

ST. MARY-LE-BOW SILVER PLATE 1550-1640

The existence of the remarkable collection of church-plate held by the Rector and Churchwardens of St. Mary-le-Bow was only known to a small circle until last July, when the sale at Christie's of a pair of flagons for £140,000 dramatically drew public attention to it. Rumours abounded over the identity of the purchaser — one sinister story suggested that the flagons might have been bought by a wealthy American sect for their rites of Black Mass. Another better-informed suggestion was that they now belonged to a well-known Arab collector of silver, whose income of £1m a day enabled him to satisfy his whims. In fact they were sold to an English private collector living in the USA and their probable final home is likely to be the Los Angeles County Museum.

How did the Church acquire these flagons and what was the history of the collection? — one of the finest collections of church plate possessed by any church in the world? Within the 90 year period covered by my talk, there are 11 flagons, 7 Communion cups and rather more patens — most of them on show, either at the Treasury at St. Paul's or in the Victoria and Albert Museum, where they were the foundation of the Church Plate Collection, thanks to the farsighted churchwardens who deposited them there in 1915 for safe custody and for public display. The importance of the collection does not rest on its size — Britain's holdings of antique silver are the largest in the world and Queen Victoria's daughter was probably correct (if not diplomatic) in taunting Bismarck by telling him that there was more silver plate in Liverpool than in the whole of Prussia. It is antiquity, not size, which makes the collection so exceptional. On the Continent, with its turbulent history, it is comparatively rare to find silver dating back beyond the 19th century — French stocks of silver, for example, rarely escaped the crucible during the Wars of Louis XIV. Even in Britain, such factors as King Charles' need for funds during the Civil War, contributed to the loss of the overwhelming majority of our plate — particularly domestic silver.

Such a fine collection, of course, has been accumulated by more than 1 Church. Over the centuries, St. Mary-le-Bow has absorbed 8 adjoining parish churches, 5 of them destroyed in the Great Fire and never rebuilt. But the church plate has survived in the case of 2 of the pre-fire Churches — All Hallows Honey Lane, which was near the site of the original City of London Boys' School, opened in Milk Street in 1837, and St. Faith's under St. Paul's, a subterranean Church under the Cathedral, which inadvertently contributed to the loss of priceless medieval books — those of the booksellers around St. Paul's who removed their stocks to St. Faith's for safety during the Great Fire only to realise too late that the leaden roof was doomed to melt under the flames. So probably the only tangible remaining link with these 2 long-lost Churches, is their church plate.

The flagons belonged to the Church of St. Augustine's, Watling Street, a Wren church which was bombed during the last War and whose tower still stands as part of St. Paul's Choir School. They were presented to the church in 1631 by a Merchant Taylor, Daniell Hollingsworth, and their value to a collector was enhanced by the fact that they had been made as far back as 1610 and were probably originally secular rather than ecclesiastical pieces. But why did this generous man present the church with the flagons? For an understanding of this, one needs to go back 100 years and to review the effect of the Reformation on City Churches.

Before the Reformation, the City churches were loaded with plate — for example as early as 1400, St. Martin's Ludgate had 5 chalices and patens together with a mass of Roman Catholic silver ornaments including a vast Cross, a censer, a ciborium, an incense burner and reliquaries. Little is known of the antiquity of this early silver but probably most of it was relatively modern — methods of silver cleaning, in the days before such aids as Goddard's Silver Polish, were rudimentary, silver received rough usage and frequently needed drastic repair or was melted down for replacement by more fashionable new plate. But as has happened so often in the City's history, this wealth attracted rapacious eyes and today only 3 pieces of pre-Reformation City church plate have survived.

But the City Churches were not the first target for the asset-stripping of the Reformation. After Henry VIII declared independence from Rome in 1534, his first priority was the immense wealth of the monasteries — during the 3 years ending 1539 this produced 9 tons of gold and silver plate for the Royal Exchequer. With their usual sagacity the City merchants who were churchwardens would have realised that their turn was to come and have united to prepare for the inevitable revolutionary changes, even if equally inevitably they must have been divided in deciding the best way in which to react. Some must have been glad to be rid of the old superstitious plate, but others equally must have wished to retain the plate used by their fathers and grandfathers — such diversity of deeply-felt belief is inevitable, be it in the Church of Rome or in the Church of England. Although I have found it impossible to prove it from existing City Church records, I think that it is fair to assume that many City churchwardens would have sold their old plate around this period to their neighbouring goldsmiths, preferring to see it melted down for cash, rather than awaiting the inevitable Crown confiscation — an early case of nationalisation without compensation.

