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# LET'S LOOK AT MORTARS

SOME ENGLISH DECORATED BRASS AND BELL MORTARS, 5½ins. AND LESS IN HEIGHT.

by Christopher A. Peal



Figure 1. "Conventional Band". In brass. This is the most common of English decorated mortars, and the latest. It was made in a wide range of sizes. Centre bands also occur on earlier large mortars. Note the machine tidying-up lines circling the body. Note also how the dies were pressed into the soft clay mould. Late 18th century.



Figure 2. "Rose Crowned". In bell metal (as are all the subsequent illustrations unless specified otherwise). This, too, is far from scarce, by comparison with other emblems; all are scarce to find now. Curiously this is almost the only emblem to be accompanied sometimes by a date. Restoration, dates being between 1660 and 1685.



Figure 3. "Fleur de lys". In brass. Also not rare. These are English, and it is puzzling why the emblem of France should have been used so widely. Had it some heraldic significance? They are much too common to have been associated with a family, or with a Guild or other organisation. Were they just a pretty picture? The subsequent illustrations will give cause to wonder. There are other fairly close varieties of the emblem, always small on brass. 18th century.



Figure 4. "Fleur de lys" (large). In bell metal. This specimen, like many others, has lost its sharpness by ignorant, over-enthusiastic and cheap grinding to 'clean' it. Second quarter 17th century.



Figure 6. "Charles I Arms". There appear to be only three emblems directly identified with a Monarch or Rule. Perhaps it is due to the coarse texture of the clay, perhaps the design was too fine for the clay to accept cleanly - or it may have been that in the Commonwealth all representations of Charles should be defaced, for I have only seen one, out of perhaps a couple of dozen, which was more clear and crisp. Appears only on this form. Obviously contemporary with Charles I.



Figure 7. "Commonwealth Arms". These are very often impressed unevenly. Like most other emblems this appears on more than one form. Datable examples like this enable a dating, of a form, however loose. Other emblems then tie the dating down more closely. 1650-1660.



Figure 8. "Charles II bust". This one is superbly clear, but often this particularly appealing portrait is wrecked by the vandal cleaners. Its appeal has probably given it a better than average chance of survival in the times when scrap metal was at a premium - c.1790, 1915, 1940. We can fairly assume that this emblem was P.R., not p.m. c.1665 (P.R. = Public Relations, p.m. = post mortem).



Figure 9. "Rosette Crowned". It is probably not easy to identify the constituents of the rosette from the illustration. They are fleur de lys, tulips and a central rose. A rare type, and surprisingly, the only example I have seen of the tulip - of William of Orange - used so much in other media. This would appear to date itself to his accession.



Left: Figure 10. "Griffon with key". Now we come on to the palpably 'heraldic' emblems. Should the inverted commas be omitted? Just what do these and subsequent emblems represent? Surely not a family. Certainly not an inn. Was it piracy of the prestige of a good 'name' — like buying an exclusive tie at a High Street store? c.1660.



Figure 11. "Lion Passant". Glorious, bouncy lions and a very rare type. But why so few, while we did our utmost to publicize France? This mortar appears to have had some kind of public use in view of the well-worn single lug for a chain. Probably late 16th century.



Figure 17. "Norwich Arms". Three designs are cast on this unique (?) mortar. Of the many hundreds of mortars I have seen, I have only seen two with City of London arms, and four with City of Norwich Arms. This form is too widespread to support much of a case for a Norwich bell-founder (for it was they who cast mortars). (a) is the Norwich Arms. (b) is an early form of rose crowned. (c) is a Grecian classic scene appliqué'd on to the mortar. Most interesting, and very rare to have the addition. Presumably there was some significance in obtaining the scene in bell metal. And what was its original from which it was cast? A buckle? Or badge? Note on (b) how the rose and crown are picked out by zig-zag impressions (wriggling). This technique was, I thought, confined to the much softer and kinder-to-the-tool pewter. c.1620 — perhaps late 16th century.



Figure 12. "Stags Head". Another heraldic emblem. But see the blob on the oval to the left, and the bungled join on the right. It suggests to me that the original was a buckle, badge, or similar, and was impressed into the clay in lieu of a true die. Positive information on the original, and indeed on the whole question of the fleur and heraldry on mortars would be most welcome and helpful. If several readers write in the information can be co-ordinated — and I have some up my sleeve — and produced more fully later. c.1640.



Figure 13. "Unicorn". If proof were needed that *some* element of heraldry were involved, this gives it. Although the original die of the unicorn is shown pacing the ground, the emblem is *always* cast on mortars at about 60° to 70° thus converting it without any doubt, to rampant c.1650.



Left: Figure 18. Mask and rosette motifs. A number of these motifs appear more especially on this form and that of the next illustration. The mask was very often present, with others, and the cross referring obviously gives us dating on many such motifs. Any help with close dating would be helpful. Note that the mask is in high relief, and the rosette in low relief — presumably borrowed from some other medium. What? c.1640.



Figure 19. Mask, and design within rectangle. Note the same mask as in the previous illustration; and that the rectangle was distorted when a true rectangle was applied to the curves of the mould. The white blobs seem to be rivet or other attachment heads. This design *may* originally have been in silver, as a book ornament. I wonder who, in general, produced the dies for the emblems. Perhaps they were in hard wood. Probably it was a trade on its own. Yet I think that the total number of emblems and motifs I have seen on mortars of a span of about 200 years is only about 70. From 'emblems' and 'motifs' I exclude the decoration so often present in the larger more personalized one-off mortars. c.1635.



Above: Figure 14. "Dragon's Head". Again, why does this appear on a mortar used privately, in the home, in still room or kitchen? c.1650.

Figure 15. "Lion Rampant". Much more fun than a fleur de lys, and more naturally patriotic. Very rare (!). c.1660.



Below left: Figure 21. "Diamond and Never-ending symbol". This is left until late, to show how few of these emblems appear in expected media. This is the only one which appears on oak furniture. I take the design to be never-ending, and as such was a marriage symbol. c.1640.

Left: Figure 20. High relief motifs. Many motifs appear on this form. I wonder why the acanthus is upside down? It does not seem to be for reasons of space. c.1650.

Right: Figure 22. Man playing a musical horn; and crest. The figure has been described as "Eastern", but surely it is more traditionally Middle Ages? As such it might delude one into thoughts of great antiquity. However, its being in brass, and the form of the mortar proclaim it as 18th century. The musical instrument is not exactly a serpent, but is a credible shape for a quaint bass. The talbot issuant from the coronet is very heraldic, and should tell us something. I have seen two other specimens bearing the musician. c.1720.



Figure 16. "Mask". This is not clear in this rather rare 'emblem', but from a clearer one seen it may be a death mask of Charles I. The form of the mortar is, in any case c.1645.