

# Captain Cunningham's Claim

The wriggleworked tankard



Photograph taken at the V& A and shown here with their permission of accession number M63-1945

SATURDAY, MARCH, 19.  
1955.  
DAILY MAIL

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**Daily Mail**  
(FOUNDED 1895)  
London: Northcliffe House, E.C.4  
(Central 6000).  
Edinburgh: Tanfield House (Central  
2535).  
Manchester: Northcliffe House,  
Deansgate (Blackfriars 8600).  
Paris: 36, rue du Sentier (Louvre  
6841).



OYSTER BAR TANKARD.  
*Captain Cunningham displays  
one of his "fakes."*

**Genuine? I made  
it myself**

**'Antique'  
of 1697  
fooled  
museum**

By DAVID WYNNE-MORGAN

CAPTAIN Owen Cunningham stood in London's Victoria and Albert Museum yesterday, looked at a pewter tankard dated 1697, and said: "1697 my eye! I made it myself in 1929."

The tankard, it should be noted, has been a museum piece, unchallenged by experts, for ten years.

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"We sold them as reproductions too. But I know that dealers sold them as genuine."

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among other exhibits. He said: "I am certain that another of my reproductions is here as a genuine article. It is a William and Mary rose bowl."

He could not find it.

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"Telling genuine pewter is always difficult."

"If Captain Cunningham insists in his claim, we shall probably remove the tankard."

And what of the rose bowl?  
"We found that it was a fake. We put it away."

Last night Captain Cunningham, home again said: "I am not just a restaurateur. I love the more serious things in life."

"To reproduce an antique tankard I used to put on scratchings and hammerings with blunt iron, punch on a maker's mark, and shake it in a kit-bag of stones and nails."

"The trickiest thing was the deposit. I would give coatings of nitric and sulphuric acid and a wash with olive oil."

"Even now I am prepared to make a tankard, set it among genuine tankards after six months, and defy any expert in the country to pick it out."

This referred to V&A item 66 as in Anthony North's book –



Let us be clear Cunningham was a liar and a fantasist.

**But why pick on this obscure old pewter item for his fantasy?**

Yes he might have been 14 but then ordinary non-academic folk left school at 14 up to 1944 so born in 1912 then in 1926 he was 14.

The place of work he details would have to be within reasonable walk from his then home.

*'It was said Neate had it as a plain plate of the right age decorated for him in the 1920s at a small workshop in St Martins Lane'* (perhaps a member might remind me later) So was there someone there? More likely it was an area for many of them.... perhaps?

The press cutting above mentions opposite St Martin's Theatre

Well my thanks to Christine Ellis of Sydney Australia whose research reveals –

*Captain Cunningham appears to have been a bit of a showman. He was born in October 1912 and died in August 1974 and was married five times, stating that he paid the earlier four no money because his Solicitor was an ex RC Priest who married a Nun and specialised in Divorce. His fifth wife whom he married at the age of 48 was only seventeen. There are several articles from 1949 to his death and some of the comments include 'wears a light-grey suit when everything intimates that he should be dressed in knee length breeches, ruffed shirt and velvet topcoat' ; and another " mentions in passing that he has been in the business for 237 years" (the business of selling oysters) and yet another "to add that he knew 'all about smoking, curing, filleting and cooking fish and had gone over 40 feet waves and come down the other side'. Apparently unharmed; presumably in a boat".*

*He had opened an Oyster Bar by 1945. There are real fights with such as the Duke of Marlborough at an exclusive Mayfair club in 1949 ; a couple of robberies, about one in 1951 he stated in his defence that he had been a boxer at school and had just been in the south of France swimming three or four miles a day with a named Australian swimming champion; Third wife goes to jail for contempt during their divorce proceedings in a Rolls Royce; and who it is stated in 1971 'came from good fish stock... fishing or selling fish since 1723, served a long apprenticeship in the trade before opening his first luxury oyster bar just after the war.... He even lays claim to be one of the team that first devised fish fingers ("for the Poor law families") in the thirties'.*

*He says he made the tankard in 1929 which as he accurately states was when he was seventeen, although it is in the North book about it being on display in 1927 so it was obviously made prior to that.*

*So can we assume that when he says 'turning out reproductions' he actually means engraving/aging 'bought in' plain items.*

*All this is very circumstantial and should be considered as such.*

***It is unlikely that he was solely responsible for the production of any items when even if apprenticed as an engraver, he would at the maximum have only been a year into his apprenticeship so perhaps he just put on the aging features after someone else did the engravings - if there is any truth at all.***

***Of course we have no way of knowing if the 'opposite St Martins Theatre' is a slip of the tongue or a sentence mis-interpreted by the Daily Mail reporter. An error somewhere along the line does appear likely as mentioned before because West Street where St Martins Theatre is located has no engravers listed there at that period of time.***

*Whereas what is apparently attributed to Richard Neate that he had the Alfred Yeates dish engraved in St Martins Lane does appear a possibility.*

