

EQD

# Rule Britannia

IN A PREVIOUS article ('Collectors Guide', September 1973) we saw that tin/lead pewter finally died out in the 19th century due to the greater serviceability and lower costs of other media. In this article, Christopher Peal, Honorary Secretary of the Pewter Society, discusses the uses of these other metals

Other media included Britannia metal, which is tin alloyed with antimony about 10:1, or tin 90: antimony 8: copper 2, but proportions varied widely. It has always been understood to have appeared in 1769, as 'Vickers White Metal'. But it has been suspected that antimony was used in the alloy at least about 70 years previously. Massé has quoted 'Superior Pewter—tin 86: antimony 14, and second quality 94: 6' for '18th century plate pewter'.

For most uses of pewter silver was simulated as closely as possible in appearance, and for practical purposes, in texture. Obviously a harder metal would wear better—and some early 18th century ware is much harder than normal pewter. Again—the X stamped on some late 17th century ware is recorded as being allowed on 'Extraordinary ware called Hard Mettle'. Collectors wonder if X stands for tin 10: lead 1 (as on the Continent)—more than twice the normal tin content. Or is it short for 'eXtraordinary ware . . .'? In any case, what is so 'extraordinary' about the 'Hard Mettle'? Can it not be antimony?

The Pewter Society is currently carrying out a programme of analysis to determine more about alloy standards, both quantitatively and qualitatively. So perhaps we shall find that evolution of Britannia was a longer process than has so far been thought. Analysis has not been undertaken before because older processes required more bulky samples, thus noticeably mutilating pieces: and analysis is expensive. We may find that antimony in pewter, with or without a little copper or lead, goes back into the 'golden' age.

Why flog the point? Simply because Britannia has been scorned, despised, segregated, spurned and even ostracised. This is grossly unfair. Admittedly, some of the later wares, with Britannia serving as a base for electro-plating, really plumb the depths of the worst design of the worst period of Victoriana. Possibly some people condemn *all* Britannia just because of one period, fashion and quality. It is an intolerance born of ignorance and inexperience.

However, far more widespread, certainly amongst the older generation, is the influence of Cotterell's autocratic



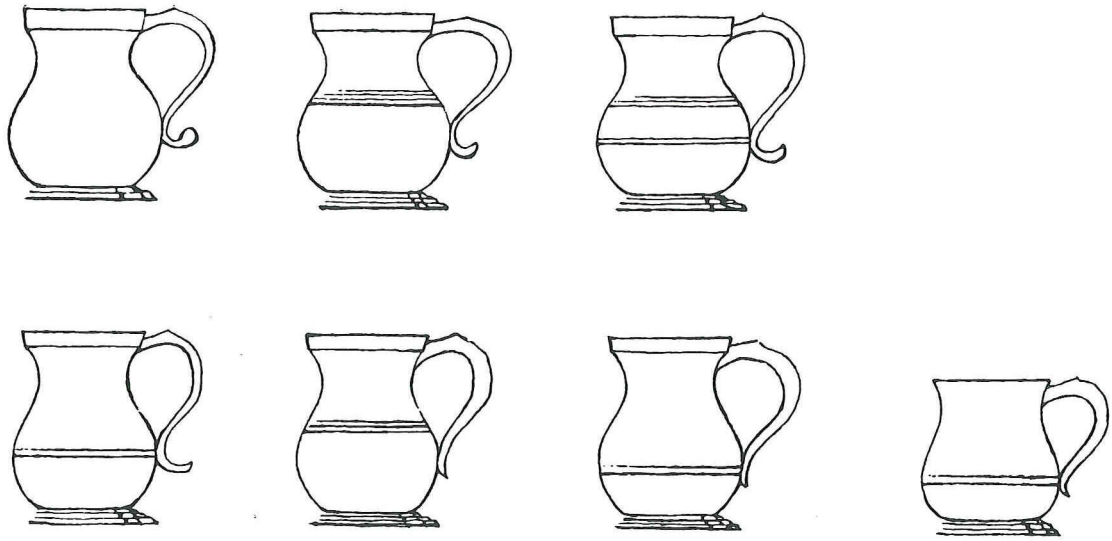
1. Britannia-base tea pot, for electro-plating, in a conservative design. 'E.P.B.M.' is stamped on the base. Cast



2. A gill bellied measure of circa 1824. Cast

Colour Plate 2. A fine Minton dessert centrepiece combining glazed and decorated porcelain with matt Parian. 1872. 15in. high. Author's Collection





**3. The various decorating bands and their periods on bellied measures. Top row l. to r.: Type 1 (with variations to outline), circa 1790–circa 1826. Type 2, circa 1824–1830. Type 3, circa 1826–1850. Bottom row l. to r.: Type 4, circa 1830–1860. Type 5, circa 1850+. Type 6, circa 1880+. Type 7, circa 1900+**

rejection. This is an enormous pity. Because he was virtually the only writer, certainly of books on pewter, between the wars, so his edict was without protesting defence, and the slur has percolated right through the trade and collectors of all ages. They only want what is in the book. Surely, it is far better to collect in a little known field, apply action and inquisitiveness, and put together specimens and knowledge apace?

