*Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series*

# The Story of Pewter in Britain

## by Tom Neil

Before we begin, a little background may be in order.

Pewter is a metal composed mainly of tin to which other substances such as copper, antimony, bismuth and lead are added to modify its properties. The detailed composition of the alloy used at various times and for varying purposes need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that all the alloys usually referred to as pewter have a low melting point (near that of tin itself, which is 232°C or 450°F). Because these alloys had such a low melting point, and were very fluid when molten, they were easily cast in moulds made of stone or metal, permitting the production of durable metal-ware without the need for great heat. The articles produced were easily repairable and, if damaged beyond repair, the metal could be easily recycled. Tin itself is one of the rarer metals, occurring worldwide in only a few places. The ore occurs as the oxide, which has to be smelted by heating with coal and fluorspar at 1300°C to extract the metal. The metal itself has always been rated as a semiprecious metal. Nowadays it is the fourth most expensive metal in common use, coming after platinum, gold and silver.

If you were to enter the home of anyone but the poorest in the early 18th century, you would note many differences from the modern home. In addition to the absence of things such as mains gas, electricity, piped water and sewerage disposal, you would also notice the absence of crockery. In its place you would see pewterware. Indeed the first half of the 18th century was the heyday of the pewter industry. The rise, and subsequent fall, in the importance of the industry is a fascinating story related to the social history of the British people.

The earliest known item of pewterware is a flask found in a grave at Abydos in Egypt with a date c1580 - 1350 BC. But apart from this find and a few items of jewellery made from tin, pewterware was conspicuous by its absence until Roman times. But there is ample evidence that pewter was made and used in Roman Britain. Apart from a number of pieces found in the Walbrook in London, most Romano-British pewter dates from 250 to 420 AD, and exists as hoards found in a 60 mile wide belt across central southern Britain. As deep excavations are made throughout the country, the area yielding no pewter continues to shrink. It may be surmised that the use of pewter in Romano-Britain was widespread among the well-to-do, and that the period of popularity corresponds with the beginning of the disintegration of the Roman Empire. Unlike the rest of Britain appeared to enjoy something of a ‘golden age’ period but, because of the disruption of supply lines and continental trade due to wars and piracy, Britain had to manufacture many of its requirements at home.

Evidence of manufacturing sites in Roman Britain is limited, but one or two have been found, the most positive being near Bath, on the Fosse Way. Moulds made from limestone, one for an oval dish 15.5” by 9” by 2.5” deep, and another for a skillet, have been found there close to a sunken furnace and simple rectangular buildings, assumed to be artisans’ houses. Tin and lead would have been melted together in hemispherical earthenware crucibles and poured into preheated stone moulds. The rough castings would

be finished by turning on a simple lathe (easily done because of the softness of the metal) or hammered on stone forms. Some pieces were then chased with hammer and chisel to produce a fine decoration. Complex pieces like jugs were made from several castings beaten and welded together.

The collapse of Roman Britain lead to the commercial and industrial regression of the Dark Ages, during which time there is no evidence of pewter production even by the late Saxons who produced some splendid metal-work. By the ninth and tenth centuries, we learn of pewter being used for ecclesiastical purposes.

Through the 11th to 13th centuries, the chief consumer of pewter was the church. The Council of Rheims, the Synod of Rouen and the Council of Winchester all permitted the use of gold, silver and pewter for sacramental use. But it should be noted that the use of pewter was forced on the church by the general poverty of the times, and was included so that even baser materials such as copper, lead, wood or leather could be specifically excluded. There is, however, scant information on the manufacture of pewterware during this period. As the centuries passed and prosperity increased, we find the use of pewter for sacramental vessels being gradually phased out, but we also find that the use of pewter for other utensils in the church increased greatly, as evidenced by church inventories and other documents.

Until the 1340's, wills and inventories of household goods extant for the great houses and for those of middling wealth make no mention of pewter, even though they list items of silver and gold together with articles made from wood, clay, iron etc. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that pewter was not used domestically before that date. However, after that time, inventories start to mention pewter among the household effects of London merchants. It is interesting to note that some other European countries, notably France, were importing Cornish tin and had a thriving pewter industry decades before one appeared in Britain. This parallels the lack of a British cloth industry in spite of the fact that we produced the best raw wool in Europe, and the general malaise in the fields of shipping and finance.

It is also from the early fourteenth century that we see in Britain the emergence of craftsmen specialising in the manufacture of pewterware, as evidenced by the rolls of those admitted to the freedom of various cities. (The 'freedom' granted was the freedom to trade, and meant that the individual concerned was a master craftsman). In 1348 we find the registration of ordinances for the control of pewtering in London, laying down the standards of workmanship and the quality of pewter to be used for different items.

By the end of the Middle Ages (say 1500), Britain was becoming affluent. This affluence was not limited to the upper classes, but was most noteworthy in the middle classes where the redistribution of wealth, together with a decline in the population led to an age of opportunity and the growth in the number of people of substance. Intermarrying between the social classes and the adoption of gentler life styles led to a great increase in the consumption of goods of all kinds, including pewter. Britain was now catching up with the rest of northwest Europe, both in terms of consumption and quality. Some idea of the popularity of pewter at this time may be judged from the amount of pewter hired for the lord mayor's feast in 1505 -viz 9,000 items!

