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# A Pewter Collector's Luck

By Percy E. Raymond

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THE writer began collecting pewter at just the right date, 1925, when prices were so high that he could not buy anything American. The necessity for being humble drove me into 17th century English. It happens that pewter craftsmanship reached its climax in the half century from 1675 to 1725 and I've been everlastingly grateful that financial circumstances led me to that period. Such pewter is scarce in this country, a fact which has greatly aided in keeping down expenditures. Curiously, several trips abroad have been strikingly unproductive. I once spent five months in Great Britain and brought back five pieces, three of them spoons. An occasional bit of luck has come along, and it may help other collectors to read about some of it.

Early in my experience I bought a double-handled, lidded English porringer (fig. 1). I took it with some glee to a meeting of the Pewter Club, where fellow members proceeded to enlighten me. They pointed out that the great English authority, H. H. Coterell, had stated that English pewterers did not make double-handled porringers and that although the lid seemed to fit it was probably that of a 19th century teapot. They admitted that the porringer might be genuine, in spite of the two handles, so it stayed in the house, but the lid went out with other mistakes to the barn, where it remained for some fifteen years. Most lidded porringers are Continental but eventually Cotterell did describe a few English ones, all doubled-handled. These however, were special commemorative forms, highly decorated, not at all like my simple, plain one.

One evening one of my colleagues, a Professor of Mining Geology, was at the house. I bored him with pewter. When he looked at this particular porringer, he, being interested in metallurgy, asked about the peculiar flecks in the bottom of the basin. Of course, they are due to the fact that in cooling, a mixture of tin, copper and antimony produces various alloys. The large flecks represent one of them. I thought nothing in particular about it at the time but a year or so later I happened to come upon the lid and noticed the same flecks. Obviously, not only did the lid belong to the porringer but it was poured from the same ladle of molten metal! Some pieces speak for themselves, if we can only learn to understand their language. This one is not distinguished but so far as I know it is unique—the only plain, simple, covered English porringer. The circular touch, TW with a bell and 1679, is that of Thomas Waight (Waite) of London. From the style of the lid, with its low double dome and flat brim, the date of manufacture was probably 1700-1715; this, of course, on the basis of tankard lids.

It is exceedingly risky for an amateur or even an experienced collector to buy a decorated piece of pewter, particularly if it bears a date. Values are greatly enhanced by clever engravers. But when, in 1940, panicky English dealers began sending really good material over here I bought one of a pair of decorated 10-inch, double-reeded dishes (fig. 3). A friend bought the other. We took a chance. As can be seen in the bowl, falconry was the motif for the wriggle-work decoration. The bird, a peregrine hawk, was of the breed assigned to earls by the rules of the "sport of kings." Yet the man holding it and leading the dog is clearly a good, honest yeoman.

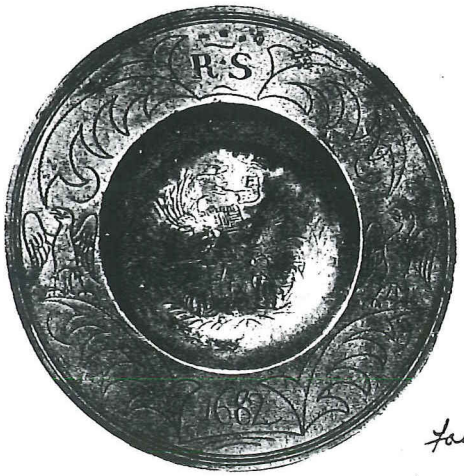
By a curious coincidence, or bit of luck, my wife, knowing my interest in everything useless, gave me a copy of Gladys Scott Thomson's *Life in a Noble Household, 1641-1700.* This turned out to be an account of the family affairs of William Russell, who became the fifth Earl and then the first Duke of Bedford. He was, after he succeeded to the earldom, much interested in falconry, and to my surprise and delight I discovered that his chief falconer for 35 years was one Robert Squire, the RS of this dish. Doubtless the two pewter pieces were presented by the Duke to commemorate some especially successful meet in 1682. Squire attended the Earl when the latter was a guest at hawking parties arranged for Charles II at Hampton Court and doubtless knew much about the high living and low ideals at Court in that age.

