

EXA

An English pewter collection

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COLLECTING ANTIQUE PEWTER in England is not easy; sometimes one feels that the native product has all gone abroad. In the 1930's there were many antique metal shops whose *décor* was dust and cobwebs (how much more attractive they were to collectors than the glossy shops of today!) and there was always the hope of discovering a real treasure. Lack of cash, time, and mobility kept my early efforts to a minimum, but intensive study resulted in first one excellent find and then another—and a collector was blooded. Some of the results of the ensuing thirty-five years of activity are shown here.

I recently inspected all known Romano-British pewter plates and hollow ware, some two hundred pieces, primarily to establish a datable series of rim types. This was futile, as dating evidence is extremely scarce: most specimens first reappear wrapped round the sharp end of a plow. However, the survey developed into total research, published in the *Proceedings* of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (Vol. LX, 1967, pp. 19-37). Among many interesting facts this study established is the near certainty that the alloy pewter evolved under the Romans when they copied silverware in the tin of Cornwall. Accidentally or nefariously the tin was debased with lead, which proved easier to work than tin alone and more durable. The proportion of tin to lead varied wildly. Pieces are known with such extremes as 99.2 to 0.8 and 43 to 57, but the ratio 80 to 20 (very roughly) became normal. The majority of known pieces have been found in the Norfolk, Suffolk, and Cambridgeshire fen and fen edge of East Anglia (Fig. 1).

With the collapse of the Roman civilization and trade, manufacture of pewter in England apparently died. We

do not know of it again until the twelfth- or thirteenth-century sepulchral chalices appear. A remarkable find is the bowl depicted in Figure 2, which is probably the earliest complete piece of native English pewter extant (the sepulchral chalices found when monks' graves are disturbed are all fragmentary). This bowl is in nearly perfect condition, although it is heavily oxidized. Because it is archaeologically so important I have not thought it wise to clean it. One deduces its function as a font bowl from its depth, the scratches down the side caused by sliding it up and down over the stone font and its state of preservation, protected in the cup of the font. The remarkable feature is the decoration round the rim. One must think of this piece in terms of twelfth-century rural perpetuation of traditional design, probably from the Celtic region.

My interest in any category wanes as its early period draws to a close; for plates this is about 1700. In its simplicity and dignity the "bumpy-bottom" type (Fig. 3 left) is particularly pleasing. So indeed is the rare triple-groove (not triple-reed) dish (right). A dish showing slightly more enterprising design is that with punched decoration around the broad rim, a late continuation of a Tudor style (center). A particularly interesting wriggled broad-rim plate (Fig. 4) is by TH of London, Number 17 on the London touch plates. This appears to be Thomas Haward (or Howard) who was fined for not serving as steward warden in 1671. The plate is inscribed, in English and Latin, *Honour is the reward of virtue 1671*.

Spoons are a fascinating form of pewterware, excellently discussed by F. G. Hilton Price in his pioneering



Fig. 1. Romano-British plate, c. 350 A. D.; diameter 15½ inches. All illustrations are from the author's collection; photographs by Michael Vesey Associates. Code numbers refer to Cotterell, *Old Pewter, Its Makers and Marks* (London, 1929).



Fig. 2. Font bowl, twelfth or thirteenth century (?); diameter 15½ inches; no mark. Decorated around the rim with fantastic beasts, strapwork, stylized flowers, and buckles, in Anglo-Saxon chip carving, a treatment earlier than the medieval wriggling and, in fact, unique on pewter; stippled background. The base of the bowl has lightly traced arcs and circles as a guide for further decoration.

