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Flagons. From left to right:—

1610/15, 10½ ins. to lip.

C. 1630, 10¼ ins. to lip.

"Beefeater" type, C. 1650, 10¼ ins. to lip.

1740/50, 9¾ ins. to lip.

Figure 1

Carvick Webster Bequest—Art Gallery of N.S.W.

# Old Pewter Ware of the British Isles

By J. H. Myrtle

Without wishing to depress would-be Australian collectors of British pewter, it must be pointed out that unfortunately there is very little early pewter available on the Australian market or in private hands at the present time. The collection owned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales is by far the largest and most important in this country; some of the collection is on permanent exhibition.<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to understand the dearth of pre-19th century pewter in Australia. Domestic use had declined in Britain by the time the Colony of New South Wales was established, and there was therefore very little incentive for the early settlers to bring pewter with them, and certainly none of the earlier wares; so far as is known, there was no local pewtering industry established. Even in England, little interest was taken in early British pewter until the second decade of this century. Before then, much of it must have been melted down or thrown away.

Pewter is an alloy of 75% to 80% tin and copper and/or lead; antimony was sometimes added, but in general, any alloy containing tin as the major constituent metal is referred to as pewter. Zinc and bismuth were also sometimes included as minor ingredients and many of these later alloys were given special names. The best known is certainly Britannia metal which was introduced about 1770. It contains only tin, antimony and copper, an average composition being 92%, 6% and 2%

respectively. Because the tin content is so much greater than in "fine" pewter, it is much harder and of a whiter colour.

Pewter is known to have been produced in Roman times and it remained in use until comparatively modern times, although to a decreasing extent from the mid-18th century because of competition from pottery and porcelain. Widespread use can be ascribed more to utilitarian than aesthetic qualities. Pewter is not fragile, is comparatively resistant to corrosion, is hygienic in use and although easily destroyed by overheating, it could readily be melted down and remade into other articles; this latter fact probably accounts to some extent for the extreme rarity of pre-17th century domestic pieces.

Nevertheless, much early pewter ware has considerable aesthetic merit. The London Guild of Pewterers received its charter in 1473 and with the establishment of a number of provincial Guilds, a rigid control of standards of quality was maintained until well into the 18th century. Consequently, the quality of metal and workmanship during this period is probably unequalled in any other country. Design was functional and hence satisfying; decoration when used was suited to the metal and generally unobtrusive.

When polished, good quality pewter has a delightful colour and texture, more satisfying in the writer's opinion than that of sterling silver.

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## TYPES OF ARTICLES MADE IN PEWTER

Most types, whether ecclesiastical, domestic, or commercial, are found in pewter at some time or another. There are church flagons (see Figure 1), chalices, patens, almsdishes (see Figure 6), baptismal bowls, communion tokens; in domestic use we find tankards (see Figure 2), chargers, plates (see Figure 3), salts, porringers, spoons, candlesticks, inkstands, commode pots, bed pans, kitchen ware; in commercial use there were measures (see Figure 4), public house tankards (see Figure 5), beer mugs and numerous other articles.

In many walks of life, various articles were obviously considered to be an acceptable substitute for silver plate; the design of such articles follows closely that of contemporary silver, only being varied in detail to suit the more malleable metal. This form of plagiarism is found in nearly all church plate, in tankards, a magnificent example of which is shown in Figure 2, in some early 18th century candlesticks, in salts, table ware, etc.

On occasions, the pewterers did show some originality, particularly in measuring vessels of standard capacity for the dispensing and sale of liquids. In England, the baluster-shaped measure, a series of which is shown in Figure 4, was by far the most popular type and is unique to British pewter. This shape was most likely derived from a mediaeval pottery form of pitcher. In Scotland, the best known national type of measure is the so-called "tappit hen," the development of which owes much to Continental European influence.



Figure 2  
Lidded Tankard with "wriggled work" decoration.  
1680/90, 5½ ins. to lip.

Carvick Webster Bequest—Art Gallery of N.S.W.



Figure 3  
Plate with "wriggled work" decoration. Probably made  
by Thomas King, London, 1675/80. Diam. 8½ ins.,  
rim ⅞ in.

Carvick Webster Bequest—Art Gallery of N.S.W.

## DECORATION

One of the main attractions of British pewter is the sparing use of decoration and the suitability of style and design. The most satisfactory type, often found in 17th and early 18th century pewter, is called "wriggled work" and is done by rocking the engraving tool from side to side (see Figures 2 and 3). Plain line engraving is less suited to the soft metal and is usually restricted to inscriptions, armorial bearings, crests, etc. Occasionally, repoussé work is used, also small punches, which, when repeated conjointly, form a continuous pattern (see Figure 6).

## MARKS

Marks on British pewter are of particular interest, not only because they often include the maker's touch (his trade mark which he was obliged to strike on the touch plate kept at Pewterers' Hall), but also because of the frequent use of irregular or illegal quality marks which indicate the extent to which Guild regulations were flouted.

