

Yates, a formidable pewter family

From the fourteenth century until the eighteenth London pewterers dominated the pewter trade of England and Wales. By the end of the 18th century, the business had begun to contract and

Britannia Metal

The alloy used to make Britannia metal would have been familiar to the London pewterers of the 18th century, as hard metal. It consisted of tin, some antimony and a little copper. Over the years the amount of antimony used tended to increase, from between one and two per cent to between six and eight per cent. Sheffield in the 18th century saw the development of Sheffield plate made by rolling bars of silver covered copper into sheet. Having developed Sheffield plate some Sheffield craftsmen discovered you could also roll hard metal to make sheet. They cleverly marketed their new products under the trade name Britannia metal, echoing the high grade silver of the Britannia standard and also appealing to the patriotism of contemporary citizens.

At the start the new products made from Britannia metal were produced using presses, in the 19th century the producing of such goods by spinning on a lathe was introduced, as was silver plating by electrolysis. In Birmingham the initial experimentation with such new techniques resulted in the marketing of an alloy called Tutania, named after the original experimenter, William Tutin. Later the Sheffield name Britannia metal was adopted. Sheffield remained throughout the 19th century the prime centre for making Britannia goods with Birmingham a respectable second; London never seems to have entered the business except as retailers of others products. By the late 19th century hardly a middle or respectable working class home would have been without a silver plated Britannia metal teapot. London pewterers, not having entered into new expanding business of Britannia metal were left to make the best of what remained of the traditional market for cast pewter.

London was faced with competition from the provinces of a type that had not been seen before. This came, in a large part, from the development of the manufacture of Britannia metal, first in Sheffield and then in Birmingham.

During the 19th century, what remained of the market for plates, dishes and chargers largely disappeared, and much of the trade was concentrated on providing for the needs of publicans. Although other things were made, the core of the traditional pewterers' trade was to be found in the manufacture of pub pots, in various sizes, sets of



Figure 1

bellied measures, funnels and jugs. Even in this area, however, the London pewterers found themselves challenged. While the challenge came particularly from Birmingham, one family was at the heart of it - the Yates.

Some of the earliest references found to the Yates of Birmingham are in the Trade Directories for 1781 and 1805, when a James Yates is listed as a 'brass founder and a casting mould maker'.

Trade Directories

Researching the history of Birmingham presents problems, as it was not given corporate status as a town until 1838 although it had been an important centre for metalworking since the 17th century. As a result, a researcher is far more dependent on 'Trade Directories' than he is elsewhere.

Later tradition suggested that James was the first pewterer in the family, setting up in this additional business in 1797. Although this has been challenged, the teaspoon shown above might offer some confirmation. This fiddle pattern teaspoon was made by "I. YATES" but it bears the Crowned Harp, the official device of the Kingdom of Ireland - and this device ceased to exist, with the Act of Union, in 1801.

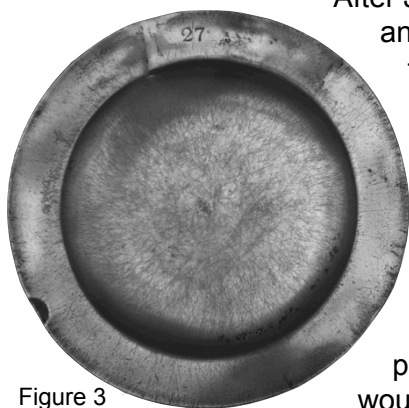


Figure 3

After James, we have what have been presumed to be two brothers: John and Thomas. John is clearly identified as a maker of pewter products from the point he is mentioned in 1815, Thomas was initially a mould maker. Both were, at times, located in adjacent properties in Coleshill Street. John was, from our point of view, the more important of the two as he set up the business, with partners, which became the powerhouse of traditional pewter-making in Birmingham. The Trade Directories show that by 1829 he was in a partnership with a Thomas Birch and a Lucas Spooner to which, at some stage, his son James was added. It is noticeable that the partnership was "Yates, Birch and Spooner", not as alphabetic order would have required, 'Birch, Spooner and Yates'.

