

The early evolution of the tappit hen

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ABSTRACT

The recent discovery of three pewter tappit hen measures from the excavation of a ship sunk off Mull in 1653 has enabled us to deduce something of the origins of this eponymous Scottish measure. They are of Scots pint, chopin and half-mutchkin capacity, and they display several hitherto unrecognised features. They were made by casting in two vertical halves, unlike the familiar 18th-century forms. This left a hole in the base that was then filled with a plug. On the inside of this plug the pewterer struck a mark of a hammer and his initials, whilst his touchmark was struck on the collar of the measure. There was a coarse-threaded projection on the underside of the lid, probably used to hold the lid in the lathe for turning and finishing. The half-mutchkin has an unusual lobed palmette thumbpiece. The method of casting and the palmette thumbpiece has now also been observed on four early 18th-century examples. These are two chopin and two Scots quart tappit hens that have been identified in private collections, and described for the first time. The tappit hen form shows strong affinities with late 16th-century pewter vessels from the north-west of France, with whom Edinburgh had strong wine-trade links. However, the name appears to originate with Alan Ramsay c 1721, who used it in his poems to describe what was probably a quart with a knopped lid and palmette thumbpiece, as in the examples described here.

INTRODUCTION

The form of pewter measure known as the tappit hen is peculiar to Scotland. The name is applied to measures characterised by having a body comprising a small straight-sided top section, a larger straight-sided bottom section and a curved section between. Typically, the measure has a domed lid that is raised by means of an erect thumbpiece located on a hinge at the top of the handle (illus 1).

Examples in the Scots pint capacity (which approximates to three of today's

imperial pints) dating from the late 18th century, are not hard to come by. However, very little Scottish pewter of the 17th century, when the craft of the pewterer was at its peak, has survived to the present day. This is due in large part to the fact that pewter is a relatively soft metal and easily damaged, and that the damaged pewter was sold back to the pewterer for recycling, much in the same way that silver was melted down (Dalglish & Fotheringham 2008: 29–31). As a consequence, our knowledge of the early forms of the tappit hen measure has been based upon a single excavated example

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ILLUS 1 An 18th-century tappit hen

(Ingleby Wood 1904, plate XXII) dating to some time after 1669, when the maker became a master pewterer. It had never been subject to detailed examination and several interesting features had been overlooked. However, the recent discovery of three tappit hens from the wreck of the *Swan*, a small mid-17th-century warship, together with the recognition of four very early 18th-century examples, previously overlooked in private collections, enable us for the first time to piece together the early evolution of this eponymous Scottish measure.

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the generic term for a vessel was a ‘stoup’ (*Dictionary of the Scots Language* online www.dsl.ac.uk). A stoup could be made from wood, silver, or other metals, but it is probable that most were made from pewter.

After the Reformation, stoups are recorded as being used in the Sacraments for carrying wine to the communion table and for water at baptism. Those used as measures were referred to by their capacities. Thus there were pint stoups, based upon the Scottish standard Stirling stoup (Connor & Simpson 2004: 279–83, item 108), and its diminutives of chopin, mutchkin, half-mutchkin and gill. In commerce they were used in the sale of liquids, from wine and ale, to buttermilk and vinegar, and they were to be found in the kitchens of the larger houses. There were two distinct forms to these stoups. In the north-east of Scotland, a pot-bellied type was made by the pewterers of Aberdeen and Inverness, and was clearly derived from similar vessels in use in the Low Countries. They continued to be made until well into the 18th century. There is no evidence that they were ever made in Edinburgh, which instead adopted the tappit hen form. However, it is important to recognise that this name was not used until the early 18th century, and prior to that they were simply referred to as pint stoups, chopin stoups and so on.

THE SWAN TAPPIT HENS

The *Swan* was a small warship, in the service of Cromwell during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. Originally it was thought to be an English ship, built in 1641 (Martin 1995: 15–32). However, subsequent research has indicated that this was incorrect and that she was probably another *Swan*, a private warship on record as belonging to the Marquis of Argyll in the early 1640s.¹ We do know that she was dispatched by Cromwell as part of a task force to besiege and capture Duart Castle on the island of Mull, the seat of the staunchly royalist Clan MacLean. Before this could be undertaken however, she and



ILLUS 2 The three *Swan* tappit hens of half-mutchkin, chopin and Scots pint sizes

