

## Joseph Austen and the Munster Iron Company

This Irish pewter enterprise also lasted from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Joseph Austen is first mentioned as a pewterer based in Cork in 1791, by 1809 he was in partnership with at least one son, he was made a Freeman of the City in 1817 and is believed to have died circa 1830. His family then continued the business (he like other 19<sup>th</sup> century pewterers produced a range of goods, not just pewter) until about 1846 when it was transferred to the Gibbings. Rebecca and her son John were Ironmongers based in 93/94 North Main Street, Cork. This is of course the address found on many pieces of pewter bearing the Joseph Austen and Son mark, however, there is at present no evidence that the Austen's ever operated from these premises. It seems rather that the Gibbings had been marketing Austen's products for a number of years.

In the 1850s John Gibbings created the Munster Iron Company to embrace his activities including the manufacture of pewter. This business lasted until 1965 when it was changed into the Munster Furniture Company. We have no reason to think they were still making pewter at this date or had been for many years, but just before World War I they were still advertising as pewter measure makers and they may still have been making a few pewter haystack measures in the early 1920s. It was only in the 1880s the Munster Iron Company stopped using the Joseph Austen and Son mark and began using their own name in touches.

Joseph Austen initially produced plates and chargers in some quantity as well as some measures and drinking pots. Ireland seems to have been slower to abandon eating off pewter although the position is always complicated by the Irish (and Welsh) practise of placing flatware face to the wall and polishing the backs. Often it is difficult to date and identify Irish plates as the maker's marks have been polished off.

Among Joseph's early products were some prototype haystack measures conforming to Irish capacity measures. The firm seem to have taken advantage of the opportunity presented by the introduction of Imperial measure in 1826. Not only were new moulds produced for the classical Irish haystack but also for a variety of pub pots, duck and hen measures and Irish handless baluster measures. The latter are very seldom marked with Austen or other touches and have to be recognised by their general design, labelling, Crowned 'X's and capacity marks. Many pub pots have Austen mark's inside the base, some have a Crowned harp mark, others a Munster mark or Crowned 'X'. After all we are dealing with products made over many decades.

Haystack measures proved popular and despite the frankly Unionist message of the touch were sold throughout Ireland in large numbers. Despite the volume of production when collectors began to buy them in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the supply of surviving examples was insufficient to meet the demand. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century reproductions were made in considerable quantities and a proportion of these reproductions were faked up to mirror the originals. Collectors still find this design attractive but anybody who buys them needs to exercise a degree of caution and to acquire a basic level of knowledge.

Marks inside the base of Yates and Gaskell and Chambers pots

A number of people have commented on the marks found in Yates pots and measures or what are thought to be Yates pieces and the marks found inside what appear to be or are thought to be Gaskell and Chamber's pieces. The marks believed to be associated with the Yates are numbers over a Crowned 'X' and those associated with Gaskell and Chambers consist of an 'X' with a triangle below containing a letter 'Y' and a geometric form.



ANOTHER COLLECTOR COMMENTS -

Just in case there is any confusion, I attach a photo of haystacks in my collection. So, if you have a bulbous measure with fake verifications, it might be a genuine one, which during the 1920s was 'enhanced' by the addition of these marks. Bulbous measures were still being made before World War I, but of course would have little age by the 20s. To enhance them made them more valuable, as in those days nobody understood verification marks. Putting some 'age' onto them was also done chemically using one or more acids, and sometimes arsenic. This leaves a somewhat artificial

patina, but now after another 80 years of genuine ageing they often appear 'right'. I bought one at auction (knowing it was not genuinely old) about a year ago when I paid £145 including buyer's premium. If it is a haystack gallon, then that is also problematical depending on what you actually have. Genuine haystacks were also made in Ireland until the early years of the last century. However, for some reason the same bunch faking up the bulbous measures did not appear to know this, and used reproductions that they either made themselves or had made in and around London. Then they used the same ageing techniques, fake verifications, even fake capacity marks (genuine haystacks always have '1' before the actual capacity stamped above the mid body line on the front of the drum) and sometimes fake 'Austen & Son, Cork' touchmarks under the base to defraud customers. The 'fakers' also added dents, areas of solder repair and other symptoms of age to make their pieces appear more convincing. Much later, with the American interest in all things Irish, another industry developed of making what one might call 'genuine reproductions' as tourist souvenirs. Some unscrupulous people have also taken these and faked them up by various means and sold them as genuine antiques. These tend to be of much lighter construction than the genuine ones, and may have evidence under the base of the proper mark applied by the reproduction maker being defaced. If you have a fake haystack it is no more valuable than a fake bulbous, and if of the lighter weight construction will be almost worthless. The only way I could be sure of what you have is to see and handle it - photos do not offer the chance to appraise the item properly. I would be happy to do this for you if you wanted to post it to me. By the way, you have a copy of the Richard Neate Touchplate book, and may find photographs of the fake verification marks recorded there. He and his gang were the major perpetrators of these frauds in the 1920-30s.



AMONGST SERIOUS PURCHASERS OF HAYSTACKS - WERE MARSHALL FIELDS OF CHICAGO

– here follows comment from a USA collector –

Attached is the only photo I can find of the 1969 visit - the set of Haystacks. (I meant a run of 7, not 8, of course). Field's bought them on that day, and they eventually ended up in my father's collection. I re-sold them some 15 years ago and see them often. They have now calmed down to a nice light-medium grey colour. The odd silver solder repair here and there, but the set is right - mostly Austen, 1 or 2 Munster.

The old mark-up formula for Field's on antiques in the 60's was: retail = 10X the pound sterling price. The pound then was, I believe, still well above \$2.00, perhaps even \$2.40. In this case, I recall the set being around L500 sterling, or perhaps L450, which would have translated into a dollar retail in Chicago of some \$4,500 US.

You can just see, in this photograph, the long wooden shelves of pewter in the showroom (no better word) to the left.