Marks on English pewter fall into seven main categories:

1. The maker's touch mark or marks.
2. "Hall marks" — These were four, occasionally five, small punched marks, personal to the maker; as they were intended to look like the hall marks on silver plate, they were unpopular with the authorities.





*Baluster Measures; all Old English Wine Standard.*

Figure 4

From left to right:—

- Half gallon, "three feathers" thumbpiece, maker's mark, R. ☆ M., c. 1800.
- Quart, "bud" thumbpiece, maker's mark, T.M. (? Thomas Matthews, London), 1730/40.
- Pint, "wedge and hammerhead" thumbpiece, 1670/90.
- Half pint, "bud" thumbpiece, maker, A. Hincham, 1720,50.
- Gill, "three feathers" thumbpiece, 1780,1800.

Nos. 2 and 3, Art Gallery of N.S.W.; Nos. 1, 4 and 5, Author's Collection.

3. The crowned Tudor Rose, a "quality" mark.
4. The crowned "X", a "quality" mark.
5. Labels describing place of origin, quality of metal, etc., and which were sometimes willfully misleading.
6. Owners' initials, usually three in number, arranged in triangular form and indicating surname, husband's Christian name and wife's Christian name.
7. Capacity verification marks on measures and public house drinking vessels.

These are usually stamped on or near the lip of measures and tavern drinking vessels. Local authorities were not obliged by law to check the capacity of drinking vessels until early in the 19th century and these local marks usually embodied a symbol or coat-of-arms associated with the responsible city or borough.<sup>2</sup>

They continued in use until 1879 when the Standards Department of the English Board of Trade was authorised by the Consolidation of Weights and Measures Act to introduce a uniform design for verification stamps. These comprised the Sovereign's initials surmounted by a crown and with a specific number allocated to each local authority.

It may be mentioned that the Imperial standard was legalised in 1824. Before this, the old English wine standard was widely used, although it varied considerably according to location and the numerous regulations which sought to define and enforce standards.<sup>3</sup>

The Australasian ANTIQUE COLLECTOR ● February, 1967.



Figure 5/1

*Tankard—Imperial quart, early 19th century.*

Height 6 ins.

(Art Gallery of N.S.W.)



## CLEANING AND CARE OF PEWTER

The question is often asked whether or not pewter should be cleaned. This is obviously a matter of personal preference and will also depend on the condition of individual pieces.

Pewter, when in use, was intended to be kept clean. There is no doubt that pewter of good quality which has been regularly cleaned over a number of years has a most attractive appearance. If the metal is relatively free from hard oxide accretions, a good proprietary brass or silver polish is an ideal cleaning agent. Pewter should not be put on a buffing wheel nor should a coarse abrasive be used.

Pewter which has not been cleaned for many years and has been constantly handled, sometimes develops an attractive patina of dark, hard oxidised metal and this may well be preferred to the clean metallic surface. The finest grade of waterproof abrasive paper, used wet, will be found helpful in removing accumulations of hard oxide. Other methods, such as the use of dilute hydrochloric acid, should be used judiciously and with care.<sup>4</sup>

## TRADITIONAL METHODS OF MAKING PEWTER WARE

Pewter was mostly cast in bronze moulds. Certain types of articles, e.g., plates, were then hammered to toughen the metal and then turned on a lathe and burnished. In England it was mandatory to hammer plates and chargers; the outside of the booge had to be left unturned so that the hammer marks could be seen.



Figure 5/2  
*Spouted Tankard or Measure. Maker, C. Bentley.  
1800-1820. Height 5 ins.  
(Art Gallery of N.S.W.)*



Figure 5/3  
*Tankard—Imperial quart. Maker, Townsend &  
Compton. 1801-1811. Height 6½ ins.  
(Art Gallery of N.S.W.)*

Some articles, the body part of baluster measures for example, were cast in sections and soldered together before turning.

Spinning (in place of turning) was not used for the production of hollow ware until comparatively modern times, certainly not until power-driven lathes came into general use. It was used extensively for forming Britannia metal articles and would be more suited to this alloy with its higher tin content and hence greater hardness. Wares produced by spinning are much lighter in weight than those produced by the older method of casting in moulds.<sup>5</sup>

The use of costly bronze moulds was doubtless responsible for the apparent conservatism of pewterers. Moulds were probably shared by several pewterers and occasionally the same mould was used for the production of more than one type of article; for example moulds for the base portion of some late 17th century candlesticks served also for casting master salts.

## FAKES

There is a great deal of faked pewter about. Most of this should deceive no one because of the poor workmanship, the chemically applied "patina" (often present in the wrong places), or peculiarities of form. However, there are very clever fakes which would be difficult to detect with certainty by anyone who has not handled a great number of authentic specimens. These are usually restricted to the rarer and hence more "profitable" types such as 17th century lidded tankards, broad rimmed plates, early candlesticks, early baluster measures, etc.