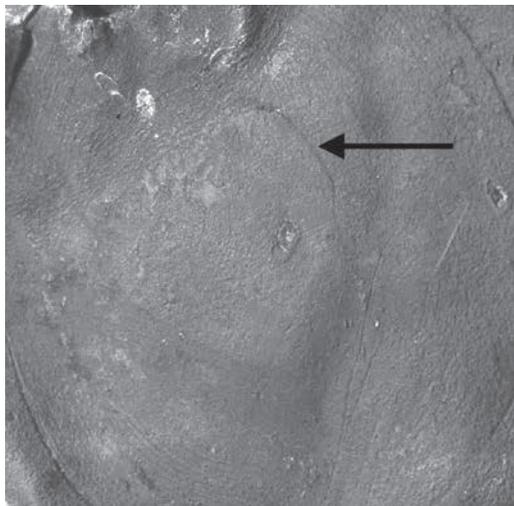
two other ships sank in a terrible storm on 13 September 1653, just a few metres off Duart Point. Her wreck was discovered by a naval diver in 1979, but the site was not properly excavated until 1992, when seabed disturbances put the wreck in danger of destruction. The subsequent excavation under Dr Colin Martin of University of St Andrews, uncovered a wealth of objects including cannon, the ship's binnacle, decorative carved woodwork and three tappit hen measures (Martin 1995: 15–32; Martin 1998: 46–66).

At the time of discovery, the three measures were covered in a heavy calcareous accretion. This was painstakingly removed by Dr Theo Skinner of National Museums Scotland, thereby exposing their hitherto unknown early features. The amount of information they contain is remarkable, and they massively extend our knowledge of these measures. All three are of the

recognisable tappit hen shape. The largest is a Scots pint, the second is a half-pint, or chopin, and the third is one-eighth of a pint, commonly referred to as a half-mutchkin



ILLUS 3 The vertical seam (arrowed)



ILLUS 4 Underside of the chopin. The arrow points to an edge of the plug

or a large Scots gill (see Appendix 1 for dimensions) (illus 2).

Compared with the familiar 18th-century forms, they are more heavily cast, with thicker walls. The most interesting feature is their method of construction. The bodies of the 18th-century tappit hens were cast in three parts, circular in section, which were then joined together by horizontal seams running around the circumference. However, in the *Swan* tappit hens, the body was cast in two vertical halves, of semi-circular section. When these were soldered together a vertical seam was left and this can be clearly seen on the inside (illus 3).

The seams are not visible on the outside because the surface was subsequently 'finished', by turning on a lathe. The base was an integral part of the casting, and each of the two base halves had a semi-circular cut-out in the centre. When they were joined a circular hole was left. This was required to centre and hold the piece in the lathe during the finishing of the outside (see below). After

the surface treatment was completed, the hole was filled with a plug of pewter. The excess metal was then removed on the outside with a hand scraper tool. Traces of the plug can be seen on close examination of the undersides (illus 4).

On the inside, the pewterer used a punch to strike a circular mark onto the top of the plug. The mark was in the form of a beaded circle with a hammer in the centre and his initials on either side. The marks are clearly seen on the pint and the chopin measures. Because of difficulties of access, the calcareous accretion covering the base on the inside of the half-mutchkin measure has not yet been removed, and so we do not know whether it also bears a mark.

On the inside of the necks of the pint and chopin measures, to the left of the handle and just below the rim, is a blob of



ILLUS 5 Inside of the lid of the pint measure to show the projection with screw threads



ILLUS 6 The heavy erect thumbpiece of the pint and the palmette thumbpiece of the half-mutchkin tappit hen (not to scale)

pewter, referred to as the ‘tapoun’, or more commonly, the ‘plouk’ (a Scots word for pimple). This indicated the level to which the measure was to be filled to hold its true capacity. The requirement for a tapoun was first mentioned in legislation passed by the Edinburgh Town Council on 31 January 1543 (ECA SL1/1/2). A further statute of 16 February 1554/5 (ECA SL1/1/2) is explicit:

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 manner following viz. that ilk mesour haif ane tapoun ane inche beneath the lip and the stop to be just mesour to the tapoun ...

Tappit hens continued to be made with the tapoun or plouk throughout the 18th century, and the makers of pot-bellied measures in the north-east of Scotland also were also required to adopt this method of showing true capacity.

