ESF

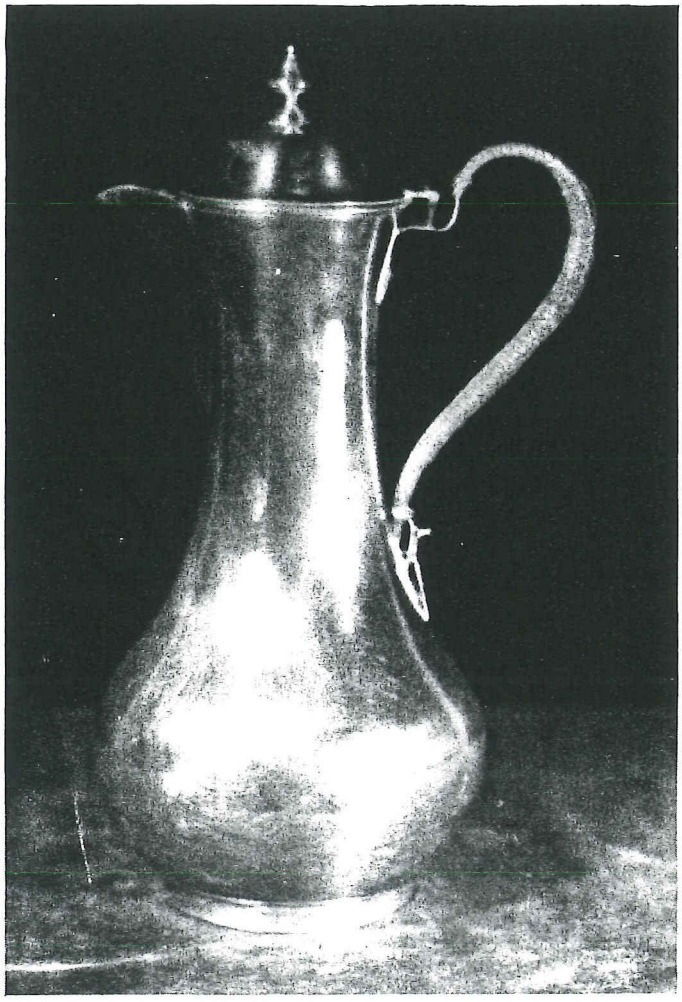
OLD SCOTS PEWTER TREASURES

FROM KIRK AND TAVERN

By Sheila Stuart

ALTHOUGH the art of making pewter was known to the Romans, and specimens of Roman pewter have been dug up in excavated sites of Roman towns and camps, the knowledge appears to have lapsed for some centuries in Scotland. and while pewterers were established in England as early as 1348 it was not until 1493 that the Scottish pewterers were grouped under the Hammermen of Edinburgh. Before that date any pewter used in Scotland—apart from that made by a few isolated craftsmen working on their own—came from France or the Low Countries, or from across the Border.

It is reasonable to assume that when it was first introduced pewter was a definite luxury, second only to silver, and only the aristocracy and the more prosperous merchants could afford it. Even in the reign of Mary Queen of Scots pewter was by no means in common use. It should be remembered that at that time the process of making china was not known in Scotland, and vessels used for eating and drinking before the arrival of pewter were made of treen (wood), horn, and leather, and these for a time the poorer classes still continued to use. But while it was used widely for domestic purposes the most attractive old pewter is not domestic. There are two other types that hold a much stronger appeal—the pewter that was used in churches and the pewter used in inns and taverns. These have a quality of interest denied to pepper pots, salts, sugar bowls, inkstands, and the like. An exception, however, is the pewter candlestick, which is a charming legacy from the past, and another is the pewter plate, either plain or reeded, than which few pieces are more decorative. Pewter punch ladles — reminders of the jovial days of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries—are also worth searching for, and in a less degree snuff boxes made of horn and mounted with pewter.



Scottish pewter coffee-pot, about 1720

But in the main the collector will be more successful in looking for pewter that was formerly housed either in the kirk (church) or tavern. In pre-Reformation days there was much ecclesastical pewter, and when St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, was being dismantled a short time before the Reformation the furnishings of the high altar included a pair of pewter candlesticks, which in a church so important as St. Giles is a pointer to the value put on pewter at that time. There is, however, practically no pewter

Two rare Scottish pewter measures of pot-bellied shape. Seventeenth century.

of that period remaining. One reason for this is the softness of the metal, which is so easily damaged, but a stronger reason is that during the upheaval of the Reformation many priests who fled the country took with them the sacred pieces from the churches.

