HISTORY OF THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF PEWTERERS OF THE CITY OF LONDON; VOL. II

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HISTORY OF

The Worshipful Company of Pewterers

OF THE CITY OF LONDON

BASED UPON THEIR OWN RECORDS

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

TO resume the brief sketch of the history of the Company. The Pewterers, in common with the other City Companies, were obliged to provide a store of wheat to be sold to the poor at ordinary prices in times of scarcity. The Company kept their supply in a granary or "garnet," which formed part of the Hall premises. The corn being a perishable article had frequently to be sold off at any price obtainable and a new supply purchased. On some occasions the Company contracted with a baker to relieve them of their obligation by supplying the necessary quantity of corn on their receipt of a precept from the Lord Mayor.

The custom of requiring new brethren to present a silver spoon and the officers of the Yeomanry to give silver bowls or nests of cups provided the Company with a goodly store of plate, but this began to disappear as early as the close of Elizabeth's reign, when it became necessary to sell plate to comply with the royal demands for financial aid. Hawkers and pedlars proved a source of constant trouble to the Company, in spite of the severe penalties laid upon them by statutes and other ordinances.

Many references occur to the registration of makers' marks or touches at Pewterers' Hall, and the periodical inventories of the Company's goods show that touch-plates existed at an early date, probably from the beginning of the sixteenth century. Only five touch-plates have

been preserved, the earliest of them dating from the middle of the seventeenth century. These are reproduced in facsimile at the end of the present volume. Although the minutes of the Court of Assistants abound with applications for permission to alter a touch or to take that of a deceased master, a widow, a partner, etc., no book containing a register of these touches is to be found among the Company's records.

Besides exercising a strict supervision over the quality and workmanship of manufactured pewter, the Company also strongly opposed all attempts on the part of the tinners of Cornwall and Devon to evade the Stannary Laws by adulterating tin in the Smelting House. With this view, they secured the appointment of one of their members as King's Assayer; but the relations between the Company and the Stannary authorities were frequently strained, especially when legislative action was sought for by the Company. The Company's efforts were constantly being directed to securing an abatement of the duty upon exported manufactured pewter, and an increase of the duty upon exported tin. The latter course was strongly and successfully opposed by the tinners of Cornwall.

Such rivalries were, however, eclipsed by the greater struggle which took place at frequent intervals for more than two centuries and a half, between the Company and the Patentees or Tin Farmers, who farmed from the Sovereign the total output of the tin mines, and fixed their own price for its sale. The Company claimed by ancient right that a large quantity, sufficient for the needs of the working members of their trade, should be supplied to them at a price below that fixed for other purchasers. These disputes occurred at frequent intervals, as the farm was granted for a very limited number of years. The expedients resorted to by either party to influence both Houses of Parliament, their Committees, and the High Officers of State, are very amusing, and occur frequently in the following pages.

The Company's method of assaying tin in 1592 is told with curious detail on pages 9–10. This may be compared with another assay taken many years later, in April, 1710, before the Officers of the Mint (pages 177–8). A curious and valuable table for detecting adulteration prepared by Mr. James Nicholson, the King's Pewterer, in August, 1730, will be found on pages 186–8.

The greatest strictness continued to be observed as to the admission of new members; indeed it was practically impossible for an outsider who had not been apprenticed to the Company in the regular way to enter its ranks. Country members of the trade, contrary to the practice of very early times, were also ineligible for membership, and London pewterers who went into the country were by that act disfranchised.

The records continue to give an interesting picture of the evolution of official diction, minutes, and method of keeping accounts. These may be studied with exactness, even to such details as punctuation and the use of capitals, as the extracts have been made with scrupulous fidelity.

The Company occasionally accepted substantial sums of money on condition of paying an annuity for one or more lives. Towards the close of Elizabeth's reign the requisitions for royal subsidies began, and continued in ever-increasing amount until the beginning of the eighteenth century. The amount payable by each Liveryman was assessed by the Court of Assistants, the contributions of the Yeomanry being left to be settled by the Master and Wardens of that body. Occasionally, as in 1594, serious disputes arose as to the method and equity of these assessments.

Another matter which figures largely was the request made for permission to fine for the various offices. This was freely granted by the Company when they were specially pressed for funds, but at other times was narrowly watched to prevent members unduly escaping the

responsibilities which properly attached to all the brethren of the Company alike. A similar source of income which could also be resorted to only at occasional intervals was the admission of new members to the Livery and of Liverymen to the Court of Assistants. Although the privileges of each of these grades were great, the burden of the fines pressed heavily upon the individuals, and many were the excuses made to be released from the obligation for a time or altogether. When the Master and Wardens failed by persuasion or threats, the offender was brought before the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen, who dealt with cases of confirmed obstinacy by imprisonment.

The number of apprentices allowed to each member formed from the earliest times an important article in the Company's regulations, and underwent continual alteration down to a late period. The high rate of interest is very noticeable during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so much as 10 per cent. being frequently paid by the Company on loans which they took up. Many illustrations occur of the strictness with which the Company watched over the secrets of pewter manufacture, forbidding members of the trade under severe penalties to employ outsiders or even permit them to see the operations carried on in their business.

Melancholy evidence occurs of the ravages of the plague in its frequent visitations, not only in 1665, but in the scarcely less severe pestilences of 1603 and 1625. A curious family quarrel occurred in 1603, when Mr. Thomas Elliott, Master of the Company, was removed by his colleagues from that position, and retaliated by refusing to approve various items in the accounts when he was one of the auditors two years later. The prohibition to buy and sell in fairs or markets, either themselves or by their servants, was strictly enforced upon all the members of the Company, not excepting those who had filled the highest offices.

The Pewterers took their part with other Companies in the royal and civic pageants, but their attendance in their stands and in the

procession on Lord Mayor's Day became somewhat irregular towards the beginning of the eighteenth century, for which they were more than once called to account by the Court of Aldermen. They had a state barge, and hired a barge-house jointly with the Haberdashers' Company at Fulham, under a lease from the Archbishop of Canterbury. The bargemaster received a small sum annually as a retaining fee, and was also paid for his services whenever the Company went on the water.

Whifflers were appointed from among the Yeomanry to go before the Livery and clear a way for the procession through the streets. The beadle provided favours in great profusion, the sum of 3*l.* and more being often spent upon ribbons. Later in the day the Company dined at their Hall, the entertainment being provided at the expense of stewards appointed in turn for that purpose from among the Livery, the whifflers acting as servers and waiting on the company.

Admission to the Company's freedom by patrimony continued to bring in a small number of persons of both sexes who were not connected with the trade. A remarkable instance occurred in 1611 of the choice of an outsider for the important position of Master of the Company. This was the Reverend Dr. John Wood, who was the rector of the neighbouring church of St. Dionis Backchurch. So great was the Company's regard for their worthy rector that they elected him again as their Master in 1617.

The lists of wares, with their standard weights, which occur from time to time in these records, give curious information as to the different objects made of pewter, and the technical names by which they were known at various periods. Such a list will be found on pages 61–64, and others follow.

Pewter ware was not long lived. This was owing to the softness of the metal, which bore the marks of any blow, cut, or fall. Perhaps, too, fashions in design or make speedily changed. At all events, the melting