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*Rare lidless tavern pot circa 1699, engraved "John Little att Ye Horse & Jockey in Reading" and with the warning, "If Sold Stole". From the Cyril C. Minchin Collection*

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# The Lustre of Old Pewter

WHILE the lustre and moonlight glow of old pewter makes a strong appeal to most of us, the blunt truth is that the hobby of pewter collecting is indeed a very curious one.

For early items—the rare Tudor pewter, the early Communion cups, the James I flagons, and items of that kind—seldom go under the hammer for less than some hundreds of guineas; while the fact that old pewter is scarce seems to tempt on to the market late and indefinite pieces of no historic nor artistic interest.

So where does the amateur pewter lover start? First, we must define what we are seeking.

Pewter, which handles so much like lead but often has a silver sheen in its surface, should have no lead at all in its alloy composition; and what silver there may be occurs only by accident, simply because the tin miners of Cornwall (whence much of the ore came centuries ago) did not know how to purify it. Fine old pewter, therefore, should be about 110 parts of tin, and 26 of copper.

Another grade, known to the old pewterers as "tin and temper," happens to be almost pure tin alloyed with a very small proportion of antimony. "Plate" pewter may contain nearly 96 per cent of tin, the rest comprising antimony, copper and bismuth. What is known as Trifle (pewter spoons and other small objects such as table salts were usually made from it) is 17 per cent antimony and only 83 per cent tin. Then there are those more modern alloys, dating really only from the mid-1700s, such as Britannia and (later) Queen's Metal. "Best Britannia" is 150 parts of tin to ten of copper and three of antimony; Queen's is an alloy of rather less tin, but with bismuth added.

So much for "ledde", as old pewter is sometimes described in 17th century accounts and inventories: and so much, too, for stories that such and such a garnish (complete set of a dozen) of pewter plate is rare and valuable because it is "silver pewter."

Of course these indisputable facts about what pewter really is are revealed only to modern metallurgists, with their test tubes filled with nitric acid—to separate out and measure the tin oxide—or peering at the photo slides in their spectroscopes when tiny fragments of test pewter are burned to white heat between electrodes. But tests of this sort are not available to amateurs.

However, there are a few split-second tests which can be tried. With permission of the owner of a specimen in doubt, you could try rubbing the blade of a knife along a very minute part of the underbase. If the alloy is soft and "leady", the knife will show a mark. This may well happen if a genuine old piece has been repaired with low-grade metal such as that from old church organ pipes, which contain often 40 per cent lead. More modern Britannia metal will not show a scratch; it is too hard.

Try rubbing the sharp edge of, say, the handle or finial of a genuine piece of old pewter on a rough paper surface. Even an old newspaper will do. If there is much lead in the composition, I have known a sharp edge write almost like a pencil.

The old pewterers, when doing an assay for the Searching Officer of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, used to melt a tiny pellet in a gun-pellet mould, then cast a similar specimen of pure tin, and compare the weights when cold. A rough test done in the old days (but you certainly could not do this in the saleroom, or on specimens in your collector-friend's display) is to run a hot iron bit from a clear flame right across the base. On pure tin only a faint grey mark will be left, but with low alloys the mark will be a clear brownish red.

No. What matters is not the metallurgy, but the artistry. When two Sheffield silver plate men, Dixon

and Vickers, separately began experimenting with high-tin alloys of the sort which ultimately became known as "Britannia," they were seeking mass production methods of using a silver-like metal to offset the competition of Sheffield plate on the one hand, and of cheap chinaware on the other.

The essential difference between old pewter and not-so-old Britannia is not what they are, but how they are made. That is what spoiled the artistry, and caused John Bright to say: "Silence is golden; speech is silvern. But to say one thing and mean another is Britannia metal."

You see, pewter items, whether they be flattish plates and dishes, or "holloware" such as tankards, are *cast*. Molten metal was poured into gunmetal moulds. Then the rough pewter casting was hammered and fashioned. On the other hand, semi-mass-produced Britannia was formed in a flat sheet. This was then put into a lathe-like machine and "spun", usually against a wooden mandrel, until it took the shape of this mandrel in the headstock. Thus Britannia is really only "bent tin" compared with old pewter which is cast, therefore heavier, and which takes its artistic form from the skill of "ye hammermen who work by fyre."

Britannia is particularly deceitful, because the Sheffield workers knew all about correct line, from their centuries-past experience with silver and Sheffield plate, and copied some of the best styles which were also adopted by reputable pewterers. Thus many flagons, bowls and tankards in Britannia could be mistaken by a tyro for the real thing. Worse, Britannia was made in thin sheet, and this could be turned over the edge even when concealing a heavy iron lining.

I have been offered "pewter" pots with traces of rust at the base. Of course a tin alloy does not rust (not even Britannia), so the faint thin red rust line was a sign the article had a core of cast iron. However, the Britannia makers were not ashamed of their work, and you can generally detect it by registered numbers under the base, and sometimes a maker's name.

Amateur collectors may retort that surely it is easy to identify and catalogue old pewter just by its punch-marks. Sadly, we collectors have to admit this is rarely so; that is one of the things which make the hobby so fascinating and difficult, sometimes to the point of frustration.