Another bit of luck, without any story, except that I was lucky enough to get the piece, is my English flagon of about 1725 (fig. 2). I have seen nothing more satisfying in silver or pewter. Severely plain, with a most gracefully sweeping handle, it delights the eye. The collecting of pewter is justified by what it does to reform the taste of one brought up in Victorian days. This example has purity of line, simple strength, absence of all the foolish adornments which disfigure many *objets d'art.* Such a flagon is worth some $200 less to collectors than one 75 years older but to me the design seems far better.

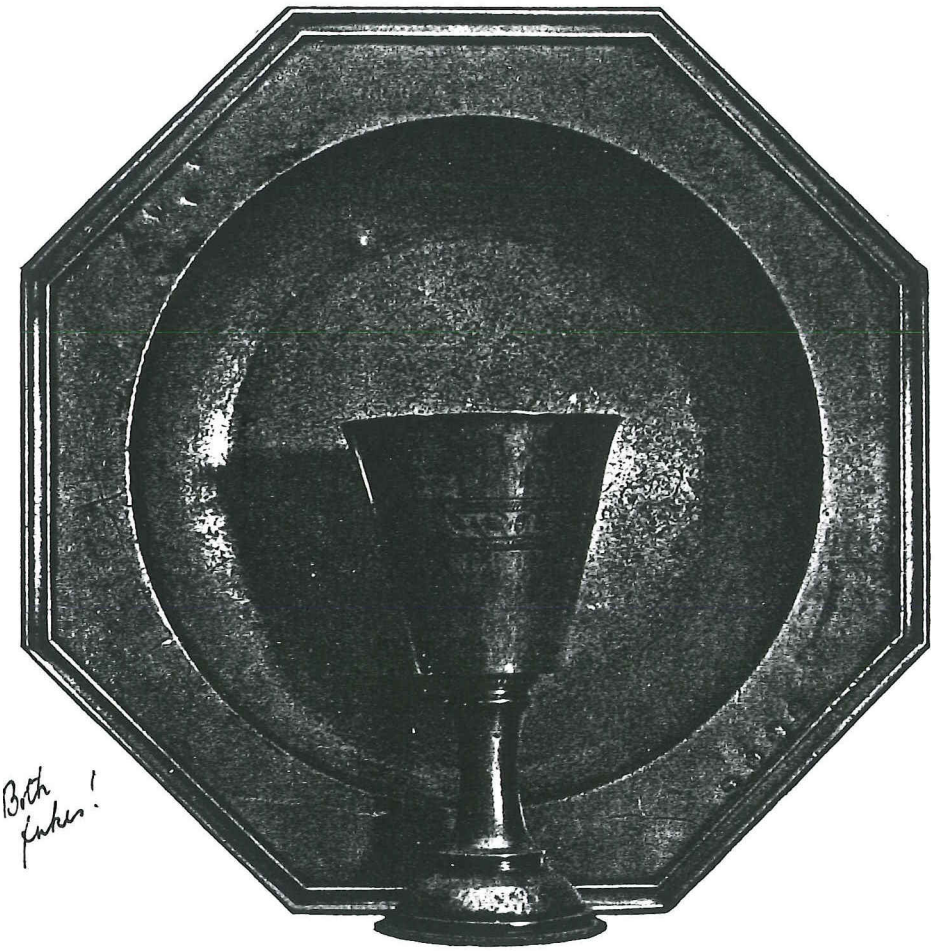
Another lucky bit is a standing cup (fig. 4), found in the famous Caledonian

1. *Unique two-handled English pewter porringer with cover, by Thomas Waite. London, about 1700-1715.*

2. *Finely proportioned English pewter flagon c. 1725. Its beauty of simple forms and simple lines is a delight to the eye.*




3. *Engraved 10-inch double-reeded English pewter dish dated 1682, commemorating the Duke of Bedford's falconer, Robert Squire.*



4. *English pewter standing cup and octagonal plate. The cup, a copy of a 16th century silver cup, perhaps dates from the 16th century. The 12½-inch plate, extremely early, bears the touch of a maker who has not yet been identified.*

Market in London some 20 years ago. When I got it I was a young and relatively innocent collector. I had heard tales of the bargains to be found there and I still think I found one, though many subsequent visits have taught me that the motto there definitely is "let the buyer beware," *caveat emptor*. It wasn't then a place of hit or miss offerings from the general populace, as I had been led to believe, but the dumping ground for materials, mostly inferior, which dealers did not wish to offer in their regular sales rooms.

