

## Captain Cunningham, Alfred Yeates and a William III tankard



Owen Cunningham was born in Westminster in October 1912, the second of six children of James Cunningham, a laundry Porter, and his second wife Sarah.

In 1955 Owen Cunningham mentioned an apprenticeship in the St. Martins area of London, although whether this was a formal apprenticeship and how long he continued in that occupation is unknown. But, after service during WW2; which presumably accounts for the title of Captain by which he liked to be known; he opened what became a well-known oyster bar in Curzon Street, Mayfair.

It appears that he did not to shy away from publicity, and was perhaps

On Saturday the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1955, The Daily Mail reported that Captain Owen Cunningham had declared that the William III pewter tankard dated 1697, on display when he visited the Victoria and Albert Museum the previous day, was a fake which he had been responsible for making in 1929 at the age of 17.

**Genuine? I made  
it myself**

### ‘Antique’ of 1697 fooled museum

By DAVID WYNNE-MORGAN

CAPTAIN Owen Cunningham stood in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum yesterday, looked at a pewter tankard dated 1697, and said: “1697 my eye! I made it myself in 1929.”

The tankard, it should be noted, has been a museum piece, unchallenged by experts, for ten years.

Captain Cunningham, who runs an oyster bar in Mayfair, looked again. “Yes,” he said, “I made it. I was 17.”

“I was apprenticed to a firm turning out reproductions in a little upstairs room opposite the St. Martin’s Theatre.

“We sold them as reproductions too. But I know that dealers sold them as genuine.”

Captain Cunningham moved.

among other exhibits. He said: “I am certain that another of my reproductions is here as a genuine article. It is a William and Mary rose bowl.”

He could not find it.

The news of the Cunningham tankard was passed to one of the museum’s experts on antique pewter. The expert appeared unperturbed.

He said: “Quite possible. It was in a collection left to us in 1945. We found that 25 pieces were fakes. We put them away.”

“Telling genuine pewter is always difficult.

“If Captain Cunningham insists in his claim, we shall probably remove the tankard.”

And what of the rose bowl? “We found that it was a fake. We put it away.”

Last night Captain Cunningham, home again said: “I am not just a restaurateur. I love the more serious things in life.

“To reproduce an antique tankard I used to put on scratchings and hammerings with blunt iron, punch on a maker’s mark, and shake it in a kit-bag of stones and nails.

“The trickiest thing was the deposit. I would give coatings of nitric and sulphuric acid and a wash with olive oil.

“Even now I am prepared to make a tankard, set it among genuine tankards after six months, and defy any expert in the country to pick it out.”

**Daily Mail 19 March 1955**

something of a showman. An article written in 1970, included the comment that he *'wears a light-grey suit when everything intimates that he should be dressed in knee length breeches, ruffed shirt and velvet topcoat'*.

There are newspaper reports of fights, (which appeared in newspapers as far away as Australia), including one with the Duke of Marlborough at an exclusive Mayfair club in 1949. He was robbed twice, and of the one in 1951, he stated that he had been able to defend himself because he had been a boxer at school and had just been in the south of France swimming three or four miles a day with a named Australian swimming champion.

The 1970 account reports that Owen " *mentions in passing that he has been in the business for 237 years*" and " *to add that he knew 'all about smoking, curing, filleting and cooking fish and had gone over 40 feet waves and come down the other side'*. Apparently unharmed; presumably in a boat".

This article also reveals that he had married five times, stating that he made no payments to the earlier four wives because his Solicitor was an ex Roman Catholic Priest who married a Nun and who specialised in Divorce. (One wife went to jail in a Rolls Royce for contempt of court during the 1951 divorce proceedings). His fifth wife was only seventeen in 1960 when he married for the last time at the age of 48. She was left a widow with six children when he died 1974 aged 61.

His reputation and success he put down to Irish fervour and Scottish perseverance; this, even though his Mothers' family was English and he was a third generation Londoner on his Fathers' side. The Irish connection came via his Great Grandparents, who were born in Ireland. (Great Grandfather Miles Cunningham, was a Shoemaker when he married in London in 1833).

In an 1971 article Owen Cunningham said that he *'came from good fish stock... fishing or selling fish since 1723, served a long apprenticeship in the trade before opening his first luxury oyster bar just after the war....* and the article continues by mentioning that, *'He even lays claim to be one of the team that first devised fish fingers ("for the Poor law families") in the thirties'*.

