

Medieval pewterers of London

between about 1190 and 1457.

Returning a book to the Worshipful Company's Library earlier this year, I came across a bundle of papers tucked away against the back of the shelf. The bundle turned out to be a photocopy of a 'study' written by Ronald F Homer. There was no date on the article nor any indication of when or where - or indeed if - it had been published. The late Ron Homer was, once upon a time, the Archivist of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers.

So, given the subject matter, it was clearly worth reading. The following is a brief summary of Ron Homer's article. Readers who are interested in studying these matters further are referred to the endnotes and to the original article itself.

In his introduction, Ron Homer states that for a thousand years, between around 300 and 1300 AD, the Cornish mines were the only significant source of tin in Europe; that the Romans used Cornish tin to make pewterware in Britain in the 3rd and 4th centuries and that far more pewter vessels and utensils survive from the Romano-British period than appear to survive from medieval times

The Council of Rheims (813) permitted the use of vessels of tin in church services, and a pewter chalice was among the goods left by the bishop of Vigne, in Spain, in 909.

Tin, pewter and lead pilgrim badges, and tokens made of these metals, dating from about 1200 onwards have been recovered in large numbers from the Thames. From just before 1300 we have the earliest surviving pewter spoons and as the 14th century progresses, documents speak of a "range of domestic plates, dishes, basins, pitchers, candlesticks, flagons and salts".

At this time, pewterware features increasingly in the wills and inventories of the English middle classes. By 1400, its use had become widespread at all levels of society and pewterers were established in at least 11 provincial towns and cities to meet local demand. By 1348, pewtering was widely enough practised in London for the pewterers of the City to be granted ordinances for the regulation of their craft; however, it was not until 1473/4 that the 'mystery' received its first charter, one that extended its power and standing countrywide.

Welch (1902, 2–11), recites the 1348 ordinances and later ones of 1438, both preserved in the City's records, but finds very little to add to these until the archives of the Worshipful Company commence in 1451.

It was Ron Homer's aim to fill this gap of over a century, and indeed to go back before the 1348 ordinances to trace the very beginnings of the craft in London in the late 12th century.

The wealth of surviving documents enabled him to identify the names of 250 individual craftsmen working before about 1450, and to reveal the Company's growth up to 1348, the devastating effect of the Black Death (in the very year that the first ordinances were granted) and the slow recovery leading to the rapid expansion of the trade in the 15th century.

The Origins of the Craft

Ron Homer found that it was the occupational names of the early pewterers that gave clues as to their craft. The earliest appearance of the name 'le pe(a)utrer' that he discovered was that of John le peutrer in 1305. That name was found with increasing frequency during the following decades. The key to the earliest recorded worker in pewter was provided by one Henry le calicer (the chalice maker). He is recorded in the parish of St Martin's Ludgate in 1306. Posthumously, however, in deeds drawn up by his widow, Agnes la calicer, and his son Thomas le peutrer, the latter is referred

to as both 'le calicer' and 'le peutrer'. This was the proof that Ron Homer needed to establish that Henry worked in pewter!

The earliest mention of the name 'le calicer' in London appears to be that of Alexander le calicer to whom an earlier grant of land "within Ludgate towards Baynard's Castle" was confirmed between 1190 and 1196. Of the 13 other individuals who have been discovered with the name of 'le calicer' in London between 1190 and 1348, 10 lived in the parish of St Martin's Ludgate, and two in the adjoining parish of St Bride's Fleet Street.

The Earliest Pewterers

Ron Homer had established that the trade existed and identified individuals working in it. He found records of pewterers in the Cheap ward in the subsidy returns in 1319 and 1332. But to follow a career in detail, he had to wait until he found Nicholas Miles, *alias* Nicolas le peautrer, *alias* Nicholas le peautrer of Ludgate, *alias* Nicholas (le) calyker. He was the successor, to Henry le calicer whose daughter, Elena, he married and to whose widow, Agnes, he was perhaps apprenticed.

