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by Sheila Stuart



Scottish quach bearing two sets of initials, probably indicating that it was owned by husband and wife

Old Scots

Pewter Worth Seeking

THE history of old Scottish pewter is unusual; it was a craft so skilled that even the early pewterers were more than able to hold their own with workmen of other countries.

Both in England and Scotland the trade was very strictly supervised. The work of the early pewterers was governed by the Pewterers Guild, and before the finished goods could be offered for sale the pewter alloy had to be tested by standards kept at the Pewterers Hall for that purpose.

No man was recognised as a trained workman until he had served a full term of apprenticeship and, apart from apprentices, no pewterer could employ workmen who were not freemen of the Guild. Other rules laid down by the Guild stated that workmen might not work at night; this was partly because of the resulting noise, and also because it was held that good work could not be performed in the poor artificial light of those early days. In addition workshops were inspected regularly.

Those rules not only ensured a high standard of workmanship, but customers were sure of an official guarantee that the pewter supplied would be of excellent quality. Such careful attention to production encouraged better working conditions for the employees and this in turn increased the financial success of the business, which was a vital and flourishing industry long after it reached Scotland.

Pewter had been made in England for about a century and a half earlier. There was a Guild of Pewterers in London before 1348, but it was not

till 1496 that the "peudrars" were mentioned in the records of the Hammermen of Edinburgh.

The pewterers of Glasgow were members of the Incorporation of Hammermen along with other workers in metal, such as goldsmiths, silversmiths, and brass founders. In order to become a member of this Incorporation workmen anxious to join had to produce an "essay" or test piece. According to records those "essays" included such articles as a basin, a stoving pan, spoons, a "bonatt" (helmet) and a tavern piece, as well as a decanter, a communion cup and a flagon. The purpose of making test pieces was to protect the high quality of pewter.

From earliest times the marking of pewter was compulsory, but gradually the introduction of pottery, earthenware, iron and other alternative substances—not including china, which was not in use in Scotland until the 18th century—made it increasingly difficult to enforce this rule. Nevertheless, owing to the strictness of the English and Scottish regulations, pewter acquired a reputation not surpassed anywhere.

In 1503 an Act of Parliament made it compulsory for the metal to be stamped with the maker's name; a year later another Act ordered the registration of such marks or "touches". By means of such markings the age and maker may be determined but too much importance should not be attached to "touches", for while it is always satisfactory to own, say, a plate with the Guild mark—a rose and a crown—or with a capital X, which is a proof of quality, a large proportion of old pewter is not marked at all.



Example of a Pirley Pig in which 17th century Scots children kept their pocket money

Early Scottish pewter included dishes and plates; the two terms are not synonymous, the plate or trencher being the smaller. It was about ten inches in diameter and food was eaten directly from it, while the larger dishes or chargers were used to convey the food from kitchen to dining room.

At first both dishes and plates were circular but by the end of the 17th century dishes began to be oval, as this was considered a better shape for meats, game and rabbit. While there are exceptions, old Scottish plates are usually plain and they are flattish with a moulded rim. Etched surfaces with scrolls and figures are more likely to indicate a Continental origin.

By the end of the 17th century there was a fairly extensive market for church pewter, for kirks that had lost their finer ecclesiastical pieces at the time of the Reformation could not afford gold or silver and therefore replaced their losses with pewter. In the Glasgow Clapperton collection there is a considerable amount of Glasgow-made pewter, including flagons, some flat lidded, others crested, and also communion cups. Very few of those church specimens, however, have survived.

Tavern pieces are much more numerous. Among these are mugs, jugs and a great variety of measures, some with lids and some without, some with handles and others having none. Most notable of all Scots measures is the Tappit Hen. This was used from the 16th to the 19th century to contain liquor. It is an elegant lidded piece, standing about eleven inches high; it has a graceful handle with a hinged thumb piece, and a cover which may be crested though it is more frequently flat.

But it is the smaller drinking measures which are the cream of old Scots pewter. Though a considerable amount of domestic ware was produced, such as sugar sifters, ink stands, pepper pots, loving cups with two handles, posset cups and 18th century cellars standing on lion-shaped feet, typical of the period, the measures are more popular and in greater demand.

In searching for these attention should be paid to detail. Consider the type of thumb piece on lidded measures. The thumb piece is the upward

projection from the lid which acts as a lever to open it and its design may indicate the locality where it was made. The thumb ball piece is found only on the Scots baluster measure, while the shell thumb piece appears on both the Edinburgh and Glasgow varieties.

There are, however, slight differences in the lids of these measures. The Edinburgh lids have sloping concave sides, while those made in Glasgow have a domed lid, either single or double. Baluster measures always have flat circular lids and with the exception of the Scots flagon, where the lid has a very slightly raised centre, they are the only measures possessing this feature.

Certain types of handles are peculiar to Scottish measures. One has a blunt end and another a rudimentary split end. If these had formed part of an English piece they would have had a fishtail terminal.

As its name suggests, the thistle measure is exclusively Scottish. Though by no means an early piece, dating from about 1800, it is now very rare and hard to find, for it was condemned after a short life because of its design. Its thistle shape, with a sort of pocket at the base, made it almost impossible to drain completely when drinking. Consequently customers complained of short measure.

Complete sets of measures are delightful acquisitions; they may be straight, sloping or barrel-sided. One of the most coveted of the smaller pieces is the quaich. Fashioned like a deep saucer with two side pieces or lugs as handles, it is like a small porringer and is now extremely rare.

Mention should also be made of the Pirley Pig of Dundee, one of the most interesting pieces of Scottish pewter. Its accepted function was that of a child's money box and it was not always of pewter. When first made about the end of the 16th century it was of crockery, hence the term "pig". An historic early specimen, now in the Royal Scottish Museum of Edinburgh and dated 1602, is of crockery, cushion shaped, a few inches in diameter and with a crude decoration of a shield on which a stylised vase with lilies is impressionistically sketched.



Two rare 17th century Scottish measures. Photographs by courtesy of John Bell, Aberdeen