

# **The Sin of Drunkenness.....Perhaps A Pewter Mystery????????**

- Bench Ends of Rural Somerset by Peter Poyntz Wright published by Avebury in 1983 - this shows a Church seat bench end from perhaps (?) the middle 1500s. On this bench end there is a figure clearly drinking (perhaps) from a metal mug and holding (perhaps) a metal jug.

What intrigued was the pattern of the mug and jug (metal-ware?) shown and the early date in now rural Somerset.

The copy on page 126 of this book suggests - this could be a traditional ale taster or possibly as he is draining his mug then it might represent the sin of drunkenness.

The stool is interesting for the linen-fold pattern and the dress likely that of the age in which it was carved which makes it perhaps late medieval.

The bench ends in this book seem to date from say 1480-1560.

Below is a picture of this image.

This bench end is to be found in Milverton (likely at)

St. Michaels Church  
St. Michaels Hill  
Milverton.  
Somerset

This is just west of Taunton



From a BADA member specializing in Early Carvings regarding this carved Bench End

This is a famous and much illustrated bench end depicting an "Ale Taster", it is from the village of Milverton. (It is illustrated in Somerset Benchends by Poyntz Wright as well as the two books by Smith on Church woodwork.)

Ale Taster was an important public appointment in Medieval times as he had the duty to test that the quality of ales served in the hostelries was up to the appropriate standard, i.e. had not been watered down.

Whilst I am not an authority, I would have thought it highly probable that

his "official" tools of the trade of a jug and tankard would be of reasonable quality. Therefore to have decorated pewter vessels would not

seem to be out of the ordinary. I think that silver would be unlikely.

#### Further questions to BADA member

A knowledgeable collector and authority says that there were not such mugs and jugs in the UK in pewter at those dates 1480 – 1560.

He wonders if this bench end is perhaps much later than those dates, so I ask you from your experience these questions.

- 1) What date would you consider this bench end to be?
- 2) Have you ever seen such mugs and jugs represented anywhere else within those datings?
- 3) As you have discounted silver is it possible they could be in other materials than pewter - for example - treen? And if so have you seen them in treen (or other) anywhere else?

My consideration was that the bench ends would be clearly understood by the congregation and that as such they are (as the teasels with the woolen cloth trades bench ends) fair representations of life at that time.

#### **Response –from BADA member and carving specialist**

I am reasonably convinced that the bench end was carved around 1500. I do not think that the mug or jug is meant to represent wooden items. The possibility of pottery rather than pewter is possible, however I am no expert in that field either.

I am not instantly aware of other carved representations of mugs or jugs, but over the coming few days I will check up on a few possible sources.

What is in the back of my mind are Flemish 15th/16th Century still life paintings so I will certainly try and check a few of them out as well.

We should not forget that from the Norman Conquest onwards continental workmen and craftsmen were omnipresent in England, if not the modern day UK.

I think that you have homed in on a fascinating area as evidenced by the interest and response that it seems to have aroused.

#### **Summary thus far –**

**The Bench end is said by three experts in their field (Poyntz Wright 1983, J C D Smith in 1974 and my BADA contact as above) to be circa 1500. There is no known conflict as to dating and this is a well researched bench end.**

**The congregation would need to relate to the figure and the drink containers as the sin was shown to warn them.**

**(Other bench ends at Spaxton Somerset of the same period show the Woolen trade and tools used; however these are known tools that confirm the accuracy and relevance of the representation. Where mythology as in the case of ‘Greenman heads’ were used these were then easily recognizable images and though pagan were permitted - again so that the congregation would easily relate to the Church. Whereas mythology was the subject of much elaboration, the carving of everyday life as seen in bench ends or misericords appears to be more usually realistic in the representations of people and occupations or leisure pursuits in English Churches...)**

**The drinking vessels might be –**

- 1) **Bronze or brass – unlikely as unknown to Schiffer (or Negus)**

- 2) Silver – unlikely as the congregation would mostly not use it
- 3) Wood – though to be unlikely by BADA contact
- 4) Pottery – unknown (but was it commonplace at that time?)
- 5) Pewter – used by Church and those advancing themselves but the form is unknown at that time and thought unlikely

