

## III.

THE EDINBURGH TOUCHPLATES: SOME NEW LIGHT ON THEIR ORIGIN AND PURPOSE. BY LT.-COL. J. S. BISSET, F.S.A.SCOT., F.G.S.EDIN.

The two plates of pewter known as the "Edinburgh Touchplates" were presented to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1870 in a small oaken chest, which also contained, amongst other articles to be described later, a note by the donor stating that the chest had been preserved in a gipsy family before coming into his possession and was known as the Charter Chest of the celebrated Border gipsy, Johnny Faa and his descendants. The plates, one of which is illustrated (fig. 1), are some  $12\frac{1}{2}$  inches long by  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches broad, and are stamped with marks (usually including a castle and a date) which we now know to be the marks or "touches" of the members of the Edinburgh Pewterers craft. The note states that these plates were the Charter which constituted the gipsies' warrant to travel and trade throughout the country, and that they were stamped periodically by the proper authority. This fanciful legend persisted for years in spite of the fact that Dr J. A. Smith, in a paper read before the Society soon after the presentation of the plates, put forward the more reasonable solution that they were the "official" plates of the Edinburgh pewterers and were a record of the craftsmen's marks. Subsequent investigation proved this to be the case.

The chest (fig. 2) is some 16 inches long,  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches broad, and 6 inches in height. It is perfectly plain, except for the deeply bevelled moulding around the edge of the lid, and the workmanship is rough, but it is lavishly decorated with ornamental iron strappings and lock escutcheons, all of which are now badly corroded and in places have actually fallen apart. There is no reason to doubt that it is an old "commoun box" of the Edinburgh pewterers, though probably not the identical box of 1562 referred to below.

In the course of a recent search through the old Burgh Records I came on evidence which has led me to believe that the real and primary purpose of these plates has not hitherto been realised.

An Act of the Edinburgh Burgh Council of the 11th December 1562, after condemning the quality of the metal being used by the

pewterers of the town, ordaining that pewterers should assay the work of their fellow-craftsmen, and detailing the method of testing to be employed, continues: "and in cais questioun or discorde mycht ryis amangis the saidis persons or thair successouris anent the trying and marking of the said weschell [*i.e.* the vessel under assay] the said pewdereris has instantlie at the making heir of [to] put in thair commoun box of the pudermaker craft ane assay of tyn markit with all thair markis and according thairto in tyme cuming the tyn weschell to be maid. . . ." This "assay of tyn markit with all thair markis" bears a striking resemblance to the Edinburgh Touchplates. Further, at a Convention of the Royal Burghs on the 7th July 1614 there appeared "Thomas Weir peuderer, deacone of the hammermen within the burgh of Edinburgh" complaining of the poor quality of the metal being used by pewterers throughout the Kingdom. The Convention "ordeans the said Thomas Weir to delyver to ilk burgh ane assay of tyne markit with the town's mark of Edinburgh (if he be requyrit thairto be thame) to be keipit by the saids burghs and according thairto in tyme heirafter the hail tyn veschells to be maid . . . and ilk peuderer to put thair stamp thairon that he intends to vse all the tyme of his lyfe, quhilk stamp sall beir the mark of thair toun together with the zeir [year] of God of the making of the said stamp." This same Thomas Weir had appeared before the Burgh Council in the preceding month sup-