Nicolas appears to have died in the Black Death. But he died a wealthy man. He left to his son Thomas "10 marks of silver, 2000 pounds of pewter (or tin) and the tools of his trade, together with a silver cup enamelled in the foot, a dozen silver spoons, two mazer cups (drinking cups turned from Maple wood and fitted with metal mounts) and various household furnishings. He had intended that his son should have his four tenements, but Thomas it seems also died of the plague and so a flourishing family business was abruptly terminated.

The effect of the plague must have been disastrous but the trade appears to have recovered quite quickly and by 1363 the pewterers contributed the not insignificant sum of 100 shillings to a cash gift by the guilds to King Edward III.

Ron Homer reports that the 1348 ordinances allowed the craft to accept into its ranks not only its own apprenticed men but also other 'lawful workmen known and tried among them'; this was an indication, he said, that there was a consciousness that the expanding craft could not cope from its own indigenous resources

The Pewterers, Post 1348

In 1349, a man called John Syward, accompanied by Nicholas de Hyngestworth (also known as Henxteworth) moved into some of the late Nicholas le peutrer's tenements. The latter was appointed an overseer of the craft; and became very wealthy and had dealings with the Duke of Cornwall (then, the Black Prince) in one of which he offered to buy the major part of the tin coming out of Cornwall.

This Nicholas died in 1364; he left to his son John (later known as 'John Peautrer') after the death of his widow, 'all the utensils of my trade together with a thousand weight of tin when he should take a shop of his own'. Ron Homer found intriguing links between John Syward and an influx of pewterers to London from the village of Arles in Bedfordshire. Other pewterers appear to have come from Kent, and Ron Homer supposes that the trade was prospering sufficiently for a need to arise to bring craftsmen in to supplement the existing London trade.

The extent of the equipment of the medieval pewterers is provided by their wills and particularly by the unique surviving inventory of the working tools of Thomas Filkes in 1427.

The Market

Edward I is said to have owned over 300 pieces of pewter in 1290, comprising 100 dishes, 100 platters and over 100 saltcellars. In 1292, pewter pitchers and a basin are recorded in the kitchen of Berwick-upon-Tweed castle. These could, of course, have come from France where a Guild of Pewterers had been established in Paris by 1268. The earliest undoubted mentions of English domestic pewter were recorded by Hatcher & Barker (1974, pp 34 and 42) from the opening years

of the early 14th century when a small quantity of pitchers, dishes and saltcellars of pewter was exported from London.

Alan Williams
2015

Editor's Notes

I am indebted to Nigel Israel for tracing where the original of this article had first been published: it was in LAMAS Transactions Vol 36 (London and Middlesex Archaeological Society); and then in a book, English Medieval Industries. The book is expensive, but a pdf of the Transactions is freely downloadable.
<http://www.lamas.org.uk/archives/transactions>

See the article on *Pewter Pilgrim Badges* in [Volume 6.2](#) of *The Pewterer*.

David Hall, the Company's Archivist, suggested that while the most significant source of tin may have been Cornwall, one should not forget that tin was also mined in Devon over several centuries. David also clarified the meaning of 'calicer', saying that calicers are thought to have made pewter sepulchral chalices. These were not so much for use in church but for burial with priests, in whose graves they have been found in recent decades. It was the practice of the medieval church to bury a priest's chalice in his coffin. Silver was the usual metal for making chalices but was very expensive, so a pewter one was often made to be interred instead. Such pewter chalices have been found in priests' graves in many countries in Western Europe. For example the National Museum of Ireland have one recovered from a priest's grave in Western Ireland.

Welch: The History of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers of the City of London, by Charles Welch FSA, printed by Blades, East & Blades, 23 Abchurch Lane, EC, in 1902. That first edition was modernised by Major GS Johnson in 1972 and again by William Grant, Past Master of the Company and its Historian, in 2003. Second edition: ISBN: 0 9500012 2 8

A History of British Pewter, by Hatcher & Barker, 1974. ISBN: 0582 50122-9

A circular button with a light grey background and a dark grey border. The word "Home" is written in a dark grey, sans-serif font in the center of the button.

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