

PEWTER AND BRITANNIA METAL

IT MIGHT BE WISE TO ASSUME THAT THIS IS NOT CORRECT - ESPECIALLY WHERE IT SAYS JAMES DIXON DID NOT MAKE CAST PEWTER *How to Distinguish the One from the Other*



THREE PEWTER MUGS (PINT AND HALF-PINTS) OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

LIKE all other forms of collecting, pewter is full of snares and pitfalls for the novice, but in addition to the difficulty of distinguishing between the genuine pieces and the clever fakes there lies another trap, into which a great many have fallen. It is the failure to distinguish between old pewter and Britannia metal. I know that many small collectors are not much concerned about this distinction. They buy pieces of pleasing shape, and so long as the price is low they feel no anxiety as to whether the hard metal is being passed off as genuine old pewter. But there are also many small collectors who are very keen to make and preserve the distinction between pewter and Britannia metal, and to them the following notes may be of value. Turning over some old numbers of the *Connoisseur* I came across an article written by Mr. Howard Herschl Cotterell on "Old Pewter and Britannia Metal" in the issue for March, 1921. This article furnishes some data that helps materially in settling the point at issue. Mr. Cotterell quotes extracts from correspondence with Messrs. James Dixon and Sons of Sheffield, and with their entire approval he states positively that Dixons *never made* pewter wares. To many collectors this came as a shock, but the truth had to be faced, and a good service was rendered by the matter being thus cleared up. It means that every piece bearing the stamp James Dixon and Sons, Sheffield, is Britannia metal and, moreover, is in no case earlier than about 1806, when this firm started business.

It is, of course, quite a technical point to decide where pewter ends and Britannia metal begins: it is a question of

composition of alloy. The old pewter—made with little change throughout mediæval times up to the eighteenth century—had a proportion of lead in it, but was chiefly composed of tin, in the ratio of 1 of lead to 4 of tin generally. Better pewter had a small admixture of copper. The hard pewter which was given the name of Britannia metal was composed chiefly of tin and antimony, lead being no longer added. This difference in composition naturally affected the colour and feel of the metal, and the articles made of it were thinner in substance.

One hears a lot of talk about the quantity of silver in very old pewter, but so there is also in the lead on the dome of St. Paul's, the reason being that in "the old days" they

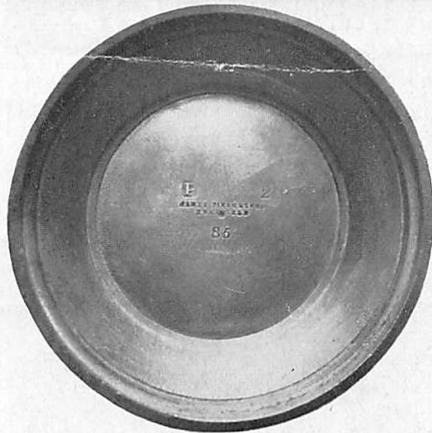
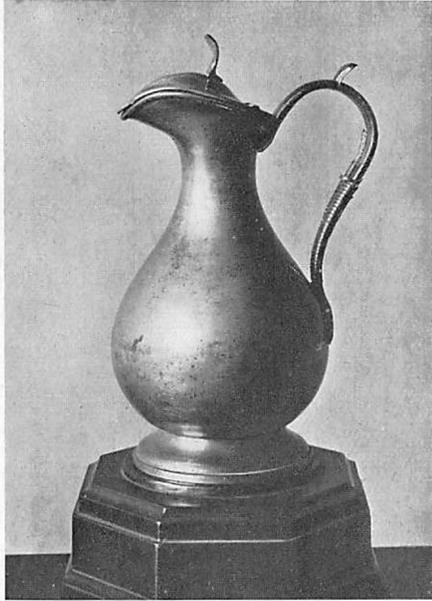


A PEWTER JUG WITH LID, AND A PAIR OF PEWTER CANDLESICKS. *These also are of eighteenth century date.*

did not know how to extract the natural impurities from the metal, and this undoubtedly has given longer life to it.

Generally, old pewter will be found to be of thicker substance. A test applied by many is to bend it slightly while holding the piece to the ear. A distinct crackle is heard, and the bend has to be forced back, whereas in the case of Britannia metal it will be found fairly springy.

Regarding marks—the pewterer's touch—these on genuine pewter are generally additional proof of the old



A BRITANNIA METAL HOT-WATER JUG.

