

TRENCHER – CHARGER - DISH - PLATE

-- WHAT SHOULD I CALL IT??????????????

John Bank December 2008

This has been a puzzle for me for some time. I thought maybe it was all a matter of the gravy!

I have been using the phrase – Charger/Dish -

The Charger-Dish term is likely enough just my own personal expression - explaining to myself that something over 16 1/2" is a charger - but I know some are dishes not plates – they served different foods on big dishes to big plates – well they must have done!!!!!!!. (otherwise the diner would have gravy/sauce/hot and wet - in his lap!)

I thought to myself that it is sort of - **the gravy test** - will it (the gravy) stay there easily!

Anyway this appears not to be an expression used and the pewterers themselves would use either Charger or Dish -but not both together.

So from now should it be a dish? - (give me plenty of gravy!).....- or a charger? - (keep it dry - hold the gravy!) - if over 16 1/2" – (and if it was under that size - a dish or a plate?)

So in trying to find out.... I ask an experienced collector who tells me -

A "trencher" was originally the thick slice of bread on which you ate your food. It presumably comes from the French verb "trencher", to slice.

It then came to mean the wooden plate-sized board which followed from the slices of bread. They in turn were followed by plates of pewter or other material. So to my mind, the expression "trencher plate" is tautology.

However, this isn't good enough, because the Worshipful Company used the expression "trencher plates" in its sizings of both 1691 and 1772 – (see PS Journal Spr 1980 p28 and Spr 1984 p87). There are several references to "trencher plates" in vol.2 of Welch as well.

I assume all it means is an item of sadware that is about the size of a traditional trencher - ie "plate size". I know that is going round in circles, but try and do better...

Interestingly the 1438 sizing (UK PS Journal Spr 1987 p8) doesn't use the term at all. It simply has chargers, platters, dishes and saucers. If you want to amuse yourself, you can find out what they meant in 1438 by these four terms by comparing the weights quoted with the weights in the 1691 sizing. I think then you'll abandon all attempts at defining terms after that! The only term whose meaning never seems to change is "saucer".

The generally-accepted modern convention is that anything under 18" is a dish and anything over is a charger. That is the convention used on the (UK PS) database.

(Comment to the writer/me) -

'I've noticed you use the expression "charger dish". I have never seen the terms used together like this. Traditionally pewterers either talked about chargers or about dishes, but never used both terms together. Interestingly they were happy to use "dish" for anything from plate size up to at least 28". However, the term "charger" is a very old one and they used that as well, but it is not quite clear what they thought of as a charger. The Worshipful Company of Pewterers used the term Charger and it appears in records of 1348, 1438 and 1549. Perhaps the term fell into disuse being replaced by Dish and Dish later by Plate. So what caused the revival of the word Charger in the 20th Century?

So 1) Modern Terms Used – Big... but under 18"... a dish – over 18" a Charger

So 2) Old Pewterer's use of terms – from Plate (9"????) to 28"...a Dish – although regional variations could have called it a charger?

Confused??? – well so am I – so why not go back to the gravy?

(mainly because - that is perhaps a modern idiom/idea and the pewterers never did think that way – though there was plenty of gravy!!!!!!!)

So I looked at what the sizing records that we have say -

The 1438 Sizing (as per Pewter Society journal of Spring 1987 page 8)

It appears they used the terms –

CHARGEOURS – the smallest quoted as weighing 2 3/4 pounds the largest as 7 pounds (sizes being – 'largest' down to 'smale hollow') (say 14 1/2" to 20 1/2")

PLATERS – the 'largest' weighing 2 1/2 pounds and the 'smale middyl' weighing 1 5/6 pounds. (say 12" to 13 3/4")

DISHES – the 'largest' weighing 1 1/2 pounds the 'smale hollow' (?) 5/6 of a pound. (say 8 1/2" to 11 1/4")

Today in my collection Chargers made pre 1700 generally weigh as –

- 16 1/2" – 3 4/5 pounds
- 18" - 4 1/2 pounds
- 20 1/4" - 6 4/5 pounds
- 22" - 8 1/2 pounds -

Plates – 13 ½" weigh about 2 lbs 6 ozs
10 ¾" weigh about 1 lb 4 ozs (later 1700s and Irish)
9" plates weigh about 5/6ths of a pound.

Here I am quoting quite flat plates – the gravy would be at risk of spilling off!
remembering that these weights were of pieces made in about 1690, unless stated,
and the above Chargeours etc – 1438

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By 1691 The terms had Changed to – (PS Journal 1980 Spring page 28)

DISHES - Quoted from 10 ½" to 29 ¼" in diameter

22" should weigh 10 pounds each
20 ½" should weigh 7 pounds each
18 ½" should weigh 5 pounds each
16 ¾" should weigh 4 pounds each

GUINEA BASONS – Quoted from 8" to 18" and weighing from 1 pound to 6 pounds

TRENCHER PLATES – Quoted from under 8" to 11 ¼" (across) and weighing from
½ a pound to 1 ½ pounds each.

PIECE BASONS – Quoted from 7 ¾" to 13 ¼" (across) and weighs from 1 to 4
pounds each.

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By 1772 - the sizings and terms used were – (PS Journal 1984 page 87)

DISHES – Quoted as from 11" to 28" (inches over) and weighing from 1 ½ pounds
to 20 pounds each (with 20 ½" at 7 pounds 18" at 5 pounds)

TRENCHER PLATES – From 7 5/8" to 9 ¾" but now various styles – broad rim,
narrow rim, Spanish plate, with weights from 9 1/3 ozs each to 1 ¼ pounds each.

GUINEA BASONS – from 8" to 18" (inches over) weighing from 1 pound to 4
pounds each

PIECE BASONS – from 8" to 13" (inches over) and weighing 1 pound to 4 pounds
each.

A Spanish Bason another item quoted is longer than it is wide by some 30% for example at 18" long and 14" wide plain they might weigh 4 lbs 4 ozs and "Scollopd" they might weigh 4 pounds.

So from 1691 to 1772 names and weights and sizes varied little.

The weight of DISHES ties in with my flatter pieces of 1690 and the Trencher Plates were smaller sizes - again weighing as do my flat plates.

Cooking – we can guess that there were three common methods of cooking

Firstly – in or above the hot ash of the fire – spit roasting – (not much gravy there!)

Secondly – in an iron cauldron with water above a fire (plenty of gravy – fast food for Busy Family, Coaching Inn, or Town Tavern to serve from the pot). The skillet was a small three footed pot that pushed into the embers of the fire.)

Thirdly – baking in some form of oven

Of course not all food would be hot cooked – Cheese, cold meat, bread, are all usually better dry – so DISHES or TRENCHER PLATES perhaps (as for meat cooked in or above the hot ash)

Stew, soup, gruel, or porridge were probably served in the BASONS as the little extra weight in a 'bason' could imply extra depth (in the booge – downwards from inner rim to base) – whilst not changing the inches across. A medieval cookery expert also comments that Stews could have been served in a pewter porringer, before that wooden bowls, plates or trenchers more likely for solid foods. Larger dishes were for serving, not for eating from.

Conclusion – so what to call our antique pewter today?

The generally-accepted modern convention is that anything under 18" is a dish and anything over is a charger.

Well that is the answer today then – so the gravy doesn't matter!!!! I quite like the idea of 'Charger Dish or Charger Plate' (the gravy test!) for those pieces over 16 ½" – but clearly I am alone in that – and readers should make their own mind up or follow the 'modern convention'.