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British Pewter I: 19th Century Pure and Simple

by Christopher Peal



1



2

1. A typical late 18th or early 19th century ale jug. These are seldom marked and handles like these are almost solely confined to this type
2. A tobacco jar with the familiar negro boy's head which serves either as lid or presser handle. Jars are usually fashioned in Britannia metal

PEWTER IS an alloy of tin. In Roman times it appears to have been evolved from adulterating pure tin (from Cornwall) with lead (from the Mendips). Fairly soon the makers settled down to the proportions, very roughly, most commonly used in the Middle Ages—80 : 20. However, in the period of most comprehensive control (by the Pewterers Company) in the 15th century, copper was used as the alloying metal for plates and dishes, giving a harder, superior material. The hollow ware—tankards, flagons, measures and so on—had their built-in strength, and so could easily stand the inferior alloy. Pieces of the pure tin/copper alloy are now very rare indeed.

It is necessary to appreciate this history because it has an important extension in the 19th century in Britannia metal. This is tin alloyed with antimony, yielding a far harder and more economical alloy. This type of pewter will be treated as a separate subject in the next article in this series.

Let it be clear that the scope of these articles is British pewter, so excluding continental. Much of the latter is very attractive: designs are usually more ornate than British; the metal is usually inferior, and styles (and marks with dates!) continued to be used far, far

longer than one cares for. A vast amount of reproduction ware was made in the latter part of the last century, and continues to be made.

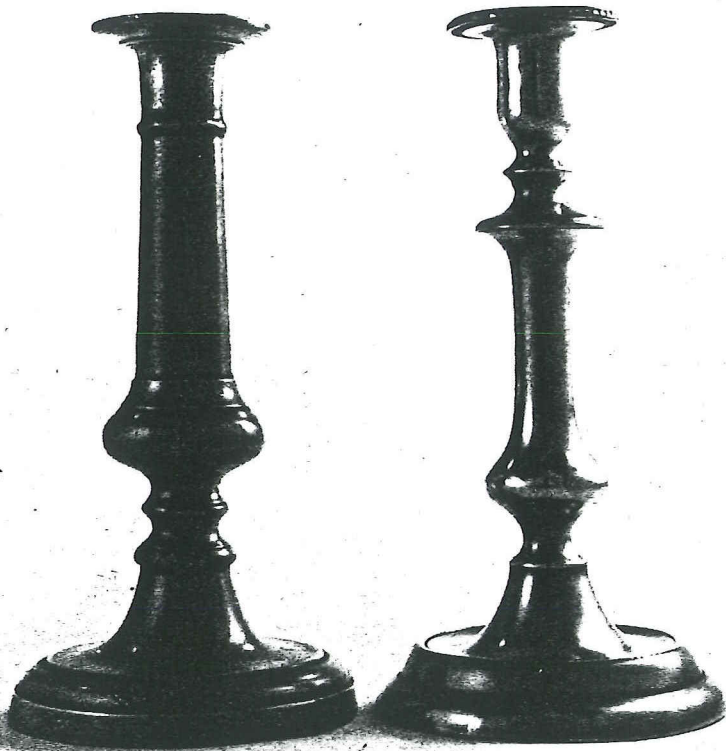
In this country 18th and 19th century competition from pottery, porcelain, glass, brass and plated goods, and increased material costs had reduced the comprehensive use of pewter, and the trade dwindled to a mere shadow of its former self in its late 17th century heyday. After 1826 it was reduced almost entirely to pub ware (remember that in this article we are only dealing with lead alloy pewter). Various widely differing factors influenced survival.

Scrap metal was desperately short in the Napoleonic War period, which may explain the depression in pewter manufacture and is probably the reason for the scarcity of pre-1815 pewter. Besides, it is difficult to distinguish some items of between 1750 and 1830. On the other hand, the implementing of the new Ale Standard (Imperial Standard) in 1826 gave a tremendous fillip to a dying trade, in providing new pub measures and drinking pots to the new standard. So the century breaks down into two periods—pre- and post-Imperial, the latter having two more check-points after 1826, in 1835 and 1878.

