

AN EARLY 17th-CENTURY WINE TASTER

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The area of the north Thames bank between Southwark Bridge and Cannon Street Station, known as the Vintry, has been associated with the wine trade since at least 1170.¹

In 1978 a silver wine taster inscribed 'Johanes Downinge Decem 3th 1634', with London hallmarks for 1634–5 and marked HB, was recovered from the foreshore near the north end of Southwark Bridge. The footed bowl with plain, straight sides sloping outward from a domed base, measures 9.9 cm in diameter by 3 cm in height. The taster was subsequently acquired by the Museum of London.²

Small bowls of this type, with raised bases to reflect the liquid, and in which the vintner tilted and swirled his sample of wine, noting its colour, clarity and bouquet, are recorded from 1383 in England (in a Norwich tavern inventory as a 'tastef argentea').³ In 1530 their function was described by Palsgrave as 'a lyttel cuppe to tast wyne, tasse à goustier le vin'.⁴

The earliest surviving English taster is an example with Norwich hallmarks for 1573–4, whilst the earliest English example with an owner's inscription is that of 1631–2 in the Jackson Collection (National Museum of Wales) inscribed 'John Hine'. The Museum of London taster is therefore the second earliest inscribed taster known.

Plain circular tasters, on a low foot and with a domed centre, such as the Museum's example, became fashionable in the early 17th century, and appear to have remained so through the century. A very similar example hallmarked 1689–90 and inscribed 'Andrew Richmond Decem 3rd, 1689' is in the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁵ Similar tasters were also used in France (Bordeaux region) and exported to Portugal for the wine trade.

John Aubrey (1626–97) the antiquary, commented that

'These silver boates are very common at Bristow among the merchants, who used to carry them in their pockets to Tast wine; they call them Tasters. They were first called cognes (from coggonnes, little boates)'.⁶

Indeed, tasters were so much a part of the vintner's equipment that an English Act of 1477–8⁷ prohibiting the export of gold and silver, made a special exemption clause, 'any Merchant going over the Sea to buy any Wine to be brought into the realm, as for to carry with him only a little cup called a Taster (un taster ou shewer pur vine)'.

A search of records relating to 'The Trade' produced evidence of a John Downinge as apprentice to one Richard Mills of the Coopers' Company in 1633/4.⁸ The taster, acquired by Downinge the following year, perhaps records the anniversary of his joining the Company.

Some coopers were also involved in the wholesale wine trade, to which the Vintners' Company objected, leading to Charles I's proclamation of July 1638 prohibiting coopers from buying or selling wine.⁹ John Downinge may have been involved in this aspect of the trade.

John Downinge served an eight-year apprenticeship, becoming a free journeyman in 1641. The date, the 3rd December, inscribed on the taster, was one on which coopers recorded their marks (usually initials at this period). Unfortunately, no mark for John Downinge is recorded.¹⁰

The Museum's taster is not the only one to be found at the Vintry. In May 1983 a silver taster marked BORD, and bearing a fleur-de-lis and maker's mark was also recorded. This type, a larger version of the Museum's taster, was common in Bordeaux between 1650 and 1717. Whether stolen, or lost while boarding a boat, is a matter of speculation.

NOTES

1. Grant by the Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's to Peter, the son of Revelum, of the land which Baldric held of them in the parish of St James 'versus vinitarium', c.1170. *Ninth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts* Part 1 (London, 1883) 13.
2. MoL Acc. No. 78.161. The maker's mark HB in a shield is regarded as being that for Henry Blackmore (apprentice of George Carey) free 1612, who took Humphrey Bache as apprentice in 1634. According to the Court Books of the Goldsmiths' Company, Blackmore's faults (1627–33) were for salts and, in 1632, a taster, although other records of pieces with his mark refer to flagons, beakers, communion cups and steeple cups. I am indebted to Gerald Taylor of the Ashmolean Museum (Department of Western Art) for his advice about this goldsmith's identity, and to the Goldsmiths' Company for permission to publish the information from their Court Books.
3. C. J. Jackson *An Illustrated History of English Plate* (London, 1911) 737.
4. John Palsgrave (d.1554), chaplain to Henry VIII, 'L'Eclaircissement De La Langue Francaise' (Paris, 1852) 279.
5. Accession No. M225–1930.
6. John Aubrey *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*; edited and annotated by James Britten. Publications of the Folk Lore Society 4 (London, 1881) 210.
7. Cotton MS. Nero. C.1. British Library; published in *Statutes at Large Edward IV–Elizabeth I* (1770) 42.
8. 'The Trade' – the victualling crafts – Vintners, Brewers, Innholders – to whom the Coopers were closely allied. Guildhall Library, Coopers' Company Court Book for 1632–1641 (MS 5603/4, f.19):
Thurs 16 Jan. 1633/4
'Recd of Richard Mills for apnticnge John Downinge sonne of Humfrye of London Barbersurgeon Deceased for Eight years from Michaelmas last xxd'.
John's father 'Humfrye Downinge' is recorded as living in Vintry Ward in a house assessed at £16 in 1638. (T. C. Dale *The Inhabitants of London in 1638* (London, 1931) 185).
9. This proclamation was declared illegal by the Long Parliament in 1641. In 1667 'the Court [of the Coopers' Company] presented a hogshhead of wine to the Lord Mayor in thankfulness for his favour to the Company in their opposition in Parliament to the Vintners, for restraint in buying and selling wine in gross'. J. F. Firth, *Coopers' Company, London* (London, 1848) 84.
Again in 1693 and 1697 the Coopers petitioned the Government against raising the import duties on wine from Spain and Portugal, duties which had apparently already reduced by half their sales of wines.
Sir William Foster, *A Short History of the Worshipful Company of Coupers of London* (Cambridge, 1961) 27–29.
10. Guildhall Library Coopers' Company Quartermage Books 1635–1644. MS 5614/3. Mark Book 1561–1648, MS 5633.





Plate 1. Silver wine taster, 1634–5.