

MARKS OFTEN FOUND -

James Yates and others

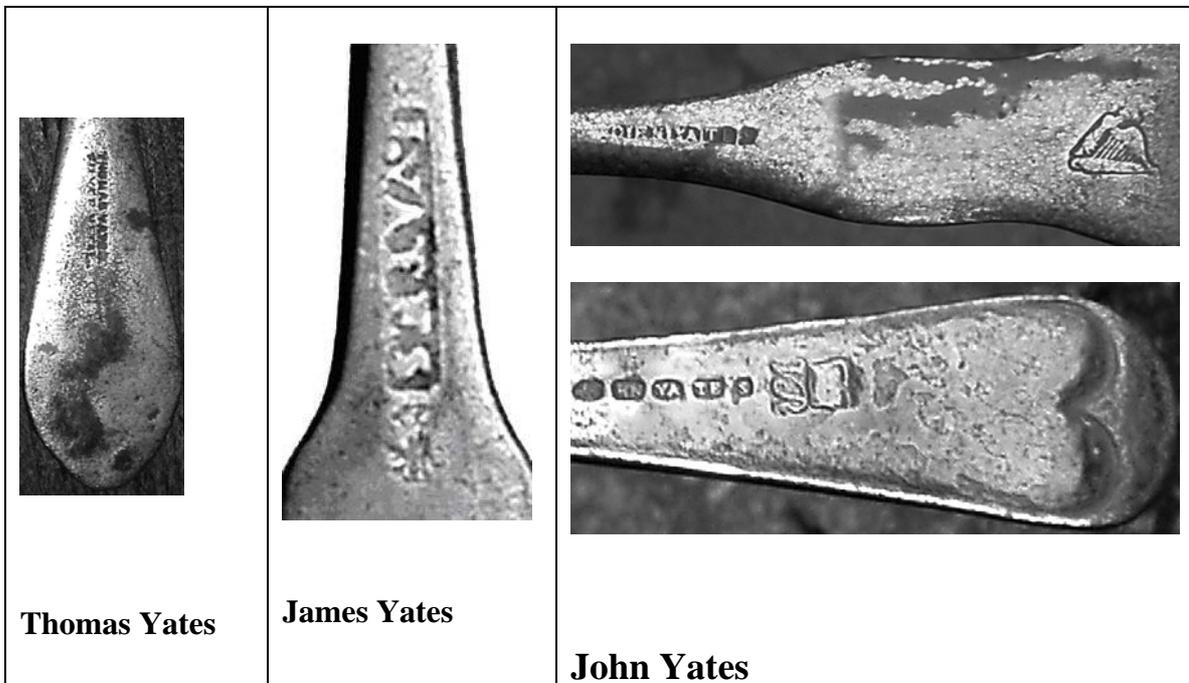
INCLUDING A SHORT REFERENCE TO Gaskell & Chambers
Some punches for marks were seen at James Smellies Birmingham in the 1980s.

This article was prepared with the assistance of David Hall

Photographs were kindly supplied by David Hall, Peter Hayward, and Marcel Escudier – the article had to be revised in May 2009 when Martin Roberts, an antique pewter dealer, demanded his photos previously shown, without his permission, had to be withdrawn. This website welcomes additional photos from readers relevant to this subject.

Until the 1980s confusion existed about the Birmingham pewterer James Yates and many of those associated with him. Nearly all were wrongly dated in the standard works. In part this confusion may have arisen from the number of Yates running businesses in Birmingham in the later 18th and in the 19th century, for example a Trade Directory for Birmingham dated 1818 lists eleven such enterprises (Yates is a family name from the English West Midlands). Careful examination of the relevant documentary and printed sources eventually sorted things out.

There are three Yates, who were active as pewterers in Birmingham that we need to be concerned with, remembering that at this period many such enterprises were making other products as well. They are John, Thomas and James. Along the way we will also meet a number of their partners.



