

The Stirling Corn Measures.....by Alex Neish

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The Stirling Corn Measures

Alex. Neish

The ungainly Stirling corn measure is one of the rarest pieces in Scottish pewter. Its obscurity has generated doubts as to its exact period. Some date it tentatively as 1708, others more tentatively place it 'sometime in the 18th century'.

The largest size to survive appears to be what Ingleby Wood described as a 1 gallon *imperial*. With two looped handles soldered on as if by afterthought, the heavy cast bodies with their moulded rim and base are 7" × 7½" in diameter and height respectively. The smaller versions have one handle. On the front of both is a medallion Cotterell described as showing a lamb. It is in fact a reproduction of the seal of Stirling with its wolf on a rock surrounded by the legend 'Sterlini Oppidium'.

Ingleby Wood thought them 'probably of Queen Anne's reign . . . as they are similar to bronze ones of this period'. This is in accord with the 1924 catalogue of the Smith Museum in Stirling which lists '5 pewter pots, bearing the Stirling seal, being copies of the Queen Anne measures' – these in turn being the ones taken north in 1708 to impose the new standards on the Scots.

Here the confusion begins as Mr. Michael McGinnes, the Smith's Assistant Curator, says of the Queen Anne pieces:



'These measures are much more decorative and made of bronze . . . all are *liquid* measures with a single handle.'

With the invaluable help, however, of Mr. G.A. Dixon, the Central Regional Council's Archivist, the jigsaw begins to fall into place.

Stirling had since the 15th century been the home of the 'Stirling jug'. This 'ane pint' had been given by a 1457 act of the Scottish Parliament and was the one to which all the standard measures, including the tappit hen, had to conform. Its capacity was 'three pound and seven ounces of French Troyes wecht of cleir running water of the Water of Leith.'

Following the Act of Union, the Stirling Town Council granted on the 24th January 1708 'Commissions to Collonel Erskine late Provost . . . To receive the Standard of the liquid measures now come from England in Stead of the former jog . . .' By the 24th July 1708 the Council was authorising 'the dean of gild and conveener To distribute the standarts of the liquid measures to the severall Royell Burroues as the Provost of Edinburgh shall desyre



after the said standarts shall Be stamped with the Toune's armes And to receive Thritty pounds Scots for each of the Setts . . .'

This authority granted to Stirling was not, however, limited as commonly thought to the liquid measures. By the 4th September 1708 the Council was instructing 'the dean of Gild to wreat to the dean of Gild of Edenburgh, Linlithgoe and Lanrick for the standers of the elne weights and dry measures.' In fact the Dundee Guilds on the 6th of the same month recorded the receipt of the new '*bushel* . . jugs, weights and their fractions'. In other words, Stirling on behalf of the Crown was also attempting to impose upon an anarchistic Scotland the English dry measures. The relative crudity of the workmanship and the use of pewter as against the normal expensive bronze are both explained by their intended use.

Ingleby Wood's attribution of imperial capacity to what are clearly 1708 measures is obviously wrong. The error, however, is small. A capacity check of the larger size suggests it is almost certainly the old English corn gallon – equal to 0,98 of an Imperial liquid gallon.

The lack of touch marks denies an identification of the maker of the pewter Stirling measures. The Stirling Council records show that one 'Stephen Crawford, Coppersmith in Glasgow' was the author of the standard liquid bronze measures. The pewter ones, however, seem more likely to have been made in town itself. After 1620 the gates are closed as the records of the Stirling Incorporation of Hammermen are lost. In any case the rarity of the measures showed the attempt to impose the English dry measures was a resounding initial failure.

Photograph courtesy Smith Art Gallery and Museum

In late August 2009 Alex Neish emails to say –

- "the Stirling Smith Museum has just bought the last gallon corn measure believed to be in private hands. It had been owned by an American collector."