And the maker's mark on the bottom, which clearly distinguishes it from pewter.

soft metal, and can often be identified with a maker who registered his touch at Pewterers' Hall. In some cases unscrupulous pewterers, wishing to get more profit, used stamps which were facsimiles of the marks on silverware, and it is recorded that on more than one occasion the

Goldsmiths Company took objection to this practice. The two half-pint and one pint mugs illustrated on the preceding page have the silver stamps, the maker's initials being SC, all impressed in little shields. This deceitful trick had very nearly died out when Britannia metal was adopted at the end of the eighteenth century. At that time makers commenced stamping their name in full with a numeral in addition, which is understood to be a catalogue number. This may appear with or without the name on small pieces, and I believe it to be infallible proof of Britannia metal. As Mr. Cotterell says, it is safer to treat every tea and coffee pot and cream jug as Britannia metal unless marked with the pewterer's "touch," and many salts, mustards, peppers, caddies, tobacco jars, etc., are made of the same metal.

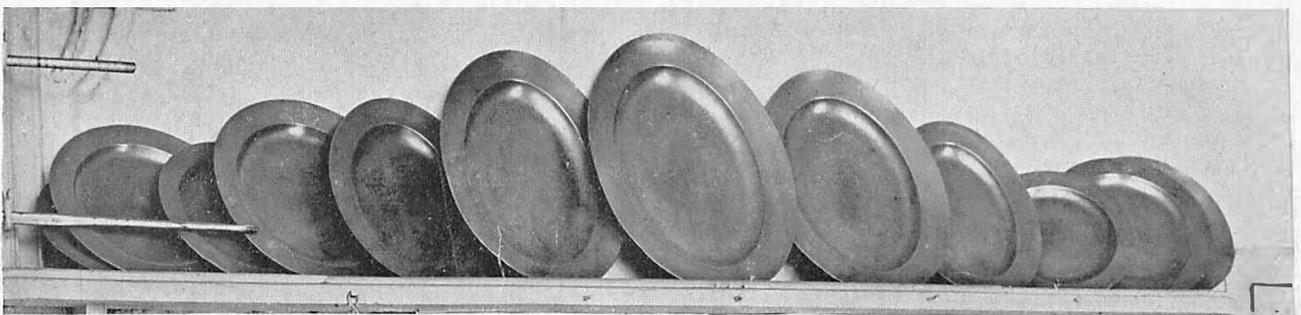
Well known makers of old Britannia metal, in addition to J. Dixon and Sons, were Ashberry, Colman, Vickers and Wolstenholme.

One further point (for the uninitiated only) is this: The early examples of electro-plate were very generally made up of Britannia metal, and their shapes coincided with unplated productions. Worn pieces of this plate have had all the silver deposit removed and have then been offered for sale as pewter; but the fact that they are spurious can generally be proved by the letters stamped on the base. In little shields or circles will be found the initials of the firm and also the letter A or B, denoting the quality of the electro-plate. This letter is sufficient to expose a rather crude deception. A little later the letters E.P.B.M. were used when the article was plated on Britannia metal.

Genuine pewter of the eighteenth century has been so keenly sought after of late years that it is now a rare thing to find a piece in the little second-hand and oddment shops of back streets, and undoubtedly the safest thing for the collector to-day is to acquire specimens through a dealer of repute; but quite naturally a higher price must be paid. Good luck, however, comes from time to time as a reward for the ardent searcher. The set of three mugs above referred to, for instance, I acquired for a very small sum during a short stay in Ipswich. The morning after my arrival my shaving water was brought to my room in the pint mug. Upon enquiring of the maid if there were a set of them, I was told there had been quite a number of them, but only a few remained in sound condition: they were being treated with far less respect than the cheapest modern jug. A search in the old kitchen quarters revealed the two half-pint mugs and several others on a top shelf badly broken or melted right away at the bottom through "standin' them on the 'ob!"

The large jug with cover (seen in the lower illustration on the preceding page) came from a rag and bone shop in a suburb of North-West London. It was then black and filthy, and the man from whom I bought it put it on the scales and sold it to me as old metal. So it was, but cheap at 5s.

The hot-water jug with cover (its shape is a very clear indication of late date) was bought and presented to me by a friend as a piece of old pewter by a good maker; but that good maker was James Dixon and Sons of Sheffield. Their name is stamped on the base, and Mr. Cotterell has settled the matter once and for all. JOHN C. ROGERS.



A ROW OF OLD PEWTER PLATES ON A DRESSER.