In Cotterell's day collecting was

young, fine specimens of pewter were more easily found—and 19th century pewter and Britannia were 10 an old penny. Britannia metal is much more delicate in design and execution than pewter, and in fact many articles are identical in form with really good silver.

But today there is a big change in the wind, for two reasons: the scarcity and price of early pewter, and the constant search for acceptable subjects to collect. Let us get in amongst specimens, for good examples do exist, in plenty in

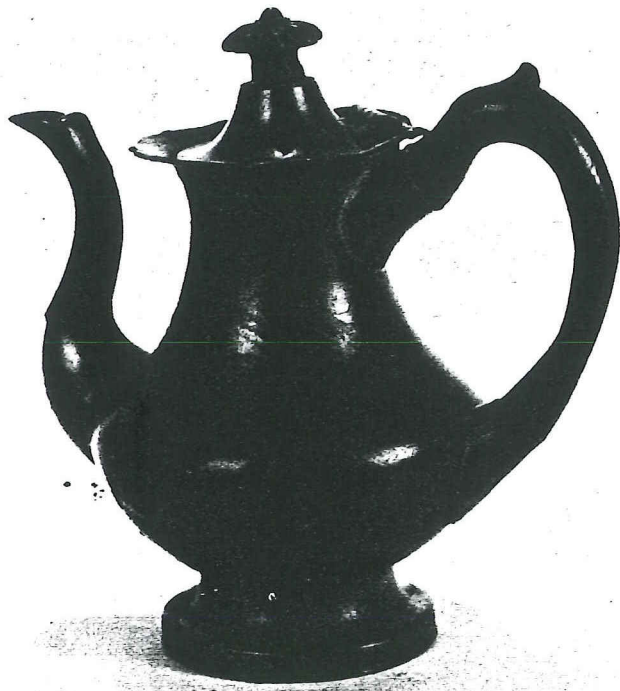
some types, and if they have been identified as Britannia—then at ridiculously low prices.

Pewter, that is lead pewter, was always cast. In Vickers White Metal time, and probably for 50 years the greater proportion, most likely a diminishing proportion, of the new alloy was made by the old process and plant. Do not collectors sometimes comment on the superb metal of some 18th century wares? Superb metal! What superb metal? We are on the way to finding out.

**4. Small collection of pleasant Britannia, made by different processes. Cream jug, early 19th century. Cast. Two-handed cup—possibly for Communion, very loosely. Circa 1830. Cast handles and base, body probably die-stamped. Salt, circa 1820. Cast. Interesting pint tankard bearing name, regiment and stations of a soldier, 1860–1890. Glass bottom, thin Britannia, perhaps spun with fillet applied. Tea pot, stamped underneath 'Britannia'. Probably spun. Superb plate on three ball feet, by Samuel Cocks, circa 1820. Cast. Dome lid tankard, perhaps spun, mid-19th century. Gill bellied measure. George IV applied plaque, circa 1824. Cast. Coffee pot, circa 1870? Hand formed. A small tea pot—a late perpetuation of a very much older style. Cast**







5



6

So Britannia was at first cast. But as its qualities became apparent, so they were harnessed, first by hand power, and then with the aid of technological manufacturing progress; steam power was available and could be applied. Britannia was used in thin sheet form, and was spun like silver, and die stamped. In spinning, hand pressure aided by leverage pressed the disc of sheet metal up to the very exact curves of the form. Instead of using costly, heavy moulds, and awaiting cooling, the new facility obviated heat and the slow

heavy casting, and all of a sudden shapes could be fashioned very quickly indeed, against easily turned inexpensive and expendable wooden formers.

This was not all. The metal was strong, tough, resilient, and capable of a very high polish. It could be made much thinner than lead pewter, but with greater strength. It had all the qualities to enable a very much closer simulation of silver. Die stamping and power presses enabled perfect complicated flutings and curves to be reproduced. Then straight-sided pieces

5. Tea pot, with 'Britannia' stamped underneath. Hollow base, wooden handle and knob. Sheet form, probably spun  
6. Showing maker's name and catalogue number stamped under base of coffee pot in Fig. 4

7. Gravy boat. Sheet form, folded edge. Die stamped

(straight-sided coffee pots) could be hand formed. Silver was copied more closely, with less metal, far faster, with much less costly plant, resulting in a harder and more brilliant product. Forget the old ignorant and erroneous cliché—'Britannia?—Just look for the seam running down'. A second's thought shows this can only apply to hand forming, and the two 'bivalves' of die stamping. Cast and spun ware still needed the assembling seams running round.

