

Pewter in the Burrell Collection

(13viO7)

The Metal

- Pewter is an alloy of which the largest component is tin (indeed in several European languages the words are the same, e.g. *etain* (Fr.)).
- To the tin, which in itself is brittle and so not easily hammered, may be added much smaller quantities of copper and/or lead, or other elements such as antimony, which make it harder and so more malleable.
- First used by the Egyptians c. 1600-1350 BC.
- Traditionally 85-99% tin, 1-4% copper.
- Historically, the best alloy, known in England as 'fine metal' contained >c.80% tin to <c.20% copper. The lowest quality alloys could contain nearly 50% lead.
- 'Fine metal' was used for 'sadware' or flatware objects, like plates, dishes & chargers - usually made & sold in sets or garnishes.
- 'Lay metal', an alloy which contained lead, was generally used for humbler wares like measures, chamber pots & spoons.
- Pewter containing antimony - 'hard metal' - was introduced to England by a French Huguenot refugee, Jacques Taudin, who came to London in the 1650s. His wares were of a higher quality than those by native pewterers - & very popular - which led to disputes and opposition, but ultimately he won the protection of Charles II.
- Cornwall remained the richest source of tin in Europe from the Middle Ages till the C20th (the last Cornish mine - the last in Europe - closed in 1998).

Manufacture

- Pewter has a very low melting point, so wares usually formed by casting.
- Making a mould was expensive and time-consuming, but once done near-perfect vessels requiring little finishing could be produced in runs of thousands.
- Hammers were used to raise hollow shapes from flat sheets and to correct shapes of flatwares; also to shape the 'booge' (or *cavetto*).
- Cast parts would be soldered together (on inside) - tricky because of low melting point.
- After casting and turning, vessels would be burnished using steel/ bloodstone/agate burnisher.

Decoration

- Pewter was often engraved, but the quality of its design and execution rarely matched that on silver. Pewterers guild may have prevented the employment of trained engravers. Standard generally higher on continent.
- Wriggle-work was a common technique: a burin with a narrow flat blade was walked across from point to point over the surface to produce an engraved zigzag design. Technique first used in England in 1630s, but most pieces using it date from 1660-1730. Mostly used on dishes, plates, tankards & beakers. Few known makers producing such ornament.
- Floral ornament may have been inspired by embroidery or ceramic designs.

Marks

- Makers' marks first struck on English pewter in late C15th, probably in imitation of hallmarks & date-letters on silver (fully introduced in 1478).
- Customary for a pewterer to strike his mark or 'touch' on a plate kept at Pewterers' Hall.
- Much C17th English pewter has series of small marks like silver hallmarks: pseudo-hallmarks; nb when new pewter closely resembles silver.
- Touchmark dates show year of maker's entry to guild, or of guild legislation, and not year of manufacture.

- European silver usually bears town & guild marks, often based on coats of arms.
- Triad initials mark ownership of man & wife - upper letter is surname, left male initial, right female.

Trade & Consumption

- By late C16th, common in houses of yeomen and craftsmen as well as rich, reflecting general increase in affluence.
- Inventory records indicate that in England, c. 1600, 83% of homes, other than of the very poor, had some pewter - so no longer a luxury or even semi-luxury item (though that owned by the less affluent probably of poorer quality & condition). A simple piece costs the equivalent of a labourer's day's wages
- From late C16th, richest therefore replaced pewter wares with silver - at great cost since an ounce of silver cost as much as 6 pounds of pewter.
- Very little pewter survives from before 1600 because of constant recycling. More found in recent years from wrecks & excavations.
- Some pewterers became very wealthy in C17th & early C18th.
- Trade divided between small group of major merchants who made wares & retailed those of others; smaller masters who made & sold only their own wares; poorer makers who worked for other masters and sold through them.
- Pewterers in smaller towns often earned part of income from other activities. Usually c.5-10% of local industry. Rare for town to have more than 10 masters.
- Major centres in UK include London (350+ pewterers in 1680s), York, Bristol, and - from late C17th - Wigan (75 pewterers in 1680s).
- Sevenfold expansion in London industry 1525-1650.
- Usage peaked in Britain and Europe c. 1680-c. 1700. About 3000 makers across England.
- Institutional use still heavy: e.g. King's College, Cambridge bought more than 2/3 ton of pewter 1692-96. Much used by City Companies, Lord Mayor, etc.
- Much use also as measures and drinking vessels in inns & taverns.
- Pewter declined in use from later C18th because of increasing popularity of (1) Britannia metal - hard, pewter-like alloy with 90% tin + 10% antimony - first used extensively in Sheffield from 1770s & which permitted thinner & thus cheaper vessels; (2) porcelain (from China) and pottery (e.g. delftware, slipware and creamware); (3) tea & coffee - for which ceramic vessels much more popular than pewter; also (4) rise in price of tin after 1780; (5) greater awareness of potential toxicity of extended contact with vegetal acids in certain foods & liquids.
- Trade survived in C19th only through pub tankards.
- Scotland had own distinctive wares. Craft came under Incorporation of Hammermen.

Collecting

- 1904: Clifford's Inn Hall exhibition was seminal in revival of interest. Followed by several others, including Provand's Lordship, Glasgow, 1909.
- 1918: Pewter Society founded. First Treasurer was Lewis Clapperton, whose highly important collection was largely Tolm & GM.
- By 1920s, fashionable for 'old oak' furniture - especially Welsh dressers - to be garnished with ranks of pewter wares & many dealers specialized in both.
- Other important collectors include Alfred Yeates (V&A bequest 1944; cf 34.), and A. Carvick Webster (1938 V&A acquisition), much of whose Scottish items acquired by GM.
- Burrell: 43 items in BC, a few English C17th, mostly German C18th, several fakes (probably early C20th). Mostly tankards and dishes; no measures & only one (fake) candlestick. Seems to have collected especially in 1930s and 1940s.