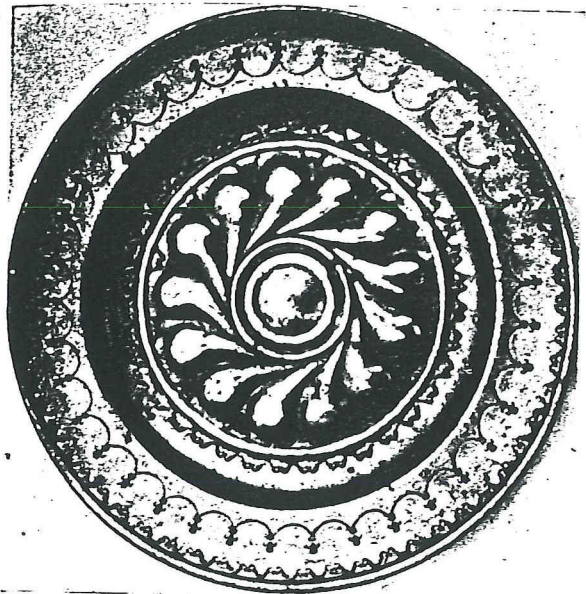


Figure 6  
Almsdish, probably one of a pair. Repousse and punched decoration. C. 1730. Diam. 11½ ins.  
Art Gallery of N.S.W.

As mentioned previously, opportunities for private collectors in Australia to acquire interesting early pieces of pewter ware are few and far between. The choice is usually restricted to late Victorian public house measures, late plates, tavern beer mugs and tankards of the late 18th and 19th centuries (see Figure 5) and the attractive pear-shaped covered Scottish tavern measures of the first half of the 19th century. Tankards with glass bottoms were made from the mid-19th century onwards, but are of little interest to the collector of old pewter as they were usually in the souvenir or sporting trophy category.

Good early pewter is certainly becoming more scarce in England, although it is still available (with the exception of certain rarities) at the greatly enhanced prices current today. These trends will continue as the supply is obviously limited and there are many keen and knowledgeable collectors in both England and America.

In conclusion, it may be of interest to record that the Society of Pewter Collectors in England celebrates its 50th anniversary in 1967, which may well make it the oldest private society of collectors in existence.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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B. Wood, L. Ingelby — Scottish Pewterware and Pewterers.

C. Cotterell, Howard H.—Old Pewter—Its Makers and Marks, 1929. Reprinted 1963.

D. Cotterell, Howard H.—Pewter Down the Ages, 1932.

E. Michaelis, Ronald F.—Antique Pewter of the British Isles, 1955.

F. Myrtle, J. H. — "Pewter"—Art Gallery of New South Wales Quarterly, Vol. 7, No. 4—July, 1966.

Of the above, only C and F are in print. C is the only comprehensive work available on marks. However, it should be noted that many additional marks have been identified since it was written in 1929.

Reproductions of the London touch plates appear in C and E, and of the Edinburgh in B and C.

E is the most useful work that has been written on British Pewter recently; it is to be hoped that a new edition or reprint will be forthcoming soon.

1 "The Agnes Carvick Webster Gift of British Pewter and Other Pewter in the Collection." — Art Gallery Quarterly, July, 1966. This illustrated handbook also contains a complete check-list of the collection (see selected bibliography, item 6).

2 Very little has been published on verification marks, except for Harold W. Speight's article on "Verification Marks on Old Pewter Measures" in the December, 1938, issue of The Antique Collector (re-printed in the August, 1962 issue). This includes numerous photographs and sketches of pre-1879 marks as well as examples of the post-1880 "uniform" marks.

A detailed study of some earlier verification marks or seals, such as the crowned WR was published in Vol. 1 No. 3, No. 4 and Vol. 2 No. 1, Oct., 1962, March 1963 of "Libra," the bulletin of the Weights and Measures History Circle (England).

3 Much research has been done recently about the old wine and ale standards of measure in relation to pewter measures. Homer, Dr. R. F., An Investigation of the Capacities of some Pewter Wine Measures, "Libra," Vol. 2 No. 4 also Vol. 3 No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3 Dec. 1963, Oct. 1964.

4 R. F. Michaelis has included an informative section on cleaning and repairing pewter in "Antique Pewter of the British Isles," Pp 107 to 112.

5 It is not always easy to distinguish Britannia metal from pewter. However, any pieces marked with the following names or with a stamp containing a catalogue number will be of Britannia metal. Dixon & Sons; Dixon & Smith; Broadhead & Atkin; I. Vickers; Wolstenholme; Ashberry; Colman's Improved Compost; Stacey; Holdsworth; Smith, Kirkby & Co.

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