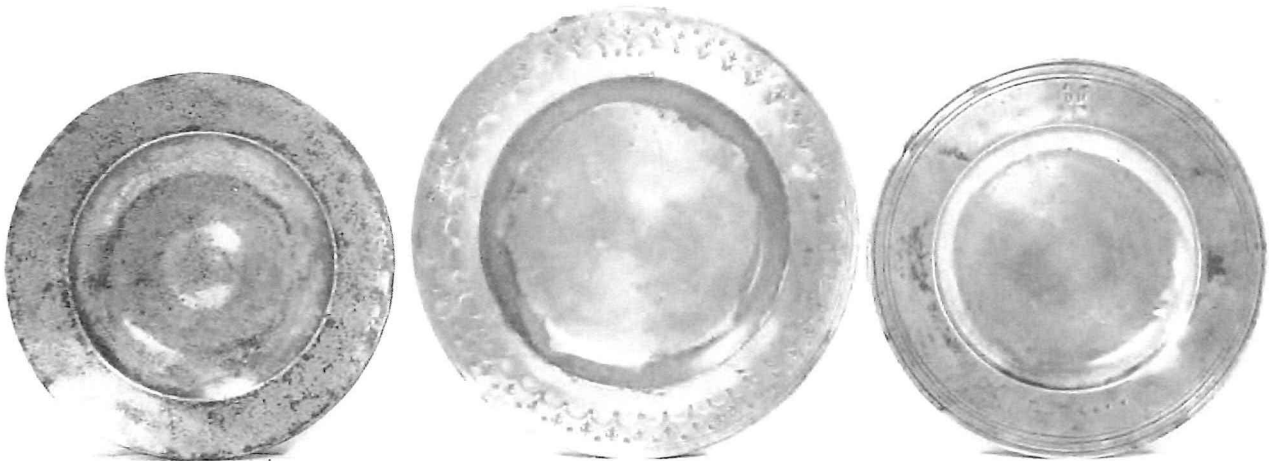


Fig. 3. *Left to right:* "Bumpy-bottom" dish, c. 1620; diameter 17¼ inches; mark indecipherable. Dish with punched decoration, c. 1680; diameter 20½ inches; mark, P (?). Triple-groove dish, c. 1680; diameter 18¾ inches; by George Smith; O.P. 4347.



Fig. 4. Plate with wriggle-work decoration, c. 1671; diameter 9½ inches; mark, TH (Thomas Haward or Howard); O.P. 5683.

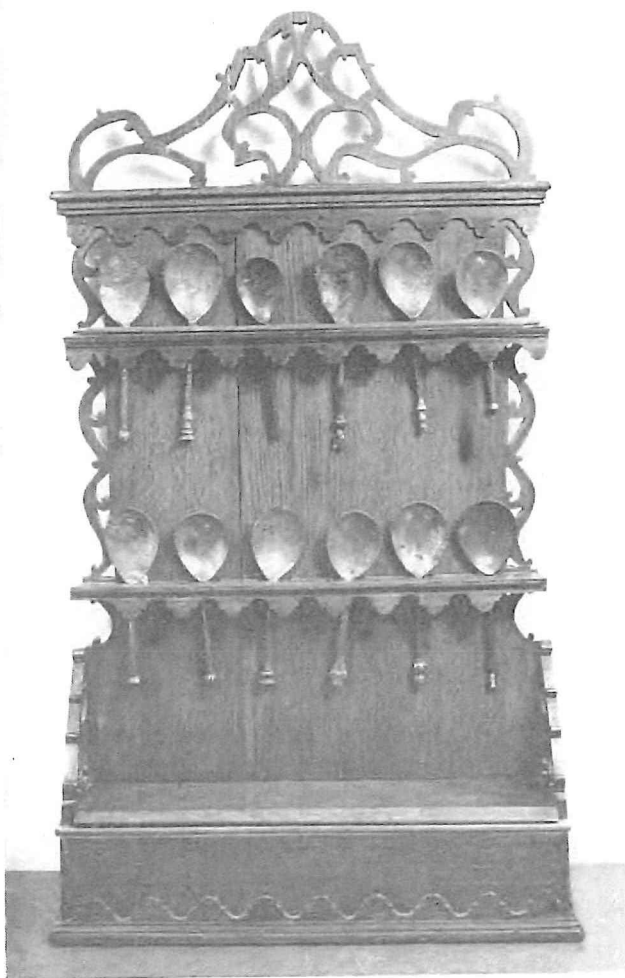
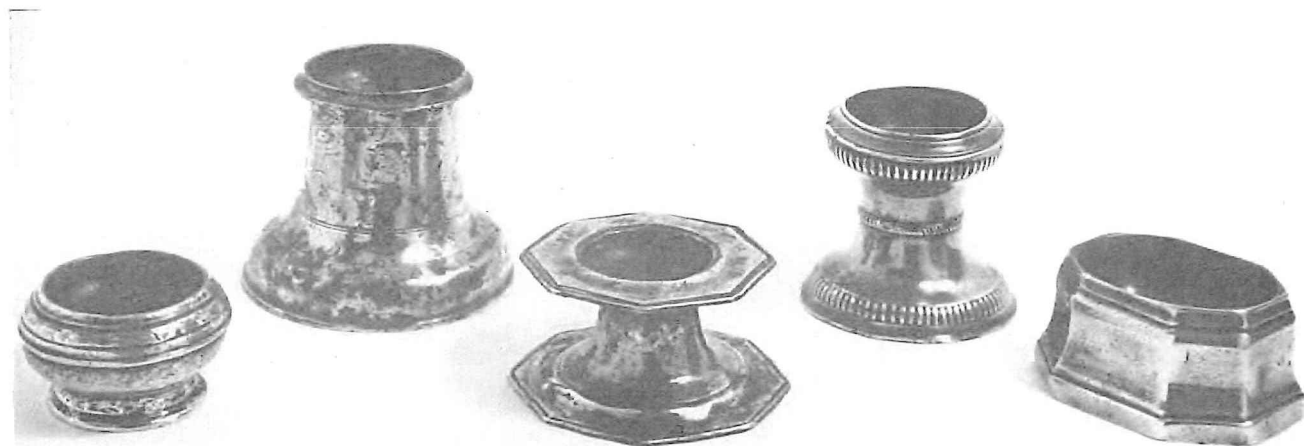


