EQI

BRITANNIA METAL *IS* PEWTER

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Fig. 1. A charming piece of early Britannia.

Let us consider the scarcity and demand for pewter, on the one hand, and Britannia metal on the other.

Since the last world war money has been spread and there is more affluence. Taste emerges and is exercised by a far larger percentage of the public and taxation has led many comparatively disinterested people to invest in antiques as a hedge. Demand has pushed up prices, created a well-to-do dealer class and organisation, and has brought out successful eagerly bought books on antiques, some by journalists who have not necessarily much depth of knowledge on the subject. All help to create demand and scarcity. Also, the research collector abhors the hoarding dealer as much as he does the investment collector who buys for future gain.

Pewter is suffering from a comparatively recent scarcity in addition to the wastage in the past because Continental dealers have been retrieving their native ware, and overseas troops were attracted to pub tankards almost as much as to our girls—and took both. These factors are some of the reasons for the recent increasing scarcity. But the corollary to scarcity and demand is an upsurge in price; and good prices bring goods on to the market. Born of wider spread knowledge, there is now a greater selectivity for the older and rarer pieces. More selective still is the greater awareness and sensitivity to fakes and reproduction pieces.

In the days of pewter-plenty, H. H. Cotterell, the great research writer loving his subject, capped his work with his "Old Pewter . . ." He had one fault, I think, judged by today's conditions, his autocratic rejection of Britannia, and his demand that collectors should follow suit. As a result, vast quantities of all grades, including the good, early specimens, have gone to the scrap-yards.

If you define pewter as an alloy of tin, the adulterant being lead (or copper in earlier days for fine grade), why should adultery by antimony (Britannia) be excluded? The derivation of the word "pewter" is obscure, from old French, and I have, perhaps, a fanciful feeling that it may have meant "lesser tin".

Collectors are like sheep, blind followers of the herd. They dare to collect only what has been proved worth collecting. Merely a small proportion extend their collections of their chosen media to include "unknown" styles, and only a smaller percentage has the courage to collect something no one else does, because the majority fear to be social outcasts. I do not know anyone who specialises in collecting Britannia seriously. Is there anyone—yet?

What is the resistance to Britannia? Is it still, and only, the hidebound influence of Cotterell's writing 40 years ago? The name Britannia has been a sneer, so I suppose it is primarily that influence. The result is that good early pre-1826 pieces are very scarce. There may be a psychological reason for disfavour. To whom should it appeal? Has it the chunky masculine attraction of lead pewter? Or has it the feminine charm of silver? Early pieces have the styling of silver, but usually have the dents and bruisings of rough pewter. Then how should it be offered? Coated in oxide, as I wish to acquire my pewter; or stripped and buffed, like ruined pewter? At present its price cannot command skilful repairing. Possibly my recent book, *British Pewter and Britannia Metal*, reviewed in this issue, may tend to swing some of the newer, and tomorrow's, collectors into at least considering and looking at Britannia.

The quantity of Britannia made was prodigious. Nancy Goyne Evans published in the United States a list of 124 manufacturers in Sheffield alone; her date span was 1812 to 1861. Tea and coffee-pots are largely thought of, but there is a far wider range to be found to form a display. Probably many inexperienced and uninquisitive people are put off the subject because nowadays the preponderance of specimens are the basis for the late fearful over-decorated Electro Plated Britannia Metal (E.P.B.M.) teapots which, however Victoriana-loving one may be, are too ghastly to touch.

It is somewhat embarrassing to be asked to write authoritatively on Britannia for I believe we are at a new understanding of its place in relation to conventional pewter. "The more you know, the more you know you don't know" is always sobering to experience. Very little work indeed has been done, to my knowledge, on analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth century pewter and Britannia. The question has arisen recently, and a sample inspection has taken place with some shattering results. As yet there is insufficient data to write on these results but they have opened a door to some undeveloped thought of mine.

Pewter had nearly always attempted to simulate silver, but its limitations of texture precluded ornate

and delicate decoration. It was soft, susceptible to damage, and it had to be cast in expensive bronze moulds. The release of enterprise, leading up to and during the Industrial Revolution, introduced many new materials by improved basic manufacturing techniques and all sorts of hitherto untapped resources. In 1770 it made possible the introduction of antimony to tin, and Britannia metal was born. Harder, stronger, more resiliant, it could be used in sheet form without melting; much thinner than pewter, it used less metal, and its products, instead of being fashioned by heat and expensive bronze moulds, could be shaped to inexpensive wooden forms by die-stamping or on a lathe.

