

## **An Interesting Piece and a Mystery!**

### **An English Broad Rimmed Saucer or Spice Plate c1500**

**(or is it more likely to be c 1630?)**



The immediate line below the title (in dark blue) was the introductory heading to lot 105 in The Little Sale at Christies London in May 2007.

This piece is almost identical. It is also similar to some of pieces brought up from the Mary Rose sunk in 1545.

But not all knowledgeable opinion considers this piece to be that early. Scarcity makes dating difficult.

A few particulars then –

The plate weighs 286 gms or 10 ¼ ozs - (this would be 5 ozs short of 8 lbs for 12 such plates)

The width is 7 3/8" or as measured 18.7cms (Christies said theirs was 7 3/8" but 18.6cms so that's down to the measurer then.)

The rim measures a simple 1 ½ inches which gives a proportion of rim to plate of 40.6% - definitely broad rim.

Often it is said why were the plates broad rimmed? - what is the bumpy bottom for? Well with the much narrower if long tables and something to drink out of and you and your knife - then space was limited for each diner and the rim might have taken a piece of bread and the bumpy bottom might have channelled the gravy and/or spices. Just a guess, but all these things had their purpose and little for ordinary folk was done for decoration.

This plate is new to the pewter world in that never before was it exhibited or part of a noted collection. It was found by a fisherman in 1984 and it came with a map marked with a cross as to where he found it with messages to his grandchild that there might be more there and they should take care of it. A Sheffield Museum offered to buy it in 1984 but it seems to have remained on a shelf in a shed and a couple of drips of paint fell on it at some stage. The owner thought that it might have something to do with the pilgrim fathers of the Mayflower in 1620 as many came from that area and there was talk of a boat taking some of them turning over at that area in the river – but all just gossip. More likely then, as so much like the Mary Rose pieces & the Little collection piece, then earlier and hence a date of the first half of the 1500s.

Marks? A simple mark under the bumpy bottom as shown almost a wrigglework pewterers hammer but that is stretching imagination – was there a shield around it, was it an owner's mark, was it added later? Who knows?

A knowledgeable collector tells me –

*This looks rather nice! The shape of this mark is typical of medieval merchant's marks, denoting ownership. They occur on all sorts of things. For example, there's one on a barrel that was in Newport's medieval ship. They are found from time to time on medieval pewter. More commonly they are simply scratched marks, but I've seen a couple of wriggled examples before.*

*We normally regard anything below 7" as a saucer. You won't find many illustrations of saucers like this because there aren't many. The Sandy Law sale (Phillips, Chester, Sep 1997) was the last sale to have a significant number of early plates and saucers, and even he had very little this early. Dating is based on just a couple of examples from known contexts - the Tong Castle saucer and the Mary Rose pewter. That means we don't really have a clear date span for this sort of thing. They might have been confined to a relatively narrow period, but they might have gone on for quite a long time.*

*The (Pewter Society) database is focused on the pewterer and does not include merchant's marks. There must be academic studies of merchant's marks because ... the one on the Newport Ship barrel has been linked to a specific Bristol merchant.*

( Note - The Tong Castle 'sawcer' has a Pewterers hammer mark to the upper rim (cast in). It is smaller at 137mms ( 5 and 4/10 inches width) with a rim taking up some 34% of total width (rim about 9/10"width )

Another knowledgeable collector and author of several Pewter reference books advises –

*1) The item was in my view from the period 1620-1640 and very likely came out of a water coarse. I would give no credence to the claims it had something to do with the Pilgrim Fathers, you could never prove it. I pressed the question of a mark and was eventually told there was a small detrited mark on the back of the rim. This was critical as it could determine whether the item was English or Continental. Although it looks like a so-called merchants mark it still may be a touch.*

*2) Regarding (the) saucer it looked to me, as I said before, like a broad rim of the pre Civil War period and therefore dating from 1620-1640, with a distinctly broad rim and a bumpy bottom. It would be difficult in my experience to date it a lot earlier because of very broad rim. The mark looks like a somewhat crude personal ownership mark, wriggled on. It does not appear to be what some people call a merchant mark which in any case by this date had largely gone out of use in England and Wales. Triad marks were introduced in the time of Elizabeth I and essentially displaced so-called*

merchant's marks and Lombardic letter marks. Such wriggled marks might have been applied by somebody who was probably essentially illiterate.

