestick was made prior to 1480.

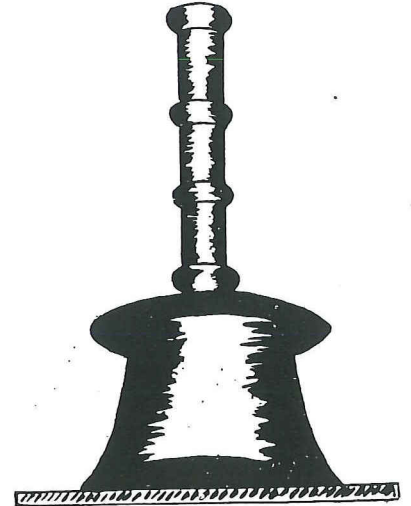
1. It is fine pewter, and the touch is unduly large, both signs of early pewter.

2. There is but one mark in the touch, yet by the law passed in 1503 several marks had to appear in the touch.

3. A replica in earthenware is in the Guildhall Collection of Tudor pottery.

4. Earthenware examples were copied from existing metal ones.

5. The figure of a mitre standing alone signifies the pewterer's name was Bishop.



Quenza Matsys. 1500.

(5)

6. Piers Bishop was producing works in pewter from 1452-1479.

7. The cylindrical stem disappears from Venetian examples before 1480, and convex mouldings to the rim base are a constant feature thereafter.

8. In the pewter example, the base and drip-tray in elevation are represented by three unbroken lines.

9. Examples of the same period exist in bell-metal, and have their counterparts in Tudor pottery.

(Figs. 1, 3 and 4 reproduced by kind permission of the Burlington Magazine, appearing in an article by the writer entitled, "English Candlesticks and the Venetian Prototypes.")



Tudor metal stick (8)