The advantages were less metal, cheaper equipment and faster output, while even hand-forming was adequate for straight-sided shapes. The curved bodies were spun, different sections at a time, but ancillary parts such as spouts, handles, feet, etc., were cast, sometimes in pewter. Designs degenerated as the mass market was appreciated and exploited, and the purer lines of earlier items emulating silver styles gradually gave way. The deterioration was greatly accelerated when electro plating was discovered in 1845 and subsequently developed. The fluting and surface decoration involved power presses, and the latter were made to work for their keep. Britannia, already on the wane, took on a vast revival of fortune as being an admirable and inexpensive base for plating, and this Victoriana resulted in E.P.B.M. reaching its lowest depths. At the end of the century Art Nouveau pewter was made consisting of Britannia ware, and today modern pewter is advertised as "lead free", using antimony in lieu.

To summarise what is usually taken as "fact", eighteenth and nineteenth century pewter was tin and lead, always cast. Britannia was tin and antimony, always spun. The fallacy that the test was to "look for the seam running down, not round" must be scotched immediately, for obviously a moment's thought indicates that a vertical seam only applies to hand-forming, and not to spinning. Everyone knows that some Britannia parts were cast and obviously fluted bodies were not spun.

Perhaps because of the overlap of methods in the two

Fig. 2. A pleasant two-handled cup in Britannia, one of a pair. The handles are cast.

Fig. 3. A bulbous measure, always taken as pewter, with appliqued plaque bearing "Imperial—G.R." (George IV), and close-up showing makers name "Dixon & Son". This is marked in the Britannia custom. The piece is very hard, and may *be cast Britannia.*

media, there has been a suggestion to call Britannia a process, instead of an alloy. But Britannia was fashioned by at least four processes, and while one cannot call a formula a process, this suggestion does hint at a better classification.

It can be taken as sure that at first the new alloy, in 1770, was used in the traditional method of casting, but as its qualities became apparent, and with the emergence of technical thought, hand-applied pressure shaped the sheet metal by die stamping, until the 1830s. Then spinning was used with machine power, and pressure applied by hand to the rotating disc of sheet metal against the form, enabled finished parts to be fabricated simply. Electro plating introduced very cheap imitation silver, with a real silver surface, to be made by combining mechanics and chemistry.

One example may be illuminating, and may be a key to the whole situation. It has been argued that James Dixon & Sons never made any pewter, but I have published facts to show that this is wrong; there are many good nineteenth century bulbous pewter measures bearing their name stamped on the rim. One old tenet for determining pewter was that makers always struck their touches so that the letters, etc., stood up, like a coin; on the other hand, Britannia was always marked with the letters and numbers bitten in. Obviously, it seemed Dixon's were using their existing stamps on pewter. But how hard are some of these thick bellied measures? Have you tried to clean them, and noted the metal? Have you noticed, too, how not only handles, but different sections of the body are of quite different alloys. Did they just use melted scrap metal of whatever happened to be going? I was probably quite wrong in my "proof". Why should these hard bellied pewter measures not have been cast in the pewter manner, but in Britannia? Likewise many of the nineteenth century pub tankards, particularly those with no reinforcing rim round the lip, are very hard, and are almost certainly Britannia.

Contrariwise, we suspect that some later pewter ware was spun. I do not know of any analysis having been made on these nineteenth century products, which would be costly to do and would result in specimens being damaged. Recently an eighteenth century plate, accepted by feel, appearance and marks as pewter, was analysed and found to be lead free, antimony being substituted for lead. I wonder if some of the later, brutally hard and difficult - to - clean lidded balusters, the double volute thumbpiece type, may not be cast in Britannia. Only recently I brought a delightful squat pewter teapot, to judge by its substance. But when on correcting its minor dents, etc., it was found to be far harder than normal pewter. I presume it was cast Britannia.

Asked to differentiate between the two alloys, I have only brought them closer together. One expects eighteenth century pewter to be approximately nine parts tin, one part lead, and Britannia to be roughly nine parts tin, one part antimony. Hitherto the two alloys have been identified more by their products than anything else, and those of Britannia have been out of demand. But now, if the suggestions are right, who is going to look down on bulbous measures? They will be just as desirable. This opens at least one field of Britannia to be acceptable, and why not extend acceptance to all Britannia which pleases. You cannot analyse your stock just to conform with the Trade Descriptions Act. How can the two be divorced?

