

EVOLUTION OF A PEWTER PLATE

From Treen Slabs to Winchester School Trenchers : Types in Metal and Wood that Coincided : A Rare Rectangular Plate of 1500

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It has been remarked of me: "I can't think what he finds to write about: a Pewter plate is a Pewter plate, and a tankard is a tankard and—well—that's that!"

Just so, but that is *not* that, it's only a fraction of it. The first part of the statement is true enough, for a Pewter plate is a Pewter plate, and so on, but that is by no means all one has to say about it.

To begin with, there are dozens of types, but space forbids their mention here in detail and I must confine my attention to my title and endeavour to tell you how we got some of the earliest of them from our ancestors. In short, I'm going to try to make interesting a *whole article*, on *one aspect* alone, of the Pewter plate, leaving tankards for future occasions!

In using the word *plate*, I refer to that particular article which was personal to the consumer and from which he actually partook of his food, as opposed to the *dish*, upon which such food was conveyed to the serving table and from which each guest's portion was transferred to his own plate. The difference is essential, because dishes were in use for a very long time before the individual-plate first made its appearance.

The Romans have left behind them many examples of pewter dishes which now find homes in our public and private collections, but the earliest plates of which we have knowledge are of a considerably later period. Man, in his earliest stages, required but little in the form of "table appointments," for he was as yet untouched by the appeal of bodily comforts; he had no table, and the floor was his chair or, maybe, a pile of skins against the wall of his hut. After hacking away a portion from the joint or carcase in the cooking pot, he proceeded to devour it from his fingers, and, no doubt, found it equally appetising, quite as nourishing, and better for his teeth than is the case in this twentieth century, with all its vaunted higher civilisation and refinement.

With the advent of tables, some greater show of manners became essential, and here we get the first suggestion of a plate, which took the form of a

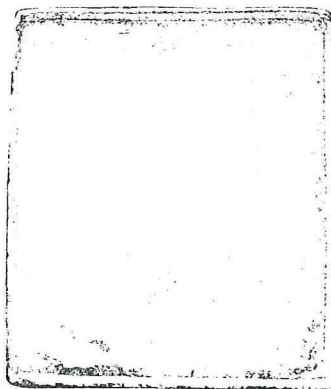


Fig. 2 left.—A very rare plate; date c. 1500. It is formed of a dead flat rectangle of pewter, size $5\frac{1}{2}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ ins.; around the outer upper edge runs a shallow inverted "U" section moulding.

(Reproduction by courtesy of Mr. H. C. Gallois, Curator of the Gemeente Museum, the Hague.)

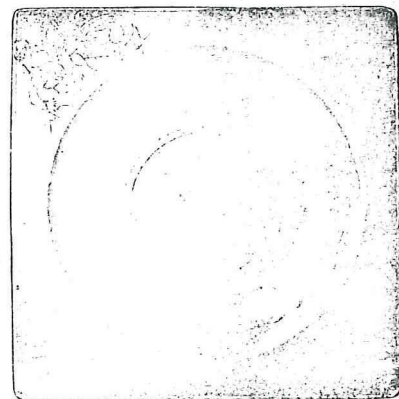


Fig. 3 Right.—A rare pewter plate dated 1607.

(Reproduced by courtesy of Mr. Elemér von Varju, Director of the Hungarian National Museum at Budapest.)

square slab of wood (or Treen), upon which, to absorb the savoury meat juices, slices of bread were placed, and upon which, in turn, the meat was negotiated with the fingers and knife, for forks were as yet unborn.

The meal being over, these treen slabs were washed and scraped, and the continual scraping tended in time to form a depression in the centre, the advantages of which were so soon apparent that we find the succeeding type *made with* an intentional central depression, and sometimes with a smaller one in one of the spandrels, for salt or other condiment.

Before proceeding further, I should like to refer to a most interesting series of coloured pictures by the late Mr. A. Forestier—"Meats and Manners of Bygone Days"—which appeared in the Christmas Number (1930) of the *Illustrated London News*, in which the artist has depicted many customs and details well worthy of closest study, including the Bread on Treen Slabs, Fingers before Forks, the Common Porringer, etc.

