

Reproductions, Fakes and Forgeries

by David Hall

Thinking of collecting old British pewter, or perhaps buying one or two pieces out of general interest? Are you confused by the items on offer and wondering what is genuine and what is not? Well, watch out for reproductions, fakes and forgeries! David Hall, Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, provides a guide to what may be genuine and what may not. Read on!

I am going to take, for example, the E-bay section for antique pewter. You may begin to have doubts when you look through the long list of pieces on offer. Isn't that so-called antique pint pot very similar to the one you were given on your 21st birthday; how can that be *antique*? Isn't the accepted definition of 'antique' something that is at least one hundred years old?



Figure 1. A pint Irish haystack measure made circa 1850, mark of Joseph Austen of Cork under base. This design has always been popular with collectors and others, as it is aesthetically pleasing. Although these were in production for about eighty years, there have never been enough around to meet the modern demand.

When I started collecting old British pewter, nearly forty years ago, I faced the same problem. Before long I had bought one or two things that in time began to cause me to have nagging doubts. Traditionally there were two ways you could address this problem: one was to buy from only one or two specialist dealers in whom you had built up trust; the other was to study your subject and learn how to identify reproductions, fakes and forgeries. It was to the latter solution that I committed myself! But what are reproductions, fakes and forgeries?

A *reproduction* is an item made as a copy of an old piece or in the general style of old pieces. Reproductions are not made with the intention of deceiving, and are not sold as anything but copies. Some pewterers in the British Isles and elsewhere never stopped producing and moved almost seamlessly from making items of practical everyday use to making reproductions. The design and the manufacturing process did not change. What *is* a problem is what can happen to a reproduction down line (see Figures 2 and 3).

A reproduction pewter measure or plate made in the 1920s or 1930s will now be around eighty years old; it will have suffered dents and scratches from use and some degree of surface discolouration. People can get taken in by such pieces, particularly if they also bear reproduction marks. Seldom, however, are such pieces such good copies or the marks so realistic, that with experience they do not become easy to recognise. The form of the piece, the nature of the alloy used, the nature of the wear, the level of corrosion on the surface and the reproduction marks are all indications of the real date of manufacture of



Figure 2. A modern reproduction gill Irish haystack

A *fake*, in my book, is a piece that has been altered or treated in some way so as to give the impression that it is older or more valuable than it is (see Figure 4). Reproductions can be used as the basis for making fakes. Buying reproductions and dressing them up is one of the three ways items are faked. A faker who takes a good quality reproduction, artificially ages the surface and adds false marks, inscriptions and dates, may well have created an item he can pass off as an antique, to considerable financial advantage.

The other two main ways of faking are by dressing up genuine pieces to make them more desirable or look older than they really are; or by disguising the fact that major repairs have taken place or that two or three damaged pieces have been cannibalised to make what appears to be one genuine old piece.

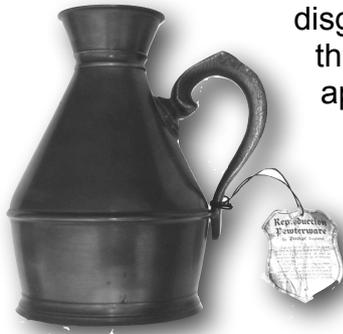


Figure 3. A pint reproduction haystack made in Birmingham circa 1960. This has a copy of the Joseph Austen mark under the base and was darkened after production probably by dipping in acid. Despite this, it still has the label attached saying it is a reproduction after approximately 50 years.

Looking at the first of these two options, one of the simplest forms of faking that has been recorded, is the adding of George IV, William IV and Victorian verification marks to Victorian pub pots. Verification marks were put on pub pots and measures to show the capacity had been checked officially and that they conformed to the official standard. Such marks are useful in dating pots and measures. In the 20th century, many such faked pots were shipped to the USA, where the fake verification marks were not only useful in deceiving potential customers but also in deceiving the US Customs into believing that the pieces were over a hundred years old (and therefore not liable to import duty) (see Figure 7c).

A common form of faking by over-repair is replacing lost lids. Tankards and baluster measures, which were essentially lidded pieces, are worth very little if they have lost their lids. By making and fitting a new lid and carefully disguising what he has done, a faker can substantially enhance an item's value, well beyond what it will have cost. Cannibalising takes this process a stage further. I saw a 17th century tankard once with the body from one piece, the handle off another and a replaced lid and thumb piece. If this tankard could be passed off successfully by an unscrupulous dealer as genuine, the sale price today could run to thousands of pounds.

Finally there are what I call *forgeries*. These are in my definition items manufactured from the start with the intention of deceiving (see Figure 5). Many collectors and general antique dealers spend more time looking out for forgeries than they do for fakes. In this way they sometimes get caught. This is not to say that there are not some forgeries around because there are. But all this business has an economic basis and making grand forgeries is expensive and risky; faking is far less expensive and can carry less risk of discovery. After all, it will come down in the end to some 'expert's' personal judgment and knowledge.

The Worshipful Company stores in the basement of the Hall what is known as 'the Black Museum'. This is a collection of fakes, forgeries and reproduction pieces belonging to the Pewter



Figure 4. A half-gill Birmingham made reproduction haystack which has subsequently been treated so it could be sold as an original. Like the example in Figure 3, it has a copy of Joseph Austen's mark under the base. After manufacture it has been treated, probably chemically, so it is now covered in what appears to be hard dark oxide accumulated over many years. This was done so it could be passed off as 150 years old - and it was.

Society. It has been assembled over many years from pieces gifted by members of the Society. The usual reason for donation was to make sure the item concerned was permanently removed from the market. Periodically the Society uses some of the pieces for discussion and instruction purposes. Although many of the items would not deceive an experienced collector or dealer, a few do present a real challenge.

If, in addition to looking on the Internet, you look in antique shops and antique centres, at auctions, views and antique fairs, you will find quantities of pewter. It will vary from the obviously modern, through vintage pieces, reproductions, fakes and just occasionally forgeries as well as genuine and interesting items of old British pewter. Rare things still some times turn up unrecognised and unloved. The slang term for such pieces when they turn up in an auction is a "sleeper".



Figure 5. Moving on to items made from scratch to defraud, this piece from the Pewter Society Black Museum purports to be a Queen Anne lidless two band flagon. It was made sometime in the 1920-1950 period and is a forgery.



Figure 6. There is nothing new under the sun: a Victorian-made piece meant to be medieval. These are called Billies and Charlies after their makers.

Most areas of collecting antiques are bedevilled to some greater or lesser extent by reproductions, fakes and forgeries, and old pewter is no different. If you want to buy just a couple of pieces, then either talk to an experienced collector or find a dealer with a good reputation.

If you want to go further than this, the best thing is to join the Pewter Society [www.pewtersociety.org/] and make use of their publications, database and collective knowledge.

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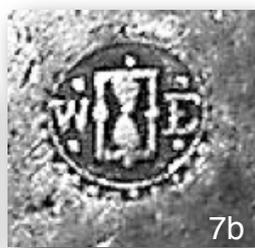
Footnote

The division between reproductions, fakes and forgeries is an old *Sotheby's* division, not all accept it. Personally I think it is a rational and helpful division.

7a. A set of reproduction Bristol hallmarks frequently used in the 1920s and 1930s on plates and dishes.

7b. A fake mark meant to represent the mark of a prominent London pewterer William Eddon, Master WCOP in 1732 and 1738.

7c. A fake verification mark; verification marks were applied by local inspectors after checking the capacity of a measure or beer mug.



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