

# An Article from a March 1972 Reprint of The Pewter Society Journal by kind permission of Mr John Douglas

## SCRIPT AND HERALDIC ENGRAVING ON PEWTER

The presence of arms or an inscription on an item transforms it from being an example of a type produced over a period of years to a piece with a history, part or all of which can probably be revealed by patient research. One of the questions to be asked about such a piece is, "Is the engraving contemporary with manufacture?" To be able to answer this question one must know how the styles changed. I had hoped to reach more definite conclusions about lettering than I have found possible so I shall start with heraldry.

Heraldry is a subject from which most people fight shy because it is a technical subject with its own vocabulary. However, it is not a large one and the basis can soon be learnt, so before we examine the various styles found on pewter I will quickly run through some basic heraldry.

What is Heraldry? It is a system of identifying individuals by means of hereditary symbols placed upon a shield.

When soldiers wore closed helmets identification was impossible so the leaders decorated their shields with symbols for recognition. In order to protect the helmet from getting too hot in the sun, a cloth known as Mantling was worn down the back of the helmet and in time this got torn in battle. As a further means of identification objects or models, known as Crests, were placed on the helmet. To hide the join between helmet and crest there was a Wreath of twisted silk. It was soon realised that duplication of symbols should be avoided and that the symbols of sons should be similar to their fathers. This was the beginning of the heraldic system, which was eventually controlled in England by the College of Arms.

Now let us examine a "Coat of Arms". Actually a Coat of Arms was really the Surcoat which was worn over armour to protect it from the sun and the rain and which was decorated both on the front and the back with the arms as shown on the shield. This was the original Coat of Arms and it survives today as the Tabards worn by the Heralds.

The term "Coat of Arms" is widely misused, being indiscriminately used to denote

- (a) the shield, which is more or less correct;
- (b) the crest, which is wrong;
- (c) the whole heraldic ensemble including the shield and all the adjuncts, which again is wrong.

The correct term for the latter is the Heraldic Achievement; let us look at the various parts of this and what more appropriate example than that of the Worshipful Company.

The basis without which none of the achievement could exist is the Shield. This can be almost any shape from the conventional "shield shape" to circular or scalloped. A diamond or lozenge shape is however reserved for a lady. I will return to them later.

The surface of the shield is called the Field and the symbols on it are called Charges. In the case of the Company the charges are 3 strakes, a chevron and roses. The field and the charges have colours, which in heraldry are known as Tinctures. Now we come to the first complication. There are three types of tincture - Metals, Colours, and Furs - and there is a Rule of Tincture which effectively states that one cannot place a metal on a metal, a colour on a colour or a fur on a fur. There are a few exceptions to this rule which need not concern us here.

The Field of the Worshipful Company's arms is blue, which is a colour, so the charges on it must be either metal or fur and in fact the "strakes" are silver and the chevron (the inverted V) is gold. Because the chevron is a metal, the flowers on it must be either colours or furs and in fact they are red and green which are colours. So the rules have been observed.

Resting on the top of the shield is the Helmet, which in good heraldry should be just slightly smaller than the shield. The Mantling was usually depicted in a tattered state and arranged so as to show the tinctures on both sides of the cloth, which from the 17th century until the end of the 18th was red lined with ermine for peers or lined with silver for those of lower rank.

The Wreath, positioned between helmet and crest, is depicted with 6 twists showing alternately the principal metal and the principal colour. In the Company's case silver for the "Strakes" and blue for the field. Incidentally ladies do not display either a helmet or a crest. When a crest is used without the shield it is almost always shown together with the wreath.

Sometimes the College of Arms awards Supporters, which are the animals propped at the sides of the shield. They are a great honour in heraldry and are not hereditary outside the peerage.

Lastly there is the Motto displayed in a scroll at the base of the achievement. This need not be unique to the bearer of the arms nor need be the crest or the supporters but the arms must be.

Now that we know what we are talking about we can look at the variations in style of achievements engraved on pewter. For all practical purposes we can limit our investigation to the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries. When one looks into books on heraldry one finds this very period briefly dismissed as one of decadence and it is not until the middle of the 19th century that good heraldry re-emerges.

Why should this be? Originally heraldry arose as a practical means of recognition for people who had followers, but by the 17th century, which is when the earliest engraved arms on pewter are found, people wanted to be granted arms as a mark of social status. So when the arms were displayed to impress they had to conform to the current fashion and heraldic accuracy was of secondary importance. It is this influence of fashion on armorial engraving that we are examining tonight.

As previously stated, books on heraldry are no help, but luckily most pieces of silver up to about 1830 originally bore heraldic devices, and since silver can usually be dated from the hall-marks this can be a good guide. It must be remembered, however, that pewter is not as easy to engrave and also that towards the end of the 18th century, when silver was becoming cheaper, it would be used in preference to pewter to emphasize one's social position. So at this period the engraved armorials will be those of Corporate Bodies such as corporations, colleges, guilds, etc. rather than of individuals.

