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Christmas Cheers!

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There has been little good and interesting pewter on the market in the last year to whet the appetite. A lot of ordinary dishes, plates and miscellaneous vessels have come and gone, but only

one piece stood out above the rest to steal my heart.

This is the lidded tankard in figure 1. Made by Abraham Wiggin, a London pewterer, at the start of the 18th century, it has the simple lines and straightforward, solid proportions of a good early Georgian tankard. It has a double domed lid and a single fillet around the drum, both fashionable at the time, and a good bold sweep to the 'S' shaped handle. Mr Wiggin has placed his 'touch' marks to the drum, just below the rim, and added a scroll thumbpiece and 'spade' handle terminal as finishing touches. It is a vessel made for a good foaming pint of beer, and has a solid 'no-nonsense' quality that lovers of English ale appreciate.

I was struck by its dark honest colour and rich patination and its untouched original condition. These factors make it desirable to a collector, but the other factor in its favour is the finely engraved armorial, now a little worn, found below the top rim and above the fillet (figure 2). These are the armorials of the Worshipful Company of Butchers and so well done that I suspect Abraham Wiggin employed a specialist engraver. The Butchers' Company have discovered that there are similar tankards in existence which leads one to believe that these tankards might have been commissioned in some number by members of the Company; despite this, however, it remains a scarce and desirable object today, and realised £1,540 at auction.

Sadly, the vendor of the tankard has been unable to trace its descent further than a couple of generations of her family, and we have been unable to connect it to a family of Butchers. I can only speculate and dream of a Master Butcher one previous Christmas, presiding over a joint of English beef with his tankard of ale to hand, and as I dream, I know what I should like to be given this Christmas.

The tankard in figure 3 was sold in the same sale at Sotheby's Sussex and fetched £330. The reason for this

modest price was a replacement lid, which has 'killed' the object for a serious collector. It is a late Stuart tankard by the maker 'T.C.', some twenty years older than the Butchers tankard, and is of a type which usually commands a higher value than its younger counterpart. Again, it has good proportions (though maybe a little squat) and the simple lines of all Stuart flat lid tankards, but with a replacement lid, despite being beautifully made, it was always doomed to realise a low price.

If the drum had been engraved with 'wriggle work' decoration in common with many of its type, it would have greatly enhanced its desirability, but it remains a plain tankard, even lacking patination which was lost as a result of a polish given it to harmonise the colour of the two component parts.

The lesson to a collector when faced with two, at first sight, not dissimilar pieces, is to look very carefully at condition and signs of restoration, and then at the overall signs of quality which make one piece stand out from the other, and I am sure, like me, you will have no doubt in choosing which you would prefer for Christmas.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.