

AN INTERESTING PIECE – THE PRICELESS PIG by Alex Neish

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The Priceless Pig

Alex Neish

Now on permanent display in Dundee's McManus Galleries is that city's 'Pirlie Pig', an item unique in British pewter for its function, format, and ornamentation, that was recovered from a scrap-heap in 1839.

'Pirlie Pig' was the Scots name for a child's ceramic money box. The Dundee pewter one was a collection box for fines imposed on members of the Town Council who failed to attend its meetings. A Council resolution dated 2nd of March 1602 states.

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The Provest bailleis and counsall hes concludit that ye hail p[er]sonis of ye counsall that sall be absent upon uye ordinare dayis & h[ou]ris sall pay xL d precislie for ilk dayis absens by all u[the]r penalteis [con]tenit in ye former actis. And that the p[ro]vest w[i]t[h] his awne [cons]ent sall ilk tyme pay ten sh[illings] & ilk baillie 6 s 8d.

In summary this means members absent upon the ordinary days and hours were to pay forty pence (i.e. 3 shillings and four pence), the provost ten shillings, and each baillie six shillings and eight pence.

What is extraordinary about the fines box is its ornamentation. Measuring some 6ins by 3ins, the melon-like shape is covered by engraved lattice work upon which are raised inter-linking chains, crescents and circles. Imposed between these in turn are four large circles containing shields.

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mandatory on such an important piece may be significant as suggesting its creation was shared with another hand which developed the engraving.

Engraving on Scottish pewter is practically unknown. Two communion beakers from Keig Church in Aberdeenshire from around 1671 are now in Edinburgh's Royal Scottish Museum. They are unique in having both cast decoration and wriggle-work engraving – but there is a doubt as to whether they are not Dutch. Brechin Cathedral has a c 1680 Scottish flagon with a wriggled portrait of a Puritan – again unique. In the Pirlie Pig's case the engraving is so complicated that it indicates either the use of an itinerant continental craftsman or reliance on the skills of a local gold or silversmith.

The former would again breach guild norms so the latter seems infinitely more likely. This is supported by the fact that some of the engraving on Scottish gold and silver work of around this period is not dissimilar.

To-day almost four hundred years later the secret is lost for all time. What remains is a masterpiece of the Scottish pewterers' art unique in the world that was only saved by accident from the melting pot.

*The assistance of Mr Jain Flett, the Dundee City Archivist is gratefully acknowledged.
Photo courtesy of Dundee Art Galleries and Museums)*

In late August 2009 Alex Neish emails to say –

“With regard to the Brechin Cathedral flagon. I subsequently managed to establish it is definitely as a Dutch piece - and in fact it carries a touchmark I finally managed to identify as one from Rotterdam, so upturning previous beliefs it was a unique Scottish piece.”

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The above message from Alex Neish shows how important it is to keep an open mind as regards pieces of early pewter - where records and comparative examples might be unknown of at the time an article is written – and firm evidence appears later to help us understand pieces all the more clearly.