

“Wriggled” Decoration on Pewter

By

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Fig. 1. An extremely rare Elizabethan Alms Dish, embellished in “wriggled-work”. C. 1580–1600. Diam. 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ ins.

THE early English pewterers, in the main, relied on good form and good metal to maintain the stability of their productions. It is to their credit that so much of their work still remains with us today, despite the fact that pewter is a soft metal, easily damaged and dented, and of such a nature that its surface could wear away with constant scouring.

Except for inscriptions on pieces donated to, or bought by, the churches, or pieces engraved to commemorate some special circumstance, it was not usual for English pewterers to embellish their wares with purely decorative engraving of any sort until after the middle of the 17th century. In this respect our pewterers differed considerably from those on the European continent.

There is, of course, a limited number of exceptions to this rule, but good examples of purely aesthetic engraving on pieces of pre-1660 could probably be counted on two hands. One such is the Alms Dish (or possibly a Rosewater Dish) shown in Fig. 1, which is probably one of the earliest examples. This dish has a centre

“boss”, surrounded with a raised flange in the well, and a narrow, flat, rim with slim single beading at the edge; the whole piece being decorated all over with simple ornamentation, including rosettes and triangles. It is datable as of late Elizabethan period, or at latest of early James I, say of *c.* 1580–1610.

There is no reason to doubt that it was engraved contemporaneously. Although bearing a maker’s mark, this is of a period before marks were recorded, or at least before the date of the records available today. Any pre-Fire of London touchplates which may have existed and been cared for by the Pewterers’ Company were destroyed in the fire, and the touchplates now in their possession are all of *c.* 1667 and later. Nevertheless the type of the touch itself on this dish may be closely dated by its style.

The form of engraving is not the normal incised work done with a burin, such as might be found on contemporary silver, but is devised by pushing a tool with a narrow chisel-like blade along the metal, at an angle, and actually digging out a zig-zag groove by rocking the blade from side to side as it progresses on its way. Were the craftsman to have engraved on the soft metal by normal methods, this would have cut too deeply, and the piece would very soon have disintegrated. The pewterers found that their own method of surface decoration, whilst remaining visible over a lengthy period of polishing and usage, did not materially detract from the strength of the article; and it was this form of embellishment which remained popular with them for well over 100 years.

In the great majority of instances the designs themselves are crude, although the tool seems to have been expertly used. This was doubtless due to the fact that the pewterer himself, although an expert in metalcraft, was normally no scholar, and would have had no pretensions to art whatsoever. Moreover, had it not been a popular fad for pewter to be embellished to

simulate silver, he would in all probability have preferred to leave his wares quite unadorned.

There is ample evidence that this work was done in the pewterers' workshops, for we find, as early as 1588, that one Andrew Bowyer, a pewterer of London, was fined by the Pewterers' Company:

"for that he did set a stranger to work to grave uppon his pewter, when he might have it wrought by a brother of the Company."¹

About eighteen months later this same pewterer was again in trouble for a similar offence; the Company records state that:

"Whereas Andrew Bowyer hath heretofore been admonished for setting to work a woman to grave uppon his pewter, contrary to the ordinances of the house, and hath been fined for it, he is again charged with the like offence, and is adjudged to pay 5s. fine, with a threat of the maximum fine of three pounds for a further offence."²

Since it is clear that the pewterers themselves were to be responsible for adding the engraved decoration to their pewterware, this, as stated earlier, accounts for the crudity so frequently displayed in the designs employed. Nevertheless it is this very simplicity of design which lends so much charm to most of their work; for no other form of embellishment seems to suit the metal better.