*After receiving this query but obviously not having a name Christine Ellis searched for Engravers and related job descriptions until she found entries for an address for the only Engraver in St Martins Lane which is about opposite the Duke of York or is it theADELPHI theatre.*

***The Engraver is William Borwick who worked from 42 St Martins Lane in 1921, having taken over the business after his Father died in 1910.***

***(Williams' Father had moved his business to St Martins Lane between 1895 and 1901). he did advertise within the latest available a 1921 Directory entry as an Engraver at 42 St Martins Lane.***

***Sometime between 1921 and 1927 William Jnr. moved the business to High Street Battersea and worked there until 1938 when he probably retired as he was then aged about 69 and he died in 1955.***

***A complete coincidence then that this man retires about when Neate stops advertising and no further business activities of his can be traced. Likely just that – a coincidence! Also a coincidence that he was likely in St Martin's Lane at a time when Richard Neate's trade in fakes appears to take off.***

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The V&A Museum took these claims very seriously as this report on their investigations shows -

### A Faked Tankard

Members who were present at the informal meeting at Birmingham will recall that the claim of one Captain Owen Cunningham, to have been responsible for making a flat-lidded tankard, was discussed.

For those who were not able to attend, it is thought that the newspaper column itself, which gave the first intimation of this claim, might be of interest, and it is reprinted herewith:

From the *Daily Mail* of March 19th, 1955

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At the Birmingham meeting Mr. Michaelis produced a faked tankard, of similar type to that under discussion (not that from the museum), dated 1679, and he suggested that this was probably the actual tankard that Cunningham had made. Mr. Michaelis had again inspected the Victoria & Albert Museum piece, and was satisfied that it was undoubtedly genuine.

In the Society's Circular, dated May 1955, it was stated that the museum had instituted experiments intended to prove, or disprove, Cunningham's claim, and the result of these tests have now been notified to Mr. Michaelis in a letter from Mr. J. F. Hayward, the Assistant Curator, Metalwork Section.

The museum sent three flat-lidded tankards to the Government Chemist for X-ray tests. These were (i) a definitely authentic tankard ; (ii) a definitely faked tankard; and (iii) the tankard claimed by Owen Cunningham to have been made by him (called the disputed tankard).

Mr. Hayward writes: "X-ray diffraction patterns of both metal and corrosion were recorded. These patterns show that the crystalline form of the corrosion product on the disputed tankard closely resembles that from the genuine vessel, and differs from that on the known fake.

"Such corrosion as exists on the faked tankard is powdery and adheres lightly to the metal, whereas the black product on the other vessels is harder and more firmly attached.

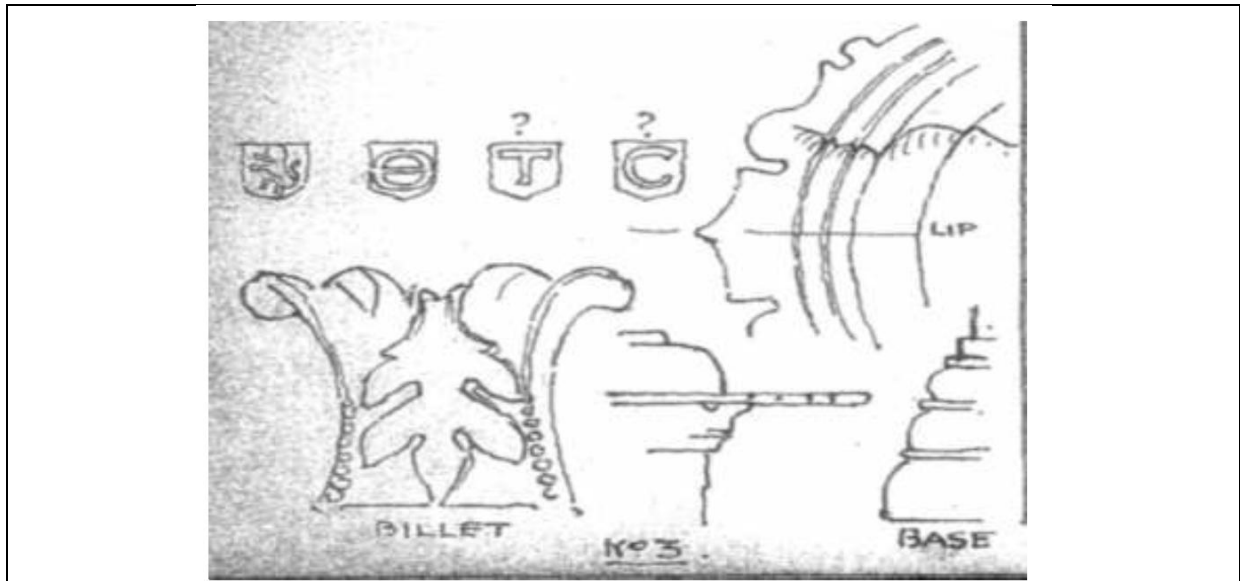
"The metal patterns also differ in that the fake has lines due to lead and/or antimony not found in the other two, which show tin only.