Before dealing with the pub ware let us run through the various articles of 19th century lead pewter—the truest pewter, if in name only. Of English, the types likely to be seen are late 9in. plain rim plates; 9in. hot water plates; oval dishes; the last double volute baluster measures, which were in Old English Wine measure, superseded by Imperial in 1826; funnels of indeterminate date, virtually never with marks; inkwells—the last lead pewter articles to be made and perpetuated until the last year or two in post offices, sometimes with wide flange bases, sometimes solo; casters, carried on from the 18th century, and likewise ale jugs, lidded and open thumbpieces, usually in quart and pint.

There are bleeding bowls, with graduated rings marked 4, 8, 12, 16, for ounces of blood drawn off—or were some used as kitchen measures? I think so, from their not great rarity. Tobacco jars can be found in many designs, usually with a chubby negro boy's head as knob of lid or presser weight. Candlesticks in hard metal, with iron push-rods, provide an example of another type for which we have no close dating, many well-known styles being used from about 1770 until George IV's reign.

This now leaves us with the measures and drinking pots, in quarts, pints, and



3

half pints, and the scarcer beakers and footed cups. The bulbous measures made in sets of quart down to half gill (later the gallon, half-gallon and quarter gill were added, besides many other diminutive spirit measures) date from after about 1825 and will be dealt with in a later article.

This bulbous shape, like a squat, sophisticated, lidless baluster appears to have evolved about the third quarter of the 18th century. All examples I have ever seen date from 1800 onwards, and all the early ones now under discussion (pre-1825) have plain bodies with no

bands or fillets and ball terminals on the handles—a feature which ran in tankards, lidded and lidless, from circa 1725 to circa 1825.

Some are tall and attenuated, and the outline of the body has not yet completely settled down. They nearly all run in Ale measure, but I do know of two in Old English Wine measure, that is, pre-Imperial (which, incidentally, is still the standard capacity of U.S.A.) being five-sixths Imperial. It is important to notice the metal of which these early bulbous measures are made as they are invariably dull and leaden, by con-

trast with the later varieties after 1825.

There are other types of measures. It is impossible to say which tankards were used solely as measures, for nearly all bear capacity marks. There is other evidence such as a stamp of contents.

Most similar are the heavy measures with thick protecting lipbands, more frequently in brass (usually later) than in self-pewter. The bodies and handles are exactly like the true drinking mugs. Another type, literally from the same mould, has pouring lips. They tend to be early specimens of the body type, in quart, pint and half pint. The spouts are almost always at 90° to the handle.

Another type, rather rare now, is the double cup, or duck and hen—two opposed cups joined by a stem, or at their thinnest part, one being twice the capacity of the other. They are almost invariably gill and half gill and date from about 1840. In the West Country, and in Bristol, two similar styles appeared, now quite rare, one being almost identical in shape to the much more common copper frog-like measures.

The Irish haystack measures seem to have been inspired by the West Country type, but bear a bead round the shoulder and the base. Again from Ireland come the range of four (pint to half-noggin, a noggin being a gill) baluster measures without handles or lids. In shape they are not unlike the stout grip of a dumb-bell. Be very careful of a hasty purchase, for they have long been made in 'repro' form.

In Scotland we find a far wider range than that from Ireland or England. Many of their types look 18th century,

3. Two candlesticks of a type that was still being turned out in the 19th century. They invariably have push-rods, but none bears the makers' marks

4. One beaker and two footed cups: the central one dates from around 1820; its companions from the 1830-40 era

4



but prove to be 19th. First let us look at the Scottish ale measure.

Scots pint (60 fl. oz.) = 3 Imp. pints
 Chopin (30 fl. oz.) = 1½ Imp. pints
 Mutchkin (15 fl. oz.) = ¾ Imp. pints
 ½ Mutchkin (7½ fl. oz.) = ⅜ Imp. pints
 English quart—40 fl. oz.
 English pint —20 fl. oz.
 English ½ pt. —10 fl. oz.
 English gill — 5 fl. oz.

Imperial measure was not readily and universally accepted in Scotland, and so for a while Scottish and Imperial ran together, until Scottish measure was banned in 1855. So a measure in Scottish standard is not necessarily earlier than that date (many a tappit hen of the mid-19th century is fondly bought as mid-18th century!).

By 1855, and certainly from then, Scottish measure vessels still in use should have had the equivalent Imperial fraction stamped on them. There are many examples to bear this out, such as ¾ I.S. Additional local and some customary measures make deductions from measuring capacity fun—but confusing, not to say dangerous. Furthermore, I have a suspicion that Scottish measure was used south of the border at least in the 18th century in the adjacent counties—perhaps including Newcastle. It would be interesting to hear readers' comments on this.