The dome-shaped lids are very heavily cast and bear in their centres a slightly raised disc, as on all later tappit hens. In the centre on the inside, they have a short projection, with coarse-cut threads on the inner surface (illus 5).



ILLUS 7 *Left*: Maker’s mark on the pint measure; *centre*: the mark as struck on the touchplate; *right*: the mark struck on the inside of the base

It is suggested that this was used to screw the lid onto a threaded iron rod in the chuck of the lathe in order to hold it in position for surface finishing.

The thumbpieces and their attachments to the lids are all very heavily cast. On the pint and the chopin

measures, the thumbpiece is of the erect type that is also seen on pot-bellied measures and 18th-century tappit hens. The half-mutchkin measure however, has a double-sided palmette thumbpiece with five lobes (illus 6). In all three measures the lid attachment is an almost horizontal trapezoid or wedge-shaped bar, reaching to the central disc of the lid.

The hinge at the top of the handle is again massive and heavily cast, and is in three parts, the centre section being a part of the lid. The handles of the pint and the gill are rectangular in cross section, whilst the chopin has more of a ‘D-section handle’ familiar on later forms. The lower attachment point of the handle is flush with the body.

THE MAKERS

The half-mutchkin measure has no maker’s mark on the neck, and we are unable to tell whether there is a mark on the plug inside the base. The other two measures have remarkably clear makers’ touchmarks,



ILLUS 8 *Left*: Maker's mark on the chopin measure; *centre*: the mark as struck on the touchplate; *right*: the mark struck on the inside of the base

located to the left of the hinge, and directly behind the position of the plouk. The positioning of the mark dates back to 1554, when the statute of the Edinburgh Town Council referred to above, also called for, '... on the uter side of the tawpoun that the townis mark be thereon and makaris mark beside it' (ECA SL1/1/2).

The pint measure has the touchmark of Robert Somervell² (illus 7) comprising a castle with the initials RS and the date 1633. This was the date at which the pewterer struck his mark on the touchplate³ of the Incorporation of Hammermen of Edinburgh. We know that Robert Somervell was the son of James Somervell, pewterer (*Edinburgh Burgess Records* 1929) and became a Burgess in 1633 (*ibid*) becoming a Freeman of the Incorporation of Hammermen of Edinburgh in the same year (ECA ED008/1/3). He died in 1638 (Paton 1902).

Of particular interest is the mark struck on the plug. It depicts a hammer with his initials on either side. This mark, together with similar ones inside the *Swan* chopin measure and the John Abernethie chopin (see below), are the first records of this type. However, similar marks were struck in the bases of vertical seam flagons in France and Germany in the 15th and 16th centuries.⁴ The use of a hammer in all three marks is appropriate, since a crowned hammer forms the centrepiece of the insignia of the Edinburgh Incorporation

of Hammermen. Careful examination of the marks shows that the hammer, in this case, does not have a crown above it.

The chopin tappit hen has the touchmark of a castle, the initials IH and the date 1643 (illus 8), whilst the mark in the base comprises a hammer with the same initials and some stylised scroll-work above, possibly suggesting a crown.

The maker was John Harvie, the first of two Edinburgh pewterers of that name.

He became a Burgess in 1642 (*Edinburgh Burgess Records* 1929) and a freeman pewterer in 1643 (Ingleby Wood 1904: 163). He died in 1658 and was buried in Greyfriars graveyard (Paton 1902).



ILLUS 9 The chopin measure excavated from North Bridge, Edinburgh

OWNER'S INITIALS

The pint measure has the punched initials GW above RH on the lid, whilst the chopin is stamped C R and the half-mutchkin has the initials I K. In the 17th and 18th centuries it was common for domestic utensils to have ownership marks, probably to deter theft. Silver owned by the gentry was engraved with their arms. Pewter utensils more usually bore the owner's initials, either punched or engraved. The pint tappit hen has the initials of husband and wife, and this is something of a paradox in a warship. It seems likely that



ILLUS 10 *Left*: Maker's mark on the Abernethie chopin measure; *centre*: the mark as struck on the touchplate; *right*: the mark struck on the inside of the base

these measures had been in private ownership, and may have been plundered from another Scottish stronghold before the *Swan* reached the island of Mull or were simply the result of trade in second-hand goods.

