

Chichester Cathedral's Pewter

- and sepulchral chalices

I was in Chichester earlier this year and took the chance to visit the glorious Cathedral there.

This Cathedral was built to replace the Cathedral founded in 681 by St Wilfrid for the South Saxons at Selsey. The seat of the bishop was transferred in 1075. It was consecrated in 1108 under Bishop Ralph de Luffa. In 1187 a fire which burnt out the Cathedral and destroyed much of the town necessitated a substantial rebuilding, which included refacing the nave and replacing the destroyed wooden ceiling with the present stone vault, possibly by Walter of Coventry. The Cathedral was reconsecrated in 1199.

In its Treasury is a collection of silver churchware and also several interesting pieces of old church pewter. While there, I collected a copy of, and the following is extracted from, '*Notes on church pewter*' written by the late Canon GH Parks, founder of the Treasury, in around 1988.

I mentioned my visit to David Hall, fellow Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers and its Hon. Archivist. He told me that he had also visited the Treasury some couple of years ago; and he has provided the photograph (of one of the sepulchral chalices - right); and also the commentary reproduced in blue italics.



Sepulchral Chalice

Canon Parks noted that it was customary to bury a chalice and paten with a priest. He went on: "In Chichester we have two silver chalices and one of pewter from coffins of bishops. They date from the late 12th or early 13th century." (Note: the coffins were removed and opened in 1829 during restoration work; the chalices, known as 'sepulchral chalices', came from there).

[The practice of burying chalices and patens with priests' bodies was, at this time, widespread in England and Wales and, in my understanding, elsewhere. I have seen an example in the National Museum of Ireland found in Western Ireland and I believe they are also found on the near Continent.]

The chalices and patens will normally, at least those used in the Mass, have been silver. Silver was a bullion metal and was scarcer in Medieval Europe than it is today. This was before the discovery of the New World with its huge silver mines. As a result there was a reluctance to bury the silver patens and chalices with the local priest, so pewter replacements were used. Bishops were more likely to be buried with silver examples.

The late Ron Homer found evidence for craftsmen, usually called chalisers or callisers, working in London as early as about 1190. He thought these were the earliest pewterers, so you know what, initially, they were making. (See the summary of Mr Homer's article on the subject in [The Pewterer, volume 6 no. 4 - "Medieval Pewterers of London" - http://www.thepewterer.org.uk/the-pewterer-issue-6-4-december-2015](http://www.thepewterer.org.uk/the-pewterer-issue-6-4-december-2015))]

Canon Parks continues: "In the 13th and 14th centuries pewter was of course in general domestic use and by the 15th century the Pewterers' Guild in London had been granted authority to control the craft throughout England."

[The first Royal Charter granted to the Pewterers was granted in 1474 - and extended to Wales as well.]

“The Tudor period was, of course, a time of great ecclesiastical change. Much church plate was plundered and destroyed ... During the reign of Elizabeth what little medieval plate survived was, as a national policy, redesigned.”

Numbers presenting themselves (at eucharist) increased as well as the quantity of wine consumed. A larger container was required, and this was to be the flagon.

[“As well as suffering from plunder, many vessels were confiscated or melted down to make Protestant vessels. One feature of the introduction of Protestantism was the idea that all confirmed members of the congregation took communion in both kinds, that is the wine and the bread. RC dogma restricted (and still does) the congregation to just the bread; the priest, as the man who stood between the people and God, was the only person who normally took the wine. Pre-Reformation chalices therefore had small bowls with a limited capacity. Elizabeth I’s government instructed, diocese by diocese, the replacement of the small capacity cups with much larger ones.

In time this seems to have resulted in many churches purchasing pewter flagons so the communion cup could be refilled. Few such flagons are known that date from very late in Elizabeth’s reign or the reign of James I. It is not that Elizabethan flagons are difficult to recognize, simply that very few exist. The Worshipful Company of Pewterers has one, I think from memory it came from Hitchin.

Some have argued that later flagons were also used to provide beer at Vestry meetings.]

“The accurate identification of specifically ecclesiastical Elizabethan flagons can be difficult. If this is true of silver, it certainly became so with pewter, the secular designs in current use being equally suitable and convenient for use in churches. Nevertheless, its use received encouragement and authority in the Canon 20 of 1603. There it directs that the churchwardens of every parish ‘Shall at the charge of the parish with the advice and direction of the Minister provide a clean and sweet standing pot or stoup of pewter if not of purer material’. There is a sense in which this heralded the heyday of church pewter.”

[Some people have argued this is not the correct interpretation of this Canon. If you read the whole thing... ¹]

“During the troubled 17th century many parishes followed the canonical direction and a number of surviving flagons are to be found to this day. Frequently unmarked, these straight sided vessels of varying dimensions have high craftsmanship and a touch of elegance. Many such pieces are to be found in Sussex. ... “.

[I think communion cups made of pewter are quite often not marked by the maker. Of course, silver ones had to be hallmarked. Flagons are usually marked by the makers, but earlier 17th century pewterers’ touch marks are often small and easily missed if you do not understand where to look for them]

“One other example of the use of church pewter was that of the Baptismal bowl. One Sussex example has come to light. It is known that sometimes Baptism took place in the home, also that in church the service sometimes took place, not in the font which was usually to the side of or behind the congregation, but from a bowl more conspicuously placed. Our example is of such simplicity that it could be domestic and date from any period from the middle ages onwards. In this case its purpose is established because an ancient inhabitant remembered its customary use. ... “.

[The extent to which baptismal bowls were used seems to have been variable. In my view there were not that many of them and some are quite late.]

¹ For those of you who want further reading on the Canons of 1603, here is a link to a website advertising a Chicago University publication on the subject. Ed.
http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/book_chapters/399/

“The Dean and Chapter of Chichester are grateful to the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, who not only maintain their craft, but have honoured their history by generously presenting the case in which to exhibit it.”

There are two funerary chalices on display. One is noted as dating from c1200; the other is said to be a “Lead funerary chalice and paten”; dated as 12th or 13th century. Both are said to have come from an episcopal coffin. Amongst the other exhibits, there are: a James I pewter flagon along with a Charles I bun-type lidded flagon; and two further 17th century flagons which had the distinction of once being stolen from St Mary Magdalen church, Cowden, in 1983, and then recovered. The first was recovered in 1987, the other in 2008, both recognised with the help of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers. They are on loan to the Collection from that church. The rest of the pewter in the Collection, other than the medieval pieces, is on from other parishes in the Diocese.

Alan Williams

The case in which the pewter is displayed was presented to the Cathedral by the Worshipful Company; and they (and the Goldsmiths, who donated the cabinets on which the Cathedral’s silver and gold is displayed) are mentioned in the annual Cathedral thanksgiving service.

Canon GH Parks played the main part in setting up the Treasury in the 1970s and building up the collections of silver, and later of pewter church plate.

My thanks to:

The Dean and Chapter of Chichester Cathedral for their permission to quote from Canon Parks’ Notes; David Hall for his generosity in finding the time to read my original article and then comment extensively on it. And also for the photograph of the sepulchral chalice; and The sub-Treasurer of Chichester Cathedral, Mr MJ Moriarty, for his help in correcting errors that had strayed into my text.

Any remaining errors are, of course, mine.

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The Pewterer, Volume 7, number 4. November 2016.

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