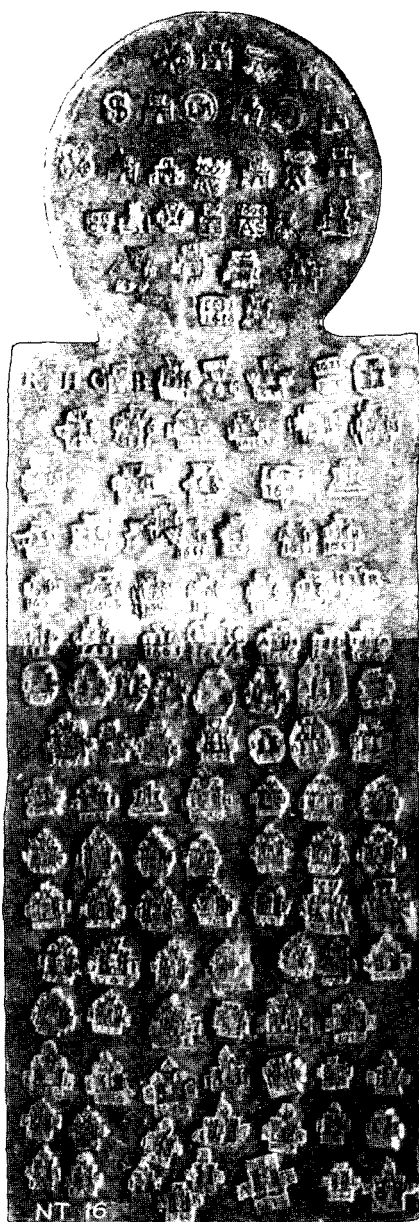


Fig. 1. Touchplate of the Edinburgh Pewterers Craft. ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ).

plicating for the "reforming of the fraud and deceit usit be the hail pewderers of the said burgh of *Edinburgh* in mixtioun of thair pewder veschell with leid or utherwayis making the same altogedder of leid" and requesting that these be made to conform to the Act of the 11th December 1562—*v.* above. The Council instructed their commissioners to the forthcoming Convention of Burghs to support the deacon's appeal there.

In view of the above it seems clear that the Edinburgh Touchplates are not mere registers of the craftsmen's touches, but are samples of



Fig. 2. "Johnny Faa's Charter Chest." ( $\frac{1}{3}$ ).

pewter of approved quality, on which each master pewterer has stamped his mark as an acknowledgment of his obligation to employ pewter of at least that fineness in making his wares. It should be borne in mind that the Act of the Covention of 1614 was not the origin of the Edinburgh plates but shows the Convention following its normal custom of bringing the other burghs in line with the methods and practice in commerce and industry already in use in the chief city.

It is probable that an earlier plate than those we have was prepared in accordance with the Act of 1562 and was stamped with the touches of all the master pewterers then working in the burgh. This plate would perhaps be little larger than would comfortably accommodate these touches, and when it was completely covered with marks a new larger plate would be taken into use—perhaps about 1588, the date

of freemanship of John Rebate to whom the first touch on the plates is believed to belong. Or, again, the Act of 1562 may have been forgotten or ignored after a short time—as many another has been—and a new plate have been prepared about 1600, in which year the original measure was re-enacted. It is significant that three of the first nine touches include the date 1600 in their design, the other six bearing no date. In either case the original plate would probably be destroyed when all the craftsmen whose touches were recorded on it had died.

Further support for this theory is derived from the fact that the chest also contains two fragments of ordinary domestic plates, both bearing the English mark of good quality pewter, the Rose. One of these is part of a "triple-reeded" plate of the type made about 1670–1700. The other is from an early 18th century "single-reeded" plate. It is probable that these also are samples placed in the common box for the guidance of the craftsmen at some time subsequent to 1641, when an Act of the Scottish Parliament ordained that pewterers' work shall be "of the finest pewter marked with the Rose in England." A similar Act was passed in 1663.

There were also in the chest a small rectangular plate of pewter bearing the "castle" touches of two craftsmen—TA, 1669, and RS, 1671—whose names are not in the records of the Craft, and a small cup  $1\frac{3}{4}$  inch high which has since been lost. No particular significance appears to attach to these.

The first touch on the Touchplates consists of two stamps, one bearing the castle only, and the other a cross saltire and a vertical line with the initials I.R. on either side. All but one of the first twelve touches are of this double form. Collectors have been puzzled by this apparent use of two touches by these early pewterers. An entry in the Burgh Records of the 16th February 1554–55 gives a clue to the solution of the problem. This reads:—

"Compeared John Rynd John Weir John Watsoun and James Cranstoun pewterers and oblist thame in tyme cuming to mak thair stoppis pyntis and chopins to all our soverane ladeis liegeis of the just mesour of the maner following viz. that ilk mesour haif ane tapoun an inche beneith the lip and the stop to be just mesour to the tapoun and on the uter side of the tawpoun that the townis mark be theron and the makaris mark besyde it."