The famed tappit hen type of measure ran from certainly 1700 and maybe much earlier, right on into the second quarter of the 19th century, latterly with the eagerly sought knop. The tappits are to be found in very many different capacities, basically in Scottish and Imperial. So we deduce that many were made between 1826 and 1855.

The style is for many people the epitome of pewter design and desirability—but look at them very carefully. Shun any that are light of substance, bear an X on the lip, 'hall-marks', or a pseudo-mark under the base. I should know: I mistakenly bought one as genuine in my very early collecting days.

Of the high-bellied balusters, there are two thumb-piece types likely to be met—the ball, and the 'embryo' shell, which is like a smooth-faced bivalve. The type is in Imperial measure, and therefore cannot be earlier than 1826, but continued to be made until the end of the century. Note the practical Scottish anti-wobble rim under the lid. As a matter of fact, English balusters made before about 1630 had the same hinge-lug protection.

The Scots had always been excellent pewterers and their skill is the more remarkable because of the economy of tin which was necessary since they had no native source; the greatest craftsmanship nearly always seems to come from the poorest countries. Wealthy countries have shoddy goods: perhaps this is why we, and notably the Americans, are attracted by the craftsmanship in antiques.



5



6

It is a little surprising to realise that these balusters, and perhaps the English belied measures, sired the more expensive form of English bulbous measure, the Scottish versions having lids. There are two varieties—Glasgow and Edinburgh. Fairly obviously the Glasgow type is the earlier, judging by its lines. These measures were made at least up to the closing years of the century. But why the lid?

So now, at last, to the most widespread types still available—pub pots. Of the Scottish, little can be said with any authority about those pre-Imperial, due to lack of recognisable examples. I have one or two which conform to Scottish measure, but as we have seen, these may be from the very north of England, and they may be as late as 1850, although various features indicate a date between 1815 and 1820. Of course, they may be odd-ball sizes for domestic use anywhere. Marks thereon are unidentified.

More and more frequently, Scotland adopted English styles of pub pots, with

5. Measures with reinforced rims: the handle finial and fillet on the left-hand example appear to date the measure around 1820, but it is in fact 1860. The one on the right, with its handle attachment and the style of engraving, can be dated to 1825
6. Irish haystack and noggin measures of a kind that are very popular and are being reproduced in some quantity today

occasional distinctive details. One I acquired recently, stamped 'McPhail, Maker, Glasgow' (again unrecorded), although made as late as about 1850, pleases me immensely with its earlier feel, superb craftsmanship and its modification to the English style of the concave type so beloved by TV and film directors in Tudor (or Saxon!) scenes.

To our main field—and how pleasant it is to know that there is one in which, with one eye on styles and the other on increasing scarcity, one can acquire specimens of interest in excellent condition, and equally suitable for display, their original purpose, research, or for flowers.



7

Records of marks and makers, and particularly their dates, not to mention dates of their wares, are weak. The carelessness bred of plenty prevented very adequate recording when so much was available 10 years and more ago. Keen readers will possess their own Cotterell O.P. (*Old Pewter, Its Makers and Marks*), and will know how frequently 19th century marks are missing and, perhaps more dangerous, that those recorded often only have Cotterell's suggested date, ascribed by judgement of the date of one or more pieces. Research on pieces bearing names of publican, pub and village will sometimes yield dates for distinctive details.

Some of the characteristics of pots dating before 1826—pre-Imperial pots (P.I.P.s)—are X on drum, maker's mark in base, ball handle-terminal, uptilted thumb-rest, capacity marked crudely or not at all, W R under crown, indirect upper handle attachment, and a general appearance just a little 'different': but some of these features appear occasionally on pieces of a little after 1826.

In the main, P.I.P.s are very similar in shape to those of the post-Imperial period, and it is often difficult at first glance—or second—to decide the difference. P.I.P.s, made to the W.III ale measure, are often marked W R, and as this standard was about one per cent over Imperial it was acceptable under the new standard. They continued to be used, and were frequently stamped confirming this; subsequently, they might be stamped several times when re-checked. But this does not preclude post-Imperial pots being similarly marked.

