

Finding Irish Pewter by David W Hall

This article has been added as a supplement to my earlier piece on Irish pewter. It will deal with some interesting recent finds and with, how and where one might look for Irish pewter.

Recent Finds



Figure 1. Two Irish measure two banded quart pots. Such pots are very rare as after 1826 they did not conform to a legal standard so were always at risk of being destroyed. The one on the left has a type of handle with acanthus leaf decoration which has not been reported before. The one on the right is conventional as far as that can be said for a rare type. The left hand one can be dated to circa 1760/1780.



Figure 2. Two two-handle cups both of types previously known in silver but not reported to have been made in pewter. Silver cups of the style of the left hand example are well known in Irish silver and usually with the acanthus leaf handle date from between 1750 and 1780.

This is one of the first pewter examples recorded. The one on the left has what are called harp handles and again reflects an Irish silver style dating from the period 1710-1740.



Figure 3. A pewter wax candle mould made by the famous Dublin pewterer John Heaney (1767-1807). It is unusual for such plebeian items to be so well marked by the maker (courtesy of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers).

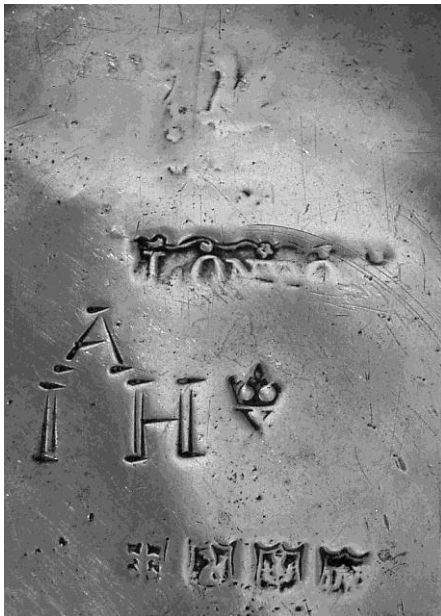


Figure 4. A set of marks now attributed to the first identified 18th century Belfast pewterer, David Watson 1758-1780. Dublin pewterers do not, as many English provincial pewterers do, use 'LONDON' labels. Versions of these marks have now been found in two churches in Northern Ireland.



Figure 5. A one-pint Imperial truncated cone mug marked "CAMPBELL of BELFAST". Campbell and Co. seem to have been hardware merchants in Belfast from circa 1850, later in the 19th century becoming jewellers. They have been known for a long time for their two handle pewter cups and recently for selling concave pewter mugs. This is the first truncated cone pot known with their mark on.

Figure 6. No Irish made porringer has been identified but as there were many pewterers and braziers in Dublin in the last quarter of the 17th century it seems possible they were made. The porringer below appeared in a sale in Edinburgh of a collection of antiques assembled by a Northern Ireland collector. The other two pieces in the lot were 18th century Irish pewter. The “TN” mark has been previously recorded but not identified. Some think the decoration in the mark shows flowers others shamrocks.



Where to buy Irish pewter

Firstly where might one buy antique Irish pewter? A few years ago a prominent collector wrote something to the effect that it was possible, almost easy to find interesting pieces of antique Irish pewter in Ireland at very reasonable prices. In my experience going back now for over twenty five years that is not the case. That is not to say that I have not bought such pieces in Ireland but they are not easily, or frequently found and will not necessarily be cheap. In fact such pieces are often more easily found in the United Kingdom or North America.

A look at the history of the 20th century offers some obvious explanations why this should be the case. For many decades, commencing circa 1930, the Irish Republic struggled economically. Many people emigrated to the UK, North America and elsewhere as a result and many antiques were sold for shipping overseas to the same destinations where they commanded better prices. When I first started to go to Ireland I met people in the antique trade who had obviously had been making a significant part of their income in this way. For example the antiques wholesaler in the West of Ireland who talked about selling a hundred pairs of brass candlesticks to an American dealer every year or so. Irish pewter was popular with collectors in the UK and USA from the 1920s and seems therefore to have formed a part

of this export trade. Ireland is not a large country and all the evidence indicates a significant part of the original stock of old pewter was exported in this period. If for example you looked at the auction records for the last twenty or thirty years far more Irish flagons have been offered for sale in the UK than in Ireland. Even when the economy of the Republic took off in the last decades of the 20th century and local people started to take more interest in Irish antiques they focused on furniture, paintings and silver, pewter was not really part of their agenda.

Another factor which has had some significant influence was the so-called 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. They started in the late 1960s and lasted for about thirty years. It was not that they ever reached such a scale that the buying and selling of antiques ceased completely, it is rather that they were a discouraging and inhibiting factor. Now that peace is restored people with old pewter, in say their church, have felt free to start asking question about it.

So if you want to buy Irish pewter by all means go to Ireland and enjoy yourself, it is a good place to holiday. When you are on holiday in Ireland by all means check out the local antique shops, centres and fairs but do not be too optimistic, rather watch out for specialist auctions in the UK and elsewhere, watch the internet and the offerings of the specialist pewter dealers.

Where to see Irish pewter

Ireland is not short of museums but as the above paragraphs imply, most give no great priority to pewter. The National Museum in Dublin has shown more interest in pewter than most of the rest. Their Archaeology Department in Kildare Street, Dublin usually has some excavated pieces of medieval pewter on display and the Decorative and Creative Arts Department at the old Collins Barracks close to Heuston Station, has pewter on display in the Curator's Choice area and in their reserve stock displays. The Ulster Museum in Belfast has a range of pewter pieces but probably only items recovered from Armada wrecks will be on display. Elsewhere it will be a matter of pot luck whether pewter will be included in exhibits.