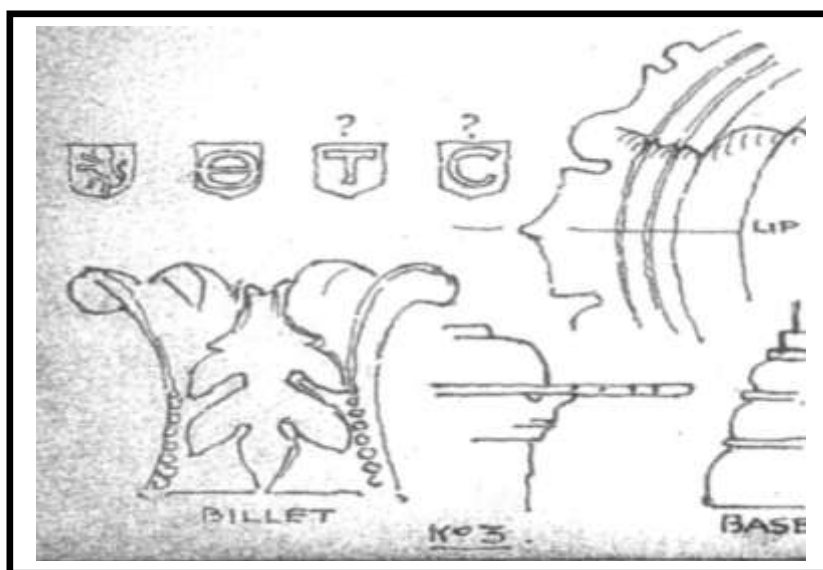
Fish and fishing do not actually feature in his 19<sup>th</sup> century ancestry but an apparent long apprenticeship in the fish trade, with involvement on a team which created 'fish fingers' in the 1930's shows a major career change from creating pewter reproductions such as the William III tankard in 1929.

So what do other documents reveal about the William III pewter tankard in the V&A? It is quite possible that Owen Cunningham was, as he states in the 1955 article, apprenticed about 1926 to a firm making pewter reproductions in a little upstairs room in a lane opposite St. Martins Theatre. (This is an area less than half a mile from Orange Street, the family home for more than thirty years). But there is no evidence of a known pewterer working in that area in that time frame; an engraver is known to have worked in St. Martins Lane although he had left the area by 1924. The only other possibility is that Owen worked for an Antique dealer who operated in the area during that period.

The William III tankard entered the collection of the V&A in 1945 through the 1944 bequest of Alfred B. Yeates, a founding member of the Society of Pewter Collectors, (formed in 1918, later to become The Pewter Society). Alfred Yeates kept a photographic and detailed description record of his collection. The two books are now in the hands of a private collector but photocopies of the majority of the pages are held in the archives of The Pewter Society.



**William III (1694-1702) tankard while in the collection of Alfred Yeates**



No 3.	<b>TANKARD</b>
	<p>PROBABLY ENGLISH THOUGH FOUND IN HOLLAND - HEIGHT <math>\frac{6}{8}</math> IN: DIAM: OF LIP <math>4\frac{1}{2}</math> IN: DIAM: OF BASE <math>5\frac{1}{8}</math> IN: SIMILAR TO No 1 ON THIS PAGE BUT LATER DATE - MAKERS TOUCH INSIDE BASE ALSO "SILVER MARKS" AND X ON OUTSIDE OF LID - OWNERS INITIALS I B ALSO G B WITH DATE 1698 - ALSO A FURTHER STAMP M H - THE LID IS ENGRAVED WITH FLOWERS - AND THE BARREL WITH PORTRAIT OF WILLIAM III AND W . R EACH LETTER CROWNED. ALSO THE LION AND UNICORN AND ROSE AND THISTLE - BOUGHT FROM MRS HARRISON OF SHIPLAKE COURT - HENLEY -</p>

**Detail from the collection book of Alfred Yeates – Courtesy The Pewter Society**

The record for this tankard reveals that Alfred Yeates purchased it from a ' Mrs. Harrison of Shiplake Court Henley'. Mrs. Helen Mary Harrison was the wife of Robert Hichens Camden Harrison, Esq., a Stockbroker in the long established London firm of Hichens, Harrison and Co. Also High Sheriff of Oxfordshire and a collector, with a home in London, Shiplake Court was built for him in 1898. Robert H.C. Harrison died in October 1924 aged 87 and Shiplake Court was sold in March 1925, with Helen Harrison retaining their London home. As Mrs.Harrison was now no longer 'of Shiplake Court, Henley', it would appear that Alfred Yeates purchased the William III Tankard before March 1925, but certainly prior to August 1927 when it appeared in the magazine *Old Furniture* in an article entitled *Old English Pewter: A collectors Notes* by Alfred Yeates ; and thus before Captain Owen Cunningham states that he was responsible for its creation.