**Clearly this representation as a carving had to have meaning in the everyday lives of Somerset people in the 1500s. It is accepted that the dress is correct for the period so why not the Mug and Measure?**

#### **16.08.08 - From BADA member –**

Paula Nuttall's

"From Flanders to Florence", has a black and white image of a painting by the Flemish artist Gerrard David, of the Adoration of the Magi in

which there are two vessels included, both of which appear to have what I would call gadrooning. No doubt they would have been silver, but would that not raise the possibility of Pewter items being produced for the lower classes. The date of the painting is said to be circa 1490.

**I then asked the BADA Member – if there was a clue in the linenfold pattern of the ‘seat’ as such design/carving appears to have changed in fashion over the years, and to further consider the responses so far – his reply –**

I think that this type of linenfold was very typical throughout the 15th century and carried on in provincial settings well into the 16th century. It was also very common in France and the Low Countries throughout the 15th Century.

I think the comments in 3 and 4 are probably getting close to the mark. Perhaps our mistake here is to assess it without contextualising it?

I suspect the "figment of the carver's imagination" is not far from the truth. To assume that it is either a direct representation, and/or of a particular material may show a lack of imagination on our part?!!

I would also still keep in mind the thought that a lot of craftsmen from Flanders were present in the UK during this period and that they brought some of their influences with them.

#### **CONSIDERATIONS**

It is perhaps simple to assume that this mug and jug are not items of imagination. As if they were based say on German vessels (and they would be based on something) then the message understood might be – ‘it is the foreigner who drinks too much!

It would be likely that the intention of the church was, as always, to ensure that the mug and jug were clearly recognizable to the congregation as the mug and jug of the area – their sin!

That pewter types span many years can be seen in Hogarths 'Gin Lane' (1751) where the Inn signs showing a pewter mug are very much the same shape as those used in French wood carvings of circa 1600 (some 150 years before), and perhaps the shape of the famous mug c 1700 by Hux might be said to have developed from that we see in the carving of 1500? - and likely, - because that of 1500 as shown in the carving would be far more susceptible to damage, and survival difficult.

Take for example An Introduction To Channel Islands Pewter by G J C Bois page 16 here is shown a detail of "Aalkmaar Tryptich Amsterdam c 1500" – surely almost exactly the shape of a Jersey Channel Islands' measure from the 1700s.

Further and from the same booklet let me quote –

"Regional variations emerged from a variety of general pan-European designs in the course of the 14th and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries; in the course of the following two centuries all of these variations developed further and became fully differential and matured. Their emergence reflected the emergence within Europe both socially and politically of definite national and regional communities (with their distinctive characteristics) from the more general community of Imperial and other territorial estates. It can reasonably be said that the evolution of a local design in pewter (whether of region or town and related district) marked the coming to maturity of the community in which it was used."

To me this suggests that Taunton/Milverton and district would have had its mugs and jugs and the congregation would know they were theirs.

Imagination - some of those I asked for comments with a great deal of knowledge of pewter suggest that the carver showed imagination when it came to the mug and jug.

Here is set out what might be thought the purpose of a bench end was.

So did the carvers have imagination? Yes they did! However reference is made to the works previously quoted or to Fred Roe (Church Chests etc) or maybe especially to such as Mike Harding's ' A Little Book Of Misericords'.

This book showed the domestic carving of the eleventh to fifteenth centuries in those very and especially English, Misericords ( a lip on an upturned choir seat that an elderly monk could lean against for relief from standing during the many hours of daily worship.). These were very English (supporters to the sides and subject matter separated them from other European examples of the same solution to the same problem).

The imagination took them to - mermaids –fantastical creatures – green man – dragon slaying angels – sirens – unicorns – flying monsters – all terrific imagination or retelling of popular and remembered folklore and legends.

