

SOME PEWTER VESSELS

NN (John Steel and Diana Thorpe-redactie)

In a Society of Arts paper dated 1894 it was pointed out that it was difficult to define the exact range of alloys to which the name Pewter should be applied.

"The proportions are so variable that it is scarcely possible to exclude any (metal) in which tin forms the bulk, where the result is a darkish silvery soft metal fusible at a low temperature"

In addition to tin, pewter can consist of either lead or antimony copper and bismuth, and any number of trace metals which have been included due to the impurity of the main ingredients. There are about 25 alloys of pewter, some were made for specific purposes, such as plates, pipe organs or spoons, while others varied for reasons of fashion or location. The identification of pewter therefore presents problems. Any attempt to find positive means of identification in old books on the subject leaves one with the impression that the means do not justify the ends. Cutting with a knife identifies pure tin by the characteristic protest that it utters; bent it emits a 'cri'. The application of a hot iron establishes the breeding of the piece by the whiteness of the scar. Another assault consisted of hacking off 1/8 oz from various parts and dissolving them in nitric acid to obtain a precipitate of tin, followed by sulphuric acid to release the lead content. Any fragments that remained could be used as pencils to establish the existence of lead.

While no doubt these tests are valid, we much preferred the humane method adopted by the pewter collector we were fortunate enough to visit. He suggested that the novice should learn to identify pewter by the colour feel and design of the piece. The colour should be a mellow, pearly grey, usually pock marked. Over a period of years, tin oxidises and forms tin oxide in small blemishes on the surface. Pieces which have not been cleaned for a period of years are covered with a black coating of tin oxide known as 'scale'. The texture of old polished pewter is hard and smooth and like old brass handles on antique furniture gives the impression that constant rubbing has formed a soft skin or patination. There are also usually a number of irregular minor dents due to age, although perfect pieces do exist, but these should not, of course, be confused with the regular marks of modern beaten pewter.

Most pewter vessels and plates were cleaned or worked on a lathe and the marks are visible, though sometimes only faintly, due to constant cleaning over a long period of time. Solder was used to join together parts of a piece and make repairs, here, too, constant polishing and use have taken away any sharp contrast between pewter and solder that originally existed.

During the early period of pewter making the pewter makers were formed into guilds and strict control was exercised by the officials of the guild over the methods and prices of the pewter makers.

Gradually the art of the pewterer became more widespread and the guild system broke down; the touch marks, which showed the quality of pewter, became a less reliable guide. It would be tempting to draw a comparison between pewter touch marks and silver hall marks, but whereas silver marks were protected by law from an early date, it was not until the Victorian period that government verification marks became a legal requirement.

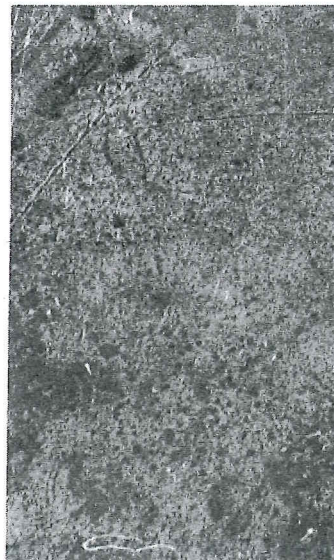


Figure 1.
Chemical action
of oxygen in the
air and tin pro-
duces pock marks
of tin oxide.

Generally makers' marks are not forged on old pieces. If the touch mark of a maker is on an old piece and is shown in W. Cottrell it is unlikely that it is a fake. The marks of rare makers do not result in a premium being paid for a piece, nor are there fashionable makers. There is no equivalent in pewter of Hester Bateman in silver.

Makers' marks are forged on new fakes but these are dull coloured and obviously new. Once a collector has seen the original he is unlikely to be taken in by modern fakes. Time is always the enemy of the faker and the fakes (or reproductions) that are commonly available have not been finished on the lathe as old pieces.



A variety of pewter which is not appreciated by the purist is Britannia Metal, an alloy which replaced the old type of pewter in early Victorian times. It is now generally agreed that the names and numbers of such makers as Dixon, Kirby Smith, Holdsworth, Parker Welstenholme, Ashberry, Broadhead and Atkins and Boulton stamped on the underside of the piece is a sure sign of Britannia Metal. Vickers is, however, thought to have made some pewter. The price of the Britannia Metal is low, tea pots for example tend to vary in price according to age. The small early pots cost about £7 while later ones, ornate and with unattractive shapes are still in the £2 - £3 bracket. Because Britannia Metal contains tin it also tends to oxidise but the scale on Britannia Metal does not flake off in the same way as it does on pewter; from which it can almost be chipped off with the thumb. A most interesting article on Britannia Metal appears in the Club's first Year Book.