The earliest known engraved arms on pewter are in the style which was popular in silver from c.1635-55. At this time it was popular to have a squarish flat topped shield surrounded by a laurel wreath. An example is the arms of Mount Edgcumbe on a broad-rim plate in the Homer collection. An alternative to this showed the shield surmounted by a helmet with plumed mantling flowing from it and a crest on top. This type is seen on silver up to the end of the 17th century, but is comparatively rare on pewter. There was a broad-rimmed plate, c.1650, so adorned in the Reading Exhibition, the ownership of which I have failed to trace.

From about 1650 the shields remained squarish, but with either a flat or three-pointed top and the corners slightly pointed. The surrounding ornament changed to "two crossed and knotted palm leaves". At first the plumes were simple and may even have been feathery on one side only, as around the arms of the Bishop of St. Asaph on a broad-rim plate c.1650 belonging to Mr Michaelis. As time went on the plumes became more elaborate and "spheres" appeared about 1675.

From about the turn of the century the Baroque style, introduced by the Huguenots, became popular and lasted until about 1740. This affected the Cartouche, which is the name for the decorative surround to the arms. By now this had lost all resemblance to mantling and was composed of shells and scrolls arranged in an orderly and symmetrical way. You will notice that some of the scrolls are very similar to the Flemish Scroll legs and arms on furniture of the William and Mary period. In the early years of the Baroque period, up to about 1720, the shields were usually oval after which the popular shape was a "curvy" shield as shown. There are examples of both types in the V. & A. Museum, the former on a broad-rim charger and the latter on a plain-rim dish. The general adoption by engravers of a system of indicating colours by Hatching, which had been evolved in the first half of the 17th century, coincided with the introducing of the Baroque style.

You will also note that the oval shield is divided down the middle. This indicated that the husband, who was entitled to bear arms, married the daughter of an armigerous person and so the arms are "impaled". If the wife had had no brothers she would have inherited the arms in her own right and instead of impaling her arms with her husband's would have displayed them on a small shield known as an "Escutcheon of pretence" in the centre of her husband's shield. The use of the wife's arms was only a courtesy and they could not be transmitted to the children.

From the early years of the 1730's to about 1770 the fashionable style was Rococo. This was typified by asymmetrical cartouches composed of shells, foliage and other natural objects. If you think that this type of engraving is too elaborate to be on pewter I can assure you there is a similar cartouche on a large strawberry dish in the Minchin collection and on an octagonal reeded plate by George Bacon in the V. & A. Museum, also on a wavy-edged meat dish in the same museum. During this period the outline of the shield is composed of scrolls, which are often symmetrical even though the cartouche is asymmetrical.

The Neo-Classical Revival, which lasted roughly from 1770-1785, also predictably influenced heraldic engraving. The fashionable motifs such as swags, paterae, medallions, etc., were all used in the cartouches which returned to being symmetrical. In the illustration the arms are those of the son of an armigerous father and a mother who inherited her father's arms because she had no brothers. When this happens the arms of the children are quartered. The oval straight-sided teapot belonging to the Company can be dated c.1780 from its style and the influence of the Neo-Classical Revival on the arms is obvious. The shield shapes during this period were simple, the most popular having a three-pointed top and sides consisting of a single curve from the top to the point of the base as seen on the Pewterers' Company teapots.

An alternative setting for the shield at this time was to depict the mantling as a sort of backcloth. The garnish recently acquired by the Company has the arms of Fraser adorned in this manner; the slightly earlier "curvy" shield is employed.

From about 1790 there was a further trend to simplicity with no cartouche shown. The shield remained the same shape until about 1795 when it was superseded by a squarish shield composed of straight lines, the sides being splayed out at the top.

It will be noted that Supporters are rarely seen on pewter. This is probably because the descendants of those to whom they were awarded are not entitled to them unless they are peers or corporate bodies.

Before leaving armorials we must realise that we have only been dealing with those engraved for identification and we must not forget Commemorative ware. In this case the arms fill the well rather than being confined to the rim of flatware, Restoration chargers being good examples of this.

In my opening remarks I said I had hoped to report on how styles of engraved lettering varied with time. So far I have been unable to find any book to help with this subject. Books on lettering concentrate on handwriting of which there were many styles such as "Secretary", "Court", "Chancery", Roman, Italian, Round Hand, Cursive etc. all in use in the 17th and 18th centuries, whilst books on engraving give practical advice to engravers without tracing the development of the styles.

Examination of engraved pewter specimens is therefore the only course left. This also reveals that many styles and standards were concurrent. In general Ecclesiastical engraving is of good quality and done in copperplate in contrast to tavern ware, where the standard in general is low and copperplate is not used.