But – in their domestic scenes – they were realistic – even in the tale of 'goose shoeing', we have a realistic goose, realistic shoeing, a realistic domestic scene as recognized by all who might see it. So is it imaginative – certainly – is it a realistic domestic scene (the background and implements) recognizable to a congregation – it certainly is.

So for others of – games – domestic scenes –novice-spanking(!) – mooning – cripples – the wrath of grapes (no mug or jug here though) – fox and goose – hound and hedgehog – even musical pigs! – shepherds – domestic brawls (a cup and stove might reward a second look) – point being all recognizable and real life is shown – the imagination is far more used on the myths, folklore and legends as would be known to the audience.

### **Mug and Jug made of “What” –**

Silver – only the better off drink too much!!!!

Brass – no evidence at all and too difficult to make – or if made who would use it? (not the congregation for sure) – it would taint any drink unless tinned inside

Pottery – no evidence or sight of, anywhere

Foreign Made – only foreigners drink too much then - cannot apply to us!

Wood – the carvers never, ever, showed it?

Pewter – too soon? no other evidence? – well no, - not too soon for pewter, those sat in the good pews might well have pewter at this time, could be an early version of the 1700s Wm Hux, could be special to the Taunton area.

Views were sought from several (7) long standing Pewter Society members who mostly did not recognize the dress and styles as being of that time and had many different views as to what mug and jug might be – though they were fairly well united in a belief that they could not be pewter and likely were not metalware. These views are some of those referred to below.

### **A REPLY FROM THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM – ANGUS PATTERSON**

**Angus Patterson**

**Curator, Arms and Armour and Base Metals**

**Victoria & Albert Museum**

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*The discussion is very interesting with wide ranging views! It is always difficult to say anything definitive, especially based on a black and white photograph alone, but the last comments from the BADA member and carving specialist seem to me to be nearest the mark.*

*Some of the correspondents get a little stuck in the rococo period because of the swirls but these were nothing new in the 18th century. Twisting lobes were common on late medieval items and were described as 'writhen' work. I have found nothing in our silver, pewter or brass collection or books to match the flagon in the carving closely but as a working object it was more susceptible to being broken up and refashioned than 'heirloom' objects.*

*Attached are 2 pieces from the late 15th/ early 16th centuries showing the fashion for twisting lobes. The first is a much grander version than the flagon (an 'heirloom') but evidence of the style nonetheless. It belongs to the German town of Goslar. The second is a Nuremberg basin from our*

collection.

Germany is the most likely source for the style of the flagon, if not the flagon itself, based on the prevalence there of lobed standing cups (especially welcome cups used for toasts by civic bodies, as with Goslar above). Artists like Albrecht Durer of Nuremberg produced designs for such cups and circulated them. So too did Hans Holbein a decade or two later working for Henry VIII. German carvers were working in England too, probably to already established repertoires. It wouldn't necessarily matter if there were no identical objects in England at the time, although I suspect there probably were even if they don't survive now. The Goldsmiths Co. has a wine cup marked for 1493 (one of the earliest pieces of fully marked English silver) of similar style with twisting gadroons from foot to lip (illustrated on p.321 of the catalogue for the 'Gothic: Art for England' exhibition held here a few years ago). Philippa Glanville's book 'Silver in Tudor and Stuart England' also has an illustration of a 1500-10 painting "The Feast of Ahaseurus and Esther" from Lubeck with similar items shown on the buffet, as well as related items in silver. Flagons like that in the carving may well have existed although the carver may have taken liberties with the depth of the gadrooning.

The other dating clue for me is the clothing and hairstyle. The pleated shirt with tight fitting body, high waistline and billowing sleeves gathered at the elbow is entirely consistent with late 15th century German clothing (see Chavalier.jpg attached: this is a playing card from around 1480-90). Hairstyles of the period (especially for the wealthy) were, in general, in transition from the long centre parted medieval styles to shorter curled hair imitating ancient roman styles. The design for this carving may have come from a woodcut (possibly traceable in the volumes of Bartsch in the National Art Library) and the artist may have derived the head from a Roman coin.