Left: Figure 2. Maker's mark or touch of Robert Joupe on a plate.

Above: Figure 3. The verification mark of Robert Victoria on a beaker

Once the pewter collector has established that a piece is made of pewter, interest centres on the design or style which, in conjunction with the makers touch mark, is a guide to the age of the piece.

The area of the country in which a piece was made has an effect on design for once a design became accepted in a particular area it persisted for a considerable time until some new design, often silver design, ousted it from favour. Our fourth illustration shows three designs which existed over a long period of time and are clearly identifiable as belonging to one particular area. The left hand piece was made in Glasgow, it is pear shaped with a single domed lid, the next belongs to Edinburgh and the right hand piece is of typical Irish 'harvester' design. These measures can still be bought for between £8 - £12 in good condition. New collectors should be on the



Figure 4. Three Celtic designs of lidded tankards, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Irish.

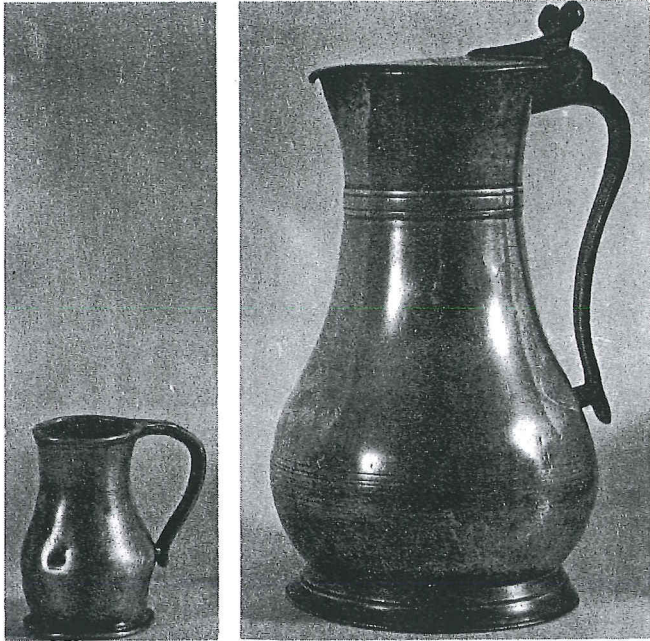


Figure 5. Jersey and Guernsey too have different designs. look out for modern fgeries of the Irish harvester for these have attracted considerable attention.

Some readers may be surprised by the fact that two areas such as Glasgow and Edinburgh which lie relatively close together should have different designs. Another example of this unusual feature of pewter collecting is shown in figure 5. The left hand piece is a Jersey noggin of the late eighteenth century valued at between £6 - £10. The right hand piece is a Guernsey quart of pot bellied baluster design dated about 1750. This is worth £25 - £30. This

piece has a separate base which is soldered onto the body of the piece, it also has a twin acorn thumb piece.

Although we quote prices for individual pieces it must be stressed that prices do tend to vary more in pewter collecting than in many other subjects. This is particularly true of earlier pieces, where the supply is short and the views of individual collectors can have a marked effect at auction. Price is affected by size, generally small and large measures, being rarer than the medium size pieces, command a higher price, this comes about again due to the relatively large supply of medium size pieces.

The effect of time on design is well illustrated by some more examples of lidded measures which show the change in style which occurred over a period of 100 years. From left to right are an early 18th century baluster with bud thumb piece, valued at about £20 to £30; a late 18th century baluster with "double volute" thumb piece, about £20 to £25, and an early 19th century measure of similar shape to many still in use today, this is priced most commonly in the £4 to £7 bracket.

Flagons

A canon of the reformed Church of England dated 1603 required that the communion wine should be "brought to the communion table in a clean sweet standing pot or stoupe of pewter if not of purer metal".

It is reasonable, therefore, to date the start of church flaggons from the earliest part of the 17th



Figure 6. A hundred years of design.



Figure 7. A muffin lidded tankard of 1630

The flaggon had, however, existed for some considerable time before this date though examples are practically unknown. Indeed, many of them bear the names of donors or the deceased which they were presented to commemorate. Contemporary inscriptions enhance the piece and if interesting by reason of name or locality might increase the value considerably. The flaggon continued in favour until shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century. Inscriptions added to a piece at a later date will, however, reduce the value severely.

Our first illustration of a flaggon is dated about 1630 and belongs to the reign of Charles I. It has a hat shaped or 'muffin' lid. The handle is bold and heavy and the whole piece has a splendid solid appearance, the value of the piece is over £150. To the non-pewter collector it appears to differ only slightly from the extremely rare earlier piece which has a bun shaped lid and a convex curve at the point where the lid and body meet.

