

Scottish Communion Pewter 1600 – 1850

By Peter Spencer Davies

Most silver and pewter communion plate dates back to the Act passed by the Scottish Parliament in 1617 at the behest of James VI, that every Kirk should provide cups for communion and a laver and basin for baptism. Very little seventeenth century pewter has survived. Although not required under the Act, flagons were used in some churches for the communion wine, but no Scottish-made example is known. No lavers of this period seem to have survived.



Late seventeenth century communion cup and a basin with a central boss and maker's mark on the rim

The early communion cups that we know of are all from the North East and are of the simple beaker type, with a maker's mark inside or beneath the base.

Deep dishes were universally known as 'basins' and may have been used for the bread at communion and for baptism. They usually had a central boss, and the edge often had 3 incised lines or reeds. There would be a maker's mark, usually on the upper rim, or beneath the base.

Eighteenth Century 1700 – 1750 Communion flagons appeared from about 1702 onwards. They are typically straight-sided about 10½" in height, with a flat lid which has a triangular 'beak' at the front. The maker's mark is often beneath the lid, but may be in the base – and therefore more difficult to see. Flagons of this period are scarce, and may have undocumented marks. Very small flagons, of about 6" in height, are even more scarce and were probably used as lavers.

Communion cups are of interest. They typically have large bowls with a stem and foot. In the North East, the beaker style continued in use.

Dishes of this period typically have no reeding around the edge, and as in earlier forms, have a rather straight angular 'booge'. The maker's mark is now usually beneath the base.



Early 18C flagon with 'beak' to front of lid, and 1704 communion dish with straight 'booge' (the bit between the rim and base that is normally curved in later dishes) and a plain edge. It has the earlier seventeenth century feature of a 'gutter' around the edge of the base

Eighteenth Century 1750 – 1800 A relatively large amount of communion pewter of this period has survived. It is likely that all of the styles in use are now known.

Flagons were as before, but without the beak on the lid.



Some were very large 13 – 14" in height (left), the majority were about 10" (centre) whilst the one on the right is one of only two known that are about 6", and are probably lavers. Around the end of the century some were made with spouts and/or acorn-shaped knobs to the lids. Some Glasgow makers also produced some very tall more slender flasks at this time.



Two late 18C tall flasks from Glasgow

Stemmed communion cups were abundant, with variations in both the shape of the bowl and in the detail of the stems and bases. Deep dishes with a curved booge, and also shallower plates and chargers, were in widespread use. Basins for baptism date from this period. They were 9" in diameter, with a very narrow rim and were deep i.e. more 'basin' shaped, and the maker's mark was inside the base.



Selection of late 18C communion cups. There were a great variety of styles

Nineteenth century Pewter making was in decline. Some of the eighteenth century styles continued. Pewter was gradually replaced by Britannia Metal. This is an alloy of tin and other metals, but with antimony in the mix, it could be rolled into thin sheets, which were then shaped and the edges soldered. It was much cheaper to produce and was mainly manufactured in factories in Sheffield. You can tell Britannia metal from the earlier pewter because it is lighter in weight and, more importantly, if you look on the inside of cups or flagons, you can see a vertical seam where the sheet metal was joined.

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