All these points are only *indications*, and as I have already said, they are not exclusive to P.I.P.s. In a brief article I cannot impart many years' observation of shades of detail. Throughout this series, I must qualify my remarks as



8

being to the best of my present knowledge and opinion, and I am well aware that there will be both exceptions and modifications; my opinion is far from infallible.

One could say that there were seven main types of drinking pot made in the 19th century:

1. The later 'tulip', on low base, quart to half-pint; made from before 1800 to the end of the period. Handle 2.
2. The (most common) 'truncated cone', with or without fillet, quart to half-pint; made from before 1800 to the end of the period. Handle 1, 2, and rarely 4.
3. The 'barrel', quart to half-pint; made from before 1800 to circa 1830 or earlier. Handle mostly 2, rarely 1.
4. The 'almost cylindrical', rounded bottom to low base, with fillet, quart to half-pint (gill for christening mugs); circa 1810—circa 1840 and later in Scotland. Handle 2.
5. The 'two-band-reeded', almost cylindrical, rounded bottom to low base, quart to half-pint and gill for christening mugs; a purely 19th century style—circa 1810 to probably circa 1860. Handle 2, and rarely 1.
6. The 'concave', quart to half-pint; circa 1825—circa 1860. Handle 3, and rarely 2.
7. The 'flared out', quart and pint; on low base, circa 1830—circa 1850; without base, circa 1840—beyond our period. Handle 2, and 4, 5 latterly.

The spouted measures do not seem to appear in the tulip, and even more seldom in the concave. They have handle 4, 2, rarely 1, and latterly 5.

In my book *British Pewter and Britannia Metal* (Gifford, £1.50) a chart of the various identification features of tankards and pots of 1700—1820 included handles of that period, just covering at least our 19th century P.I.P. period. I was well aware of courting proof to the contrary which, if forthcoming, would

7. An unusually solid example of the tappit hen. Beware examples with 'hall marks' on their rims as there are scores of reproductions around

8. Two late Scots measures, (left), a Glasgow single dome, baluster shape, circa 1840, and (right), Edinburgh type with the bulbous lines, circa 1870

be a welcome advance of knowledge, and I still think all my assessments were fair, except that the concave should be probably five years or so later (but it is very apposite that only in the week of writing I found an early squat specimen of about 1820); and the rectangular handle should not appear until probably 1830, or even later.

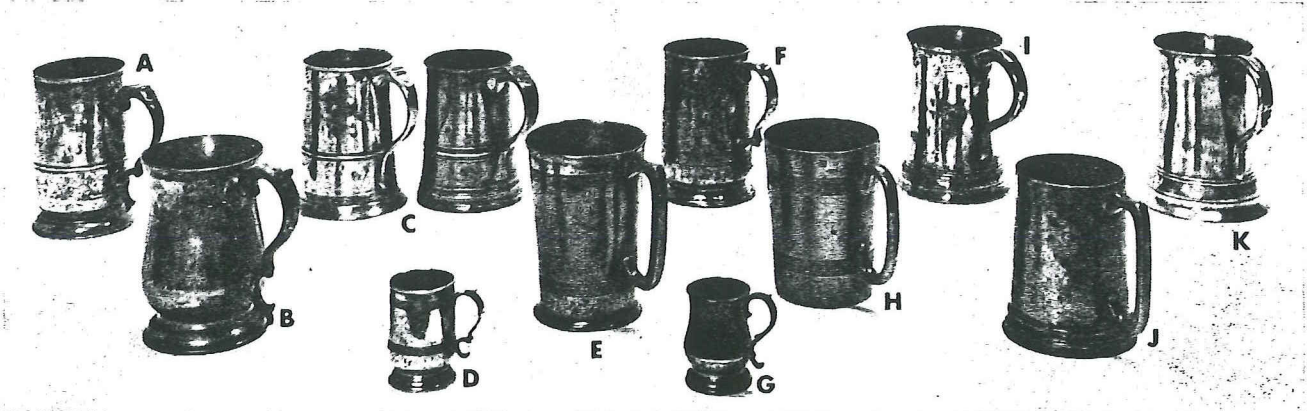
So, before leaving the pots we must grasp their handles. We will only meet, in this century:

1. The 'standard'—very common, rather functional and disappointing in appearance. The flat 'hand at attention' lower terminal carries a little more shaping in earlier specimens. Probably the 'ball' terminal ran over from the 18th century into the earlier years of the 19th. Made until circa 1860.
2. The 'broken' (or 'double') is also common. A more prominent thumb-rest is sometimes earlier. Made up till circa 1850, then fading out.
3. The handle on the concave is almost always a tapering sweep, but bears an elongated U for the thumb-rest—confined to this body (and the footed cups).
4. The 'rectangular'. Made from 1830 to the end of the period.
5. The 'tubular'—a shaped tube. Late—say 1860 onwards.

