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Fascinating Curiosities In Pewter

THERE is a fascination about old pewter which few who are not collectors can understand.

The richly mellow look of the metal, the real and the fancied historical connections of so many of the articles which the dealers offer—these are things which grow upon the collectors until the metal glows in their imagination with all the beauty and the costliness of gold.

The hearts of many collectors must have ached with envy when, while visiting the historical exhibition in the National Gallery on North terrace, they gazed on the mustard pot, teapot, and milk jug, all of pewter, which were used by B. T. Finnis on board the Cygnet on its journey to South Australia in 1836.

Others, visiting the Museum, must have gazed with longing upon the pewter ewer which was used on board the Buffalo. This charming ewer, the battered surface of which only adds to its delightfulness, has a long lip and a dainty handle, with a slight irregularity of swelling on the handle side to keep the balance of shape. Only during the last few years has the world seen a return to tableware of equal grace.

To most of us, knowledge of pewter is so slight that we have no more than a vague idea of its real nature. Something like lead and something like silver might be the nearest we could come to a correct definition. As a matter of fact, pewter only rarely, and then usually by accident, contained any silver at all, but was nearer in nature to tin than lead. Certainly common pewter contained about 20 per cent. of lead to 80 of tin, but even "trifle" pewter had tin and antimony mixed with a very small proportion of

been turned out since the end of the 17th century.

In the reign of Edward II., the Pewterers' Company received official recognition. From then on, for four centuries, they dictated the trend and the quality of English pewter. Searchers were appointed with power to enter the shop of any pewterer in the country. Fines were imposed; stocks were forfeited. The cheap and fraudulent pewterer was hard put to it to escape detection. The great age of English pewter had begun.

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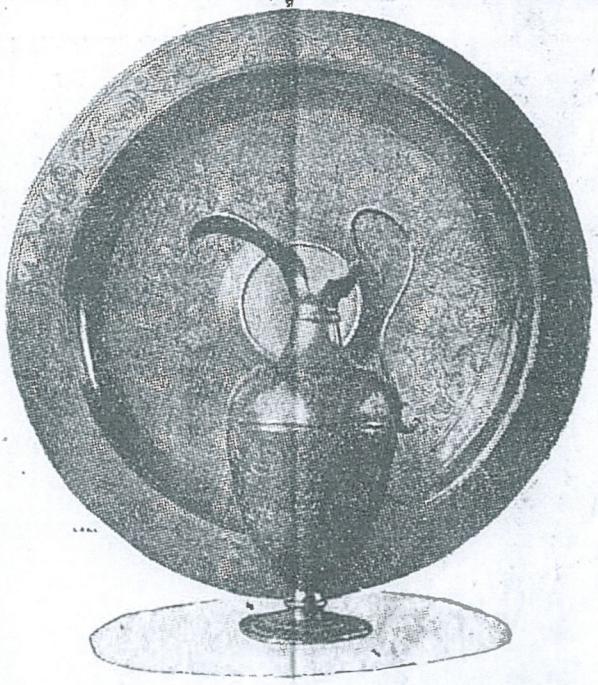
ON account of the favor in which travelling tinkers held it as a substitute for solder, much old pewter has disappeared. But of that which remains there is much that is both interesting and beautiful. Salt-cellars, chalices, ewers, plates, tankards, measures, teapots—tea from pewterware was supposed to have special virtues—candlesticks, even snuffboxes, every variety of pewter has its ardent collectors. Indeed, one English collector has gone so far as to gather together a great amount of pewter, every piece of which—such is his boast—is a clever forgery. It was not to him, however, that two communion cups inscribed with the name of a meeting-house of the Society of Friends, from which they were said to have come, were



Rosewater dish and ewer of pewter.

contained about 20 per cent. of lead to 80 of tin, but even "trifle" pewter had tin and antimony mixed with a very small proportion of lead. Of the better grades of pewter, while "fine pewter" was an alloy of tin and copper, "plate pewter" consisted of tin, antimony, bismuth, and copper, with tin forming about 90 per cent. of the alloy.

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OWING to the fact that in the great days of pewter manufacture the Pewterers' Company enforced strict regulations on all members of the guild, English pewter has always been of a high standard. Heavy forfeits were taken from those whose work was below the standard of the guild. All inferior work discovered was destroyed.

There were, roughly, four methods of producing pewter. The alloy was melted and cast in moulds; metal already in plate form was hammered; these two methods were used in conjunction with each other; or else pewter was turned on a lathe. Today, the introduction of power-lathes has made spinning possible as a means of pewter manufacture. Otherwise, traditional methods are still followed. Indeed, in Sweden, pewter-making has seen a renascence during the last 30 years. The metal is now not only used for the manufacture of traditional pewter-ware, but also for lining drawers in hand-made furniture, and for table tops. Thus a traditional metal of the centuries is adapted to modern needs.

Pewter, indeed, is very old. Numerous pewter vessels have been discovered during the excavation of Roman sites in England. Much of it has been of as high a quality as work of the 16th century. Indeed, Roman pewterers seem to have been more daring than the craftsmen of England's greatest pewter age. While some of their work was very ornate, most of it was of a far higher quality than has

that two communion cups inscribed with the name of a meeting-house of the Society of Friends, from which they were said to have come, were sold. They were bought by a too enthusiastic collector who was not aware of the fact that in the Society of Friends communion is entirely spiritual, and therefore needs no chalices.

Although most pewter, especially in England, was made on traditional lines, a few curiosities are to be found by the diligent seeker. For instance, at an exhibition held in London in 1904, a curious pewter object, about which the authorities disagreed, was displayed. It was somewhat in the shape of a square-toed shoe. Accordingly, the owner and others concluded that it had been a shoemaker's sign. Others declared, however, that it was no more than that rare object, a pewter hot-water bottle!

Strange tankards are sometimes discovered. In one collection is a shapely beaker, with lid. The whole of it is covered with fine lettering, stippled ornamentation, and engraving. The

Pewter communion plate.

claim is made that this work was done with a sharpened nail, the craftsman being that strange adventurer, Baron von Trenck, who taught himself pewter engraving while in prison. If it is authentic, this work is remarkable. The finest engravers, using, instead of a sharpened nail, the most delicate of their tools, would find the reproduction of the work difficult.

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SALT cellars in the form of dogs, a milk jug in the shape of a cow, a pewter ship, with sails and rigging complete, to serve as a liqueur bottle—such are a few of the curiosities which pewterers turned out as novelties or to please eccentric customers. Some of the rare inlaid work, too, is curious and interesting. There was formerly in the Gurney Collection a fine German flagon on which inlay work of great excellence had been carried out on pewter no thicker than stout brown paper. No craftsman of today would have the courage to attempt such a task.

A set of motto plates is another curious pewter rarity. This set consists of six plates, on each of which is inscribed a line of verse. The lines from the whole set make up the following:—

What is a merry man?
Let him do what he can
To entertain his guests,
With wine and merry jests.
But if his wife do frown
All merriment goes down.