

Villers of Birmingham

Alex Neish is well-known for his Collection of pewter. That Collection is now happily housed at the Smith Museum (www.smithartgalleryandmuseum.co.uk) in Stirling. The art gallery and museum was established in 1874 and holds the keys of Stirling's past.

Mr Neish continues to collect pewter and told me that he has recently added to the Collection a number of items, including two cake stands (illustrated here), one of which he believes was made by an 18th century pewterer, a Birmingham man, called Villers.

I looked up Villers on the internet and found reference to 'John Birch and William Villers' of Birmingham (1772-1786). The site claimed that they were the first recorded major firm of Birmingham pewterers.

But 18th century Birmingham is not an easy place to research. It did not have Borough status until municipal reform after the 1832 Parliamentary Reform Act. Even though it was already a significant metal-working town by the time of the Civil War, 1642-1646, it had no local government and therefore lacks many of the types of records that can be found elsewhere.



Notwithstanding the claim by the website that Birch and Villers were the first Birmingham pewterers, there were other pewterers in Birmingham who were working before Birch and Villers. One example is the Woods one of whom was Master of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers and, later, father-in-law to John Duncumb of Bewdley. (The current Master of the Company will be leading a visit by members of the Company to Bewdley later this year - see the companion article elsewhere in

this e-zine).

There were a number of pewterers in Birmingham in the 18th and 19th centuries:

John Wilkes 1765-72
 Birch and Villers 1772-86
 Villers and Wilkes 1805-33
 Edward Villers Wilkes 1839-80

Information about Birch and Villers is limited. There are known pieces of pewter marked by 'Birch and Villers' and some, mostly from the late 1820s and 1830s, marked by 'Villers and Wilkes'.

There are items in circulation purporting to have been made by 'Birch and Villers' which are 20th century reproductions, sometimes made with poorly struck marks so one might see only 'Villers'. There are also 20th century items circulating marked with reproduction touches of William Wright. These types of 'repros' were being made in the 1920s and 1930s.

But congratulations to Alex Neish on his find!

Alan Williams

The author, in thanking David Hall for his research into Birmingham pewterers, would like to make it clear that the conclusions are his, and his alone.

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