I am told that my advocating Britannia as collectable is a welcome freshness. When I see Britannia that I like, if the price is reasonable, I buy it. But I do not often see any that I like: in fact, very seldom. Most of it has little appeal. Perhaps it is too similar to silver in conception. Perhaps I am still tainted by Cotterell; and I do not like spouts. But with forty years' experience, one tends to hark back. Let us think of the new generations of collectors, and prepare to serve them. Encourage their taste by selection. Britannia must surely come into great demand.

Fig. 4. A very pleasing teapot of undoubted Britannia, with black wood handle. This piece bears a dense oxide, and is a good example of earlier, more desirable Britannia in contrast to Fig. 5 above.

Fig. 5. Aesthetically horrifying in contrast to Fig. 4 below, this Britannia based teapot for electro-plating of circa 1860 *has no traces of silver which have long disappeared, and a dark oxide has developed.*

But if, (and I emphasise that much of what I have built upon is only suggestion and surmise, not proven by analysis) if we cannot readily divorce or differentiate between the two, we can at least classify them into observable separate categories, which admittedly overlap slightly. Here are some generalities about the accepted characteristics of the two media and their more customary products as far as the nineteenth century is concerned.

Pewter	**Britannia**
Thick	Thin
Soft, malleable	Hard
Details of marks in relief	Names, addresses, numbers bitten in
Single numbers denote size, in a set of various sizes	Usually bear catalogue numbers
Dying craft, largely confined to pub use after *c.* 1825	Heyday *c.* 1814 to 1860. Wide range of products
Styles simple	Becomes more and more ornate (broadly speaking)
Teapots rare, coffee pots never	Profusion of tea and coffee pots, cream jugs, salts on three legs, casters, toy wares and many other products, some plates
Plates of early nineteenth century most commonly	Should be collected by taste and delicacy of style
Collected by degree of rarity and sets of sizes	Very resistant to cleaning; even finest emery leaves unsightly scratches
Resists removal of scale	Used as base for electro-plated goods

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Front Cover Illustration

A gold and enamel censer by L. P. Krag. Set with the cypher of Emperor Paul I and Empress Maria Feodoravna, inscribed 'in the year 1797'. The censer was made for one of the religious houses within the Kremlin which was destroyed in the early 1920s.
Courtesy of Sotheby's.

ANTIQUES INTO USA

The situation regarding the importation of antiques and works of art into the United States, following the recent imposition of a surcharge of 10 per cent on all dutiable goods, has now been clarified. Last month we passed on the opinion received from the authorities that antiques would be subject to this surcharge, but the gratifying decision has now been made that those antiques which were previously free of duty will so continue. Accordingly, all antiques of 100 years old or over will be free of duty, but because anything made after 1871 is not classed by the U.S. customs as an antique it will be liable for duty and the 10 per cent surcharge. This will be a relief to dealers who ship goods across the Atlantic. The duty on goods manufactured after 1871 is charged on FOB values, namely the cost of the article plus the cost of getting it to the port of embarkation.

Since the number of pieces which are accepted as antiques here and are exported to the States is so considerable, including Victoriana and art nouveau which does not come within the 100 year dateline, it may be useful to give the duty charged. For bent wood furniture duty is 15 per cent, for chairs 10 per cent and for other furniture 6 per cent. All are now subject to the 10 per cent additional surcharge. Cutlery and articles of sterling silver are charged 15 per cent duty and on other silver 12 per cent is payable, all again being subject to the 10 per cent surcharge. Jewellery and precious metals and stones are charged 14 per cent plus the 10 per cent. The position regarding glass is complicated as the percentage varies according to many factors such as size, content of the glass, and the usage of the article. The maximum is 24 per cent and the minimum 12½ per cent plus the 10 per cent. Mirrors not over one square foot in area have to pay duty of 20·5 per cent and over that size 12 per cent, always plus 10 per cent.

The British government's attitude to the value added tax in regard to dealings in antiques, which is another imposition worrying dealers, has not yet been clarified. Representations have been made to the Customs and Excise Department regarding adverse effects of the levying of the tax on antiques on the export trade due to their considerable help to the balance of payments. It is hoped that the views put forward will now be sympathetically considered. It would appear the government must give special consideration to antiques since levying of the tax would be most difficult to enforce fairly in view of the large number of times which a piece can change hands before it reaches its final buyer. So far London has benefited greatly from its freedom from any taxation on transactions in the fine arts and antiques, and its current position as the world centre for dealing in them has been in no small measure due to this. Any change therefore would be most regrettable and the trade lost would probably be far greater than the gain to the Exchequer.