The ornamentation applied to the basic design continued to increase until by 1760 the flaggon had become a more elaborate affair as illustrated by figure 8. The top now has an ornate finial and the handle has acquired an ogee or 'broken' shape, the lid has a raised and shaped dome and the prominence of the thumb piece has declined, the value is about £50 to £75.



Figure 8. A flaggon of 1760



Figure 9. A Scottish flaggon of about 1769



Figure 10. Two early lidded tankards with attractive thumb pieces

Figure 9 shows an elegant Scottish flagon of about 1780 although this design was popular throughout the eighteenth century, the approximate date quoted is suggested by the fact that earlier examples are normally somewhat thinner in the body. An interesting feature is the big bi-cusped thumb piece, the shape resembling a sycamore seed. There is something particularly pleasing about the restraint of the design, the boldness of the thumb piece and handle which is reminiscent of earlier examples of English design. The value of this piece is in the £40 to £100 bracket, the higher figure being paid for the earlier examples.

Tankards

Tankards have always been very popular and early tankards of 1650 with wriggle work engraving and decorated and fretted rims appear in the London

sale rooms only three or four times a year and command prices in the £400 plus range. This may seem expensive until one realises that similar silver pieces realise £6,000 or so. Our first two examples date from about 1680 and about 1710/1720 respectively. The left hand earlier example has a very thick handle and an attractive ramshorn thumbpiece. The lid is flat and the rim farthest from the handle is serrated. It is a particularly attractive piece which would fetch £250 to £300. The tankard on the right is of early 18th century design, though similar examples date from the end of the 17th century. It has a high domed lid and a cap and bell decorated thumbpiece. The handle does not have quite the same boldness as the earlier example but, even so, it is of very substantial proportions. The price of this piece is considered to be in the £75 to £95 range.



Figure 11. A lid of 1690 - 1720 and on the right another of the period after 1720



Figure 12. Although a late example this tankard retains a simple style

Our next illustration is a close-up photograph showing the lids of two tankards. The first is from the last example and shows the high domed lid in fashion between 1690 and 1720, the second is also high domed but is a later form of this design which came into fashion about 1720 and continued in vogue until the late part of the 18th century. The price is significantly affected by this feature for whereas the former was in the £75 to £95 bracket, the latter is considered to be in the region of £50 to £60.

A later stage of the antique pewter tankard is illustrated as no. 12. This style started toward the end of the 18th century and continued until late Victorian times. The sides are straight and the tail of the handle is flush with the body. The moulding at the base is less pronounced. It is lightened in weight and generally lacks the uncompromising forthrightness of the pieces made a hundred years previously. The body of this example is, however, well proportioned and restrained, it is a good example and was probably made in the early years of the nineteenth century. Its value is about £9 to £12. Other examples of tankards are illustrated in figure 13; from left to right they are a tulip shaped piece of about 1730-1740, valued between £40 and £50, these are more common than the straight sided pieces in the lidded form. They are also being made at the present moment but can be easily recognised once one has examined the real thing, for the modern



Figure 13. Various shapes of tankards covering a hundred years of design

reproduction - one can hardly call it a fake - looks very new. The middle tankard is of an uncommon date - about 1760; note the substantial handle with the curve away from the body at the base. Finally the small measure dated 1830 with the ornately designed 'broken' handle similar to that shown on the flagon in figure 8.

Our final example in this section dealing with tankards is a very special item which is described as a lidded tavern pot. It is a delightful design and colour and stands out even among this fascinating collection. It was made in approximately 1680 and is one of possibly only two or three in existence. Despite this it is probably only worth £250 to £300 as it is not of a recognised type, not having been illustrated in standard textbooks and hence acquired the glamour associated with much publicity.

Although unmistakably early, the good balanced design makes it in our view preferable to the squatter, heavier tankards so much sought after. It is impossible to reproduce in any photograph the superb glow that this piece disseminates.

A number of ornate foreign guild tankards exist but the average English collector does not rate these very highly, unlike collectors of an earlier generation, so that they tend to go abroad.

Pewter collecting we find has the same problems that beset other branches of collecting. It is difficult to find early pieces and the prices are rising rapidly. Those of us who visit antique shops regularly become used to seeing no pewter other than the little bar measures similar to those in use in bars. It is not until one has the privilege of seeing and handling a collection of the type we illustrate that one realises what real pewter looks like.



Figure 14. Without doubt our favourite. Shape, age, rarity and colour combine to make a most desirable specimen

It is a warmer colour than silver and harmonises beautifully with the old oak dresser and beams of Tudor houses. In this article we have only touched on one aspect of collecting pewter and even here it has not been practical to illustrate all the examples that exist. We hope that if readers are interested in this subject to publish a further article at a later date.

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For Collectors

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