One can tell the difference between copperplate engraving of about 1700 and that of the mid-19th century without being able to trace its evolution. The earlier style is more fluid with the scrolls flowing along the line of the inscription. By comparison the 19th century style is duller and more uniform with equally spaced letters and parallel ascenders and descenders. I have not been able to go much further than this. Perhaps members with wider experience have been able to deduce more and would care to pass on their knowledge.

As a postscript I would like to say that I had been of the opinion that engraving on pewter was inferior to that on silver, but since examining engraved armorials I find they show a high standard of technique and artistry, especially in the 18th century. It is not surprising that if pewter was to be engraved to emphasize social status the best engravers would be employed. Conversely tavern ware which was engraved purely to prevent theft would not warrant the expense of employing skilled engravers. The presence of armorials on an otherwise uninteresting piece merits a second look.

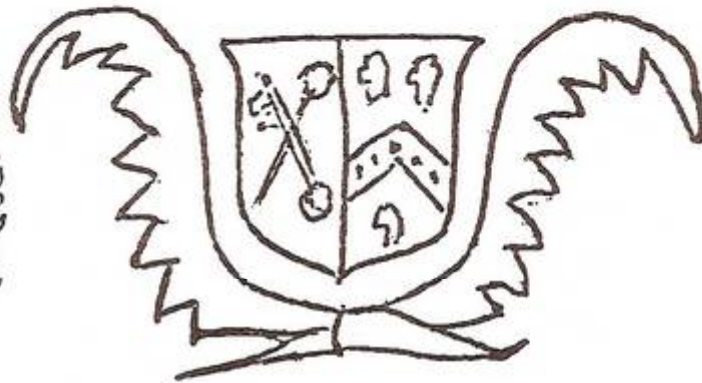
The tools used for engraving have not changed for centuries according to a friend of mine who as a hobby engraves presentation tankards etc. His great grandfather and grandfather were both professional engravers and he very kindly allowed me to bring some of his tools to show you.

(A talk given by J. A. Douglas at Pewterers' Hall in January 1970)

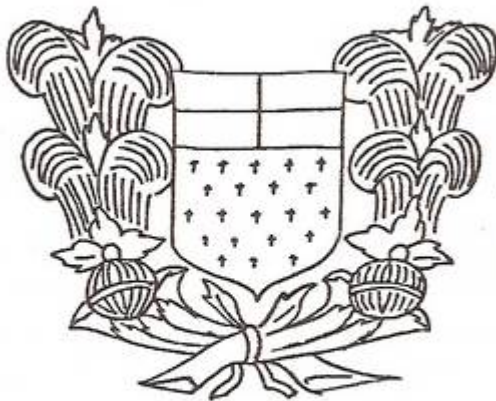
### Styles referred to by Mr. Douglas



circa 1635-55



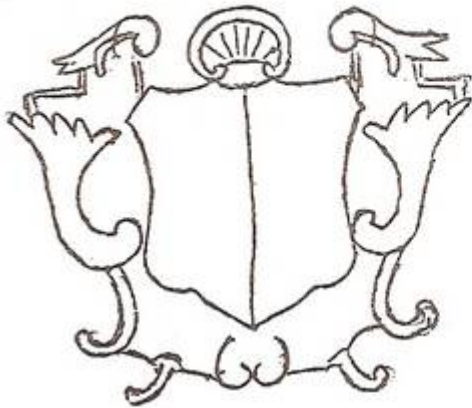
circa 1650



circa 1650-1685



circa 1705-1740



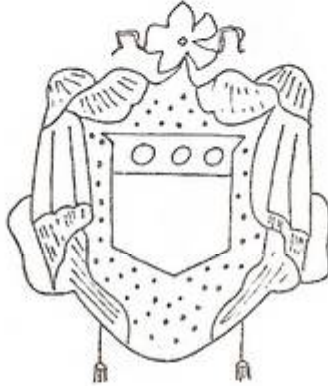
circa 1720-40



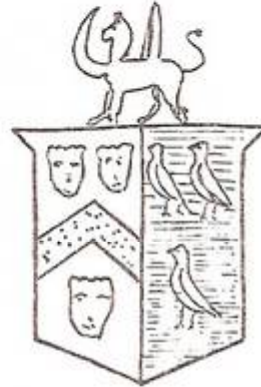
circa 1730-1770



circa 1770-1785



circa 1780-1805



circa 1790-1810

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During a short discussion which followed the talk the question was raised whether it was possible to date engravings from their style. It was agreed that this was probably not the case as an older style might well be used as a model. Some engravings seem to be mere "doodling".

In an achievement, while the arms and crest, being awarded by the College of Arms, remain unchanged, the mantling is a matter of individual choice and may well vary.

The books to which Mr Douglas had referred were "Papworth's Ordinary of Arms", which enables the owner of arms to be traced from the details of the shield, and "Fairbairn's Crests", which enables one to proceed from the crest to possible owners (crests being not necessarily unique to the owner).

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