

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE CITY'S PLATE

The first Lord Mayor to live in the Mansion House was Sir Crisp Gascoyne. He was driven there in a coach and six on the evening of 9 November 1752 after his Banquet which he had held, as was customary, at Guildhall. Since then the Mansion House has always played such a prominent part in civic life that it is easy to forget that it is only for some two hundred years or so - quite a short time in the long history of the City - that the Lord Mayor has been provided with an official residence.

Before Crisp Gascoyne's time the Lord Mayor lived in his own house during his mayoralty. The mayors, who were often great merchants, were men of wealth and many of them must have owned or leased houses of sufficient size and grandeur to accommodate the mayoral household and to permit the Lord Mayor to entertain with a dignity and splendour befitting the civic head. If not, the Lord Mayor might arrange to take a suitable house for the term of his mayoralty or he might carry out his entertaining within the hall of his Livery Company.

Until the City's plate, which was always intended for the use of the Lord Mayor, was lodged permanently at the Mansion House it was transferred each year at the beginning of the mayoralty to the house of the new Lord Mayor. The porters who carried it from the house of Sir Edward Osborne to that of Sir Thomas Pullison in 1584 were rewarded with 12d.

Today an annual inventory is taken of the plate and an indenture, known as the plate indenture, to which is annexed a schedule of the plate, is drawn up between the Chamberlain and the new Lord Mayor. This procedure is centuries old. Some of the inventories and indentures survive from the late sixteenth century onwards - the earliest dates from 1567 - and these are one of the best sources of information as to the history of individual pieces of plate and of their descriptions. They are the only source which tells us the size of the collection at any one time.

Scarcely anything is known about such plate as the City may have possessed in the medieval period and my remarks today are concerned almost exclusively with the sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century. The first thing to strike anyone who is familiar with the present day accumulation of plate at the Mansion House is the smallness of the collection in the earlier period. Over the last two hundred years or so the

collection has been enormously enlarged by purchases, by gift from distinguished visitors and, of course, by the tradition which grew up that each Lord Mayor should donate a piece of plate in commemoration of his mayoralty. By contrast in 1586 the collection comprised only two great pots or flagons, two smaller livery pots, two standing cups and covers, two basins and ewers, a great bowl, a dozen spoons, and six dozen trenchers, all of silver gilt or parcel gilt. To these were soon added another great bowl of silver, a third silver-gilt basin and ewer, three voiders parcel gilt and some more trenchers, but it seems certain that the Lord Mayor must have drawn upon his personal plate and also upon that of his Livery Company to supplement the City's collection. This may be the explanation of the otherwise curious fact that in the period under review there is no mention in any of the lists of the City's plate of the inclusion of a salt. Salts would have been certain to have figured in Company and personal plate and so it was perhaps thought unnecessary to make specific provision among the City's own collection.

However, I will begin by singling out for specific mention two items which might not normally be regarded as pieces of plate at all but rather of insignia. These are the Lord Mayor's chain of SS and the jewel which hangs therefrom. Traditionally these have always been included, and are still included today, in the plate inventory and indenture.

As is well known, the beautiful collar of SS with its ornate gold esses interspersed alternately with Tudor roses and knots was acquired by the City in 1545 under the will of Sir John Aleyn who had himself served the mayoralty twice and who bequeathed it 'to be used always and worn by the Lord Mayor of this City for the time being'. Nothing is known of its history before it was given to the City. At that time there were 24 esses in the collar, but in 1567 four more esses together with two roses and two knots were added, and this has remained its size ever since. It has been repaired and restored, of course, on many occasions.

The central link in the chain is in the form of a portcullis. Nothing is known of any jewel being suspended from this link until in 1558 Sir Martin Bowes, goldsmith, who had been Lord Mayor in 1545-46, gave a jewel or cross of gold set with rich stones and pearls for use with the collar of SS. The plate inventories contain a fuller description of this jewel from which we learn that the rich stones comprised a great emerald and two sapphires set down the centre of the jewel with a great 'balist', three pointed diamonds and four great pearls. Another sapphire, later to be described as the fairest of the three, was added by Sir Roger Martyn, Lord Mayor

1567-68, and in 1572 the cross was remade when some additional gold and a 'fair orient pearl' purchased by the City for £8 were added. I do not know of any portrait of a Lord Mayor of the period who is shown wearing the collar of SS and this jewel.

