

6837

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p. 35

Pewter

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A bun flagon c.1630, sold for £2,860 in February 1989. An example at the top end of the market demonstrating the renewed demand for good English pewter.

The demand for pewter has been stronger this year than in previous years, and collectors have been keen to buy. The proportion of unsold pewter lots in our sales over the last year has been very low compared to sold lots, and this has been the case for most types of pewter.

This time last year I had sensed a resurgence in the pewter market and had been encouraged by the omens of the previous year, but I had been worried that no collector had the confidence to place collections on the market. Since then I have sold selected pieces from

three different collections and with great success.

These have included a Charles II 'wriggled work' flat lid tankard circa 1670, the drum engraved with naïve figures representing a scene from mythology, and the lid with flowers. This realised £5,280. The tankard had been bought for £1,980 in 1980, giving the vendor a good return on his initial investment. A pair of Charles I 'ball knob' candlesticks circa 1640, each with wide circular base and single low ball shaped knob rising to plain stems realised £4,950. A 'York' tankard with distinctive bulbous lower body of about 1730 realised £1,925; and there have also been two very similar 'bun' lid flagons of about 1630/40. The first by the maker E.G. (see illustration) was in very good untouched original condition and made £2,860, and the second, almost identical, by the maker R.G. made £2,640; both had pierced heart-shaped thumbpieces and were 13in. high. The flagon illustrated is particularly interesting because it had been valued by Sotheby's in 1984 at £1,200-£1,800; assuming a hammer price of about £1,300, this means it has doubled in value over five years which again represents a good return on investment.

All the above are good examples of British pewter at the top end of the market, but it is not just these pieces which have done well. In the last year plates and chargers, 18th century measures and lidded tankards have also fared well. The prices for these items have not increased dramatically but they have slowly and steadily risen over the last couple of years, giving encouragement to collectors and dealers alike. For example a set of three 'bud' baluster measures by John Langford circa 1720 of quart, pint and ½ pint capacity made £1,100 recently, and a Stuart triple reeded rim 22in. charger made £572.

19th century pewter, unlike that of the 17th and 18th centuries, has remained fairly static. Large numbers of tavern mugs and lidless baluster measures

appear in each and every metalwork sale and it is only the large sizes or more unusual types of mug or measure which sell well. Ordinary pint and ½ pint capacities can often be purchased for an average of £10-£15 each, which appears very reasonable and well worth buying. Quart measures and tankards are nearer the £50 mark, and the scarce gallon and ½ gallon sizes are the rarest and most desirable. 19th century pewter candlesticks, predominantly with push-up eject mechanism, circular bases and baluster stems, are more in demand, but still reasonably priced compared with the 1970s, and seem a good buy at their present level of around £100 a pair at auction.

As a note of warning the loaded Britannia metal candlesticks do not fall into the above category and are less valuable and desirable.

Another disappointment has been the market in Continental pewter which is still depressed. There are no regular Continental dealers or collectors in evidence, unlike the 1970s, and for the most part, saleroom prices have been lower than in previous years. I would not expect an immediate change in fortune for Continental pieces in the year to come unless we are suddenly besieged by an influx of Dutch, German and French dealers.

It is difficult to predict investment trends but I am confident that prices will continue to rise. The top end of the market should get steadily stronger, and I hope that the middle and bottom end of the market will increase in value at a faster rate. Tavern mugs and baluster measures are cheap at present, and should prove a good investment. I also feel that plates and chargers in good condition, and especially matched sets of plates, will become more expensive.

The revival in oak furniture has helped the revival in the pewter market over the last couple of years, and I see no reason why this will not continue. Collectors interested in pewter could do a lot worse than invest in a few pieces in the year to come. 