It was after the re-establishment of the Monarchy in 1660 that pewter began to be more generally ornamented in this way. One may point to numerous examples of late Stuart tankards, plates and dishes, so ornamented, ranging onwards to well into the mid-18th century, when the practice almost ceased, except for the addition of Coats of Arms or Crests, mainly on the rims of flatware. By this time, however, the cruder method of "wriggling" had either been superseded or supplemented by finer line engraving for the smaller areas involved. Whilst an heraldic embellishment on a plate can add some interest for the

genealogist, it has not the same attraction for the collector who is primarily interested in the form and methods used by the craftsmen of an earlier period.

It seems probable that "wriggled" decoration was given a fillip by craftsmen who came to this country in the wake of Charles II, for otherwise it would be strange that pewterers should have remained aloof from such ornamentation for fifty years or so prior to this, except for the few rare examples already mentioned, and for notable specimens bearing cast embossed decoration, to which I have drawn attention elsewhere, but which do not concern us here.³

One type of charger, in particular, must receive special mention. I refer to a group of finely "wriggled" large dishes, known as Restoration Chargers. One such, of 20 $\frac{3}{8}$ ins. diameter, incorporating the Royal Stuart arms in the centre, with motto, and around the boogie the

- (1) Welch, "History of the Pewterers' Company", Vol. II, p.2.
- (2) *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 6.
- (3) Michaelis, "Antique Pewter of the British Isles", 1955.



Fig. 2. A fine Charger, engraved with Royal Stuart arms, etc., to commemorate the marriage of Charles II with a Portuguese princess in 1662. Diam. 20 $\frac{3}{8}$ ins.



Fig. 3. Tankard, *c.* 1675, engraved with crowned lion, and two plates, similarly engraved, *c.* 1700-25.

legend "VIVAT REX CAROLVS SECVN-DVS—BEATI PACIFICI—1662", is illustrated at Fig. 2. The rim is also enriched with Tudor roses, blazing sun motifs, and conventional tulip ornamentation. The date 1662 is, of course, later than the Restoration, and it seems more than probable that this and other similarly dated dishes (of which about half a dozen are known) were intended to commemorate the King's marriage with a Portuguese princess in that year. This theory is put forward by another writer, far more able than I to delve into the historical aspects of the problem.⁴

The delineation of detail on this particular specimen is far from crude and was doubtless the work of a skilled artist. It shows, in all its glory, just what could be achieved by a simple process.

Whereas only one or two examples of pewter tankards are known with engraving relating specifically to either Charles II or to James II, there are nevertheless numerous examples

(4) A. V. Sutherland Graeme, "Pewter Restoration Chargers", in *The Connoisseur*, June, 1942.

executed in their reigns. This may be verified by the dates of working of the makers, who are known by their touchmarks which appear in or on their pieces; for example, the flat-topped tankard in the forefront of Fig. 3 bears the touch of a maker "W.F." (Cotterell No. 5605), whose mark has been found on various pieces which may be dated as from *c.* 1665 to *c.* 1685.

The spirited lion with a Crown may well have indicated the people's joy at the return of the monarchy, although it is less certain why

a similar design was adopted some thirty to fifty years later, on the plates in the background, unless this, also, was to commemorate the accession of later monarchs.

The plate at right of the illustration was made by Edward Gregory, of Bristol, about 1700-10, and that on the left by Stephen Cox, also of Bristol and, incidentally, a pewterer who had served his apprenticeship with the foregoing master. This plate may be dated around *c.* 1715-25.

Figure 4 shows an example of more sophisticated "wriggled-work", and adequately displays the excellence to which the method could be brought with care. This multiple-reeded plate bears the touchmark of a woman pewterer, one Martha Fly, of London, widow of a well-known master pewterer, who succeeded to her husband's business about the year 1690. Several somewhat similar plates by this maker are known.

The two small Wine Cups, shown in Figure 5, are exceedingly rare items in themselves, no other examples being



Fig. 4. Plate, with multiple-reeded rim, engraved with cormorant and thistles, made by a woman pewterer, Martha Fly, London, *c.* 1690. Diam. 8 ins.

known. The style of decoration, however, is typical of the late Stuart period.