Here we see certain selected pewterers, if not indeed all the master pewterers then in the burgh, authorised to put the town's mark on their

measures as well as their private touch. This entry is also of value as showing with especial clearness the town's mark performing its function of guarantee of correct measure. Not only is it to be stamped on the outside of the measure but exactly over the spot occupied on the inside by the tapoun—later and better known as the "plouk." This was no doubt intended as a safeguard against the subsequent alteration or removal of the latter by an unscrupulous retailer or customer.

An Act of the Burgh Council of the 26th February 1573-74 carries the matter a stage further by giving the maker's name a separate and distinct function. This Act and an almost identical Act of 1586, after ordaining that quarts, etc., shall be of just measure, continues: "and that every mesour have the townys merk upoun the lyp, at the uter side, *with the craftismannis markis*, makaris thairof, besyde the samyn *for the fynes* [fineness] *of his stuf*. . . ." Clearly here the craftsman's mark is to serve as a guarantee of the good quality of the metal used, while the town's mark, the castle, stands for just measure as it had for centuries.

Why these early craftsmen considered it necessary to put both these marks on the Touchplates is not clear, but, as each seems to have had his own private version of the castle stamp, it may have been due to a misreading of the "markit with *all* thair markis" in the Act of 1562. Or is it the correct reading?

After a few years a more convenient plan was evolved, in which the castle and the craftsman's mark (his initials) were combined in one stamp, along with a date—generally that of the craftsman's becoming a freeman or a master. This form, with rare exceptions, persisted to the end. In spite of the difference in form the significance remained the same. This mark approximates very closely to the hall-marks on old Edinburgh silver, where we find side by side the castle, the craftsmen's initials, the date letter, and, for greater security in the case of the more valuable metal, the initials of the Deacon, who was always responsible for the quality of the materials and workmanship of the members of his craft. Each craftsman probably still had his separate private touch, but it was no longer necessary to put it on the Touchplates. Indeed, by the end of the seventeenth century, as marks became larger and more elaborate, this would have been manifestly undesirable. This latter touch he seems to have used as his guarantee of quality on all his wares except those which were required by law to bear also the town's mark of just measure, *i.e.* measures, etc., used in trade. Amongst these was the tappit hen, which might well have been

expressly designed for "sendand for wyne to ony taverne," so well does its narrow neck with low-set Plimsoll mark, the "plouk," fit it for the rough journey across the old Edinburgh streets, and, be it noted, it was the customer's own measure that must be "set to the punscheoun heid," and therefore must bear the town's mark. On these measures the craftsman placed his castle touch only, as adequately fulfilling both functions.

The foregoing appears to afford a satisfactory explanation of the absence of a Dean of Guild's mark on Edinburgh measures earlier than the nineteenth century. It must be remembered that, though the last touch on the Touchplates only bears the date 1764, there is no reason to doubt that several of the latest touches would still be in use for many years after that date. Andrew Kinnear and John Gardiner, for example, were still in business in 1803, and, though they had in addition private marks of the more elaborate type favoured by English pewterers, they would continue to use the castle touches on their measures. This is confirmed by a remarkable entry in the Burgh Records of the 4th April 1798. In this is recorded at length a Memorial addressed by Robt. Wemyss, Dean of Guild Officer, to the Dean of Guild of that year. This officer complains that, although by an Act of the Burgh Council of the 3rd April 1584, confirmed by Act of Parliament in 1593, the Dean of Guild and his Court were charged with the overseeing and reforming of Weights and Measures, and that by right and by the custom of other burghs these duties belonged to himself as Officer of the Court, and that he therefore should have charge of the "legal stamps and standard measures," in point of fact these had "somehow or other been resigned to the different tradesmen employed in the making of weights and measures," with injury to the public and loss of emoluments to himself. The Burgh Council, on the advice of the Dean of Guild and his Court, ordered that the stamps and standard measures be withdrawn and kept at the Dean of Guild Court, and that *copies* of the standard measures be issued to the tradesmen, subject to their inspection by the Dean of Guild Court at their pleasure, and that no person be allowed to put the Dean of Guild's stamp on any piece of work except the Dean of Guild Officer.

