

Interest in Old Pewter Collecting

At first it appeared that everything developed from the formation of the Society of Pewter Collectors in 1918. But clearly the twelve founder members had interesting collections by then.

Looking at what was in collections around 1912.

The date chosen was because there then had been five exhibitions of Old Pewter in the UK. The library had some details of each exhibition and it was a short number of years thus allowing for less likely overlap of collections.

For readers' interest there were two exhibitions at Cliffords Inn London in 1904 and 1908. Mr T Charbonnier had two exhibitions, mostly of his collection, at Taunton Castle in 1908 and 1912. In Glasgow there was the Provand's Lordship exhibition in 1909.

The exhibitors were individuals and not especially the churches who did hold, recorded, large numbers of old pewter pieces then.

Taking note of all the exhibitors names and found that there were 136 different exhibitors of whom 28 were female, and exhibited in their own name (by 1912). Many well-known names were not exhibitors including H H Cotterell who in 1911 had over 200 pieces recorded in his collection, Charles Rowed author of "Collecting for Pleasure" who had over 300 pieces in his, and William Redman who had in 1903 photographed some 200 pieces of his collection (both on the steps of his Chapel and at the front door of his modest Yorkshire terraced home) - he was the author of "Old Pewter and Sheffield Plate".

Colonel H N B Good (of the delightful Sutton Courtenay Abbey, Abingdon, Oxford) showed 200 pieces of his collection in a 1906 magazine photograph.

There are perhaps another 60 names that might be found of serious collectors who were not exhibitors.

Thus it can be interesting as to what these people had found and collected. These were very determined collectors from very different backgrounds. Working men, professional working men, very wealthy men and women; schoolteachers collecting from their contacts with tinkers, architects collecting from their contacts with wealthy patrons, a variety of people across the social structure of the times - albeit those with the time and interest.

In a simple way their collections might show what the early collections had, and what might then be found. Might this truly reflect "early British Pewter".

The earliest "written of" English collector made a recorded purchase around 1884, he was the instigator of the famed "old pewter dinners". Frank Jackson was a noted artist of Bedford Park, London. Again he was not a member of the Society of Pewter Collectors in 1918, nor did he exhibit in the 1904-1912 exhibitions.

Thus simple estimates suggested that there were some 20,000 pieces at a very minimum in collections in 1912.

It was said that many of these pieces were European so checking where possible indeed some 20% of those were. That still showed there were an awful lot of pieces of Old British Pewter then in collections (16,000 plus).

This did not include what was known to be in the Churches, we could see Norfolk later put on an exhibition of 400 interesting old pieces and a part of Yorkshire when counted had 650 recorded pieces in their churches (mostly, perhaps all - not in use).

The exhibitions and collections though suggest a problem. As was suggested by experienced collectors to me these collections are a little "dull".

Indeed there is maybe no disagreement with that, although it is a personal judgement, and perhaps what was there had a chance of being what had been used by our ancestors and was really interesting for that alone.

So we need to ask what made collections more "exciting or interesting" and when did they become so?

Why did later collectors find such more "interesting pieces?" I have not yet found all the answers. I do however have a few clues that might interest the reader and readers might be able to suggest an answer.

A subject in question might be Flat Lid Stuart Tankards. The Society of Pewter Collectors worried about them for over 40 years (1921-1965). They often reported reproductions being sold with marks to suggest age.

Indeed one maker is found -

John Jewsbury & Co Ltd - (formed 1911 succeeding John Jewsbury which was founded in 1884 and succeeded by Pearson Page & Jewsbury in 1933 - whose catalogues from around 1920 to 1965 offer Flat Lid Stuart Tankards in Antique or Very Antique (very - is my word) throughout that period.

This website has their sales catalogue details. So where are the thirty plus years of production now? Have these pieces aged enough, and are now worth enough, to cheer us all?

Those tankards with William (III) or William and Mary wriggleworked designs on, are really not found before 1925 other than Dutch Ones, though an early Clapperton photograph of one is not too easy to be sure about.

