

Newlyn Copper

By Judith Clarke

'Within the last year auction records have been set and higher prices established around the country.....Last year, a Newlyn mirror fetched £2500, a record auction price for a piece of Newlyn copper. A similar example made £430 in 1996!'



Copper galleon on top of the Seaman's Mission in Newlyn.

The small Cornish fishing town of Newlyn is quite a remarkable place in the collector's scheme of things. Not only is it internationally renowned for the Newlyn school of painters but it was also home to various studio potteries from the 1950s to the 1980s such as Troika, Celtic, Leaper and Tremaen. Now the collecting spotlight has focused on Newlyn copper and the metalwork industry established there in 1890. The quality of the pieces and the attractiveness of the designs has made these items very sought-after and within the last year auction records have been set and higher prices established around the country.

The painter J. D. MacKenzie moved to Newlyn around 1888 and under the prevailing ethos of useful work for idle hands was among a group of artists and local benefactors who established a Newlyn Industrial Class (later known as the Newlyn Art Metal Industry).

Once established on a regular footing the Industrial Class not only taught the skills of metalworking but also included classes in enamelling and embroidery. A contemporary writer, A. G. Folliot Stokes on visiting Newlyn noted that 'There is one industry in Newlyn that has for its avowed object the cult of the beautiful....Here, in rude workshops showing the rafted roofs, men and boys are busy at the copper repoussé work and at the beautiful enamel jewellery, for both of which Newlyn is becoming famous.' He goes on to mention the instrumental role of MacKenzie who 'threw himself heart and soul into the matter, and brought his wonderful taste and sense of proportion to bear upon designing good shapes for articles in everyday use'. MacKenzie was to continue designing and instructing the Newlyn lads for over two decades.

Equally instrumental in establishing Newlyn copperworking from a technical point of view was John Pearson. Pearson came to Newlyn in 1892 to teach the techniques of repoussé metalwork at the Industrial Class. He stayed for several years and pieces designed by him are much sought after. His decorative style was heavily influenced by William de Morgan motifs and his work is quite different from the later highly finished style perfected by the Newlyn 'lads'. The work of these Newlyn artists in copper was much acclaimed at the time and appeared in exhibitions in London. The Class also made items in bronze, brass and pewter such as tankards and bowls.

The heyday of Newlyn copper in terms of quality, public acclaim and demand was probably between the late 1890s and 1910. The First World War definitely marked the end of this period. Not only did MacKenzie die in 1918 but the world had changed forever.

In 1920 copperworking was started again by Tom Batten and Johnny P. Cotton (with Obed Nicholls working from home). The kind of work carried out at this time increasingly had to meet commercial needs with items becoming ever more functional. By the 1930s streamlined Art Deco would hardly have time for finely worked pieces of handmade copper.



Newlyn Art Gallery with four copper plaques representing Earth, Air, Fire and Water by Philip Hodder.



Large rectangular Newlyn tray decorated with medlars - £550.



Twin handled tray by John Pearson £320.



Newlyn galleon charger 11in diameter, signed by Obed Nicholls. £500-£600.

Cotton and Batten continued to work together until Tom Batten's death in 1949. In the 1950s Johnny Cotton worked making 'Newlyn Copper' at Morrab Studios in Penzance until his retirement in 1956.

For the collector of Newlyn copper a visit to the area has much to offer. At the Penlee Gallery in Penzance there is a permanent display of Newlyn copper and it was here that the first exhibition took place in 1986. At Tony Sanders Gallery in Chapel Street there is a fine range of Newlyn copper and other antiques and art for sale.

David Lay Auction Rooms in Penzance regularly feature Newlyn copper. This is where some of the finest pieces have been sold. They hit the headlines last year when a Newlyn mirror fetched £2500, a record auction price. A similar example made £430 in 1996 giving some indication of the rapid rise in prices. Around the fairs and shops quite modest items now have a price tag of between £200-£400 and small to medium-size decorated mirrors are currently priced at around £800 to £1,500. Other recent prices include a Newlyn stick stand decorated with an underwater scene of fish, seaweed and crabs which sold for £820 in November 1999.

Also associated with copperwork from the area is the work of Herbert Dyer working in Mousehole and in collecting terms the less desirable Hayle copper. The town of Newlyn bears many traces of the influence of the metalwork industry. The original old copperworks building still overlooks Newlyn harbour and the four plaques on the end of Newlyn Art Gallery designed by MacKenzie and the artist T. C. Gotch are a constant reminder to local and tourist alike of the fine workmanship of the Industrial Class. There is also the copper galleon weathervane on top of the Seaman's Mission in the centre of Newlyn made by Tom Batten and Francis Clemens and the war memorial beneath it bearing the name of J. D. MacKenzie.

There has been some confusion as to how to identify Newlyn Copper. Some pieces are unmarked. Many pieces will have the indented words NEWLYN, others an incised signature on the back often including other details such as the designer and the date. The most distinctive clues are in the decoration. Designs include shells, fish, fruit, flowers, ships, local sights and landmarks such as St. Michael's Mount, seaweed, galleons, lemons, octopus, squid, sea serpents, medlars, seabirds and fritillary flowers.

Newlyn Copper at its finest has a richness and a depth. Whether stamped or not it is very distinctive and sensuous to the touch. These beautiful handcrafted objects have a glow which, it could be romantically inferred, is a reflection of the light that so attracted painters to the area.

A hundred years later the work produced in copper by the men and boys working in Newlyn has reached a new peak of popularity and has come to denote some of the best work of its kind in repoussé metalwork.



Hayle copper pipe rack with Art Nouveau decoration.



Large Newlyn mirror decorated with fish and shells - impressed Newlyn.



Oval galleried Newlyn pierced tray with fruit decoration.



Detail of mirror - a highly desirable piece.



Detail of 10in diameter plaque with fish. Impressed Newlyn.



Large Newlyn tray with inscription. Designed by J D MacKenzie and worked by Philip Hodder. £800-£900.



Detail of large Newlyn charger by John Pearson.