When the early Reformed Church was established church vessels were so scarce, especially in country districts, that an Act of Parliament ordered all parishes to provide the necessary cups, flagons, and plate for the administration of the Sacrament. From records it would appear that at least a proportion of those were supplied by church members from their own possessions, and while wealthy parishioners would give silver the majority would offer pewter. The Covenanters, too, who worshipped under duress in the hills and glens, were also too poor to have any but pewter vessels. As conditions improved the early pewter was cast aside and replaced by silver, and comparatively little of it has been preserved. Pewter was used at Communion in certain of the poorer churches in Scotland, however, as late as the nineteenth century. The early Communion flagons of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were pieces of the most dignified kind.

They are tall and straight bodied, sometimes tapering upwards from the base; others are more slender and do not vary in width. Flat covers with decorative thumb-pieces are more pleasing than the domed lid with the acorn knob which appeared later and which is rather reminiscent of coffee-pot designs. The plainness of the flagon is relieved by rows of banding discreetly placed at intervals on the body, and by reeding on the base. Handles are usually graceful. Smaller flagons are occasionally found; these fitted the needs of small congregations. Church plates and patens, the plates plain and the patens with reeded edges, are attractive pieces to the collector. The Scottish baptismal bowl was an austere little piece. The broad rim was sometimes reeded, but otherwise the basin was plain, and its appeal is confined to the simplicity of the design and the gleam of the pewter.

Early chalices had a small bowl mounted on a tall baluster or inverted baluster stem. Later designs were larger, occasionally with the bowl taking the shape of a rummer, and sometimes designed like a tallish cup. The quaich—that typically Scottish piece—was intended for drinks such as wine and ale, but on occasions it was also used in churches, both for taking up the collection and for Communion tokens at the Sacrament, and at times it was even used as a Communion cup. The quaich is shaped like a deep saucer, with two lugs or ears at the sides, and it is a distinctive survival of other days.

To collectors the chief interest in old pewter centres in the variety of jugs and mugs and measures. Most important of these, and characteristically Scottish, is the Tappit Hen. In appearance this is very much like the Normandy flagon, which was used for holding cider from about the beginning of the fifteenth century, except that the French measure lacks the domed cover of the tappit hen, its thumb-piece is different, and it has a heart-shaped lid. It is likely that when the Scottish kings James IV and V brought over craftsmen from the Netherlands and France to teach their trades to the Scots those workmen evolved a flagon resembling the Normandy pattern. But it is much clumsier

Scottish Communion flagon. Seventeenth century.

than the tappit hen and should never be confused with the Scottish piece. The tappit hen was a vessel for measuring liquor throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and part of the nineteenth centuries. It was made in various sizes, always in pewter, sometimes in sets of three or five, but the "true" tappit hen held one Scottish pint—equal to three English pints. In appearance it is a tall lidded measure, delightfully proportioned, with a longish curved waist ending in straight sides. There are two types — the crested variety, which has a small knob on the lid, and the earlier uncrested variety, with a flat cover.

Curiously enough, the crested kind of pewter tappit hen, though it belongs to a later period, is more rare than the uncrested. An interesting feature of the tappit hen is the "plouk," a small protruding point of metal like a blister or pimple just inside the neck of the measure. This served to indicate the point below which the liquor must not come for full measure. The " true " tappit hen stands about eleven inches high, though there are one or two larger " hens " and several that are smaller. Comparatively easy to find, this is one of the most popular Scottish measures.