The cup on the left, which was dug up in Strutton Ground, Westminster in 1925, on an old site upon which Stourton House once stood, may be dated fairly accurately by its maker's touch ("C.R." in a small diamond lozenge), which mark also appears on a miniature posset-pot, engraved with portraits of William III and Mary, *c.* 1690, in the possession of Mr. C. C. Minchin, of Reading.

Stourton House was erected in the early 17th century under the bequest of Anne, Lady Dacre, sister to Thomas Sackville, the first Baron Buckhurst, as a hospital to house twenty poor women and their children.

The other wine cup, at right, with cast gadrooning around the foot, is of almost identical period, although unmarked.

"Wriggled-work" engraving was at its greatest popularity in the fifty year period *c.* 1689–*c.* 1740. This is exemplified firstly by numerous examples of plates, mainly of single-reeded type, dating from *c.* 1690. One family in particular—the Hitchmans of London—is represented by James Hitchman (1701–35), and his son, Robert (1737–60). These two were responsible for producing a very large number of the "wriggled" single-reeded plates known to day. Figure 6 shows an excellent pair of marriage plates by the former maker, *c.* 1715. In a pair such as this, the initials of both husband



Fig. 5. Two very rare Wine Cups, each only $3\frac{1}{2}$ ins. high. The one on the left was excavated in Strutton Ground, Westminster, where THE ANTIQUE COLLECTOR'S office is situated. *C.* 1675.

and wife are shown, the surname initial being placed at the top of the triangle.

It is worth recording that the same peacock and peahen designs were used on plates by other makers, but nevertheless they were undoubtedly engraved by the same hand.

This type of engraving does not appear to have been used to any great extent on 18th century domed-lid tankards, but a few instances are known. So too are a few porringers known, with "wriggled" engraving around the sides or in the base, and in every case the appearance of the piece is considerably enhanced.

Illustrations of the pieces in Figures 2 and 6 are by kind permission of the owner, Mr. R. W. Cooper, of Nottingham; pieces in Figures 1, 3, 4 and 5 are in the writer's collection.

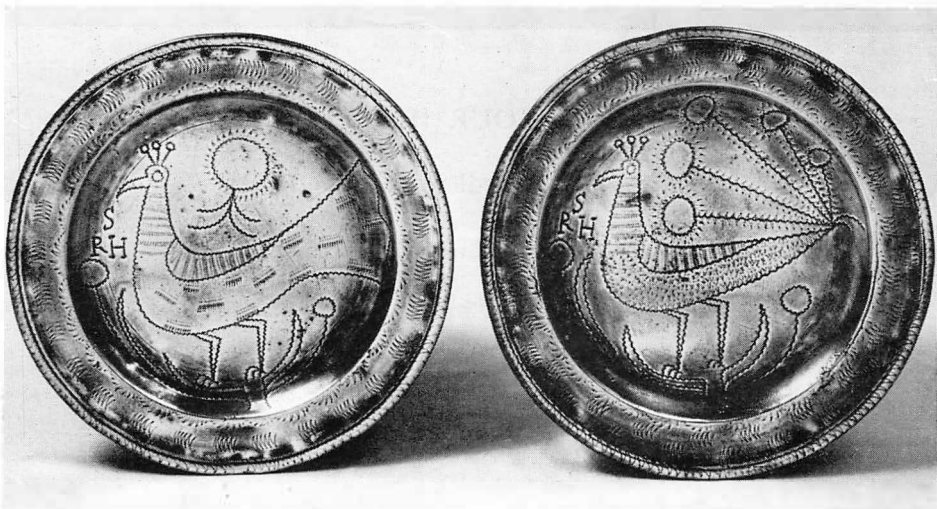


Fig. 6. A pair of engraved Marriage Plates, engraved with peacock and peahen, and initials S R.H. Made by James Hitchman, London, *c.* 1715. Diam. $8\frac{1}{2}$ ins.