1955 The Connoisseur

An article in the Connoisseur magazine of October 1955 by J.F. Hayward, reveals that after the Daily Mail report of Captain Cunninghams' statement, the tankard was sent, along with a two other tankards, ( a genuine and a known fake), to the Government Chemist for testing using the equipment available at that time. The object to *'reveal any differences among them which might be of use in establishing the genuineness or otherwise of the challenged vessel.'*

Spectrographic analysis of metal scraped from all three tankards revealed the presence of antimony, bismuth, tin, copper, iron, lead, silver, magnesium, and molybdenum. The metal and corrosion patterns were also recorded using x-ray diffraction which revealed the similarities between the genuine and disputed tankard; patterns which did not appear on the comparison fake. Under magnification it was revealed that the corrosion had taken place over the engraving and the report shows that the corrosion on the genuine and disputed tankard was black, much harder and more firmly attached; whereas on the comparison fake it was very different, with the corrosion being powdery and only attached lightly to the metal as would be produced by the process of patination as described by Captain Cunningham.

The conclusion stated, *"In our opinion these facts established similarities between the genuine and the disputed tankard which support the view that it is authentic. No evidence to the contrary has been obtained"*.



**V&A Museum Number M63-1945**

**Touch and inscription details**

**Inside on base: The initials TC and the date 1697.**

**Top of cover: Simulated hallmarks; also crowned initials IB and GB, with the date 1698.**

**Images from 'Pewter at the Victoria and Albert Museum' Anthony North 1999 pp78&79.**



**Lid detail**

**(Photo courtesy John Bank and the V&A - Sept 2012)**

This example of the pewterers' craft inspired a reproduction based on items in the V&A collection and made in the 1980's by the company of John Somers of Minas Gerais, Brazil for sale in the V&A shop.



Reproduction tankard and beaker beautifully decorated in a style of engraving called wriggle work. Features portrait of King William the III and Queen Mary with the lion and unicorn of the British coat of arms. Based on artifacts in the Victoria and Albert Museum of London.

**John Somer catalogue (Courtesy John Bank)**

The engravings on the reproductions are not part of the casting of the piece as in later reproduction examples sourced elsewhere, but hand engraved by one of two skilled craftsmen. Below is one of these tankards purchased from the V&A shop in the 1980's by a private collector.



**Somers' reproduction tankard with images of monarchs  
William and Mary (1684-1694)**



**Marks –**

**Rim : RG – Indicates made by John Somers of Brazil for the Pewterer , Rene Guggisberg of Lamone, Ticino, Switzerland.**

**(This piece appears to have been on-sold to the V&A after John Somers was no longer the manufacturer for the V&A.)**

**X - High quality pewter**

**MG - Minas Gerais – State in Brazil where the pewter is produced.**

**Base : 'N' the 14<sup>th</sup> letter of the alphabet. John Somers commenced production in 1968 therefore 'N' indicates this tankard was produced in 1982.**



Although containing similar elements, such as the Lion and the Unicorn, the William III tankard obviously differs from the reproductions which carry images of both William and Mary. Amongst other pewter items at the V&A containing similar images which may have been used as a design source for the reproductions is another tankard which does portray both monarchs. This William and Mary tankard was part of a bequest by another member of the Society of Pewter Collectors, Mrs. Agnes Carvick-Webster.



**William & Mary Tankard**  
**C1695 -V&A Museum number M.71-1938**  
**Photo courtesy V&A**

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Resources :

Alfred Yeates personal collection courtesy Pewter Society archives/Librarian John S. Bank  
1955 Connoisseur Magazine October issue – article by J.F. Hayward  
1982 Reproduction images from private collector; Additional information on the original company of John Somers Brazil from Geoffrey Somers - via John S. Bank  
Pewter at the Victoria and Albert Museum; Anthony North and Andrew Spira; V&A Publications London; 1999 ISBN 185177 2235