I wouldn't read too much into the 'foreign-ness' of the style's origins to an English congregation.

Despite English insularity and regular government attempts to protect local trade, both the objects in the marketplace and the workforce that created them were far more international than we usually give them credit for. The pew end may well have been a simple warning against excess in all things, not just drink.



**It perhaps seems then that we need to think again about what there might have been in the Taunton area at the turn of the 1500s – for example did the wool trade have German connections?.**

Angus was asked if he might clarify the remarks he thought ‘nearest the mark’ and he kindly replied as follows –

*The comment I was referring to from the BADA carving specialist was in the first document you sent me suggesting a date of circa 1500. One always hesitates before assigning a date as there are always so many variables but from the photograph and information you have sent me I have seen nothing that convinces me that any other date is appropriate.*

*It doesn't look at all like 18th century carving and the William Hux suggestion, to me, is some way off the mark, perhaps wishful thinking by a pewter enthusiast! (We too have a William Hux mug in the Museum.) A combination of the shape of the frame, the wear and tear of the wood, the clothing, shoes and hairstyle of the figure and the style of the flagons are all consistent with a date around 1500. I attach a French panel from our collection from around 1500-10 where you can see similarities in dress and proportion.*

*There is also no real reason to suggest pewter over any other metal. I mentioned in my note that the style of the carving suggests a woodcut print as a source. As a symbol of excess or more specifically of drunkenness this could be a warning to all levels of society. The carver has also more than likely used a little licence with the depth of the carving to increase its light and shade so the flagon is quite stylized and representative. I think it is meant to represent a fashionable flagon but not a specific material.*



I was surprised with the last sentence as whilst I understand the idea of a fashionable representation..... all the domestic scenes I have seen in early English carving appear good representations of life at the time - with imagination saved for myths, legends and Christianity.

Angus also suggested that - Perhaps Hazel Forsyth at the Museum of London might be able to shed further light on this.

Before contacting Hazel Forsyth two Pewter Society members expressed their views –

*Firstly –“ In c1500 Milverton might have been almost as significant a place as Taunton, which did not become the County town until part way into the 20th century. I know little of the history, but Exeter for example only had a population of about 20000 in the 18th century). We know of no early pewterers in Somerset.”*

This set me to think that maybe the History and Archaeological people of Somerset based in Taunton might help or know who might have information so I contacted them and await a response as everyone is moving departments to other buildings.

Further it reminded me that Bristol served a lot of Wales with pewter then and after so maybe it might have been easier even for Bristol to sell into Somerset.

Next the above PS member suggested I contact Roderick Butler of Honiton and the Antique Metalware Society.

Then another Pewter Society member with long experience suggested a Bristol type jug plus imagination –

*The Bristol type jug of 1455 looks as though it might with imagination fill the roll for the pew carving. It was suggested pottery or brass on the grounds there were no known Somerset pewterers - pointing out as well that Milverton might have been more important than Taunton in those days and that there were known potteries about in the area. However if Bristol supplied throughout Wales why would it not supply Somerset?*



I am awaiting replies from various outside the Pewter world. I keep coming back to the thought that carving in domestic scenes (outside of legends and myths) was not imaginative but realistic.

Anyway on to Hazel Forsyth at The Museum of London who replied –

How intriguing! The form is vaguely familiar but I must confess that I have been unable to come up with suitable comparanda. Plain, polygonal flagons with a flaring pedestal and angular basal edge are relatively plentiful and examples in pewter are known from France, Switzerland and England which have been dated to the late 14th century. The wrythen decoration is rather more unusual and although I think I have seen something similar somewhere I have yet to find it!

I seem to remember that there is some wrythen plate on the buffet and table in von der Heide's painting of 'The Feast of Ahasuerus and Esther' c.1500-10 (Lubeck), and there is a broadly similar vessel in *Bildnis der Familie des Basier Goldschmeids* (Hans Rldolf Faesch, 1559) in the Basel Kunstmuseum.