A quite genuine tankard showing Charles II and Catherine at Rolleston in Nottinghamshire is a puzzle as the wriggleworker had clearly never ever seen Charles II (whose features were distinctive and in England the pamphlets and coinage showing him had been prolific.) The decoration of Catherine's garments are also not of any known English style of wrigglework being far more detailed and perhaps more likely European or more especially Dutch artwork.

William and Mary English silverware tankard styles are only seen by this writer illustrated as a plain undecorated style of tankard.

The wrigglework that is found on flat lid tankards in early collections is often simply floral.

A V&A tankard (Anthony North, Pewter at the V&A; item number 66; pages 78-79) was a subject of some contention when a roustabout Oyster bar owner made a claim to a National Newspaper that he had made it as a school leaver (if indeed he went to school) in the 1920s. They took that seriously enough to analyse the metal, find it matched others of the right age and concluded he was - at least - wrong. They did not however comment on the decoration.

It is marked 1698 to the lid, one or two of the hallmarks appear to be on top of the wrigglework decoration. The hallmarks are those of Thomas Carpenter only free in 1713 suggesting the piece is unlikely made and decorated until 1714 the reign of George 1st. William is dead, Queen Anne is dead and George is on the throne. Something of a puzzle then: but happily not to the V&A in 1955; who never questioned the design work; being pre-occupied with the metal.

In 1934 Isher of Cheltenham writing to a wealthy Scottish Collector advises him to strictly avoid a flat lidded Stuart Tankard for sale at Sothebys of unusual girth. A curious person might ask if this was the first sighting of "entasis". It appears the business originally called John Jewsbury would offer whatever punches they had for their repro pewter or use your own.

What is not known is the design of any punch marks of their own before 1933. "Peerage" and "Homemaker" though after 1933 they did have nice small punch marks easily removed that they might use.

In 1955 Ron Michaelis the acting librarian of the Society of Pewter Collectors did make inquiries as to what punches PP&J had used but made not a lot of progress.

Another question worth asking is why there were so few James 1st and Charles 1st flagons about. Please be clear that I am not inferring these are faked but simply suggesting that in most part that they are not to be found or are rarely found in early collections. That could lead to the question of at about what year the Churches throughout Britain were persuaded to part with them. Similar applies to Beefeaters though with trade Guilds also owning them there were more of those to be seen by 1912; but not a lot of them.

A retired senior Church of England clergyman collector says that after the Great War - "In the C/E in the 1920s onwards there was a strong movement to make the church more relevant to society, many clergy had served as chaplains in the army and were changed. The bishops made a promise that any man who displayed a strong vocation would be given residential training whatever his financial background, this altered the social makeup of the parish priesthood. I can see this resulting in a clearing out of what seemed irrelevant."

From which we can assume the war changed the returning clergy, the new social order (requiring dedication regardless of means) changed the new clergy, and that

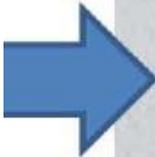
the clergy then, may have cleared out some of the irrelevant - such as - out of use old pewter.

It was also noted in 1955 that Gaskell & Chambers were using a number of old punch marks on reproduction pewter which they said did not belong to them. One set of punch marks clearly in the possession of Gaskell & Chambers in 1955 marked pieces seen at the UK Tin Research Council's "Pewter today Exhibition of 1955" and passed from them to Smellies after them and included the "Duncomb" punch marks.

Of interest for the collector might be the large number of plates marked for "Duncumb" in HH Cotterell's collection in 1911, which then he appeared to be happy with.

So back then to where this article started - in gathering together the available photographs of old collections and the details of the exhibitions of 1904-1912 and such information can be made available to other collectors. I do hope that such information might guide me to what could be collected by determined collectors before the repro makers were fully occupied.

However we should always bear in mind a quotation from the American **Edward J Gale in 1909** who wrote -



It is probable that more porringers were made between 1900 and 1905 than in the preceding one hundred and fifty years, and jugs, flagons, and, more latterly, plates, pepper-pots and spoons are all on the market, and these may be found not only for sale by dealers, but well distributed in households far distant from any railway. The Colonial sperm oil lamp is perhaps the best of all the American reproductions and therefore the most to be regretted.