Pewter can bear a number of marks: X appears to denote a standard of alloy. W R under crown shows that the pot conforms to William III ale standard. G IV under large crown—probably 1825–26.



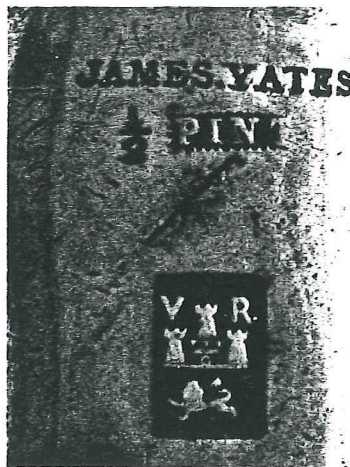
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9. A group of pre-Imperial pots—these are all quarts except for two pint-pots. (a) barrel 'broken' handle 2, circa 1820; (b) early two-band with type 2 handle, circa 1820; (c) plain truncated cone handle 1, circa 1810; (d) truncated cone with one fillet, circa 1820; (e) tulip, rather compacted base, circa 1815; (f) truncated cone, circa 1820; (g) truncated cone, no fillet, circa 1810; (h) almost cylindrical, with rounded base, squat type, circa 1820; (i) Bristol shape, circa 1810

10. A group of post-Imperial pots, all quart-sized, except for two gill-examples. (a) almost cylindrical, rounded bottom (to low base), circa 1830; (b) handle type 2, tulip; (c) two truncated cones, with fillets, showing variant tapering, circa 1835; (front): (d) two-band christening mug, one gill, engraved '26 February 1846'; (e) flared-out shape with



11

flange base, rectangular handle of type 4, circa 1840; (f) two-band, circa 1840; (g) tulip, gill capacity christening mug, circa 1860; (h) flared out, tubular handle type 5, circa 1890; (i) concave, handle type 3, circa 1840; (j) late truncated cone, no fillet, handle type 4, circa 1880; (k) concave example of Scots provenance, with a prominent upper storey to the base, circa 1850

11. Markings on pot, circa 1830. Note especially the maker's name stamped incuse, and the curious combination of incuse and relief work in the legend '1/2 pint'. This reflects the urgent conforming of legislation which marked the year 1826, and even more notably, 1835. As regards the borough stamp of Norwich, it is quite likely that the Victoria stamp was added on her accession in 1837

G IV, W IV—checked for capacity in those reigns (after 1826).

County and Borough emblems—checked for capacity between circa 1835 and 1878 (with a few later exceptions).

PINT (etc.) incuse—added after 1826.
PINT (etc.) in relief—applied by maker mostly, after circa 1830

V R (and other numbers)—after 1878 the Weights and Measures Department mostly took over responsibility for checking the capacity of vessels in which a measure of ale was sold. These are the district numbers (see table in *British Pewter and Britannia Metal* mentioned above).

08, 09, etc.—checked in those years of 20th century.

F in a single stamp—an early district code letter—probably pre-Imperial, certainly pre-1835 in my opinion.

Maker's mark, or touch. Not often impressed in this century, earlier in base, later stamped incuse on rim of pots and measures.

'Hall-marks'—purely a maker's own mark, traditionally to simulate silver, occasionally and diminishingly used in the 19th century. It only gives a clue as to the maker, and does not show date or provenance.

Often a pot or measure is engraved 'Imperial Measure', or with its pub name, address, and probably the name

of the landlord, sometimes in a border opposite the handle.

Loose dating, I suggest:

Border—before 1830.

Rounded engraving—before 1830.

'Imperial Measure'—1825–1830.

Linear engraving—1830–1860.

Under base—1835–1860.

By the latter part of the century lead pewter was almost completely ousted by Britannia, this alloy taking in rowing and other trophies, and at the end of the century, Art Nouveau. □

(The next article in the series deals with Britannia Metal and will appear in a later issue).