I am unaware of any ceramic vessels of comparable shape and style but the low-cut vamp is a characteristic feature of early 16th century footwear (see The Whitehall Mural depicting Henry VII and Henry VIII by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1537 &c).

All in all something of an enigma and I wish you well with your research!

***Is it fair to say that you consider this likely to be metalware?***

**And the reply was –**

Absolutely - of that there is no question.

**Hazel Forsyth FSA**

Senior Curator (Post-Medieval), Department of Early London History and Collections

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**Reply from Valentine Butler of The Antique Metalware Society**

Presumably the bench end in question is the so-called 'ale taster'. Both the wrythen jug and mug are quite stylish. Wrythen decoration is perhaps a more common Scandinavian or German feature than British - certainly in silver I believe. What are the material options? Silver? Pewter? I would not think brass or bronze but maybe gilded copper.

Christa Grossinger in 'The World Upside Down - English Misericords' refers to many medieval designs. It may also be useful to look at carvings and paintings of the period (c.1500), of the Annunciation which frequently depict lilies in a wrythen vase. One attached for you which I believe to be North European.



Milverton would repay researching in more detail. Most of the wealth to build the church would have come from the woollen trade I think and tanning later on, but check out the local wealthy families who were probably involved in shipping. I am not convinced that silver should be ruled out. (ale taster though?)

#### Brief Milverton History

This is one of the largest villages in Somerset and it is well worth exploring for its many fine Georgian buildings. It retains its medieval street pattern around the church which is on a central prominence. Its name was perhaps taken from the old Town Mill to the north of the village. Although the present building dates from the 18th century (and was still used for grinding corn well into the 20th century), there has been a mill on the site since Saxon times. The Domesday survey of 1086 shows that Milverton was then a substantial place with one of only seven recorded markets in the whole of Somerset. The village seems to have gone into some decline after this period. The woollen industry became, for centuries, the mainstay of the population. It was a cottage industry, with many spinning wheels and looms being worked throughout the village. The weavers of Milverton came to be renowned for their serges, druggets and baizes. As there were no textile mills in Milverton the products of the cottagers were sent to the mills of the Were (later Fox) family at Wellington for finishing and distribution. These were prosperous times again, and the resulting houses now grace the streets of the village, the best of which is North Street.

(Reprinted from Taunton Deane document, 'Milverton.pdf')

#### From Vanessa Brett (Vanessa Brett Editor, *Silver Studies*, the Journal of the Silver Society)

I would agree with them (V&A and London Museum) that the pieces depicted are far more likely to have been brass than silver. Most surviving silver ewers from the late 15th century are tall narrow objects, like the image Angus Patterson (V&A) sent you.

However, I attach 5 scans that I hope will add to your file.

from:

Ornamentprenten I, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, 1988

Helen Clifford, *A Treasured Inheritance, 600 years of Oxford College silver*, 2004. "Pair of pilgrim flasks, silver-gilt, Paris circa 1400-40, All Souls.

*Gothic Art for England 1400-1547*, V&A 2003, ed Richard Marks and Paul Williamson

Hanns-Ulrich Haedeke, *Metalwork*, 1970

Carl Hernmarck, *The Art of the European Silversmith 1430-1830*, (1977).

I see from Pevsner that there is a good, early, Vicarage, and that there is a 'legend' linking Milverton to Wolsey. Such tales should not lightly be ignored as they often have some foundation? Obviously the link to the Flemish woollen industry might lead the panel to that part of Europe; I have no idea whether such panels were ever made abroad and then imported to England, or whether they are all English manufacture



**Extract from a further email from Vanessa Brett -**

- another tack is to ask how such a vessel could have been made in pewter. There was no problem in creating very large flagons, there are surviving examples from Germany and Holland, for example. These were mainly made in sections and have horizontal seams. But would it have been possible to cast a body with such swirls? I don't think it would have been feasible to hammer, in one piece, such a body in pewter - whereas it IS possible to do this in silver or brass. They did it in Germany in the 19th century, but the alloy was different. I simply don't know - have you asked the question of a pewterer with experience of casting?