Fig. 5. Spoon rack, c. 1700; containing (left to right, top section): written-ball knop, c. 1450; gauntlet seal, c. 1600; stump end, c. 1400; horned headdress, c. 1450; lion sejant, c. 1560; lined ball, c. 1500; (lower section) peach-stone ball, c. 1520; melon, c. 1530; seal, c. 1550; alderman, c. 1620; maiden head, c. 1550; decorated slip top, c. 1520 (this bears bands of decoration at both top and bottom of stem, applied with the same punch).

Fig. 6. Salts. Left to right: Trencher, c. 1710; height 1½ inches; by G. Lowes of Newcastle; O.P. 2001. Base of bell salt, c. 1590; 3½ inches; mark, HW. Octagonal-collar salt, c. 1670; 1¾ inches; no mark. Gadrooned capstan, c. 1700; 2¾ inches; mark, TL. Octagonal trencher, c. 1715; 1¾ inches; no mark.



Old Base Metal Spoons (London, 1908). My collection contains examples of all save one of the types known to Price, and it has several not included in his study (Fig. 5). Because pewter is so soft and flexible it is a rather unserviceable alloy for spoons, and their use must have been confined to foods no stiffer than porridge. Pewter spoons were as personal possessions as toothbrushes are now; they were carried about and, fortunately for us, dropped. All old pewter spoons have been recovered from below—found in wells, drains, rivers, or accidentally dug up. The earliest appear to date from about 1400 and to have a thin four-sided stem. Later the stem becomes hexagonal. The fig-leaf bowl varies slightly but significantly in the next two hundred and fifty years. Spoons with a diamond or acorn knop seem to have been made throughout those two and a half centuries. Apostle spoons exist in pewter as well as in silver, but in most cases wear has made the cast emblems impossible to identify. The stump-end spoon is the only type with a stem that is circular in section and—excepting, of course, the slip top—with no knop. It is always small and, because of its tapering sides, easily distinguishable from the much more common and much later, heavier Dutch type. Almost all the knopped spoons are very rare indeed. The economy slip top came into use in Tudor times and is by far the most common type.

Salts are exceptionally rare in pewter. Styles changed quickly and salts were inexpensive, so they usually went to the pewterer to be melted down in part payment for new pieces. Perhaps the most interesting of the group shown here (Fig. 6, second from left), certainly the earliest, was found with a stone cannonball teed up in its cup, propping open the door of an antiques shop. It is Tudor and is the base of a bell salt which must have had two or even three sections above, in a lighthouse shape. It is exactly paralleled by the salts recovered from the Dutch Heemskirk expedition of 1596 and now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Another great rarity is the octagonal-collar salt (center). I know of one or possibly two other genuine examples, but specimens not more than fifty years old are to be seen, here and there.

Coeval with the salts are the candlesticks (Fig. 7). The bell-based one (center) is Tudor. I am convinced

