

John Bly's

# 'Perfect Pewter'

- The Collector

The Bly family have been dealers in Tring, Hertfordshire, since the beginning of the 19th century. An ancient letterhead proclaimed 'John Bly Antique Dealers since the reign of William IV'. The grandfather of the present John Bly first established his own business in the centre of Tring in 1891.

The present John Bly worked for four years at Sotheby's before joining the family firm. He has been resident furniture expert on BBC Television's Antiques Roadshow' since it started in 1978, and has his own ITV programme 'Heirloom'. John Bly lectures in Britain, Europe and North America and writes for a variety of specialist magazines.



He has written and edited 14 books related to antiques including *Discovering English Furniture*, *Discovering Hallmarks on English Silver*, *Is It Genuine?* and *Miller's Silver and Sheffield Plate Marks*. His most recent is also for Miller's and is entitled *John Bly's Antiques Masterclass*.

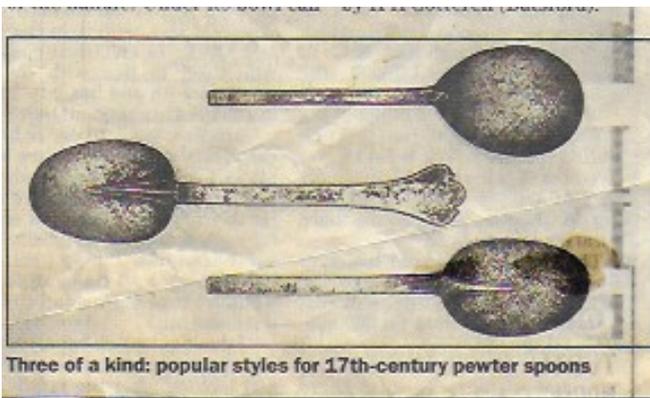
John Bly clearly at one time had a weekly column in the *Weekend Telegraph*. But this comes from a clipping; and there is no date apparent, though John says it must have been in the 1970s. In his email confirming that I could reproduce the clipping, he added:

*In the context of utility items taking on greater significance, I think the spoon ranks highly. The traditional gift to a child from the Godfather was a spoon - if sufficiently wealthy, a silver one with a figure of an Apostle cast as the finial. As the early word for spoon was 'spone' the patron was known as the 'sponsor'.*

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MORE THAN a thousand years ago the Chinese were proficient in making pewter, an alloy of tin. They were slightly ahead of the Romans who introduced its manufacture to Great Britain. Our earliest official records of control over production are the first Ordinances of the London Guild or Company which were made in 1348. In these the Guild is referred to as the 'Craft of the Pewterers', and from then until the 1500s pewter was used to make utensils for the homes of the wealthy and ecclesiastical artefacts for the Church.

During the 16th century it became used at every level of society and its great age of production lasted from circa 1550 to the third quarter of the 1700s.



Three of a kind: popular styles for 17th-century pewter spoons

After 1800 it was mainly used for making tavern drinking vessels and as beer consumption rose during the late Georgian and Victorian periods, tankards and mugs were turned out in huge quantities.

But the collector of old pewter has to look for that made prior to the 1780s to provide him with an interesting variety of objects.

Dismissed as lower class in the Victorian period, it is intriguing to note the esteem accorded to pewter in earlier times when even the most humble item might have the finest decoration lavished upon it. For example, look at the spoons illustrated this week, especially the

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one at the bottom. No ordinary spoons these, not now anyway, but not exceptional when they were made in the mid to late 17th century. The one in the centre is a good example of a 'trifid' spoon, from the triform shape at the end of the handle. Under its bowl can be seen a moulded 'rat-tail', a strengthening bracket as well as decoration, popular well into the 1700s.

At the top is a slightly earlier 'slip-top' or 'slipped-in-the-stem' type, the end of the handle being cut at an angle as one would prune a rose.

The most interesting of the three is the bottom one. Its handle being plain flat and rectangular in section, was of a type popular during the Commonwealth period, 1649-1660 and is called the 'Puritan' handle. However the raised scrollwork on the back of the bowl lifts it from such moral strictures.

### BUYERS GUIDE

Are there fakes?

Yes, both old and new.

'Antique' pewter as well as Arts and Crafts style pieces became popular in the 1920s, a large amount being made on the Continent, particularly in Belgium. Much of this was struck with pseudo marks to imitate those of the London pewterers and was also chemically 'aged'. After 60 or 70 years, these are hard to spot. Do not clean your pewter until you have had advice.

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Recommended reading: *Old Pewter, Its Makers & Marks in England, Scotland and Ireland* by HH Cotterell (Batsford).

### John Bly

Photo of John Bly: from his website

Antiques Roadshow, John Bly: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/1CDqLQsGVHbVRZXGS9HWIBb/john-bly>

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*The Pewterer*, Volume 8, number 2. May, 2017.

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Published by Alan Williams, 14 Dandridge House, 31 Lamb Street, Spitalfields, London E1 6ED and endorsed by the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, Pewterers' Hall, Oat Lane, London EC2V 7DE

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