

# Pewter, St Dionis and tin trade through Southampton

The references in the first part of this article to tin and pewter, to St Dionis Backchurch and to Agnes Don-Bretton are taken, with kind permission, from *The Ricardian*, Volume XXII, 2012, The Journal of The Richard III Society.

I spotted this article when reading my *Ricardian*. The article, by Anne Sutton, looks at the life and marriages of Agnes Don-Bretton and, in passing, raises two 'connections' with the Worshipful Company of Pewterers. The first is the church of St Dionis Backchurch, which was the Company's parish church while its Hall was in Lime Street; and the second was the trade in tin and pewter.

**Agnes Don-Bretton, Merchant Stapler, Widow and Matriarch of Southampton and London, circa 1450 to 1516.**

By Anne F Sutton



St Dionis Backchurch

The church ...

Agnes Don-Bretton was active for 20 years in the latter part of the 15th century as a merchant of the Calais Staple and, according to the article, acted "*as an important cog in a complex network of trade and personal relations between Southampton (the parishes of St John the Baptist and Holy Rood) and parishes in London (the parishes of St Mary at Hill and St Dionis Backchurch).*"

Lime Street fell within the parish of St Dionis Backchurch. The church was dedicated to Dionysus the Areopagite, a follower of St Paul, who is said to have converted the French to Christianity. He became the patron saint of France, where he is known as St Denis. The name Backchurch may have come from it standing behind other buildings, or from its position relative to the neighbouring church of St Gabriel Fen, often referred to as the 'Forechurch'.

St Dionis Backchurch was in existence by the year 1288. It was rebuilt (like our Hall) after the Great Fire of London (to the designs of Christopher Wren), and was finally demolished in 1878/9.

Tin and pewter ...

*“... It could have been iron which brought Agnes' second husband [Thomas Bretton, iron monger of London] to Southampton, or perhaps the flourishing tin trade. Iron came in from Spain: the annual total of Spanish imports was between 2,500 and 3,000 tons in the Yorkist period, London being considered one of their two main markets by the Spanish. If it was iron that brought Bretton to Southampton, it is nevertheless certain he was not in the export and import trade through that port, and he might have relied on a man like Don, who is known to have dealt in iron.*

*“Tin was the major metal exported from Southampton; England boasted the purest and most abundant supply in medieval Europe, with Devon and Cornwall producing 500-750 tons a year in the fifteenth century. It is tempting to make this trade the draw which brought Bretton to Southampton: tin was transported along the coast from Cornwall in three fleets a year, and Londoners were encouraged to come to the port to buy tin and sent it home by road or by sea along the coast to the wharves of London where Bretton lived. It was exported in the raw state or as pewter, a highly valued alloy of tin and lead (and other metals), all over Europe, for example by the Italians using the ports of Southampton and London. ...*

*“... The London ironmongers' trade often overlapped with that of the pewterers who combined tin with lead to make pewter, as mentioned above. The Pewterers' Company of London was rising in wealth and power, they still tended to focus on the manufacture of vessels at this date, but can be regularly found exporting their goods via Southampton. Despite their apparent failure in overseas trade, the Ironmongers managed to cling to the status as one the twelve great companies of London (number ten), and it was to their company rather than the Pewterers, that an important Yorkist servant from the Stannaries, Avery Cornburgh, sought admittance in 1463.”*

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I showed this article to William Grant, a Past Master of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers. He said:

*“St Dionis Backchurch was the church used by the Company for many years for its election day service and there are many references to it in Welch. The Church stood at the South West corner of Lime Street, behind Fenchurch Street, and the Pewterers' hall was in the Parish of St Dionis. Dr John Wood, the Rector of St Dionis, was so popular with the Pewterers that, although he was an outsider, he was elected Master in 1611 and 1617.*

The Company's first place of religious assembly was the Grey Friars Church. They changed to All Hallows, Lombard Street in about 1496 and to St Dionis in about 1600. No reason is given for removing the Election Day Festival service from the Church of All Hallows to that of Dionis Backchurch but the fact Pewterers' Hall was situated in the parish, would naturally account for the Company leaving All Hallows.

Shortly after St Dionis Backchurch was demolished in 1878, a new St Dionis church was built in Parsons Green, Fulham, and the font and pulpit from the one in the City were

transferred to it. You may find it interesting to look at [www.stdionis.org.uk/about-us/history.php](http://www.stdionis.org.uk/about-us/history.php).

Sale of tin abroad by the Cornish was strongly opposed by the Company, who neither wanted the English price of tin to go up, nor foreigners using the tin to make pewter and compete with the English pewter in the international market.”

Further research into Southampton and the tin/pewter trade will be incorporated into a future article; in particular the book *English Tin Production and Trade before 1550*, by John Hatcher (pp 136 to 146) has relevant information.

## Alan Williams

### Notes

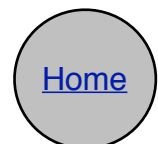
Of course, pewter has not contained lead in any measurable quantities for hundreds of years. The alloy is, depending on its intended use, 92-96% tin, 2-4 % copper and 2% antimony or bismuth

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The 'Welch' referred to by William Grant is the formal History of the Company, researched and written by Charles Welch FSA, and published in 1902, as modernised by Major GS Johnson in 1972 and again by William Grant in 2003.



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