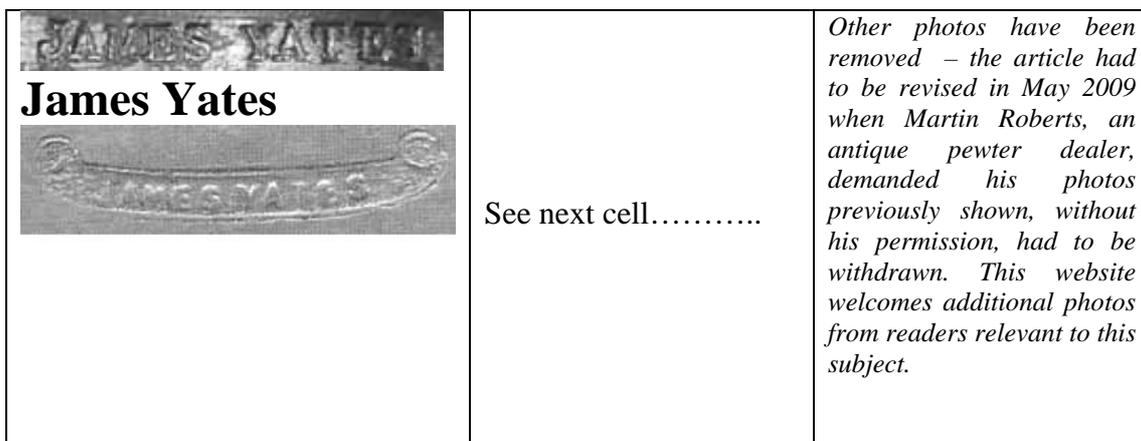
Thomas Yates was a spoon maker and his enterprise is recorded from the 1820s until the end of the century and evidence from surviving spoons indicates Thomas was active in the 1830s.

(John Yates was a Spoon-maker. This top central photo above is off a spoon with a crowned harp mark on the stem. It is likely this is some kind official marking and possibly dates from before 1801 and Union. Note also the Grove type flower hallmark.)

John was supposedly born in 1788; although it is fairly obvious this was a different John, as he is listed in a Trade Directory for 1805 as a spoon maker, when he would have been only seventeen! By 1823 he was based at 38 Coleshill Street an address where the enterprise would remain. In 1829 he entered into a partnership with Thomas Rawlins Birch and Lucas Spooner (hallmark Y B & S). Before 1834 the partnership acquired Abel Grove's pewtering business and in 1838 the moulds of John Carruthers Crane of Bewdley (including some going back to the Duncombes). This whole exercise seems to indicate changing times, that required larger and better-funded enterprises.



John Yates's son James joined the business in 1837 and after the death of Spooner in 1839 John left and a new partnership of James Yates and Thomas Rawlins Birch was formed (Yates & Birch). The latter died in 1857 and in 1860 the Birch interest lapsed and the business known as 'James Yates' was created. James Yates died in 1881 when the business was sold to Fredrick and Herbert Greenaway although it continued to trade as James Yates until effectively the business was merged with that of Gaskell and Chambers in 1902. After the split with James Yates the Birches formed a partnership with Samuel Mason.



Although the three successive businesses from 1829 to 1902, as later catalogues show, offered a whole range of products their output was largely concentrated on two types of pewter, bellied measures and beer mugs. The former were made in a whole range of sizes from one gallon down to very small fractions and survive in large numbers until today. They also made large numbers of beer mugs some in traditional truncated

cone form while others followed 19th century fashions. Again the production was significant including material for export.

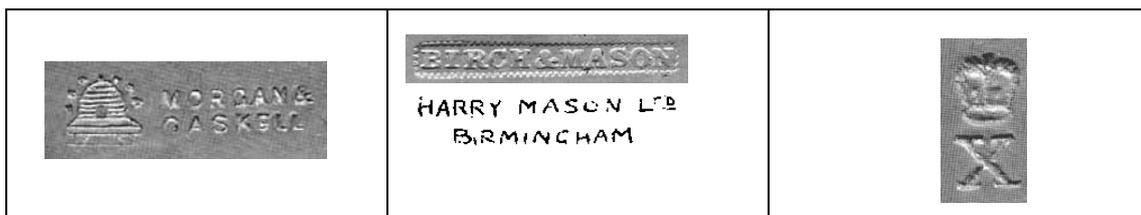
Gaskell and Chambers Almost the end of the Road

