

Miniature Pewter

by Anne Griffith (now Hobson)

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Anne Hobson has extracted this article from her longer one published in [Art & Antiques Weekly](#) of 11th August, 1979. This article concentrates on the references to pewter; for the references to glass, we refer you to the full article.

The editorial comment on the article began:

WHO CAN RESIST anything in miniature - such tiny detail must surely appeal to most collectors, and how amazing it is to see so many things made in tiny scale through the centuries? Among the many small desirable items are pieces made in pewter, many of which can still be found today in antique and specialist shops.

It is often difficult to tell whether a piece of miniature pewter was originally intended for baby houses (as the earlier dolls' houses were called), or as travellers' samples. As a full-scale set of pewterware would have been cumbersome and very heavy for a pedlar to carry on his back, many items were made in miniature as samples to be shown to prospective customers.

It must also be remembered when studying miniature pieces that most items were made later than their style indicates. Although there were most certainly pewter items made in miniature before the 16th century (miniature pewterware was made in England as early as 1467), very few pieces have survived. There is also no mention of size in any of the trade cards of the period, and miniature pewterware classified as 'toys' may well have been larger than dolls' house scale.

The great interest in miniature pieces seems to have started in the 17th century, with the advent of Nuremberg Kitchens and the exquisite Dutch cabinets. These cabinets were made for rich merchants to house the miniature copies of their own possessions made for them, in incredible detail, by craftsmen. The outsides resembled cabinets but the insides were miniature

Anne Hobson talks about miniature (glass and) pewter vessels:

The Nuremberg Kitchens were three sided rooms with a floor, and were used mostly to instruct little girls in the art of running their own establishments. These Kitchens contained a wealth of gleaming pewter, copper and brass and were imported from Germany and the Low Countries.

Even in the 17th century, pewter toys had to pass scrutiny by the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, and heavy fines were imposed on those whose toys were



A display of miniature pewter items from Laughing Monarch Products, Penzance. I have tried to find LMP, but a search of the internet has produced nothing. If anybody knows their whereabouts, please let me know. In their heyday, they manufactured miniatures to original designs, some of which date from the 17th century. Ed

below standard quality. Weight and colour will help collectors to identify their miniature pewter - the earlier pieces will probably be darker and heavier.

The more elaborate serving dishes and tableware were probably made in hard pewter: an alloy of tin mixed with a little bismuth and copper. This was used until the late 18th century. From this date antimony (the one metal that expands on cooling, giving greater density to moulded items) was often used with copper instead of bismuth. This gave the metal a lighter, more silver-like colour, which was known as Britannia metal.

From the 17th century, I think it is possible to say that most of the fullscale tableware in pewter was copied in miniature, including the trencher (a square or round piece of pewter or wood, used for cutting meat or tough food at the table to avoid scratching the beautiful pewter plates). Pewter plates seem to have been the most prevalent pieces to survive. These were hammered from sheet pewter. The earlier ones have very wide rims and raised edges. From about 1650 until about 1690 the rims became smaller, and grew larger again at the beginning of the 18th century.

Pewter tankards for miniature taverns and baby houses were made in great number. Like their larger counterparts, the earlier tankards were dumpy, cylindrical vessels with flat-topped lids. The domed lid then became fashionable at the end of the 17th century. At the end of the 18th century, tankards without lids were beginning to be made, and some of these looked just like chimneypots with handles at the bottom instead of the top.

I have never seen one, and I wonder if any tavern keeper ever conceived the idea of having replicas of his own tankards reproduced in miniature? In the Victorian period landlords had tavern pots engraved with their names and those of their taverns.

From the 18th century we find miniature tappit hens, which are still being made to this day. The tappit hen is a tankard with a knob on the lid, and is so called after the hen with a crest or top-knot. There are many examples of these in the beautiful baby houses of the 18th century. These were the forerunners of the dolls' houses, and some of them were reputed to be copies of people's own homes made by the estate carpenters. They were certainly elaborate and housed many treasures.

As in real houses, except in the poorer establishments, pewterware was confined to the kitchen and used by the servants - the family being served with glass or china. Understandable when one sees the beautiful glass, also reproduced in miniature during this period. Glass always seems to me to be the most difficult of all the miniatures to date. Except for wear and tear on the old glass, there is such excellent miniature glass made today that it is extremely difficult to decide whether a piece is old or new.

(The original article concluded by looking at glass. Ed)

Let's hope that even in today's disposable era, miniatures will be cherished with as much care and love as their forerunners of yesteryear.

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With thanks to: Anne Hobson, and *Art & Antiques Weekly*, August 11th, 1979.

David Hall, the Archivist of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, adds some comments on this article. See the next issue of *The Pewterer*.

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