

Pewter Forgeries

In an article in *The Pewterer* in 2011 ([Volume 2 No 1 in 2011](#)) David Hall differentiated between the terms 'reproduction', 'fake' and 'forgery' and explained what they meant to those collecting old pewter. He said that reproductions and faked pieces were far more common than outright forgeries, meaning pieces made from scratch in order to defraud. In this article, he examines why there was one period - in the later 1920s, and 1930s - when there appears to have been something of an epidemic of the manufacture of quite sophisticated *forged* pieces.

The late 1920s and 1930s are remembered for forgery by pewter collectors through the actions of one individual, the man who was accused in the mid 20th century of being *the* arch forger, 'Richard Neate'.

We now know that Richard Neate (1880-1953) was born in St Pancras in north London and other than war service, spent all his life in that part of London. He seems to have been of lower middle class origins and, until near the start of World War I, worked as a clerk. He served in both the Boer War and World War I, being apparently invalided out of the latter as a Sergeant in May 1918. After that he set up in business as an antique dealer in Albany Street, Regent's Park, specialising in pewter. In this rôle he seems to have achieved some success as, by the late 1920s, among his customers were some of the wealthiest pewter collectors around. These included, in particular, Antonio de Navarro, a wealthy American expat who lived in Broadway in the Cotswolds.

A close connection between Navarro and Neate has always been suspected but, unsurprisingly, in the light of what Neate was doing, evidence was not easy to find. Navarro died early in 1932 and gifted his collection to the FitzWilliam Museum in Cambridge; but for many years little, if any, of the collection went on display. In summer 2010, the Pewter Society had a session at the Museum when a part of the Navarro collection was viewed and discussed.

This was followed up by one of the Society members, John Bank. He secured permission to photograph and record all the pieces in the Navarro collection. John Bank's photographs made it possible to compare pieces in the collection with letters written between 1928 and 1932 by Richard Neate to Navarro, offering items for sale. For the first time it was possible to make an objective assessment of Neate's goods - with the result that many reached the conclusion that the accusations made in the past against him were valid.

As a result a number of forged pieces sold by Neate to Navarro have been identified. Going through all of them might be tedious so I will give just a couple of examples. In a letter from Neate to Navarro dated 24th July 1929 he says:

"I have today sent you, on approval, by passenger train a box containing a pair of Jacobean candlesticks and a Loving Cup of Charles II period. You will I think agree with me the

candlesticks are one of the finest, if not the finest pair known. The Cup is probably a Coronation Cup of Charles II as it bears the Royal Arms and date 1660 and on the reverse side two angels holding up a crown. The Latin inscription to the effect one is to Drink his wine with gladness seems to bear out the fact that it was made in celebration of the Restoration. The touch mark inside is that of Thomas Bell no 45 on the 1st touch plate. It is one of the most remarkable loving cups I have ever seen."

Perhaps the last sentence has a ring of irony about it. The cup probably was the most remarkable Neate had ever seen! It is a two-handled cup, straight-sided with outward turned rim at top, stepped foot and two simple-scroll handles with spade terminals, body engraved in wriggle-work with two tulips, two winged putti bearing crown and inscription on one side reading "VINUM TUUM BIBE CUM GAUDEO" and on the other side, the Stuart Royal Arms, 'CR' and '1660'.



Figure 1. The two sides of the 'Coronation' Cup (NAV.179).

This cup appears remarkably clean and untarnished for its supposed age. The piece carries wriggled decoration some of which is comparable with that on commemorative chargers. However, there are otherwise no known parallels except the clearly forged cup dated 1603 and sold by Neate to a collector called Yeates in July 1932, for the sizable sum of £110.

The Navarro cup, when viewed on the occasion of the Society's visit to the FitzWilliam in summer 2010, found very few, if any, defenders. The mark mentioned in the letter as Thomas Bell's is today believed to be that of Timothy Blackwell and is known to have been faked. (See also the Pewter Society Journal, Autumn 2003 issue. Ed).