It has been written, and confirmed, that James Dixon & Sons never made pewter (lead pewter), only Britannia. In my book, *British Pewter and Britannia Metal*, I made a false assumption in proving that in fact they *did*, by showing an illustration of a pewter bulbous measure with 'James Dixon & Sons' stamped on the rim, incuse. This is indeed the method of stamping names and numbers into the very hard Britannia. But these bulbous measures are extraordinarily hard. Have you ever tried to clean one? The metal and its properties in resisting cleaning are quite different from those of the lead pewter of the period. What period? George IV, exemplified in the later specimens of bulbous measure of the plain body type, and in the succeeding types, i.e., from c. 1826 onwards. So here is a real shock

7





—that the bulbous measures are not 'pewter' at all (in the normal accepted sense), but almost certainly Britannia.

Dyed in the wool possessors of a pleasing set of these measures following our long line of pewter baluster measures, 150 years old, may not be pleased to learn that they are Britannia. But why be displeased? There is a long history of excellent pieces in equally hard, bright metal. So too, with the drinking pots of the 19th century. True, increasingly the proportion in hard metal is apparent, and the eventual fast phasing out of lead pewter is obvious at about 1835. The situation, too, is equally obvious—that lead pewter and Britannia are inextricably intermingled at least as far as the drinking pots go.

This metallurgical classification can be broken down into three main types: (a) Cast ware, in which examples run together with those in lead pewter, probably early or mid-18th century (some tankards, plates, etc.), particularly drinking and measuring vessels c. 1825 onwards. (b) Sheet form, pure Britannia die stamped probably spun and hand formed, to a small degree in late 18th century, blossoming c. 1820 onwards, copying silver. (c) Base for E.P.B.M., c. 1860 onwards, cheap, with real silver on the surface.

While I do not suppose for one moment that dates of processes, seams, etc., are neatly pigeon-holed, it does give an understanding to collecting 19th century Britannia. It is particularly noteworthy that The Worshipful Company of Pewterers, and The Pewter Society (formerly The Society of Pewter Collectors), have both formally recorded the fact that they accept Britannia as pewter—without having differentiated the classifications set out above. It is also to be noted that modern ware is stamped 'Lead-free pewter'.

Although an enormous amount was made, and little remains, research and knowledge of records of English Britannia are scant, and we lag far behind the thoroughness of the Americans. Britannia forms a large proportion of their pewter history, and with comparatively few examples, and a huge following, technical research has been made in far greater depth. Nancy Goyne Evans has published a list of 124 British manufacturers in Sheffield alone, spanning 1812–1861.

At present, if asked to distinguish Britannia from lead pewter, most people would say, judge by the style. Many articles had been thought to be made only in one or the other. But we have already gleaned how some overlap, yet how we can largely classify. Let us look closer at the product itself as made.

We have sketchily touched on processes, three of them from thin sheet metal. A seam running down was hand formed. Two running down, die stamped. We can with certainty say that articles spun are from sheet metal,



8

and that they are thin, harder, more capable of taking complicated curves, and high polish than is lead pewter. That leaves cast Britannia—and here, for the present, I leave the enigma of types, periods and makers to the results of present and future analysis. It does open all eyes to the welcome of Britannia. Some diehards will accept cast Britannia, but reject sheet form. The crunch comes in your own taste and

selection.

Earlier I touched on the method of marking Britannia. In lead pewter the makers always struck their marks (and 'Hall marks') in relief. Britannia is too hard for a dispersed impression, so identification of maker is functional and uninteresting, by means of lettering stamped incuse. Under the straightforward name of maker, on tea pots, coffee pots, etc., numbers are stamped



8. Toy or doll's pewter. A cutlery box makes a pleasing display rack. Here are four very different classes of manufacture. (Measure in centre is a reproduction)

9. Neat dome-lid tankard with glass base. Note 'open' thumbpiece, and lack of any reinforcing rim or bead round lip of drum (as in soldier's tankard, Fig. 4)

9



—catalogue style numbers. '1469' is not its date, as one correspondent from afar thought.

Let us now look at *some* of the items made:

*Tea services*, of which the pots remain, chiefly, from the earlier period through. But the vast majority are the frightful mid-Victorian overloaded unsightly bases for electro-plating, often with no plating remaining. (Electro-plating started about 1845, but its impact on Britannia was not considerable until c. 1860.) No doubt they will become eagerly sought antiques—one day—but not yet.