In 1607 a new jewel was purchased by the City for £480. The goldsmith was Richard Gossen and the jewel contained a total of 133 diamonds including one great diamond cut with facets, one great lozenge diamond, three great triangle diamonds, one rose diamond and five great table diamonds. From the bottom of the jewel was suspended the pearl which the City had bought in 1572 and which was transferred from the old jewel to the new. This jewel can be seen in the portraits of a number of Lord Mayors of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is depicted with a considerable degree of artistic variation but was clearly pear-shaped with the single pearl pendant from the lower, wider, end.

To complete briefly the story, this jewel remained in use for almost two centuries. The present jewel, which has at its centre an onyx cameo carved with the City arms, was made in 1802 by Rundell, Bridge & Co. The encircling wreath of diamonds in its present pattern dates from 1867.

The jewel given by Sir Martin Bowes after it passed out of use was ordered to be kept 'in remembrance of the donor' and in 1651 was still in the Chamber of Guildhall. There is no further mention of it and, sadly, it must be presumed to be one of the losses of the Great Fire.

But what of the collection of plate in use at the time of the Fire and which, as we have seen, was not in Guildhall but in the Lord Mayor's house? There is today among the Mansion House plate a lovely standing cup and cover, hall marked 1662, which is sometimes called the Fire Cup since it is singled out as the only piece now in the collection of pre-Fire date. This is quite true in the sense that it is the only piece not to have been refashioned since the Fire and therefore to bear still a hall mark earlier than 1666. It is not true as is sometimes said, that the so-called Fire Cup was the only piece of plate physically to survive the Fire. The inventories of the period make it clear that the Lord Mayor's chain and jewel and the small but precious collection of plate survived the disaster. This really is no more than one would expect. We obtain from Pepys' diary a vivid picture of the citizens carrying away their more valuable belongings from before the path of the Fire. The house of Sir Thomas Bludworth, Lord Mayor in 1666, was in Gracechurch Street, which was towards the fringe of

the burnt area, and there would have been time. The City's plate would have had after all a high priority.

However, all the important pieces in the collection save the Fire Cup were subsequently refashioned. Many of them, and this time not excluding the Fire Cup, had been refashioned before. And this brings us to the discussion of a very interesting point, namely the way in which the plate was regarded by the aldermen who were responsible for its upkeep. Reverence for the antique is a comparatively modern attitude. Today, if a piece of old plate were damaged or frail, much consideration would be given to its careful preservation and restoration. Not so in former times. If in use a piece of plate became "battered and bruised", as the proceedings of the Court of Aldermen sometimes describe it, or even if it was thought to be unfashionable in design, the aldermen would not hesitate to order it to be melted down and remade, and refashionings of this sort were of frequent occurrence. A piece of plate would thus be consigned to a goldsmith who in due course would redeliver a new piece, not necessarily in the same form as its predecessor and not necessarily of the same weight. From the goldsmith's charges for workmanship and materials would be deducted the value of the metal in the piece exchanged.

The Fire Cup, for example, began life as a great gilt bowl with a cover which was given to the City in 1580 by Robert Christopher who had a long career of service with the Corporation and was then one of the Secondaries. In 1640 this 'old broad bowl', as it was rather disparagingly described, was exchanged for a standing cup and cover all gilt and this in its turn in 1662 was exchanged for the present standing cup and cover. In each of these particular exchanges, the piece lost a little weight but this was not always so. Sometimes refashioning led to an increase in weight.