Again, Neate writes in a letter dated 1st April 1931:

"A dealer arrived this morning and brought me some plates, dishes, inkstands etc., and a wonderful pair of 17th century large square base candlesticks. The latter are certainly imposing and important pieces which I think you will like so I sent them off to you this afternoon, per passenger train. They come from Limerick. The price is quite reasonable for such fine pieces. They are costing me £150 and I will gladly take 10% profit on them, just for turnover as things are still bad in business."



Figure 2. One of a pair of square-based candlesticks purchased late in Navarro's life (NAV.247).

The candlestick illustrated (See figure 2) would seem to be one of the pair mentioned in the letter, as they are listed near the end of the Navarro's inventory, and he died in February 1932. They are believed to have been bought from Richard Neate in around April/May 1931. Neate claimed in the letter that they had been sold to him by a dealer from Ireland who reported they came from Limerick. This raises the first issue, as such 17th century pewter is virtually unknown in Ireland.

Secondly, it has been suggested by a collector with an engineering background (See page 95 of *Pewter Candlesticks(English candlesticks of the second half of the 17th century, ISBN:0-9538887-1-1)* by Jan Gadd in 2004) that they had been made from cold rolled sheet. Such cold rolling was not introduced until well into the 18th century. But these candlesticks purport to be from the late 17th century.

Thirdly they have on the stem, again in an unusual place, the touch "EN" (See figure 3). This touch is not the version on the London touchplate (no 126) but the fake version illustrated on page 16 of a Pewter Society publication *The Richard Neate Touchplate*. There seems little doubt that this pair of candlesticks are complete forgeries.

There are a number of other, similarly doubtful, pieces in the Navarro collection several of which can be attributed, because of the surviving correspondence, to Richard Neate. With such items coming from the 1920s and 1930s often no such convenient paper work survives. Another way of testing pieces that may be forgeries is by scientific analysis of the content of the pewter alloy. Today, we have sophisticated ways of the testing what metals are present in an alloy that would not have been dreamed of in the 1920s or 1930s. In 2004, the Worshipful Company of Pewterers had some 44 pewter items from its own collection tested by the Sheffield Assay Office. The testing supplied some useful information, without any one result causing concern or alarm.



Figure 3

As time has gone on, others have had pieces tested. In a couple of cases this has thrown up concerning results. Most interesting are the results that came from a pair of rosewater bowls with bronze enamelled plaques of the Arms of James I. These were made, reputedly, by a Weir of Edinburgh (see Figure 3). When one of these bowls was offered in a Sotheby's auction in 1965 it was sold on terms that indicated considerable doubts had been aired about the piece. At that time there would have been dealers and collectors at the sale who had been active in the 1930s.

The other bowl ended up in the Museum of British Pewter in Harvard House in Stratford-on-Avon. In 2007, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, which was then running the Museum of British Pewter, had samples from 30 pieces tested at Sheffield. The only really concerning result was that for the Weir rosewater bowl, the results for which were tin: 83.9%, lead: 12%, copper: 1.1% and antimony: 2.7%.

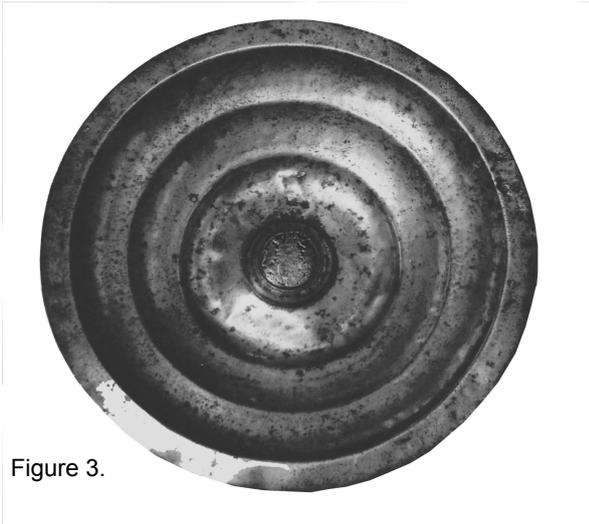


Figure 3.

Two things in this analysis cause concern. First the high lead content; in an item being made presumably for a Royal presentation, you would have expected it would be made of a tin rich alloy. The second cause for concern was the significant amount of antimony.