Cream jugs deserve a special mention, as being perhaps the most consistently charming one type of piece, and occasionally very early for the class, from c. 1770.

*Coffee pots*. You will not see many early specimens. Again, I would suggest that 95% to be seen are post 1850. Most are tall, converging, hand formed. Although they are stately, I just do not like spouts.

*Lamps*. No doubt there are some English, but they were far more common in the States, using whale oil (first quarter 19th century).

*Casters, salts, mustard pots* with glass liners—all small, inexpensive items, with a wide range to go at.

*Urns*—dignified, or gross. There used to be many around, but now they have dried up.

*Dish covers*—yes plenty—but what can you do with them, other than cover dishes? Clean them, I suppose, and do just that.

*Hot water dishes*—from the early part of the century, and fine plates a little later.

*Gravy and sauce boats*, ran, I think, throughout the century.

*Church plate*—quite a considerable amount, the lips of clumsy flagons shouting 'Victoria' for all to hear.

*Two handled cups*, by contrast, nearly all very elegant and well proportioned. Some may have been used as Communion cups.

*Tobacco jars*—a very pleasant variety of styles available, given time for the hunt.

*Snuff boxes*—again a great variety, usually well worn. Often to be found in shops with trinkety stock, as opposed to 'oak and pewter'. Almost invariably they carry engraved scenes or initials.

*Toy and dolls' ware*. A tremendous amount was made, some of it really quite well, and is all of table ware, often in older styles—for instance the plates are usually wavy edged. The range of items is of plates and dishes of several sizes, entrée dishes, gravy boats, tea services of pot, sugar, milk, cups and saucers. These tea services are usually die stamped. By the way, a knife box on its side makes an admirable display rack for toy ware.

Finally, the Britannia versions of the

10. Art Nouveau.  
Circa 1900. Cast



*drinking mugs*. Types follow the lead pewter styles, probably in the very same moulds, and were cast similarly (see *Collectors Guide*, September 1973). Detail deteriorated, sometimes, for instance, the small reinforcing lip round the rim was no longer necessary, and now looks very bare and austere. Styles, too, deteriorated in the last third of the century, and we are left with the very bare 'Tulip', and the plain, straightforward 'Flared out', now without foot; and the handles are 'rectangular' or 'tubular'.

Art Nouveau blossomed in about 1895 for some years, with an array of jugs, vases, trays and even more elaborate structures. The flowing curves of flowers and their stems stand out embossed. All that I have seen are exceptionally well-made, and this style of decoration will certainly echo in and out of demand, irrespective of pewter allegiance, from time to time. It is, perhaps, noteworthy that 'Tudric' was a brand name confined to Liberty's, in London.

We have already dealt with the bulbous measures, which latterly (and far into the present century) were made in the smallest size for measuring spirits at the bar—until the Optic ran them out of business. These smallest ones were made in many sizes for different reasons (perhaps 1 or 2d nips) from 1/10 to 1/32 pint. I have one measuring 1/48 pint. No use to me—as a measure of spirit!

#### CLEANING

As to cleaning Britannia—if it is already clean but with a film, then vigorous polishing with a good metal cleaner will retrieve a very high gloss. However, if there is a scale of oxide—

then the job is more difficult. Hydrochloric acid, or caustic soda, in their chemically opposite ways, do have an effect, but not nearly so much as with lead pewter. You need to wear protective gloves, and you need to do a lot of hard tiring work rubbing with very fine 'wet or dry' emery paper, used with water (which both lubricates and washes the emery clean. However, be warned, I find that on some brands, although sold as 'wet or dry', the manufacturers appear to have used a very water-soluble glue).

Do you want your Britannia of one or more classifications like your pewter—fairly bright, but with black oxide lurking in all the mouldings and interstices? In this way the contrast shows up detail in the most dignified and truly antique way. On the other hand, you may take the view that as your choice of Britannia simulates silver in style and potential finish, then you would need to strip all oxide by immersion in strong acid or alkali, as above, and then smooth the surface by fine emery and perhaps buffing, and ideally, an immeasurable amount of work in polishing. The best thing is to try out your own efforts and results on several insignificant pieces before undertaking the better examples. It is extremely rewarding to clean pieces exactly to your own taste, and what is more, you learn a tremendous amount about the metal and its manufacture by such intimate attention.

Here in Britannia Metal is a field full of reward for the discerning eye and stamina for the chase to collect at reasonable cost, and for which knowledge and research are sadly wanting. Good specimens, apart from the drinking pots are scarce—but prices will be found to be very encouraging. □