Through the 16th to the end of the 18th centuries the general prosperity of the population increased, even reaching the poorest classes. This period also saw the rise of the merchant class and of the yeomanry, all of who possessed some pewter, as recorded in their inventories. Throughout this period the guilds maintained tight control over the industry,

by insisting on high standards of workmanship and controlling the quality of the metal used.

Most trades were regulated by guilds, which received their powers, by Royal Charter or Acts of Parliament. They were enabled to police their craft by enforcing standards of workmanship and materials, held their own courts to adjudicate on matters pertaining to their craft, and could prevent unskilled workers from practising their craft. The pewterers' guilds were among the more successful guilds. For a considerable period of time the Worshipful Company of Pewterers in London was empowered to regulate standards throughout the country. The larger provincial towns and cities also had guilds but often of a more general nature. For example, in many places workers in metal were lumped together in guilds of 'hammermen', since there would have been too few members of any one trade to form a guild. At various times during this period the trade was protected: imports of pewterware and the employment of aliens were prohibited, and pewterworkers were prevented from emigrating.

As a result of these controls and the protection afforded by law the quality of British pewter by the 18th century was second to none. The style of British pewter was always plain compared with continental pewter, especially that from the Netherlands and the Germanic States, which were often decorated with designs in high relief. By contrast British pewter was distinguished by its boldness of form.

Pewter had become the dominant material from which domestic utensils were made. The trade consisted of many masters employing apprentices and sometimes freemen (that is, men who had completed their apprenticeship and were free to set up in business on their own if they so wished). The trade was strictly controlled by the guild and no-one could enter the trade, unless he had served an appropriate apprenticeship and had been admitted to the freedom of the guild. The guild also specified the quality of metal to be used for each type of item, and had the power to confiscate inferior goods and to stop a man trading by confiscating his moulds. Virtually all the goods made were utilitarian - drinking vessels, plates, dishes, candlesticks, chamberpots and so on. They were almost invariably made by casting the molten metal into moulds made of bronze, and finished by turning on a lathe and by hammering. Most items were cast in several pieces which were then soldered or welded together. The moulds were the most expensive items of the pewterer's trade, and were sometimes shared by groups of tradesmen. These moulds were very durable and lasted literally hundreds of years. (I have cast plates in a mould bearing the date 1724!) Therefore, it is often difficult to date a pewter piece by its form, and because moulds were passed around (particularly for larger items) attribution to a particular maker from the form alone can be hazardous.

However, the years 1800 to 1850 were to see the decimation of the pewter industry. Many elements conspired together to bring about this change. First, drinking habits changed. Instead of beer and wine, coffee, chocolate and particularly tea became popular beverages. Inexpensive crockery became available , when Wedgwood and others discovered how to make pottery more cheaply by slipcasting. Indeed, the whole technology of pottery-making underwent considerable changes, so that it was not only cheaper but of better quality. Also it was more comfortable to drink hot beverages from crockery rather than pewter. The manufacture of pottery cups led to a demand for plates and other utensils to match and so, by 1850 or thereabouts, the pewter industry had collapsed.

At the same time, the Industrial Revolution was well under way. With the coming of steam power and the power lathe, the process of metal spinning was developed. In this process, a flat disc of metal is clamped against a former attached to the lathe and set

rotating. The metal disc can then be moulded onto the former by the application of pressure from a tool. This technology was developed in the industrial north and the manufacturers did not acknowledge the authority of the guilds. They were able to undercut the price of the equivalent cast item and, although the quality of the spun piece was not as good as a cast one, business was lost by the traditional pewterer.

However, this technology came along at the time when the pewter trade was in decline. The spinners therefore produced copies of silverware, particularly tea and coffee services, which were often silverplated. This was a mistake, because the silver designs were not really suitable for the softer pewter and the new products were not particularly durable. Thus pewter became associated with shoddiness and by the end of the 19th century the industry was in a bad shape. There was some revival in the popularity of pewter with the coming of the Art Nouveau style. In this country, Arthur Lazenby Liberty introduced a whole range of Art Nouveau designs in furniture, textiles and silver as well as pewter, and there was a corresponding revival on the continent. Indeed, British Art Nouveau work is often described as 'Liberty Style'. This revival persisted to some extent into the Art Deco period, but by then newer materials were available including the first plastics and aluminium, as well as stainless steel. Even at its zenith, the volume of pewter goods produced in the early 20th century was a mere trickle compared with the heyday two centuries earlier. In any case, these goods were aimed at the luxury end of the market.

In the 1930's, the pewter industry all but disappeared. The metal tin was used in industry, particularly for white metal bearings and in tinplate, but there was little production of domestic pewterware. However, some of the old firms survived, either producing a small volume of quality pewter for the luxury market or spun pewter tankards, particularly for the souvenir and trophy market. Many of these firms survived only because they formed part of other companies producing cutlery, silver plate etc. In the post war period, the pewter industry has struggled on. In 1970, the Worshipful Company of Pewterers (WCP), which is a London Livery Company and the descendant of the London Pewterers' Guild, was instrumental in forming a pewter trade association called the 'Association Of British Pewter Craftsmen' (ABPC). This association represents many, but not all, pewter manufacturers in this country and sets standards, particularly in respect of metal quality to which members subscribe. The WCP and the ABPC are encouraging young designers in art colleges to design in pewter, by organising competitions and by other means. But it must be said that once again Britain is lagging behind other European countries and America in the development of a modern pewter industry.

(For the past 12 years, Tom Neal has worked as a designer craftsman in pewter. He became a member of the ABPC in 1983, and was admitted to the freedom of the WCP In 1986.)



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