London pewterers began to use antimony as a hardening agent in the second half of the 17th century. They were introduced to the use of antimony by one particular family of Huguenot refugees, the Taudins; as far as we can ascertain it was Taudin family secret. So why so much antimony in the early 1600s in an Edinburgh-made rosewater bowl?

By the first half of the 18th century antimony was in more general use to make what was sold as 'hard metal'. Even then the percentage of antimony was normally between one and three. With the development of the Britannia trade, with sheet made by mechanical rolling, the percentage of antimony rises to between 6% and 8%. There was usually no lead in Britannia metal - just tin, antimony and a small amount of copper; it was the origin of our modern lead-free pewter.

By this date, the pair to the Weir bowl at Stratford was in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Faced with the result of the Stratford test, the Museum was persuaded to get its bowl tested. The outcome of this test, which was carried out by a method considered superior, was tin: 79.3%, lead: 15.9%, copper: 1.3% and antimony: 3%.

This reaches the point where your contributor, as a collector, applies the "would I buy it test"? The answer has to be at anywhere approaching the anticipated market value "no". It would be impossible to remove from one's mind the suspicion one was looking at piece manufactured in the 20th century using 19th century scrap - perhaps a mixture of old scrap items, pub pots and measures (which would have had not just 20% to 25% of lead in them but also small amounts of copper and antimony from the pieces melted down to make those Victorian items); and Britannia teapots and similar things with some copper and say 6% to 8% antimony. Obviously each melt of a mixture of scrap would result in a slightly different alloy

There are other problems with these two rosewater bowls. One is that they appear, from the current surface condition, to have been artificially aged by dipping in acid. This produces a particular surface finish with a scatter across the whole piece of little pits. The touch marks have been damaged significantly, and the process of dipping could have been a cause of this damage.

As far as provenance is concerned, there seems to be no record of the two Weir bowls, or four other reputedly similar but smaller Scottish rosewater bowls, until the 1930s. The National Museum Weir example is known to have been purchased around this time from a London dealer called Kimbell.

Further description of the problems with these two bowls and other similar Scottish rosewater bowls can be found in an article in the Pewter Society Journal for Autumn 2014.

So we come to the point where it can be demonstrated that modern research and modern methods have substantiated the claims made by early generations that Richard Neate was selling expensive antique pewter forgeries (and that the 1920s and 1930s were the heyday of such activity). That leaves one final question, why beyond human greed, did this kind of activity flourish in these two decades?

One obvious point of pressure is mentioned in the second of Richard Neate's letters reproduced above "*They are costing me £150 and I will gladly take 10% profit on them, just for turnover as things are still bad in business.*" This letter was dated April 1931, some eighteen months after the October 1929 New York Stock Exchange Crash had triggered a major depression. We have evidence that by October 1931 antique pewter being offered for auction had fallen between 40% and 60% in price. In the UK the depression would not reach its nadir until 1933. It is fairly easy to imagine what pressure such a catastrophic economic event would place on many antique dealers, restorers, and others. For those with limited scruples, their remaining customers who still had ready money to spend, would have become targets.

There has, however, to be more to it than that. As the above correspondence indicates, Richard Neate had commenced his nefarious activities before the 1929 Crash. Certainly pewter collecting was well established by the late 1920s. It was, however, dominated by what we perhaps should call 'wealthy gentlemen collectors'. The standard work on old pewter, Howard Cotterell's *Old Pewter, Its Makers and Marks*, would only be published in 1929. Some of these collectors essentially relied on selected individual dealers, putting much trust in them, but also putting them under pressure to find a constant stream of interesting and exciting items. After all, collecting of that kind can be very competitive. Richard Neate apparently initially descended to forgery to ensure his most important client continued to get what he wanted.

A couple of final points. Consumer protection was, of course, far less well developed at this time and Neate could be quite careful with what he put in formal documents like receipts. The receipt he gave Alfred Yeates in July 1932 for the cup he sold him, mentioned above, describes what is engraved on the cup including the date 1603; but nowhere does say it is antique or of that period. When Neate died he was definitely not a wealthy man; so he probably had more than one partner in his enterprises, who shared in the profits.

Mind you, even today you have to be careful when, for instance, buying on some on line sites!"

David Hall

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