The aldermen remained very conscious of the kindness of the original donor and to perpetuate remembrance of his gift often ordered that an inscription bearing his name should be engraved upon the new piece. This, though admirable from one point of view, could obviously be confusing. The existence of, let us say, a tankard inscribed as the gift of A.B. is no guarantee at all that A.B. in fact gave a tankard; he may well have given many years before a bowl which became a cup which became a tankard. A particularly elaborate example of the metamorphosis undergone by certain pieces of plate is provided by a bowl made of newly mined silver from Combe Martin in Devon which was given to the City in 1594 by Bevis Bulmer. It is described in the inventories as 'one great white bowl with a cover of English silver with a manikin holding a pickaxe in his hand standing

on the top of the cover'. In November 1643 the Court of Aldermen ordered the bowl to be melted down and made into small pots. Thomas Vyner, the goldsmith, allowed £34.18s.6d. for the bowl, then weighing 132 oz. at 5s 3½d the ounce and provided six silver cans or tankards weighing together just over 137 oz. for which he charged £37.14s.0d. at 5s. 6d. the ounce plus 3s. 0d. for engraving the inscriptions. A balance of 58s. 6d. was therefore due to him. In the 1660s these six cans were exchanged for four, in 1674 for another four and in 1689 for yet another four. In 1700 two of these tankards were exchanged for one, thus reducing the number to three. In 1704 these being 'bruised and not fit for use' were exchanged for another three. In 1721 two of these were exchanged and one repaired. Finally in 1731 all three were exchanged for the last time and three tankards, hall marked 1731 and inscribed as 'The Gift of Bevis Bulmer', the donor of the sixteenth century bowl, are among the Mansion House Plate today. (They now have spouts which were added in 1845.)

Small tankards, which were obviously put to practical use, were subject to heavy wear. None of the larger and more ornamental pieces of plate passed through so many changes as this. But the Bulmer tankards illustrate an interesting point, namely, that although the Fire Cup is the only piece of pre-Fire plate still in existence, nearly all the early 18th century plate in the Mansion House collection can be shown to have an ancestry going back to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century.

Among such items are the lovely pieces made by the famous goldsmith, Benjamin Pyne. Three ewers and rose water dishes made by him and hallmarked 1721 can be traced back in the inventories through several refashionings to (1) a basin and ewer which had been given by Alderman Sir William Denham in 1542 as part of a fine to obtain his discharge from the offices of alderman and mayor, (2) a basin and ewer of silver gilt given by Lady Margaret North in 1567 for use in the Lord Mayor's house and (3) a basin and ewer of silver chased and all gilt purchased by the City in 1621. One of Pyne's, three rosewater dishes still bears an inscription 'The gift of the Lady North' encircling her arms.

Three great flagons made by Pyne, also in 1721, can similarly be traced back through several refashionings to two great gilt pots given by Alderman John Browne for discharge from civic office in 1527 and to one of two livery pots which were certainly in the collection as early as 1570. Two cups and covers made by Pyne are the descendants of two standing cups and covers which like the first basin and ewer already mentioned were part of Sir William Denham's fine for discharge from office in 1542.

I cannot leave this brief description of the early plate without mentioning the trenchers for these are of especial interest. Already before the end of the sixteenth century the collection included six dozen silver gilt trenchers; by 1633 the number had doubled to twelve dozen although now they were all of silver. Trenchers, like tankards, were subject to heavy wear and they were remade a number of times in the course of the seventeenth century, being reduced in number to ten dozen although showing an increase in total weight. (Incidentally, throughout the changes two dozen of the trenchers continued to be engraved with the arms of Lady Nicholas, widow of a Lord Mayor, who had been the donor of two dozen of the original sixteenth century trenchers in 1586.) The fate of these trenchers is uncertain. There exist today among the Mansion House plate ninety-two silver plates, hall marked 1737, and made by Paul De Lamerie. It is tempting to think that these may be a refashioning of the earlier trenchers but for once the records offer us no positive evidence.

However, the important point about the trenchers is their presence in the collection in such numbers. Trenchers of silver or silver gilt would have been rare outside royal or noble households in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. We have speculated whether the City's collection of plate included no salt because a salt could have been easily supplied from the Lord Mayor's personal plate or from that of his Livery Company. Trenchers of this quality could not and therefore the City, which acquired most of them by purchase, provided them for the Lord Mayor in quantity. Their presence in the collection is an indication of the splendour of civic entertainments of the time.

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