

FACT OR FICTION - BARMAID'S HALF AND

GLASS BOTTOMED MUGS

Written and photographed by Trevor Moore

A pub mug or measure is marked with a verification stamp to indicate that the capacity is correct to the quart, pint, gill, quarter gill and so on. No cheating therefore on the part of the publican but what about the barmaid ?

“ Wouldn't dream of it, Sir!” - Lots of froth, a serious dent to the pewter pot, or he's had so much he wouldn't notice it anyway ? Perhaps, but not saving much ale to make up for the lack of a good money tip. Some customers in Victorian times (and still may do from the gentlemen among our readers) offered the barmaid a drink. But what was needed was something guaranteed to make up for the poor wages in the Victorian period.

So the story of the “Barmaid's Half” where it was alleged that this pewter mug looked like a pint in size but was much less in quantity, so that “thank you Sir, I'll join you for a pint” secured the cash difference and also enabled the barmaid to keep on her feet for much longer !! But how true is that unlikely tale. Well, such a “Barmaid's Half” did indeed exist and here is the photo of one below. This ½ Pint is thus marked (quite small so as not to be read easily) and with the London verification mark of a crown/VR/2 giving it a date between 1879 and 1901. It does hold half a pint as I have checked it again. There is no makers mark.



Pewter pots can have some indent to the base but look at this one below – clearly made to to deceive. The proof of the pudding is in the eating or in this case in the drinking ! AND that's a fact.



The other photos show a 1 Pint glass bottomed mug made by Townsend & Compton (London) early 19th century.





What about all these stories of glass bottomed tankards? The most related story is that of the King's shilling paid to recruits for the Royal Navy as a signing-on bounty. Press gangs tricked men into accepting the shilling by passing the coin to them in a pot of ale and when drunk to the bottom the man was deemed to have accepted the shilling and Navy service. Thus using a glass bottomed pot was a protection from such a trick as the shilling would be seen before the ale was consumed. Another story is the ability to secretly observe the movement of other persons in the pub who may be thieves, press gangs, ladies, or just unwanted friends whilst pretending to be drinking but looking out of the glass bottom at the same time!

These stories are still upheld today and often used in the commercial marketing of modern glass bottom pewter mugs. However, the most likely reason, albeit not as exciting as the myths, are that in the old days the clarity of the ale was usually a good test of the quality and seeing that the ale was free from various dregs, hence the glass bottom; and this was before the introduction of all glass mugs. But don't just believe me as I still prefer the story of the King's Shilling – let us keep our British heritage! Or is that really fiction?

There is a scarcity of old pewter mugs with a glass bottom that also have a verification mark to authenticate their use in a pub. Many appear to have been for domestic and private use although the owners may well have used them in their local pub. I think that a publican would be wary of using too many glass bottomed pewter mugs and measures for his every day trade because of the strong likelihood of breakage of the glass. I must add that many old pewter mugs of quart and pint sizes with glass bottoms were presented as sports and other memorial prizes and this can also be an interesting area for the collector.