When the blow fell, it came from the new boy — King Edward VI — in the first year of his reign — 1547 — the plate of chantries was confiscated for the King and as the City Churches were so richly endowed with bequests from members of Livery Companies and religious fraternities — bequests that were tied with injunctions to sing masses for the soul of the testator, this must have left few City churches untouched. The pace of confiscation quickened rapidly — the

following year further commissioners were sent out to make an inventory of all church goods. The inventories of around 95 of the 109 Churches in the City have survived, so that we know more about the pre-Reformation holdings of City Church plate than of the succeeding centuries. By 1551, it was decreed that Commissioners should be sent country-wide to confiscate such church plate as remained, leaving only one cup or chalice for the maintenance of divine service. Not surprisingly, in the years prior to 1551, churchwardens reported an unprecedented volume of theft of plate and it is likely that the churchwardens themselves had connived at much of the loss, feeling it to be their duty to remove the plate for safe deposit in a place where it would escape the Commissioners' searches. The City's standards of probity appear, as usual, to have been above the standards of the day and in his classic book on English church plate, Charles Oman records that the surplus from the sale of plate and ornaments amounted to over £25 in 15 City parishes and in the case of St. Mary-le-Bow, possibly the richest or most honest church in the City, to £120 — this at a time when a new Communion cup could be made for around £3.

Not only were the City Churches active in the melting down of the old plate, they were already commissioning new pieces and the first piece in the collection is an Edward VI silver gilt communion cup and paten dated 1549. I do not want to complicate this talk with technicalities such as weight and makers marks, but in this case the weight of the cup at 23 ounces is, I think, significant, particularly compared with later cups — for example the same church, St. Mildred's Bread Street, possesses an Elizabethan Communion cup of 1571 which weighs only 13 ounces and this encourages the supposition that the churchwardens, knowing that they were to be confined to a single communion cup, may have melted down 2 of their old chalices for remaking into a single new piece. Similarly the 1549 paten weighing 6 ounces is double the weight of the paten of 1571. Only 18 Communion cups of Edward VI are known to survive (9 of them from City Churches) and the interest of the St. Mildred's cup is enhanced by its early date, ranking with the St. Mary Aldermary cup and paten in the Victoria and Albert Museum as the earliest of the City cups.

By the end of Edward's reign, the transformation of the Catholic churches was virtually complete, the tabernacles, roods and images had been taken down, the chancels had been white-limed and virtually all the church plate had been melted down largely for the benefit of the King's Mint. So when Queen Mary tried to restore the Catholic practice her reign proved too short and no City plate of her period has survived.

But with Queen Elizabeth's succession, the scene was set for the commissioning of a quantity of new Church plate in the City. In 1559 the cup was restored to the laity, the struggle between the Church of England and the Church of Rome for supremacy over City churches had resulted in the Pope's

defeat and the era of Elizabethan prosperity brought exciting new commissions for London's goldsmiths. Two years later, in 1561, the Bishops began to insist on the changing of the old massing chalice into a fair and comely cup, but St. Mary-le-Bow did not wait for the Bishop of London's orders as their fine silver-gilt Communion cup and paten of 1559, on show today in St. Paul's Treasury, testifies. Neighbouring churches soon followed the lead. All Hallows Honey Lane's cup and paten is dated 1567, St. Faith's 1568 and St. Mildred's Bread Street 1571 — the latter being particularly rare as St. Mildred's already possessed the Edward VI cup. It is interesting to speculate on the need for St. Mildred's to possess 2 Communion cups at a time when public opinion favoured austerity rather than ostentation — one theory is that men and women received Communion separately, thus requiring two cups for the expeditious performance of the Service.