Cornelius Chambers acquired the pewtering business of Peter Gaskell in 1892 so creating what would be one of the only two Birmingham pewtering enterprises to survive well into the 20th century. Gaskell traded from 60, Stafford Street which had previously been the premises occupied by another prominent Birmingham pewterer Joseph Morgan (also of Manchester). In 1902 he acquired the old James Yates business and in 1910 that of Samuel Mason so a large part of the inheritance of West Midlands pewtering came to this business. (Research suggest that in 1860 the two Birch boys, who has inherited their father's interest in Yates and Birch separated themselves from Yates and went into a partnership, fairly short lived, with Samuel Mason in Dale End Road. Mason later continued on his own and it was presumed this was the business Gaskell and Chambers bought in 1910 when it had gone bankrupt. Harry Mason who had been running it then, presumably son or grandson or something similar, of Samuel apparently tried to restart the enterprise a year or two later.)

Of course like most of their 19th century predecessors Gaskell and Chambers did not just deal in pewter but also bar fittings, pumps and many other related products.

Gaskell and Chambers Birmingham premises were bombed in 1941 and most of their own and their inherited records were destroyed. In the early 1970s they sold their traditional pewter making enterprise to another Birmingham firm, James Smellies, who continued with the work until 1983. The closure of James Smellies pewter manufactory left only one traditional pewterer in Birmingham, A.E. Williams.

Gaskell and Chambers catalogues showed the same wide range of products as their 19th century predecessors but the bulk of their production was again beer mugs and measures including bellied measures and handless balusters for the Irish market. Their products are normally marked under the base 'Gaskell and Chambers Brmingham'. Sometimes they have inside the base an 'X' or Crowned 'X' with a triangle below. In the early 20th century Gaskell and Chambers were also dated earlier than they should have been.





Marks inside the base of Yates and Gaskell and Chambers pots

A number of people have commented on the marks found in Yates pots and measures or what are thought to be Yates pieces and the marks found inside what appear to be or are thought to be Gaskell and Chamber's pieces. **The marks believed to be associated with the Yates are numbers over a Crowned 'X' and those associated with Gaskell and Chambers consist of an 'X' with a triangle below containing a letter 'Y' and a geometric form.**

When David Hall visited James Smellies in 1981, a couple of years before they closed, he persuaded the foreman to stamp various punches and touches, that were kept in a couple of boxes, on some sheets of pewter. This confirms the connection of the Yates business with the numbered Crowned 'X's and the triangle with Gaskell and Chambers. It has been suggested the numbered marks were to identify the individual craftsmen who made items and the triangle containing the apparent 'Y' was to show old James Yates moulds had been used to make the piece concerned. This is of course speculation, as the firm's records were apparently destroyed in the blitz.

If the numbered Crowned 'X's were to identify individual craftsmen it has some logic; there were questions of quality control and piecework payments (not that the Victorians would have used those terms). It does appear, however, that there might be other possibilities. For instance if the men worked in gangs or groups, possibly self-employed as they still do in some Sheffield businesses, then their gang might have been identified in this way. Perhaps even less likely but just possible might the numbers refer to a particular mould that been used to make the pot so marked. From what Smellies had - in what was already a downsized enterprise - this might just be possible.

There was nothing at Smellies to make anyone think that they were still using the old Gaskell and Chambers base of pot marks. They did occasionally use old marks but there were many in those boxes far older and unused for many, many decades. A best guess was that those Gaskell and Chambers triangle marks had been out of use for sometime. Beyond that it is difficult to be at all certain so perhaps it is best to say they had ceased being used by the 1980s but when the practise stopped is unclear.

When Smellies closed a lot of the moulds and other stuff were bought by a working pewterer who was a member of the Worshipful Company. Subsequently he sold them on to A.E.Williams of Birmingham where I

understand they are now. Exactly what Williams have I do not know but it includes the Duncombe plate and charger moulds listed

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