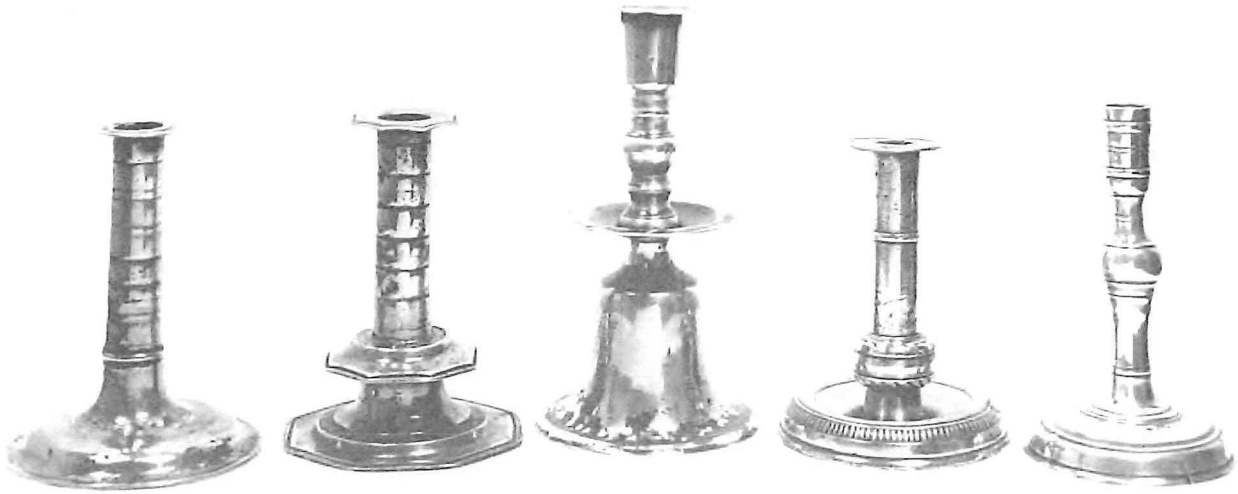


Fig. 7. Candlesticks. *Left to right*: Jacobean without drip pan, c. 1670; height 6½ inches to lip; mark, RB; O.P. 5452. Drip-pan or skirted candlestick, c. 1675; 6½ inches to lip; no mark. Bell base, c. 1590; 9 inches; no mark. Knopped stem, c. 1700; 5¾ inches; no mark. Newcastle type, c. 1720; 6½ inches; by G. Lowes; O.P. 3001.

that the only other one I know, in the Victoria and Albert Museum and often depicted, has been tapped to its present shape falsely to give the base a flat rim. The drip-tray and the knopped sticks illustrated with it are well-known glamor types, but there appears to be no fellow for the simpler, no-tray specimen at the left. There are very few English pewter candlesticks made between about 1710 and the late 1700's; the specimen at the right is one of four of that period in my collection, representing what was apparently a Northumberland specialty.

Spoons and salts, for their interesting variety and rarity, are perhaps my favorites, but their fascination is surely equaled by that of the sometimes chunky, sometimes slender, and sometimes delicate baluster measures (Figs. 8, 9, 10). The series must have run from about 1500 to about 1820 and was made only in pewter. Sired by the leather bottle, the baluster has a low center of gravity and narrow neck ensuring stability, while its graceful curves give it great strength. In the eighteenth century, a few examples were made without lids. The wedge type (Fig. 8, *left* and *center*), so called because of the simple attachment on the lid, *must* have borne a thumbpiece—a ball or a hammerhead. Every single lidded tankard, flagon, or measure has a large, imposing thumbpiece; is it reasonable to accept such a miserable leverage as the wedge would afford to stubby thumbs? Both of those illustrated bear house marks as well as touch marks—one (*center*) a bull, cast or branded in the base; the other (*left*) a Saracen's head struck thrice on the lid and once inside the lip. This measure has the initials TD in the house mark, and also punched on the lid. In the early seventeenth century the Saracen's Head at Dunmow, Essex, was kept by a family named Deane, but unfortunately there is no record of a Deane whose given name began with T. One of my first acquisitions (*right*) is a half pint with simple early lines and early touch; unfortunately, the lid and thumbpiece are missing.

It bears a rose-and-crown house mark on the underside of the base, almost obscured because the base has been tapped up, no doubt to reduce its contents—for which mine host at ye Rose and Crown may have had a spell in the stocks or an uncomfortable time at the whipping post.

The baluster with ball thumbpiece appears in several forms, and an early North Country type in my collection (Fig. 9, *left*) has an "anti-wobble" flange under the lid (as have the late Scottish balusters). Hammerhead balusters are most desirable (*center* and *right*), and therefore popular with the fakers. Genuine heavy hammers are very, very scarce; the thin hammers are less worrying.

The range of measures with bud thumbpieces (Fig. 10) shows a most pleasing variety of detail. Though all were supposed to conform to the official standard, they vary, unaccountably, in capacity. A particularly rare type of ball thumbpiece (*front row, left*) seems to have been used for the smallest measure in the bud set, as genuine eighth-pint buds are even rarer.