5. *English pewter paten, 10¼ inches, once used as an offertory plate. Late 17th century broad brim and other characteristics.*

This cup is definitely good. Two or three similar specimens have turned up and there is considerable discussion about them. It is a copy in pewter of a 16th century silver cup. No one knows when they were made, for they bear no marks. The general conservative opinion is that most of them are 18th century work. A modern faker wouldn't bother to hammer the foot and cup or even to make it of good pewter. One shown by Antonio de Navarro on plate *liii* of his *Causeries on English Pewter* is almost exactly like mine except that it retains the paten-lid. De Navarro assigns a date of 1570-71 to it. Cotterell also reproduces it and says, "late 16th century type." This is probably the proper designation.

Speaking of fakes, except the obvious ones, I find that experts are agreed on one thing. If I own the specimen, it's a fake. If they own it, it's genuine. With all my experience I do not know any absolute test for genuineness. The one criterion I have is my belief that no faker would bother to make a piece so well that it could pass muster and still sell for five or ten dollars. When you pay large sums, look out. The cheap fakes reveal themselves. For one thing, too many of them come on the market at once.

Another Caledonian Market "find" in my collection is a 10¼-inch paten (fig. 5), obviously used as an offertory plate for it bears the roughly incised inscription, "To Ye Who Do Give." It has the broad brim characteristic of the latter half of the 17th century, and the maker's touch, in a lozenge, RD 1677. The finish is poor, as was, probably, the congregation which owned it.

The original wooden trenchers were square. A bit of style was occasionally added by sawing off the corners, thus making the board octagonal. No English square pewter trencher has been found, and few octagonal ones. But right here in Boston I got a 12½-inch dish at least 75 years older than any that has so far been illustrated by writers on English pewter (fig. 4). The maker's touch, 1668 WL, on a shield, has not been identified although it is on the first London touch-plate. Most such dishes were made about 1750. Still more rare are the decagonal ones. Mine cost three dollars.

The greatest bit of luck was the aquisition of a 16th century English measure (fig. 6). It came over in the exodus from England in 1940. One can see only two reasons why it should have left England. One is that it was newly discovered; the other that it had been turned down by

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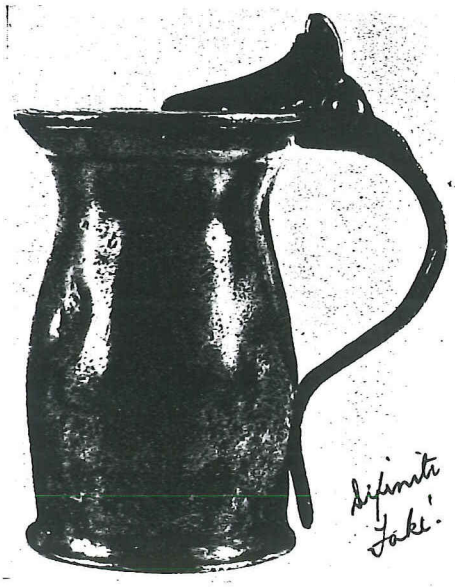

6. *Oldest type of pewter baluster measure. By Thomas Curtis, only 16th century English pewterer whose touch has been identified.*

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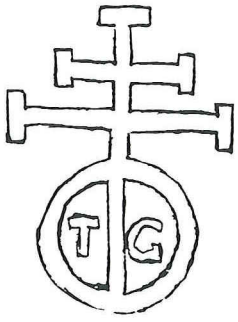
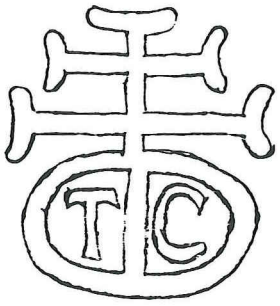
experts as not genuine. The writer has already described it in detail in the New York *Sun*, Feb. 8, 1941, and has shown considerable internal evidence that it could not be a fake unless "its maker were supernaturally clever."

