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A PEWTER POT *for my* PRESENT

by Ronald F. Homer



Figure 1. A fine twin banded tavern pot dated 1670 in the inscription. Note the crowned "C" verification mark of Charles II.



Figure 2. A quart pot by William Bancks of Bewdley c. 1780-90. A simple dignified piece of local interest.

Last year I wrote about pewter salts — a slightly esoteric subject, but nevertheless a part of the tradition of English table manners and habits. This year I propose to be more prosaic and bring to your attention my interest in the earlier types of what can quite properly, though perhaps somewhat irreverently, be termed pewter beer mugs. By that I mean the 17th and 18th century equivalents of the robust, handled drinking glasses which form the stock in trade of the modern pub and which equally form part of English drinking tradition and habits — a matter not irrelevant to the Christmas season.

These unlidged pewter drinking vessels for ale and beer, alluded to universally as "pots" in old records, have been made in England for over six hundred years. The term is used in the 1348 Ordinances of the Pewterers' Company, and 15th century records itemise "tavern potts" and "potts" in potel (half-gallon), quart, pint and half-pint sizes. They were made even then in substantial quantities for domestic and tavern use. The inventory of Richard Parker, pewterer, of Walsall, who died in 1534 (believed to be the earliest pewterer's inventory yet discovered), includes the entry: "In fine potts iiii score li and x . . . s". Ninety pounds of pots represents perhaps seventy or eighty of these items in stock in his shop at the time of his death. The expression "fine", incidentally, is a term of the art used for a particular quality of metal.

Regrettably, and rather surprisingly, while we have excavated examples of medieval and/or Tudor plates,

porringers, spoons, beakers, flagons and candlesticks, we have no pots from this period. The earliest surviving English unlidged drinking vessels in pewter (a few beakers apart) are from the mid-17th century. Those of this period are of a splendid tall tapering form, plain save for two more or less raised fillets round the drum, and with solid cast handles of simple strap construction. Some were clearly tavern pots used in local ale houses and have evocative inscriptions by which they can be related to long defunct hostelrys and their landlords. "Edward Hill at ye Red Lyon in ye Poultry 1670", reads the one on the very desirable pot shown in figure 1. The Museum of London has one of c. 1700 inscribed "Timy Buck at ye Fountain in Portingall Strete against ye Playhouse". One of the earliest, a quart recently dredged from the Thames, now also in the Museum of London, bears the legend "John Kennett in Shierness Fort, Suttler, 1669". This is a use of the word "sutler" in its original meaning — one who lives with and sells provisions to a garrison.

The tall, twin-banded form persisted until the close of the Stuart period, with some minor variation in style. Some examples have wider, flatter bands, and after about 1700 the handles may be hollow cast. Simple foot mouldings also appear, but the essential tallness remains. Of robust construction and designed for hard work, what could be more traditionally English, and what more satisfying as a receptacle for my festive ale? Unfortunately, unless you

are very lucky, you will have to search too long to find one of these in time for my Christmas present in 1982 (though I would be very content to wait until 1983). Furthermore, you would have to part with perhaps £1,000 or more to acquire it.

If I seem too covetous, come forward in time a hundred years when availability increases and the price tag falls dramatically. In the closing decades of the 18th century many attractive provincial styles of pewter pot were made. Distinguishable from the run-of-the-mill London-made pewter pots of this period by their design features, their interest is as yet not fully appreciated. The West Country, the Midlands and the north of England, to say nothing of Scotland, had substantial centres of pewter manufacture with their own local styles. The simple and dignified quart pot shown in figure 2 was made by William Bancks of Bewdley who died in 1793. It would be a desirable addition to any collection. Its cost would be perhaps £60.

Not infrequently these later pots bear engraved cartouches with the names of public houses which can be traced and may well still exist. If you could find one inscribed with the name of my "local" I would value it at far more than its cost. I know of one inscribed "The Shoulder of Mutton, Binfield", only a few miles from where I live. Alas, it is in the U.S.A., having just eluded me in a London dealer's shop a few years ago!

Keep looking — I'll wait. Christmas is an annual affair!