The above was apparently not given full effect until September 1801, when the following order was issued by the Dean of Guild and published in the *Edinburgh Advertiser* of the 18th-22nd September:—

By ORDER of the LORD DEAN of GUILD  
of EDINBURGH

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WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

Dean of Guild's Office, Parliament Square, 16th Sept. 1801

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As it is intended that a survey of all WEIGHTS DRY and LIQUID MEASURES in use in the city and liberties shall shortly take place—NOTICE is hereby given to all concerned that they may have their weights and measures stamped by applying to the Dean of Guild Officer between and the 15th day of October next.

It being the Dean of Guild's intention to have all Weights & Measures in future stamped at THIS OFFICE ONLY, all tradesmen and others are prohibited and discharged from using his stamps for that purpose and if any Weights & Measures are found in the possession of any dealer or other person making use of the same after the said 15th day of October next, they will not only be forfeited but every such person severely fined or otherwise punished.

There can be little doubt that the stamps to which the Dean of Guild's order refers are the old castle touches. As mentioned above, at least two of the craftsmen whose touches are found on the Touch-plates were still working in 1803—two years subsequent to the issue of the Dean's order, and as there do not appear to have been more than half-a-dozen master pewterers in the city at that time, it is quite possible that these two long-established businesses, with their staff of freemen employees, were responsible for half the output of pewterware in Edinburgh in 1801. The exact meaning of the last portion of the order is not clear, but if strictly and literally enforced by an energetic officer it may well have resulted in the destruction of most of the pewter measures bearing the castle touch that were in use at the time and thus account for their rarity to-day.

The earliest mark I have been able to trace, which is definitely associated with an Edinburgh Dean of Guild, is that on a mutchkin baluster measure in the collection of Mr Gilbert Hole. This is the mark of James Jackson, who held office from Michaelmas 1799 to Michaelmas 1801, and was therefore the Dean responsible for the above-quoted order. This, I think, can hardly be a coincidence. His mark is a simple  $\frac{II}{DG}$ . This was no doubt devised as being distinctive from the

old marks and also as being a mark which craftsmen were less likely to use without authority or embody in their own touches.

The mark of the next Dean, Thomas Henderson— $\frac{TH}{DG}$ , is to be found on another mitchkin baluster measure belonging to Dr A. J. Young, at present in the Royal Scottish Museum, and the mark apparently continued in this simple form down to 1820 when Alex. Smellie is still using a plain  $\frac{AS}{DG}$ . These marks, late as they are, are remarkably rare. Perhaps later Dean of Guild Officers were not so enthusiastic about their job as Robert Wemyss. In 1816 they had been replaced by a specially appointed Superintendent of Weights and Measures, James Welsh, whom we find in the Burgh Records making application for an additional allowance of 4s. The Council, however, ordered that his duties should revert to the Dean of Guild Officer. In 1821 Henry Hardie, now known as Inspector of Weights and Measures, is also applying for an increase of allowance. In this case the Burgh Council not only refused the application but told Hardie that unless he performed his duties more efficiently his present allowance would be discontinued.

At the end of this year (1821) the castle reappears in the mark of John Turnbull. This is of the well-known four-lobed type with the crown, castle, and sovereign's initials occupying the four lobes. It is accompanied by his initials only. Turnbull's mark is of particular interest as the three towers of the castle have the tall pointed roofs or spires found on many of the old burgh seals, in place of the usual embattled parapets. Turnbull seems to have been the first Dean to bring into use the Imperial Standard Weights and Measures, though I have been unable to find anything in the Burgh Records or elsewhere to account for a change at this time. The Act of Parliament which replaced the old Scottish Standards by the Imperial ones was not passed until 1824 and did not come into force until 1826. All the marks of this Dean that I have been able to find are on measures of Imperial capacity, while those of his predecessor, Alex. Smellie, are on measures of the old capacities. Incidentally there was a later Dean with the same initials as John Turnbull. His mark is frequently met with, but Turnbull's is readily distinguished by the pointed towers of the castle.

Subsequent Deans used the same type of mark except that the castles have plain embattled towers and the letters DG are again added below the Dean's initials. In this form the mark continued till 1835 when the duty finally passed out of the hands of the Dean of Guild.