This baluster, 5 inches tall, is of the oldest type which has been preserved. It has the wedge thumbpiece and, like all such measures, a perfectly flat lid and solid handle. About a half-dozen such vessels have been found but no other so well preserved as this one. Its chief interest, however, lies in the maker's touches, five of which are impressed on the lid, as was the custom in the 16th century. This is the only 16th century touch (fig. 7) so far definitely identified, and its owner is known only because of

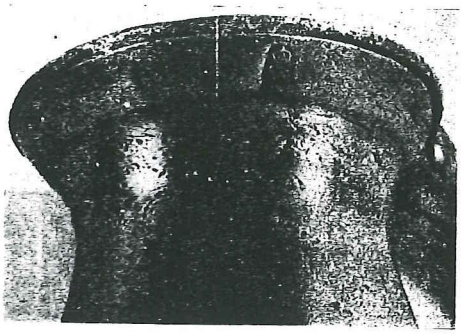




*7. Above: The lid of the baluster measure by Thomas Curtis, showing touch-marks.*

*8. Left: Drawing of Curtis' touch, copied from an item dated 1550 in the* Inventories of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers.

*9. Right: The base of the same measure, showing Curtis' touch flanked by two capacity-verification stamps of Henry VIII. Sir Thomas Curtis was the first pewterer to become Lord Mayor of London.*



a rather peculiar circumstance. In the book of *Inventories of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers* it was recorded that on Jan. 1, 1550, "Mr. Curtis gave a playne table clothe for the hye table a dd [dozen] of playne napkyns markyed wt hys mrke a towell cambryck." The grateful clerk sketched the mark on the margin of the page, so preserving it.

The touch is the patriarch's cross, made familiar to us today through its use by the Red Cross and the National Biscuit Company. Sir Thomas Curtis, however, probably adopted it from the colophon of Nicholas Jensen, a Venetian printer who died in 1481. This touch is one of the principal evidences of authenticity of the piece. Welch, in his *History of the Pewter Company*, reproduced the sketch made by the clerk back in 1550. It has therefore been known for more than 40 years. If anyone were to make a fake the touch would have followed that design. But as can be seen the real one differs considerably from the old sketch. In fig. 8, at the left is a drawing of the mark shown in the records, at the right one made from the measure itself. Sir Thomas Curtis worked as a pewterer from about 1520 to 1556. Since the measure bears the capacity-verification stamp of Henry VIII (fig. 9), one might think it was made before 1547. But governments move slowly and it is possible that Henry's stamps were used for some years after his death. Sir Thomas was the first pewterer to become Lord Mayor of London. That's how he got his Sir.

If you want to have collector's luck, the recipe is simple. Buy pewter, a good deal of it. Study every piece you get, read every book or article on the subject. See and study private collections and those in museums. Discuss the subject with other collectors and dealers. Go to the shops frequently. You cannot expect to find things in private homes nowadays. Become an expert, but do not let anyone know you are one.

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The photograph shown in fig. 4 is by Mr. Paul J. Franklin; all others by Mr. Fred P. Orchard. All the examples are in the author's collection.

# McClellan Porcelains

(from page 5)

porcelain manufacture became widespread, numerous small factories sprang into life in Germany proper and from there the new industry blossomed out into France, Holland and England. Eventually, when porcelain could be made all over Europe, a deterioration of quality began to appear as always occurs with arts and crafts when geared to cheap mass fabrication.

George McClellan, who never considered later periods of porcelain as collectible, wrote two years before his death in 1940 an informative guide to his collection which is now printed through the generosity of Mrs. McClellan. The story is told in simple, readable language which carries the character of a man who had found his happiest avocation in studying and collecting porcelains. It may be that some of the important collections listed by the author, such as the famous one in Dresden and the one in the Schloss Museum in Berlin, have fallen prey to destructive forces of war. Others, however, for example the Frank Collection in the British Museum and the Tillman Collection (at present probably in a New York warehouse) might be added to his roster. His taste was "catholic." He valued as the finest accomplishments in European porcelain the early examples fashioned in a solid, simple yet delicate form with lively, never overloaded decoration.

Confined to utilitarian pieces, this charming collection makes no claim to being representative of the whole realm of this special art. The story is not complete without works by Johann Joachim Kaendler of Meissen, Johann Peter Melchior of Höchst, Bustelli of Nymphenburg and Anton Grassi of Vienna, all famous for their porcelain sculpture. But the Metropolian Museum is fortunate, indeed, in being the beneficiary of Mrs. McClellan's gift. Everybody who enjoys superb specimens of a very special phase of 18th century European art may now share in this good fortune.