Legally such a saucer should have borne a maker's touch which means its place of manufacture is uncertain.

Although the saucer under discussion in general terms is quite similar to one or two on display (Mary Rose) it does not make the argument for (its) being 1530 instead of 1630 any easier. (This) saucer has no archaeological provenance beyond it was found in a river and bears so far as I can see no marks which will help to date it. The ownership mark could happily be 1630 but we have no evidence when it was added. Some later Medieval English pieces, probably London made, bear 'Lombardic' letter struck on them in relief. These are presumed to be ownership marks. Some earlier pieces have hammer touches and certainly from say the 1550s touches which we would could recognise as such come into use. This saucer has none of these types of marks so how can one sustain the argument it is earlier? The possibilities of survival are far greater from 1630s than from 1530s.

The rim of the saucer is very wide, calculated from the picture at over 40% which would be exceptional in late medieval period. Weight can also be a straw in the wind as later medieval pieces tend to be slightly heavier than those of the 1630s, but that is not an exact science.

(no mark has been found to the back of the rim – the mark found is to the underside of the bumpy bottom or boss – the plate appears to have been found on a river bank.)

Damage and repairs? Where the booge joins the rim for about 3 inches there is a fine split and daylight shows through the back for about one inch of this but it is fortunately very firm. Some small evidence of nature's gilding in a coppery colour and some iridescence at the edges to an area about 1 inch square on the upper side of the bumpy bottom (raised central boss - to the better versed/ or more expensive collectors). There is a fine pin hole where the rim had a little push to the side, difficult to see, but it is there. There are lots of signs of being buried and found later to the surface patina but not unlike the same size that sold at Christies in May 2007.





## **PARTS OF AN EMAIL EXCHANGE WITH JON BURGE ON THE MATTER OF THE PAINT DRIPS ON THIS PLATE**

*TO - Jon,*

*I thought I might try to tap your expertise in pewter matters regarding a small problem with a plate.*

*This plate is likely from the middle 1500s (or c1630!) found by a fisherman in the 1980s near Nottingham and given a bid by the Sheffield Museum back then. The fisherman declined the offer and kept it on a shelf in his shed and at some time some paint has dripped on to it. Someone had a scratch at the area (some metal shines through the scratches) but realised that was hopeless. The paint looks like it was a beige gloss.*

*Problem is I suppose to remove them or not bother. And if removing them - then gently - sort of a layer at a time because the overall condition lends credence to the age.*

**FROM JON**

- a most interesting article and item

I would think that - ignoring the rim width - the boss is a structural thing. If the booge joins a flat bottom, the junction and the bottom are easily dented. If the booge joins a boss that covers much of the bottom, it forms a ridge that is difficult to dent, and the domed bottom itself is much harder to dent than a flat one. If you have a set of many plates for a family or ship's company, dent-free plates are easier to stack, and it is easier to judge equal and fair portions. The junction of the booge and boss also make a plate that will stand flatter.

I have never really understood broad rims, especially the exaggerated examples such as this one. It may also be a way to judge equal portions, the more valuable ingredients (meat) measured into the bowl part and the less valuable stacked around the rim. This is of course wild speculation. Broad rims are more understandable in church services where a very broad rim ceremonially focuses attention on the valuable contents in the bowl.

I would take out the paint with nitromors paint stripper . I often attack corroded pewter first with nitromors to take off varnishes etc. that would inhibit penetration later with alkali - and the nitromors did not seem to disturb the oxides/sulphides etc that form the layer of corrosion. Of course on this piece I would not follow up with an alkali treatment - it is just too rare to do a restoration. Just paint a thin layer of nitromors onto the paint with a small brush, wait a few minutes, and push at the paint with a very soft toothbrush or artist's paint brush, finally removing the paint with a q-tip; trying to let nothing spread to the unpainted area. I would think that this would get the job done satisfactorily with little risk but as you mentioned - might take a very gradual approach of many small attempts. It might take a thicker layer of nitromors to cause the paint to expand and wrinkle enough that it flakes off.

Of course a reasonable person would say do nothing at all to it given its rarity and value - but I would probably try to remove the paint.