

SEDITIONIOUS LIBEL AND POLITICAL IMMORTALITY

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Pewter has been used for many things down the centuries but rarely for political propaganda. It is for this reason that a double-domed tankard by John Townsend and Thomas Giffin is important. After more than two centuries, it has



FIGURE 1. Quart commemorative tankard c1768.

finally returned to Britain where at Stratford-upon-Avon it will remind us of the fiery career of Englishman John Wilkes, politician and agitator. Giffin was the son of a pewterer and worked in Leadenhall Street, London. Townsend a Quaker with American connections worked in Fenchurch Street, and was a major exporter to the Colonies. In 1763, he filled three orders for Philadelphia, one of which amounted to almost 13000 pieces. From that date, presumably to keep up with demand, he entered into various partnerships, one of which was with Thomas Giffin in 1768¹. Probably their business links with America gave birth to the idea to create this tankard in honour of Wilkes soon after they began working together. Bought in New Jersey by the late Charles V. 'Bud' Swain, the tankard was a favourite piece in his British pewter collection sold at auction 19 May 2007. From a distance, it appears 'normal', but Bud would point out the pewter medal set into the lid at the time of casting. This bears on the upper face a bust of John Wilkes surrounded by *JOHN WILKES ESQ*, while on the reverse there appears the figure of Liberty next to an obelisk, with the legend *45 / North Briton / Magna Carta / in Memory of the Year / MDCCLXVIII (1768)*. The medal was issued following Wilkes's arrest for publishing edition No. 45 of the North Briton his newspaper, in which Ministers were attacked as *tools of despotism and corruption*. The tankard is just under 8" high and 4⁷/₈" in diameter. The makers' marks are stamped inside the base and secondary marks are on the side near the lip. On the handle just below the hinge is a small engraving of scrolls, shells, and a diamond design, which is uncommon and attractive. In a letter to Bud, Ronald Michaelis commented *it is most unusual for any English piece to bear commemorative medallions. I can think of only two others at the moment; these are early straight sided tankards ... Your own tankard is particularly interesting for its association with John Wilkes, the great Parliamentary Reformer.*

In the catalogue of the British part of his collection, Bud mentioned the existence of a similar tankard with a Wilkes medallion, which was in the hands of a Mrs Henry D. Paxton of Doylestown, Pennsylvania. However, efforts to



FIGURE 2. 1763 etching of Wilkes by William Hogarth.

trace this have failed ². An apparently identical silver medal by an unknown artist 2¼" diameter was purchased in 1913, and is on display at the National Portrait Gallery.

Wilkes was a fierce defender of democracy, the freedom of the press, and other concepts now taken for granted but which in the 18th century



FIGURE 3. Reverse and obverse of medallion in lid.



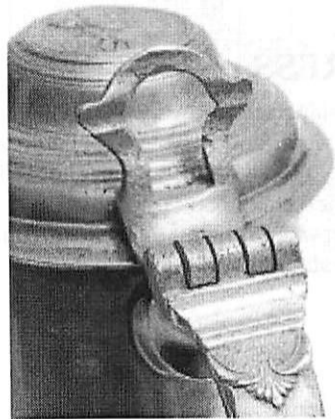
FIGURE 4. Silver medallion in National Portrait Gallery



FIGURE 4. Secondary marks of Townsend & Giffin.

2. *British Pewter- the Charles V. Swain Collection*,
published by the author 2002, printed privately in the
United States.

were hardly politically correct. Having entered



into a brief marriage of convenience for clear financial reasons, Wilkes dallied with a life of relative debauchery before dedicating himself to politics as the MP for Aylesbury. He rapidly achieved notoriety for his bitter and devastating attacks on George III and his Prime Minister, the Earl of Bute. In 1762, Wilkes founded his own newspaper *The North Briton* to publicise his views. A year later, the King and his Cabinet prosecuted him for seditious libel. At public demonstrations in his favour, slogans were chanted against the Monarchy and seven people were killed when troops opened fire. Riots followed. Wilkes was later found guilty of seditious libel and sentenced to gaol. On no fewer than three occasions, he was expelled from Parliament for defending religious toleration, attacking the system of rotten boroughs, and for seeking seats for the growing industrial cities then without representation. Such ideas undermined the political Establishment and Wilkes had to seek exile in France to avoid further arrest. When he returned he became Lord Mayor of London and his politics moved towards a more conservative stance. William Hogarth famous for his depictions of both the leaders of Society and its dregs painted his portrait. Throughout his life, however, he had been a fervent if scurrilous exponent of free speech and democracy. Contrary to legend, he never championed the cause of American independence in principle. Nor was he always sympathetic to colonial grievances. However, colonial adulation of Wilkes as a hero of liberty led him to adopt the idea of a common cause on both sides of the Atlantic. He offered words of encouragement to America, commending resistance to the 1767 import duties on tea and other items, and deploring the use of soldiers in Boston, by an analogy with events in London. A town in Pennsylvania, and a university are named after him, as are Counties in Georgia and North Carolina, and John Wilkes Booth who assassinated President Lincoln.

FIGURE 5. Unusual detail on upper handle.

REFERENCES

1. Ricketts C *Pewterers of London 1600-1900* Pewter Society 2001.