EVOLUTION OF A PEWTER PLATE—(continued)

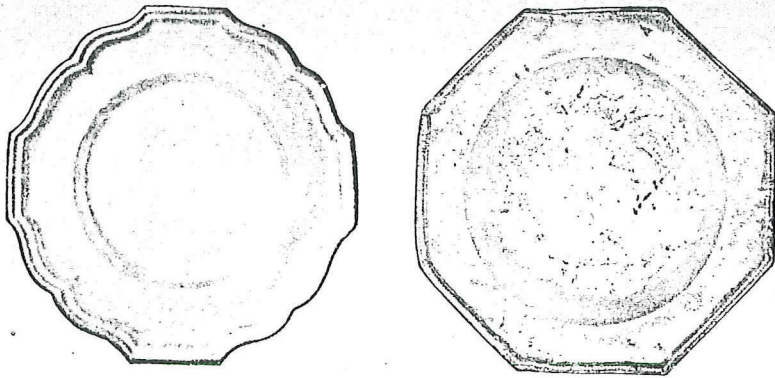


Fig. 5 Left—A pewter plate with cupid's bow treatment of the corners, made by Sebaldus Rupprecht of Augsburg, c. 1720, now in the collection of Mr. Robert M. Vetter of Amsterdam.

Fig. 6 Right—An octagonal plate made by Richard Pitt of London, c. 1755, in the collection of Mrs. Carvick Webster, of Monkton.

One cannot, of course, "speak from wide experience," but the cutting up of one's meat on bread rendered soppy with gravy, must—at best—have been a "messy" business, and one can therefore readily appreciate how eagerly the *welled* plate must have been welcomed.

In my first illustration—Fig. 1—from examples in the collection of Mr. Oliver Baker, of Stratford-on-Avon, four Treen plates of various dates are shown. Of the two square examples, which are the earliest, the one on the right is the earlier of the two, possibly mediæval. The well is so shallow as almost to suggest it might have been created in the course of scraping, though it is too symmetrical to admit of the suggestion. The smaller depression in the angle is also apparent.

The more elaborated development of these features is well seen in the later example on the left, the diameter of both pieces being $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches. (The two central plates are described under Fig. 4, where similar ones are illustrated in the series of later examples).

Against the earlier square Treen plate one can place a pewter example dating from 1500, by courtesy of Mr. H. C. Gallois, Curator of the Gemente Museum, the Hague; Fig. 2. This wonderfully rare relic, which is almost unique, is formed of a dead flat rectangle of pewter, $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches, around the outer upper edge of which runs a very shallow inverted "U" section moulding. Patches of the heavy black incrustation with which it once was covered, still adhere to the surface in places, an added testimony to its age, as also is the fine early crowned Rose mark at the top.

Against the later Treen example, I am able to show, in Fig. 3, another excessively rare pewter one, dated 1607, from a photograph most kindly supplied by Mr. Elemér von Varju, Director of the Hungarian National Museum at Budapest. One will hunt over many fields before happening upon the duplicates of these two pieces, and I count myself extremely fortunate that I am able to place their existence on record as the descendants of the earlier Treen examples. Fig. 4 shows three pairs

of plates of differing types, one of each in Pewter and Treen, *a*, *c*, and *e*, being the pewter ones, and their ages in the same order, c.1725, c.1750, and c.1675. These are all English, and in the collection of my friend Mr. Walter Churcher, of Bedford Park. They tend to show how almost exactly the types coincided in the metal and wood.

Some indication of the hold which tradition can exercise upon the mind is found in the reversion, from time to time, to earlier forms, and we see the idea of the old rectangular shape budding out once more in such examples as are illustrated in Figs. 5 and 6, which are nothing more than squares with the corners removed; in the one instance to be replaced by a Cupid's-bow treatment, and in the other by transformation into an octagon. Fig. 5 was made by Sebaldus Rupprecht, of Augsburg, c.1720, and is in the collection of my continental collaborator, Mr. Robert M. Vetter, of Amsterdam, and Fig. 6 shows a piece by Richard Pitt, of London, c.1755, now in the collection of Mrs. Carvick Webster, of Monkton.

The use of Treen trenchers and platters was discontinued in our English Royal Household in the latter part of the XVIIth century; they are—or were until recently—in use at Winchester School, and Mr. Vetter tells me that meat is still frequently served on Treen trenchers and platters on the continent.

Probably the latest "hanger-on" of the Treen-trencher-family as an English household god today, is to be seen in the white-wood bread boards which still find a place in nearly every home, and—so far as one can foresee—still have a long and useful life ahead.

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