"I hope to arrange for the full report to be published in the *Connoisseur*. I doubt if these investigations have provided any particular criterion by which pewter vessels as a whole can be judged".

A copy made using this tankard specifically and others as a basis for a genuine later reproduction is referred to in an article concerning John Summers.

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How did this piece get to the V&A ? It was donated by a renowned Pewter Collector Alfred B Yeates. He kept meticulous details of his collection and the following two illustrations are taken from his record made about 1935.



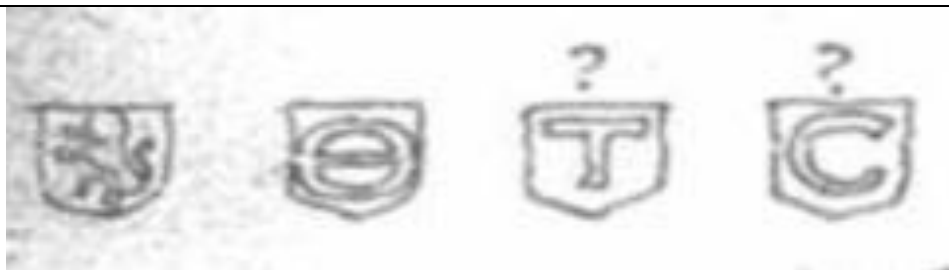
No 3	<b>TANKARD</b>
<p>PROBABLY ENGLISH THOUGH FOUND IN HOLLAND - HEIGHT <math>\frac{6}{8}</math> IN: DIAM: OF LIP <math>4\frac{1}{2}</math> IN: DIAM: OF BASE <math>5\frac{1}{8}</math> IN: SIMILAR TO No 1 ON THIS PAGE BUT LATER DATE - MAKERS TOUCH INSIDE BASE  ALSO "SILVER MARKS" AND X ON OUTSIDE OF LID - OWNERS INITIALS   ALSO   WITH DATE 1698 - ALSO A FURTHER STAMP  - THE LID IS ENGRAVED WITH FLOWERS - AND THE BARREL WITH PORTRAIT OF WILLIAM III AND W · R EACH LETTER CROWNED. ALSO THE LION AND UNICORN AND ROSE AND THISTLE - BOUGHT FROM MRS HARRISON OF SHIPLAKE COURT · HENLEY ·</p>	

The description of this tankard reveals that Alfred Yeates purchased it from a Mrs. Harrison of Shiplake Court Henley. Mrs. Helen Mary Harrison was the wife of Robert Hichens Camden Harrison, Esq., a Stockbroker in the long established London family firm of Hichens, Harrison and Co. Also High Sheriff of Oxfordshire and a collector; with a home in London, Shiplake Court was built for him in 1898. Robert H.C. Harrison died in October 1924 aged 87 and Shiplake Court was sold in March 1925 with Helen Harrison retaining their London home. As Mrs. Harrison was now no longer 'of Shiplake Court, Henley', it would appear that Alfred Yeates purchased the William and Mary Tankard before March 1925 and thus before Captain Owen Cunningham states that he was responsible for its creation.

Perhaps there is another small mystery in relation to this piece?



Hallmarks appearing on the Lid of the Tankard



Alfred B Yeates reasonable interpretation of these hallmarks marks.

The UK Pewter Society database tells us that if A B Yeates is correct then these are the hallmarks of a Thomas Carpenter, apprenticed in 1706, working for

himself from 1713. His father was a clerk name of John Carpenter from Broxsted in Essex.

He was apprenticed to Elizabeth Paxton in 1706 and then her son James Paxton in 1707.

These names are mentioned just really for clarity to show that there was not another TC or similar, whose marks he might have continued to use. Very likely they were solely his marks. They appear to have been used by successors for a further 100 years or so - but NOT prior to 1713.

Likely then this means that the tankard could not have been made before 1713.

Why then the date on it of 1698?

William and Mary were on the throne from 1689 - 1694. William III was on the throne alone from 1694 - 1702. (Anne - 1702-1714 and George I -1714-1727).

So if Thomas Carpenter made this piece it is more than likely he made it in the reign of George I.

So who decorated it - when? and why?

Another identifying feature according to the UK Pewter Society Database leading to Thomas Carpenter is this distinctive Crown



This article accepts that the original tankard as far as the metalwork is concerned is of a proper good age.

It is accepted that Captain Cunningham could not have made it.

It can be surely accepted that Thomas Carpenter did make it.

The decoration is carefully and well done in appropriate wrigglework but there are unexplained inconsistencies.

If any reader would like to add thoughts then they would be welcomed.

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This website thanks the V & A for permission to use photographs taken there.

Thanks to the UK Pewter Society for the use of various extracts from documents in the Pewter Society Library.

Thanks to Christine Ellis of Sydney Australia for various genealogical detail.

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