Flat-lid tankards (Fig. 11) without wriggling are much harder to find than decorated ones, but of course they do not have the same appeal. That shown (*left*) has a very unusual chrysalis-inspired thumbpiece, and the ram's horn (*right*) is one of the few pieces extant made in the county of Norfolk, where I live. It may have been used as a measure, for it bears the mark of proving in Queen Anne's reign. Lidless tankards are scarcer still; a magnificent specimen is shown in Figure 12.



Fig. 8. Wedge baluster measures. *Left to right:* Pint, c. 1600; height 5½ inches; marks, 1 (?) and Saracen's-head house mark. Pint, with initials B/WM, c. 1640; 7¾ inches; mark, DB (cf. O.P. 498B, 5416); the house mark, a bull, appears inside the base. Half pint (lost lid), sixteenth century; 4½ inches; mark, FE, and rose-and-crown house mark underneath the tapped-up base.



Fig. 9. Baluster measures. Pint ball, c. 1640; height 5½ inches; mark illegible; North Country. Half-pint hammerhead, c. 1700; 4¾ inches; mark, RP (?) with anchor. Pint hammerhead, c. 1690; 5¾ inches; mark illegible.



Fig. 10. Baluster measures in various body styles, c. 1690-c. 1750. Quart, pint, two half pints, gill, half gill, all with bud thumbpieces. The smallest (*left, front*) has a ball thumbpiece; by A. Hincham; stamped AR crowned, to show that the capacity was proved in Queen Anne's reign.



Fig. 11. Flat-lid tankards. *Left to right*: Chrysalis thumbpiece, c. 1685; height 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches to lip; mark, a male head in profile. Twin cusp, probably c. 1695; 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches; no mark. Ram's horn, c. 1690; 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; by Henry Seagood, King's Lynn; O.P. 4169; this piece bears also a check for capacity, AR crowned.

Church flagons present a sequence of swiftly changing styles (Figs. 13, 14, 15). In 1605 the churches were poor and most of their larger silver had probably been appropriated. At last they were officially allowed to use pewter for flagons, and then followed a stately series with few regional peculiarities. One individual expression is the example (Fig. 13, *second from left*) with cast decoration on thumbpiece and handle. Another (Fig. 13, *right*) is one of a pair by John Emes; about eight specimens by that maker are known, all with different thumbpiece designs. The so-called York acorn (Fig. 14, *right*) is a distinctive North Country type, and the straight-sided "York" flagon beside it, though perhaps made in York, appears to me to be more truly Lancastrian.

Do not always believe dates on pewter pieces. Although their presence, for no valid reason that I can see, enhances the price, they can mean many things—"I was put on last year," for instance. The flat-lid flagon shown in Figure 15 is inscribed *AD/1588*, which is obviously anachronistic; perhaps it marks the centenary of some episode, or it may be the date of donation of a flagon this one replaced. Another (*right*), the small spire top, bears its original inscription, truly dated 1719, and at the top a much later but equally honest one dated 1833.

The pieces shown here are only some of the more interesting specimens from a collection that has given me many years of fruitful quest—and is still growing.

Fig. 12. Lidless tavern pot, c. 1690; height 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches; by James Donne; O.P. 1415A. The inscription reads *John French, at the Rose and Crown in . . . Streete, Sofhoelds*. The initials *F/IE* appear on the handle.





Fig. 13. Seventeenth-century flagons. *Left to right*: c. 1610; height 8 inches to lip; no mark. Transitional flagon with cast decoration on front and back of thumbpiece and handle terminal, c. 1625; 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; mark, RI. "Muffin" flagon, c. 1640; 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; mark, CB. "Beefeater" flagon, c. 1670; 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; by Thomas Lupton. Flagon by J. Emes, one of a pair; c. 1690; 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; O.P. 3092; Emes alone made this type.



Fig. 14. York flagons. *Left*: Straight sided, c. 1740; height 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches to lip; mark, IV. *Right*: Acorn, c. 1750; 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; mark, IH (?) for John Hardman or John Harrison; O.P. 2136 or 2162.



Fig. 15. Flagons with misleading dates. *Left*: Predated flat-lid flagon, c. 1688; height 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; mark, IF; inscribed AD/1588, probably for some kind of anniversary. *Right*: Post-dated spire-top flagon, c. 1719; 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; mark illegible; inscribed both 1719 and 1833 with the names of churchwardens at both times.