

The use of verification marks to identify pewterers

Carl Ricketts and John Douglas

While researching material for our forthcoming book on verification marks we have made several discoveries and evolved some tentative hypotheses. One of the latter is the likelihood that certain “verification” marks may be as reliable as “hallmarks” in identifying pewterers. This article is intended to raise awareness and hopefully to stimulate the appearance of further evidence to confirm or refute the hypothesis.

The practice of verification marking was to attest graphically to a largely illiterate population that the weights and measures which were used for trade agreed with the legal standards. This form of consumer protection dates from at least Saxon times and was intended to stop fraud by traders.

The earliest style of verification mark, known to the authors, on measures, mugs and tankards was a simple device comprising a crown over the monarch's initial(s). This style is mentioned in 1700 in the Statute II & 12 Will. III cap.15 (An Act for the ascertaining the Measures for retailing Ale and Beer), which instructed all mayors and chief officers of local authorities (in England and Wales) to test, from time to time, all ale quarts and ale pints and “shall cause them to be plainly marked with W.R. and a Crown testifying that such Quarts and Pints have been measured, compared, sized and equalled with the Standard, which Marks or Stamps the Mayor or chief Officer is required to provide”. The charge for stamping or marking was not to exceed one farthing per measure. This act was neither amended nor repealed until the 1824 Weights and Measures Act. A Proclamation dated 1699 informed the public that as from 24th June 1700 it was illegal to sell ale or beer except in vessels duly marked as aforesaid.

It is clear that in 1700 it was the intention that all existing measures, which were used for retailing ale and beer, should be stamped under the direction of local authorities. However, judging by the survival of both ale and wine measures with a different royal cypher such as a crowned GR or with a mark incorporating local heraldry, it was not always strictly observed. The question to be addressed is whether there was further laxity in the subsequent observance of the act and that after a while some pewterers were allowed to apply the stamps themselves to newly made measures. Stoneware mugs are known bearing crowned GR seals which could only have been applied at the time of manufacture. It therefore seems plausible that pewterers would also have been allowed to apply a “Conformation” mark themselves.

It is known from historical records that throughout the country various officials and groups of citizens did in fact ‘from time to time’ carry out the duties of ‘examining’ weights and measures. This practice, which was typically performed annually, would ensure that false weights and measures were identified, seized and destroyed and fraudulent traders were apprehended and prosecuted or dealt with summarily. The local responsibility might have been with an annoyance jury, jury of headboroughs, court leet or grand jury or with an official who might have been known as an ale conner, ale founder, ale taster, pecksealer, surveyor/ clerk of the market or examiner.

In the 19th century the function of ‘inspection’, which involved checking the capacity and applying a verification mark, was quite clearly separate from that of any subsequent ‘examination’ for fitness for use and the presence of the required markings. It is therefore possible that the bodies or individuals mentioned above did not apply the Royal Cypher marks but merely examined the measures.

Let us look at the evidence provided by the appearance of marks on surviving measures. The verification marks found on Imperial measures, which were applied by Inspectors, were often struck so heavily that the pewter was distorted. Additionally the marks were not

carefully positioned. In contrast, the 'crowned WR' marks on pre-Imperial measures were usually cleanly struck and positioned neatly and consistently relative to other marks applied by the pewterer. This indicates that they were applied by someone familiar with stamping pewter rather than by the hand of a casual 'examiner'.

A preliminary study of the details of the style, size and spacings of the crown and the lettering on these royal cypher marks indicates links between specific marks and either an area or in some cases a maker. The following line drawings show the considerable differences in these marks. Please check to see if any marks on your measures can confirm, contradict or extend any of the attributions.



ON LIDLESS POT
c 1690-1705



UNATTRIBUTED



WM CHARLESLEY
COTT. 888



EDMUND GROVE
COTT. 2032



UNATTRIBUTED &
LONDON VERIFIED



'?' & TF
of LONDON?



JOHN FOSTER
COTT. 1734



YATES of
LONDON



IP (PHILLIPS?)
of LONDON



SAMUEL COCKS
COTT. 1004



GRIMES & SON
COTT. 2025



BEWDLEY MAKERS
I&H; JCC etc



WM MCKENZIE
OF BIRMINGHAM



UNATTRIBUTED - 1/2 PT
TULIP MUG - BODY FILLET,
BALL TERMINAL HANDLE



EDGAR & SON
OF BRISTOL



RP MISTER
COTT. 3236



JOHN FOSTER
COTT. 1734



E. FERRIS & CO
OF EXETER



JAMES BROWN
OF BIRMINGHAM



UNATTRIBUTED +
NORFOLK VERIFIED



IMPERIAL
STANDARD

GEORGE KING
OF LIVERPOOL ?



? MARSHALL
OF NORWICH ?



GERARDIN & WATSON
COTT. 1837

Illustrations

Members of the PCCA have successfully compiled a record of 'crowned X' marks which can be used alone to identify individual pewterers. We would like to enlist the help of our members to compile a similar detailed and comprehensive record of crowned Royal Cypher marks. The points to study are the shape and form of the crown, lettering, spacing, outline, size and position of the marks. Because rubbings, 'smokes' and drawings often lack definition, the record needs to be a photographic one.

As published by the UK Pewter Society in their Journal of Autumn 1994