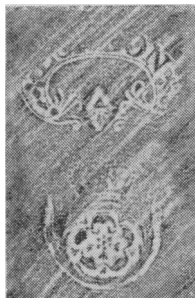


## *Museum notes*

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Llantwit Major

*Each Combatant his Adversary mauls With batter'd Bed-pans*  
Samuel Garth, *The Dispensary*



THE ACCOMPANYING PHOTOGRAPH FROM OUR collection illustrates a fine example of a round all-pewter bedpan. It was probably made in the 1760-90 period, perhaps a little later. Its vital statistics are as follows: Diameter of base 9 inches; widest diameter  $11\frac{1}{4}$  inches; and depth  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches. The handle screws off quite easily. On the under surface of the base it is stamped with a rose and crown and, above this, the word 'London' can be made out. R. F. Michaelis is of the opinion that the marks are not attributable to any maker—they are 'secondary' or subsidiary marks only, the main touch is missing. Such marks were used by a number of makers including the Duncomb's of Birmingham, Birch and Villiers (an associated firm) and several others during the latter part of the eighteenth century. The fact that one label is of 'London' does not necessarily mean that the article was made there. Some provincial manufacturers used this label without authority, and it sometimes indicates only that the bedpan was made of pewter from London or that the maker was apprenticed in that city.

Of the antiquity of pewter it is difficult to speak with certainty owing to the doubtful meaning of the terms employed. It is said to have been known to the ancient Chinese, and it is claimed to have been made by the Chaldeans, Egyptians and Greeks. As to its production by the Romans, mention is made by earlier writers, and all doubt has been removed by the analysis of some of the pewter of the Roman period found at Appleshaw, Hampshire, now in the British Museum. Specimens of Roman pewter left in England at the time of the Roman occupation show a range in composition varying from 99 per cent tin to 1 per cent lead, for the richest, to 46 per cent tin and 53 per cent lead, with a little copper at the other end of the scale. Generally, however, the proportions were 71.5 per cent tin to 27.8 per cent lead or 78.2 per cent tin to 21.7 per cent lead. From early days the rich mines of Cornwall supplied the Continent with tin of fine quality: it is therefore only natural to find the use of pewter very common in Great Britain and Europe. The ordinary methods of working the metal were by casting, hammering, or lathe spinning on a mould.

In domestic life pewter played an important part for many centuries in the past. In London, according to Monson-Fitzjohn, the early existence of a Company of Pewterers is proved by a reference in 1347 to the will of Nicholas le Peautrer, who mentions this Corporation; and in the fifteenth century, York was the principal town in the North of England for the manufacture of the alloy. Thus, the Pewterers' Company of the City of London had already been in existence for a century and a half when Edward IV in 1473 conferred upon it the formal charter granting the right of assay. Pewter, pewtre, peautre, pewdre, pewder, pewtir, or peuther is variously spelt with delightful inconsistency in old English documents. The original word was 'spelter', then the Dutch changed it to 'peauter', the French made it 'peautre', the Spanish 'peltre' and the Italians 'peltro'.



The composition of pewter has varied very much throughout the ages. The commonest variety consists of about 80 parts tin and 20 parts lead; a class known as 'trifle' has 79 parts tin, 15 parts antimony, and 6 parts lead; while 'plate' pewter is made without any lead, consisting of 90 parts tin, seven parts antimony, two parts bismuth, and one part copper. The major step, probably taken in the early sixteenth century, was the incorporation of antimony as it conferred increased hardness. The use of 'plate' pewter for domestic utensils and vessels removes any risk of lead poisoning. It is interesting to note that the earliest printer, Gutenberg (1436), used metal type made from tin and lead; and metal type containing antimony is referred to by Basil Valentine as in common use in 1600. The Reverend William Harrison, writing in the time of Queen Elizabeth I, a period when pewter was much in favour, states:

I have been also informed that it consisteth of a composition which hath thirty pounds of bettle brass to a thousand pounds of tin, whereunto they add three or four pounds of tin glass; but, as too much of this doth make the stuff brickle, so the more the brass be, the better is the pewter, and more profitable unto him that doth buy and purchase the same.

Undoubtedly, English pewter from medieval times until the eighteenth century was a superior product and is still favoured by collectors. The most satisfactory pewter is marked by simplicity, a good outline, and an absence of decoration.

The use of pewter declined during the nineteenth century, although it is still employed for candlesticks, teapots, spoons and other domestic utensils. In the middle of the century, however, doctors were still able to buy shovel-shaped bedpans, male urinals, spitting pots, and graduated bleeding basins made of pewter from instrument and appliance makers in this country. Even in the early twentieth century one could still purchase ear syringes, funnels and wire composed of this alloy. The *Art Nouveau* movement in the opening years of the present century witnessed an attempt to revive the manufacture of pewter and this in some measure persists today.

Sir Arthur MacNalty in his recently published dictionary defines a bedpan as "a shallow receptacle made in china, enamel, stainless steel or rubber designed for the reception of the faeces and urine of a person confined to bed". The writer feels that a fuller definition should include pewter, polypropylene, and at last, *papier maché* (disposable). It is interesting to note that last November on a street-stall in Portobello Road a pewter bedpan as featured in this article was priced at seven pounds ten shillings.

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