Amongst other things this business in Coleshill Street was described as 'pewterers and manufacturers of Britannia metal wares'. Again local tradition comes into play suggesting this partnership was originally set up in 1826. Birch and Spooner both had pewter making backgrounds. In 1838 the partners are believed to have bought out what remained of John Caruthers Crane's Bewdley pewter making business including moulds going back to the very early 18th century. In 1839 Spooner withdrew from the partnership and, in 1840, so did John Yates leaving in the business only his son, James, and the Birch interest. This partnership continued to grow the enterprise until 1860, when the Birches withdrew, leaving James Yates on his own.

It is, judging from the surviving pieces, in the time of James Yates that the Yates's enterprises reached their zenith. There were three different family business occupying eight adjacent premises in Coleshill Street, those of 'Thomas Yates' a Britannia metal maker



Figure 2

specialising in spoons; of James; and of 'Yates Brothers', electro platers and gilders.

There was another part of the family manufacturing enterprise, nearby in Pritchett Street, making spoons and other Britannia metal products. James Yates was more than a traditional pewterer in that, like some other Birmingham pewterers of the time, he offered the pub trade a comprehensive service, including beer pulls or machines (in our terms beer pumps) and a range of other fittings and plumbing. In a world of expanding population and growing industrialisation, the pub trade was also expanding, and the Yates honed in on the opportunities that such expansion presented. They were also enterprising in other ways and, for example, James developed an export trade stretching as far as Australia.

In 1881, James Yates died and the business was taken over by his brother, Thomas, who himself died in 1882. The business was then sold to two Greenway brothers, and they ran it under the name of 'James Yates' until close to 1900.

It was not until around 1899 that it actually traded as Yates & Greenways. In 1902 there was an amalgamation with a Birmingham business known as Gaskell & Chambers who also took over other Birmingham pewterers.

Gaskell & Chambers continued the pewter aspect of their enterprise until the early 1970s when they sold that element of their activities to James Smellie whose premises were located at 155 Warstone Lane, Birmingham. Gaskell & Chambers had other aspects to their business, including making beer pumps which, I believe, they continued (our village pub stills has a pair of pumps made by Gaskell & Chambers).

With the pewter business Smellie inherited a considerable quantity of bronze and cast iron moulds some going back to about 1700. In 1983 James Smellie went out of business and the moulds were sold off, most of them eventually arriving at the A.E. Williams' business in Birmingham. For traditional London pewterers, the kind of enterprise that Yates operated in the second half of the 19th century represented formidable competition. While traditional pewter making had seen few technical innovations, the development of Britannia metal had seen many, and even in the traditional area there had been considerable changes in the market.

The Yates showed a willingness to change their ways of doing business to meet the changed market conditions. It is difficult to be certain whether they became the largest remaining producer of traditional cast pewter, as the Yates business records were destroyed when the premises of their successors, Gaskell and Chambers, were bombed in the Second World War. However, if survival of pieces is anything to go by, there is considerable evidence to suggest they had, by 1881/2, become the market leader.

David Hall

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Editor's notes

We are not aware that anyone has yet produced an easily understood genealogy of the Yates family. However, David Hall has produced a table listing details of Birmingham's Britannia metal producers from 19th century trade directories. It was published in the Journal of The Pewter Society, Spring 2009 issue, pp42-52, under the title "19th century Birmingham Revisited"

The basis of this article comes from, and for more information on this subject, please refer to,:

Provincial Pewterers, written by the late Ron Homer and David Hall. ISBN 0 85033 572 8. Published by Phillimore & Co

Illustrations:

Figure 1. An example of a Yates made teaspoon bearing the Crowned Harp symbol of the Kingdom of Ireland and the makers' mark "I YATES". 'I' at this time often stood for 'J'.

Figure 2. A half-pint cup shaped mug made by Yates, Birch and Spooner.

Figure 3. A rare 7½ inch diameter plate made by James Yates. The size of this plate, the number stamped on the rim and the many knife marks, showing heavy use, all contribute to the idea it was made for institutional use, possibly for a workhouse.

Photographs: David Hall

A Gaskell & Chambers history will follow in a future issue.



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