Basically there are two types of mark you may find on old pewter (though some of the earliest is not marked at all), and these are the pewterers' touch marks, and bogus hall-marks. There are no complete lists of either.

Of course it is different if you collect, say, clocks and watches. You have standard works such as Britten's *Old Clocks & Watches and their Makers*, or G. H. Baillie's *Watches*, with comprehensive, dated lists of many thousands of makers. There was only one comparable work on pewter, by Howard Cotterell, a pioneer collector. This was produced back in 1929. There have been many discoveries since. "Cotterell" has become a standard work, but cost five guineas in 1929, so first editions are almost as rare and costly as the pewter they describe. There has been a reprint in Japan since the war.

The main reason even Cotterell's lists do not help the amateur much is that except for a relatively brief period, and then only for certain articles, the "touches" of the old pewterers were frequently changed. There are five world-famed touch-plates

*American pewter, left to right: Chalice by Timothy Brigden, 1774-1819, Albany, New York; Dish by Simon Edgell, working 1713-d. 1742, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Two-quart flagon by Thomas Danforth Boardman and Sherman Boardman, c. 1810-54. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*

(large pewter sheets on which some of the pewterers impressed their marks) in safe keeping at the City Hall of the Pewterers Company, including some from 1673 to 1824. Unfortunately earlier touch-plates were destroyed in the Great Fire. Anyway, none of these records includes the touches of the great provincial guilds, which today concern most of what the amateur collector can hope to find. Even in the 18th century the Pewterers Company were getting into grave difficulties about their records, and a bylaw in 1747 virtually abandoned the principle of restricted marks.

What about the hall-marks? In the majority of cases these were meant only to deceive the purchaser, in his day, into believing pewterware was subject to the same strict conditions as silver and gold. By hall-marks (that is, by the familiar punch-marks registered at Goldsmiths Hall) one can tell with reasonable certainty since 1478 when and where a silver article was made, and since 1697 the name of the maker, too. This was not the case with pewter. Indeed, at one period during the 1600s the Pewterers Company foolishly (for us) forbade any marks which savoured of advertising. With intent to puff their wares, pewterers imitated silver marks, even including the familiar lion passant, and leopard's head.

To check from available information, use the lists in "Cotterell," in H. J. L. J. Massé's *The Pewter Collector* (1921), and in the usual antiquarian lists. In my own *Pewter Collecting for Amateurs* I am able to give some further details beyond those known at the reprint of "Cotterell" in 1963.

In general, the "X" mark was originally reserved for best quality metal. But the Continental pewterers copied this. English pewterers impressed their touch once, or perhaps twice on each piece. Many French, Flemish and Dutch pewterers used a triple-touch.

*Early pewter flagon of Stuart period with flat lid and wide base. From the Cyril C. Minchin Collection*

When beginning, do not attempt to rely heavily on touches, since they are relatively easily faked. Go for line. And specialise. Irish and Scots wine and spirit measures make a pleasing collection. Late pewter inkwells of the "capstan" type, or the box variety known as the "Treasury" (a design copied from a silver original in Whitehall, in Pepys's day) can still be had for ten guineas or less, but an early specimen, or one by a famous and identified maker may add a nought.

There are so many faked spoons in circulation that I feel this is no branch for the beginner. Be cautious about church pewter. Some of those alms dishes are faked up from Victorian pewter bed pans. Church plate tends to look earlier than it is, partly because of its basic simplicity of line; it may prove only an 18th century copy of silver ecclesiastical items. Pewter snuff boxes and tobacco jars are so specialised they will appeal more to the "tobacco" man than to the average pewter collector; the same may be true of coins, although there were pewter crowns in the time of Charles I, and pewter farthings at various periods until William and Mary.

How best to scour your pewter? Again, experts are as undecided as they are on touch-marks. I favour soaking really corroded pieces in a strong caustic soda solution (adding the caustic flakes to the water, not in the reverse direction, or it may spurt up), in a plastic bucket. If you must remove scale, do not use a do-it-yourself hand-drill and buffing wheel except as a last resort. Boiling pieces one at a time (to avoid denting) in a strong solution of domestic detergent powder is often sufficient.

Subsequently items can be kept clean by rubbing once a month with a paraffin-dipped rag. A longer-lasting method, less malodorous, is to spray each item with an aerosol of one of the new silicone and plastic lubricants such as Ambersil or WD 40. These are available from most garages, and give a protective surface to metal.

At all costs you must avoid patina. In pewter, the word strictly means the opposite of its implication with regard to the surface of antique furniture, where an original patina is highly desirable. In metalcraft it reverts to its original meaning of being "patinated" (oxidised, encrusted), as used by present-day collectors of bronze.

Some expert help may be expected from the Pewterers Company, although records are officially only for Liverymen of the Company. All works on pewter except one refer to the Pewterers Hall wrongly in the past tense. I was fortunate in writing my *Pewter Collecting for Amateurs* to be able to put the record straight.

Through a variety of troubles such as a fire, and then demolition, the Pewterers lost their City Hall in 1932; other property was destroyed in the 1940 Blitz. At last, in 1961, a fine new Hall was opened in Oat Lane, London E.C.2.

Here are kept the precious touch-plates, some of the original chandeliers and oak panelling, and the accounts of the Company from 1451, with only a gap of a few years during the Wars of the Roses.