If you go down the route of the link with Flanders, through wool, then you need to look in Dutch and Belgian museums. There may well be something there that has simply not been illustrated in the books I have.

Just because something has not survived, or has not been seen before, is no reason to assume it did not exist. But if major objects have not survived (such as the silver of Louis XIV) there is often some kind of record, either documentary or in a painting. There ARE pictures of early pewter, there are paintings showing people holding tankards, glasses or jugs from the base, such as in the carving, but maybe you need to spend a lot of time looking at books of still life and genre paintings.

It's surely a question of changing manners, rather than drunkenness.

**October 10<sup>th</sup> 2008**

**FROM**

**Bob Croft  
SCC Historic Environment Service  
Taunton Castle**

I would agree that the drinking vessel and the larger jug appear to be metalware and are unlikely to be pottery. I am copying this note to David Dawson who is a local pottery expert, ex museum curator for Somerset with an interest in pottery and crafts of the post medieval period. He may be able to offer some thoughts.

I'm not aware of any evidence that we can offer to suggest a European connection at the moment.

It may be that David Dawson can offer additional information I shall wait and see and meanwhile try and find any other possible leads.

**In Conclusion –**

Vanessa Brett's illustrations are surely the nearest to those of the mug and jug on the carved bench end. They would imply some European connection as might the clothes.

It seems agreed that the entire style of the figure and the carving is correctly dated, and that the mug and jug were indeed metalware.

There is no provable case to be made for pewter as the metal used. Possibly the carver was copying something he had seen elsewhere depicting the use of brass or silver.

However if we look on a map of Europe as to where these Flemish weavers came from then the German connection is very clear.

That none of the mugs/jugs shown in this bench end have survived is not surprising.

That they should be anything other than Pewter would be surprising, given the churches spoke to the congregation not just the few richer members of it through the decoration of the church.

For Germany in the middle 1700s, some 200 years later than the bench ends were carved, a good deal of 'Wrythen' pewterware does survive. There is no telling when this method was developed or how long it lasted. But we do know from other examples that this style was being made in the late 1400s. Given the social circumstances and population and occupations within Milverton around 1450-1560 – there is to this writer little other possibility that these vessels shown were anything other than pewter. Contrary opinions are welcomed (please email).

Examples than of Wrythen Pewter ware surviving in Germany from the middle to later 1700s and beyond are shown in the two following illustrations.

The final illustration is taken from Pewter of The Western World by Peter R G Hornsby.





527. A group of Rococo wrythen pewter coffee pots including second from right a tea pot and third from left a sugar bowl. All German. From left to right: Coffee pot, eighteenth century, 8 1/8 inches high; Probably a chocolate pot but may also have been used for coffee, eighteenth century, 7 1/2 inches; Sugar bowl, circa 1800, 3 3/4 inches high; Coffee pot, circa 1800-20, 6 7/8 inches; Tea or chocolate pot, late eighteenth century, 4 3/4 inches; And a coffee pot, circa 1780-1800, 9 7/8 inches. (Courtesy of Christies, Amsterdam).

528. Coffee or tea pot, Frankfurt, Germany, late eighteenth century. (Courtesy of Christies, London).

529. A small coffee pot with side handle, German, mid-eighteenth century, 5 1/4 inches. (Courtesy of Robin Bellamy Ltd).

530. English Britannia metal coffee pot with fluted body by Vickers, circa 1810, 9 inches. (Courtesy of Robin Bellamy Ltd).

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531. A style unique to Sellew and Company, America, circa 1830-60, 11 inches high. (Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Melvyn Wolf).

532. Rare double bulbous pot, American, by Boardman and Hart, circa 1830-50, 11 3/4 inches high. (Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Melvyn Wolf).

533. Coffee pot, American, by Richardson, nineteenth century, 9 1/2 inches high. (Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Melvyn Wolf).

534. American pot by Hall and Cotton, circa 1840-45, 11 inches high. (Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Melvyn Wolf).



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Notice perhaps the main direction of the old pewter 'Wrythen' ware as shown in these illustrations and in the bench end.