Another is the dainty little Thistle measure, and although this is by no means an early piece —it is late eighteenth or early nineteenth century—it was not long in circulation and examples are hard to come by. Because of its curved shape a certain amount of liqour could be left in the fold of the sides, and thus the measure given was not exact. On that account the thistle measure was condemned. Another piece ascribed to Scotland is the double-ended spirit measure, which is made like a double egg-cup, the larger end holding half a gill and the smaller a quarter gill. Pot-bellied measures, which were made chiefly in Aberdeenshire, are extremely graceful. The body starts with a slight inward curve, and billows out before curving in again towards the straight base. These measures are found in sets of four, ranging in capacity from a pint down to a gill, and they are sometimes seen with lids, sometimes without. When lids exist they are usually rounded and slightly raised; thumb-pieces and handles vary in design. Pear-shaped measures are lidded and were made both in Edinburgh and in Glasgow. They, too, are to be had in graded sets. In all Scottish lidded measures the thumb-piece, which projects upwards from the handle and on which the thumb rests when the lid is to be raised, should be studied, as it is often informative of age and locality. The " ball " thumb-piece is found only on the Scottish baluster measure, and the " shell" thumb-piece is common to measures made in Edinburgh and Glasgow. The difference between the measures of these two cities is found in the lid.

Early reeded pewter plate.

In Glasgow measures there is a domed lid, either single or double. In Edinburgh measures the cover has sloping concave sides. Handles are always interesting, and some differ considerably from their English prototypes. The handle which on English pewter has a fish-tail terminal appears on Scottish pieces either with a blunt or as a rudimentary split end. Perhaps it is because of Scotland's reputation for thrift that Scottish pewter is invariably of a high quality. An article on Scottish pewter would not be complete without some mention of the smallest pieces of all—Communion tokens. It is frequently assumed that these tiny squares, which guaranteed admission to the Sacrement, are purely Scottish in origin, but this is not so. They were common throughout the Reformed Churches of France as early as 1560, and were used in the Walloon Church, Amsterdam, in 1586. Calvin tried to introduce them in Geneva in 1561, but his suggestion was not adopted till 1605, and records show that they were in use at St. Saviour's Church, Southwark, in 1559.

2nd. November, 1953.

The Editor,
"Antique Dealer & Collectors' Guide",
92, Fleet Street, E.C. 2.

Dear Sir,

I feel the occasion should not be allowed to pass to draw attention to one or two errors and mis-statements in the article on Scottish Pewter, by Miss Sheila Stuart, in your October issue.

Miss Stuart illustrates an obvious and well-known type of Irish Flagon, of the late 18th. century, which she describes as " a Scottish Communion Flagon, of the 17th. century".

Such a glaring error should not be allowed to pass uncorrected if only for the benefit of beginners in collecting who are inclined to read and believe everything they read in a journal such as your own.

Miss Stuart falls into another error in recording that "the ball thumbpiece is found only on Scotish baluster measu

The ball thumbpiece is found on English baluster measu of a much earlier period. It is possible that Miss Stuart quoted from the late Ingleby Wood's "Old Scottish Pewterware Pewterers", in which the author states that this is purely a Scottish feature. The fact is, of course, that much more is known of the derivation of types nowadays than was the case 1902, when that book was written.

I am interested to note that Miss Stuart describes the spouted pot in her first illustration as Scottish, and it wo

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be of assistance to me to know upon what grounds she makes the attribution, for, to judge by the type alone, there is ~~XXXXXXX~~ little or nothing to enable one to asign it even to the Bristish Isles.

Yours sincerely,

at Crieff Hydro,
Crieff,
Perthshire.
7th November, 1953.

Ronald F. Michaelis, Esq.
35, Park Hall road,
West Dulwich,
London, S.E.21.

Dear Sir,

The Editor of Collectors' Guide has sent on the letter you wrote him regarding my article on Scottish Pewter which appeared in the October issue.

It is very good of you to have troubled to write and to have drawn my attention to certain statements in the article. I am in particular interested to learn that the ball thumb-piece is not found only on Scottish baluster measures, but also on English balusters of a much earlier period. As you surmise Ingleby Wood is my authority for Scottish pewter and I am sorry that on this point his knowledge ~~on this~~ has been added to since 'Old Scottish Pewter ware and Pewterers' was writte

Regarding your query about the illustrations I can only say that I consulted an expert on old Scottish pewter and I cannot understand how there has been a mistake in the identification. Unfortunately it is not easy for me to deal fully with this point. I am convalescing after a serious illness - a Coronary Thrombosis - and for a period I am separated from my books of reference. Nevertheless I am grateful to you for having written. I take considerable pains to be accurate and I regret that this time I appear to have slipped up.

Yours sincerely,

Sheila Stuart.

(Mrs Howard Baker.)
To which please address any correspondence.