THE ABERNETHIE CHOPIN

This tappit hen was excavated when the foundations for the new North Bridge in Edinburgh were being dug in 1895 (Ingleby Wood 1904: 131). It was gifted to the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, and was illustrated in its original rather battered form in Ingleby Wood's plate XXII. It has subsequently been re-shaped (illus 9) and is now on display in the National Museum of Scotland.

It has exactly the same method of construction as the *Swan* tappit hens, and bears the Edinburgh touchmark of a castle with initials I A and the date 1669. In the base (and this was only discovered following the discovery of the similar marks in the *Swan* measures) it has a hammer mark with the initials I and A, and again has crown-like scroll-work above the hammer. The maker was John Abernethie⁵ who became a Burgess and Freeman in 1669 (*Edinburgh Burgess Records* 1929; ECA ED008/4), and died in 1687 when he was buried in the west end of Greyfriars Kirk (Paton 1902).

The measure has essentially the same features as the *Swan* chopin, but was probably made 20–30 years later.

These four tappit hens are the only ones that clearly belong to the 17th century. However, it is interesting to note that several of their

features were also present in the remaining four measures that were made at the beginning of the 18th century.

THE BUTE QUARTS

In a private collection at Mount Stuart, on the island of Bute, are two magnificent early quart tappit hens (illus 11). They were acquired by John, 4th Marquis of Bute, between about 1910 and 1930 and had been kept at Dumfries House in Ayrshire for most of the intervening period. They are now on public display at Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute. Their existence was completely unknown to scholars of pewter. Most importantly, they are the only known examples of tappit hens in the Scots quart capacity. They are truly massive.

Their overall height is 355mm, 320mm to the lip and with a base diameter of 160mm. The bodies were again cast in two vertical halves, but the plugs in the base hole do not bear a mark. In addition, there is no threaded projection on the inside of the lids.

They have similar double-sided palmette thumbpieces of nine lobes, attached to the lids with long, heavy, horizontal wedge-shaped bars, as in the *Swan* measures (illus 12). The hinge areas and attachment of the thumbpiece to the lid are again massive. The handles of both are now D-shaped rather than rectangular in section, a feature that continued in all later tappit hen forms.

The first one, with a plain domed lid, bears the touchmark of a castle with initials I and N and the date 1700. The maker was John Napier who became a Burgess in 1700 (*Edinburgh Burgess Records* 1929) and a Freeman (Ingleby Wood 1904: 166) in the same year. He had died some time before 1733.⁶ The lid is unusual in displaying lathe turning marks on the inside. Previous and later tappit hens were left unfinished after they were released from the mould.

The second example, with a knopped lid, bears an Edinburgh maker's castle touchmark, but the pewterer's initials and the date are not visible due to an infilling of oxide. The most remarkable feature is the lid, which is unlike any other. It is domed with three convex tiers and has a flat-topped knob, engraved with the owners' initials WL and IB. The body is engraved 'William Loch & Janet Balderston

1736'. It has been established that this couple from Newton, Midlothian were married in 1734 (Scotlandspeople online). It is not known, however, whether the engraving was



ILLUS 13 The two early 18th-century chopin tappit hens

contemporary with the date of manufacture, but the measure must date to no later than 1735.

TWO TAPPIT HENS OF CHOPIN CAPACITY

The first of these appeared at a recent auction of the contents of a private museum in Orkney, where it was found amongst discarded items in the loft. It appears to have been excavated from sand, some of which was still adhering in a small depression on the handle. The lid is missing but the rest of the measure is intact (illus 13). Regrettably, the maker's mark is too corroded for identification to be possible. The method of construction was again by casting the body in two vertical halves. As in the Bute measures, the seal to the hole in the

base does not bear any mark. The hinge and thumbpiece are again both heavily cast. The thumbpiece is a palmette, but with the lobes less pronounced on the rear. One notable difference is that the attachment to the lid is now a thinner strap of metal that follows the contours of the dome of the lid. In this it anticipates the attachment seen in all later forms. The handle is of D-section.



ILLUS 14 16th-century woodcut showing a pewterer finishing a flagon on a wheel lathe

The final chopin tappit hen is known only from two black and white photographs.⁷ It was sold by a London dealer to an American collector in the mid-1950s, but has subsequently not been seen, and so details are scant. It has a palmette thumbpiece, and bears the mark of David Symmer (Ingleby Wood 1904: 166) who became a Burgess and a Freeman in 1692 (*Edinburgh Burgess Records* 1929; ECA ED008/1/4). It is not known if it is of seamed construction. It seems likely that these chopin measures date to the same period as the Bute quarts.

