

The Pewterer. Volume 2, Number 1. May 2011

The Worshipful Company of Pewterers' Powers of Search

In the first number of this Journal, we published an article on the Company's powers of search (see Volume 1 Number 1). We have had the following responses from William Grant and David Hall.

Commenting on the powers of search, William Grant, Past Master of the Worshipful Company and its Historian, said: "My research in Welch highlights the intriguing possibility that when the Court searchers were out in the country, word got around that they were coming and people would hide things that might be a bit 'dodgy'.



"The Company's 17th century Orders & Entries [effectively, the Minutes of proceedings of the Court of the Company. Ed] indicate that it was the pewter manufacturers in Bristol who were particularly against the searchers as they had a very good trade in poor quality pewter which they shipped to Africa to trade for slaves who were then taken on to America.

"On a more substantive point, the Company was concerned about the quality of workmanship. I have come across quite a few instances of this although the occasions are far outweighed by the instances of sub-standard metal."



David Hall, Liveryman and the Company's Archivist, quoted the late Christopher Peal writing about these issues in 1983 (*Pewter of Great Britain for Pleasure and Investment* by C.A.Peal (and others) published by Gifford, London 1983, pp 16 and 17) who wrote:

"The Company, for its part, enforced on the craft very specific standards of quality. All sadware - plates and other flatware that generally did not require cored moulding - had to be made in 'fine metal'. This,

according to the records, comprised 'pure tin with as much copper as its own nature will take', which would amount to no more than approximately two per cent.

'Lay metal' was used in the manufacture of hollow-ware comprising tin mixed with lead of no less a ratio than four to one. 'Trifle', a third grade of pewter, was specified for tavern pots, candle moulds, toys and buttons.

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In later years some changes were made to these specifications as new hardening agents, such as bismuth and antimony, were introduced. It is interesting to note that at the end of the seventeenth century a variation of 'fine metal', denoted as 'hard metal', came into use for the highest quality flatware. This had very similar constituents to the Britannia metal of a hundred years later."

David Hall goes on to say that even that was a simplification. "Peal was only talking about *London* standards and trying to summarize regulations that had been in operation for hundreds of years; these obviously varied from time to time and place to place. For example, the regulations in Amsterdam in 1685 allowed 6% lead in their best quality pewter; and in Rotterdam in 1635 the same percentage. At this time, best London pewter contained virtually no lead.

"Modern pewter," he said, "is a derivative of *Britannia metal* which itself derives from London '*Hard Metal*'. This new alloy, in which initially about 1% to 2% antimony was added to a mixture of tin with a little copper, was introduced to London by Huguenot refugees in the 1650s/1660s. It was only well into the 18th century that it was introduced to Sheffield in the form of rolled sheet. The percentage of antimony tended to be increased in these Sheffield products until, in the 19th century, it reached around 6-8%. Virtually no lead was supposed to be used."

"I would expect modern pewter to be very similar in composition. The use of lead has been banned for many decades."

William Grant added:

"I think we still have much to learn about searches. There seem to have been Metal searches as well as General Searches; and three particular areas where they were looking for defaults. First the quality of the alloy for the piece being made of that alloy; secondly, whether the Pewterer's scales and weights were in order; and thirdly, whether the piece(s) were properly made.

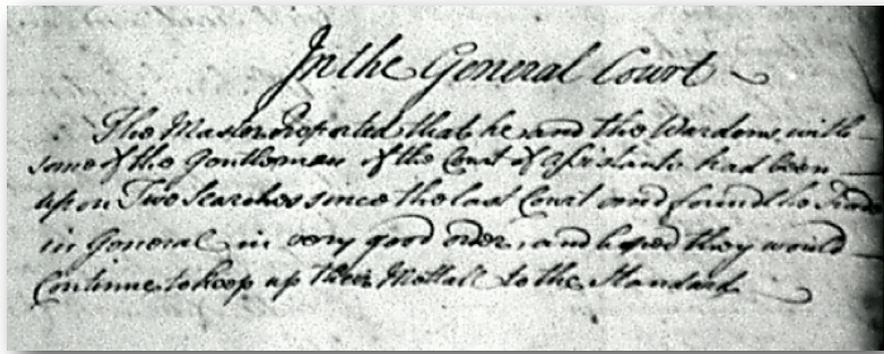
“The most common reason for a Pewterer to be summoned before the Court seems to have been the mix of his alloy; whether it was so many grains worse than (say) lay [‘Lay metal’, a term used in London for a specific alloy: see the

Glossary. Ed]. It makes me wonder why this was the case. Did each Pewterer have his own assaying tool? If not, how was he to know whether what he was using was the correct alloy, particularly when old pieces were simply put back into the melting pot? And if he did have an assaying tool, did each Pewterer have a sufficiently delicate set of scales to be able to work out whether his alloy was the right mix?

“My suspicion is that they had neither an assaying tool, nor a delicate set of scales, and perhaps that explains the reason for so many summonses on this count. Weights and scales (usually referred to as beams) were the second most common reason for a summons. I have always wondered why it might be that a weight, which presumably started out correct, managed to change its weight. I would not have thought that brass weights were easily damaged.

“The third category of shoddy manufacture is pretty rare for getting a summons and, of course, confiscation of the goods, if the searchers determined that the goods were not up to an acceptable standard of manufacture.

“I do not know quite what was meant when, at the beginning of the quarterly General Court, the Master pronounced that the search had proved that ‘the Trade was in General (or pretty) Good Order’. The expression was frequently coupled with an expression by the Master that he would hope the Company members would ‘look to their metal’, or something like that. Perhaps the answer is in the word **General** good order i.e. on the whole things were OK but nevertheless there was room for improvement.”



WCoP O&Es. **In the General Court** (18th October 1759)

The Master reported that he and the Wardens with some of the Gentlemen of the Court of Assistants had been upon Two Searches since the last Court and found the Trade in General in very good order and hoped they would continue to keep up their Metall to the Standard.

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