By 1571, the simple needs of the Churches in the United Parishes of St. Mary-le-Bow were probably mainly satisfied for the time being, as no further Elizabethan church plate survives. After the accession of the Stuarts, and the appointment of Laud as Bishop of London, amendments to the Communion ritual created a fresh demand for new plate. Laud desired to restore to the Liturgy the ritual that pre-Reformation history and tradition had employed and this high church Gothic revival was responsible for over 70 chalices in Britain, many of them reminiscent in shape of the pre-Reformation chalice. The collection contains a chalice of 1662 from St. Faith's, a chalice and paten of 1623 from St. Mary-le-Bow and a chalice and paten of 1625 from All Hallows Honey Lane. For the most part, these pieces tend to follow the simple Elizabethan pattern and to be unaffected by the high church revival, which suggests that they stemmed more from the spontaneous generosity of City donors than from pressure from the bishop.

But the main significance of the early Stuart period to the collection is the need for flagons, which resulted in the remarkable accumulation of 11 pieces of what is perhaps the most impressive class of Anglican church plate. In order to appreciate the causes of this accretion, it may be helpful to review briefly the stages of development from the pre-Reformation Mass to the Stuart Communion service. At Mass, cruets were used in pairs, one for the wine and one for the water. Sometimes absent-minded priests became confused over the procedure — one priest surprised his communicants by offering them a chalice of red ink, which he had just consecrated. After the Reformation, water ceased to be added to the wine in the chalice and with the restoration of the cup to the laity, more wine was needed, requiring new receptacles. By 1572 Wells Cathedral had its own flagon. The earliest flagons in the collection were those recently sold dated 1610, but not presented to St. Augustine's until 1633. Another pair belonging to St. Mildred's are dated 1617, but these too were presented later in 1631. However the pair of 1629 belonging to St. Mary-le-Bow carry the names of the churchwardens and the date 1630, so perhaps St. Mary's was the first of the 9 churches to commission new flagons. Flagons

from St. Faith's survive — a pair of 1631 given by a merchant that year and a single flagon of 1640 engraved with the arms of the Stationers' Company — one of the many links between the churches and the neighbouring livery companies.

Probably in the early Stuart days, before these flagons were commissioned or presented, the wine would have been sent to the Church by a nearby tavern in their own container. A canon of 1603 laid down that the wine brought to the Communion Table should be in a clean standing pot or basin of pewter or purer metal. So naturally, churches then encouraged wealthy parishioners to present flagons of silver or silver-gilt and the 2 pairs presented in 1631 could well have come from the domestic silver owned by the donors.

The size of these flagons — sometimes large enough to hold 6 bottles — creates speculation on the need for such large quantities of wine. It is true that the churches were crowded with communicants, but this cannot entirely account for the amount consumed. James Gilchrist in his book on Anglican church plate suggests that one can but presume that it was the custom to take a pull at the cup and not a sip. He also mentions that any wine remaining after the service became the property of the curate — hardly an incentive for him to be other than generous in filling the flagons. As there are also suggestions that churchwardens sometimes participated in convivial parties in the vestry following services, there seems to be some evidence that our forefathers believed in a convivial Christianity.

With the flagon of 1640, my period comes to an end, but perhaps I may bring the story up to date. The City had endowed the Churches well and little new silver was needed — a few Charles II pieces including 2 alms dishes and another flagon — also another chalice tragically commissioned by St. Faith's only 2 years before the Church was burnt. St. Mary-le-Bow acquired a pair of Queen Anne chalices and patens and later Lord Wakefield of Hythe presented 2 handsome beadle's staff heads. But the generosity of the donors had provided the Churches with some of the most practical gifts ever made, for centuries they were regularly used for Communion services and it may not be fanciful to imagine John Milton, who was born and lived in Bread Street, taking Communion from one of the St. Mildred's cups — Shelley was married in this church in 1816, but even the most romantic historian would, I think, have difficulty in imagining such a rebel sipping from the cup.

Little is known of these munificent donors — many of them had, with commendable modesty, refrained from inscribing their names — but we can safely assume that all of them held their City Churches in deep affection, just as we do today. There is no suggestion that any of them warrants the description given to a famous swindler, who had been outstandingly generous to another church — “Well-respected by all those who did not know him”. But to borrow from the famous tribute to London in Londonderry Cathedral

— “If plate could speak, these pieces would sing London’s praise”.

It will be abundantly clear to you that I am no expert on this subject and that I have drawn heavily on the published works on church plate — I should also like to record my debt to those experts who have guided me, particularly Historian James Sewell, Philippa Glanville of the Victoria and Albert Museum and Tim Kent, author of *London Silver Spoonmakers*.