MANUFACTURE OF TAPPIT HENS WITH VERTICAL SEAMS

The first stage of manufacture involved casting of the molten pewter in bronze moulds. Only four moulds would have been required – for the half-body, the lid, the thumbpiece and the handle. The two halves of the body were then soldered together using pewter as the solder. The seam was left unfinished on the inside, but on the outside, the body was finished by turning. This was then followed by burnishing to give it a high surface polish. In order to hold the flagon on the lathe, it would have been centred on an iron rod, which passed through the hole in the base. A wooden jamb would have been required at both the base and top openings to secure the vessel to the iron rod.

Lathes of the period were turned by hand, the rotation being provided by a heavy iron flywheel. The woodcut in illus 14 shows a German pewterer of 1568 finishing a flagon, whilst his journeyman or apprentice turns the wheel (Amman & Sachs 1973). The seam on the flagon, where it crosses the base, can be seen, together with the wooden jamb in the hole in the base that was used to hold it against the tailstock of the lathe. At some time during the mid-18th century, this method of manufacture went out of fashion, and the body was cast in two sections, with a horizontal seam about 2cm above the foot. This allowed the base to be made in one piece, thus doing away with the need for a hole.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE TAPPIT HEN FORM

It seems likely that the tappit hen body shape first appeared in Edinburgh, since all of these early forms bear the marks of Edinburgh



ILLUS 15 French flagon *c* 1600 from Rouen in Normandy

pewterers. In the 17th century, Edinburgh had extensive trade links, via the port of Leith, with northern European countries, but particularly with France and the Low Countries. Both of these countries appear to have influenced the form of the tappit hen measures. The body shape was very clearly derived from the north-west of France, from where extensive wine imports were made (Kay & Maclean 1983). Boucaud⁴ notes that the ‘shouldered’ body form of early flagons and measures was peculiar to that part of France, and was not found elsewhere in Europe. The flagon from Rouen shown in *illus 15* dates from *c* 1600, and the similarity of the body outline to the tappit hen form is immediately obvious.

This flagon has a palmette thumbpiece, a style that was again only found in north-west France. Beekhuisen (1979: 46) illustrates

three different variants of the thumbpiece, associated with different towns of this region. The body of the Rouen flagon was cast in two vertical halves, and the base plug has a maker’s mark of a heart with the initials V and B on either side. The main difference from the early tappit hens is that the lid is rather more square in section, there is no threaded projection beneath, and it lacks the massive hinge area. The threaded projection beneath the lid has not been observed on any continental pewter flagons, and therefore appears to be a feature that is unique to 17th-century tappit hens. However, the domed lids and the erect thumbpiece seen on the early Edinburgh measures are almost identical to those of Dutch flagons of the period.

This method of construction of the body was in common use throughout Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries (Barkin & Boucaud 2007: 15–19). In the early 18th century most of Europe switched to the use of moulds in which the body was cast in two sections, with a horizontal join. However, it is clear that some Scottish pewterers continued to use their old moulds until well into that century, sharing this distinction with Normandy and some of the French provinces of Switzerland.⁴ Tappit hens by John Tait (Freeman 1700) (Ingleby Wood 1904: 166) and Alexander Coulter (Freeman 1707) (Ingleby Wood 1904: 167) were already being made at this time with horizontal seams,⁸ the method that was to continue until the eventual demise of the tappit hen in the 19th century.

DERIVATION OF THE NAME ‘TAPPIT HEN’

The origin of the name tappit hen has been a source of conjecture for some time. In the 17th century the name does not appear to have been in use at all. Household inventories at this time referred to these measures simply as

stoups. They were differentiated by size: pint stoup, chopin stoup, mutchkin stoup and so on. Earlier writers on pewter, including Ingleby Wood (1904) and Hornsby (1983) suggested that the phrase ‘tappit hen’ really referred only to the pint capacity of the form, whilst Cotterell (1931: 291–6) suggested that the phrase was a corruption of the word ‘*topynett*, a French measure containing a quart’. However, a search of the Scottish literature is more helpful. Jamieson (1808) defines ‘Tappit Hen’ as: ‘1. A hen with a tuft of feathers on her head. 2. A cant phrase, denoting a tin measure containing a quart, so-called from the knob on the lid, as being supposed to resemble a crested hen’.

The first appearance of the phrase in literature was in 1721, in a poem by Allan Ramsay (1721) entitled *An Ode to the Ph* –:

That mutchkin stoup it hauds but dribs
Then lets get in the tappit hen

From this it is clear that he was describing a much larger vessel than the mutchkin, and also one that had something particular to it that justified giving it a name other than (say), quart stoup. In 1740, Ramsay (1740) wrote in his poem *Andro and his Cutty Gun*:

And well she loo’d a Hawick gill
And leugh to see a tappit hen

Very much later, Walter Scott (1815) in *Guy Mannering* wrote, ‘... and there we sat birling till I had a fair tappit hen under my belt ...’. He evidently thought the tappit hen to be sufficiently unfamiliar by that date that he needed to explain it in the Notes to the 1929 edition of his novel: ‘The tappit hen contained three quarts of claret ... I have seen one of these formidable stoups at Provost Haswell’s at Jedburgh, in the days of yore. It was a pewter measure, the claret being in ancient days served from the tap, and had

the figure of a hen upon the lid.’ However, Provost Haswell had died before Scott was born, and it appears that Scott was not really familiar with the tappit hen. He was clearly of the impression that it was a large vessel. In *Waverley* (1814), he had written, ‘... their hostess appeared with a huge pewter measuring pot containing at least three English quarts, familiarly denominated as a “Tappit hen”, and which in the language of the hostess, reamed with excellent ale just drawn from the cask’. Three English quarts would equate to approximately one Scots quart.

What is clear from the literary references is that a tappit hen was the impressively large Scots quart size and probably had a knop upon the lid. It is possible to speculate that these distinctive measures first appeared around 1721, and Ramsay, who regaled in Scottish vernacular language, invented a name for them. The second derivation suggested by Jamieson becomes more credible if they had a palmette thumbpiece, which, with a bit of imagination, could be thought to resemble the tail feathers of a hen. It may be that the crested quart tappit hen in the Bute collection, and described here for the first time, is an example of the archetypal ‘tappit hen’. At some time, perhaps in the late 19th century, the term came into common usage, maybe initially for other capacities of the knopped or crested tappit hen, and later for all types of measure with the characteristic body form.

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APPENDIX

TAPPIT HEN MEASUREMENTS

Measurements in millimeters are height to lip (since overall height can be inaccurate due to damage to thumbpiece);

top diameter and base diameter. No weights available.

No data available for illus 11 chopin by Symmer (known only from a black/white photograph) or the Rouen flagon (known only from image obtained from French dealer Boucaud, who does not now have it)

<i>Illustration no</i>	<i>Height</i>	<i>Top diameter</i>	<i>Base diameter</i>
1	239	96	125
2 (pint)	250	92	120
2 (chopin)	210	73	98
2 (gill)	102	46	55
9	210	70	95
11 (both)	318	?	160
(lidless)	196	75	95

NOTES

- 1 Martin, C (pers comm).
- 2 Ingleby Wood (1904: 163) ascribed this mark to a Robert Simpson who was admitted as a freeman pewterer in 1631. However there is no record of anyone of this name in the *Apprentice Records* or in the *Burgess Records* at this time, whereas Robert Somervell became a Burgess (*Edinburgh Burgess Records*) and Freeman of the Incorporation of Hammermen in 1633 (ECA ED008/1/3), matching the date in the touchmark.
- 3 There are two of these touchplates, each one being a 5mm thick sheet of pewter measuring 315mm × 110mm. An Edinburgh pewterer struck his mark, or touchmark, when he became a Freeman of the Incorporation of Hammermen of Edinburgh, enabling him to open his workshop and become a master pewterer. The touchplates are now on display in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.
- 4 Philippe Boucaud (pers comm).
- 5 Ingleby Wood (1904: 165) ascribed this mark to a James Abernethie. However there is no one of this

name in the *Apprentice Records*, or in the *Burgess Records* of 1669, whereas there was a John Abernethie who became a Burgess (*Edinburgh Burgess Records*) and Freeman (ECA ED008/4) in that year.

- 6 Carl Ricketts (pers comm).
- 7 The photographs are now in the photographic archive of the Pewter Society. The tappit hen was last recorded as being in the collection of the late Walter Deckelman in the USA.
- 8 Peter Spencer Davies (unpublished research records).

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