



CHURCH PLATE

In money terms, the church silver is often the most valuable item owned by the parish church. But current cash values obscure more important truths. The parishioners of two hundred years ago may have had to scrape and save for a decade to buy the church its lovely pair of silver flagons. Many churches have been using the same silver cup for communion ever since it was made in the sixteenth century. These are precious vessels indeed.

It is essential that church plate is properly secured, cared for and recorded. Plate should be kept in a locked safe built into a wall or dry floor in a room to which the public do not have access; there are dangers in storing it elsewhere. Some silver has been lost because churchwardens and incumbents have failed to record where it was deposited, and the knowledge has died with the depositor. The EIG would expect the room, or vestry, to be alarmed. Insurance values need to be kept up to date. To ensure that your premium is not too high, you should seek advice from the Diocesan Advisory Committee. Parishes need to appreciate the purpose of insurance: what would you want if you did lose your sixteenth-century cup? Probably not another sixteenth-century cup but a good modern replacement. In that case you may decide to insure the cup not at full market value but at a figure for which you could buy a good modern piece.

As the manner of worship has changed over the centuries, so has the design of church plate. The result is that certain designs of plate are not regarded by some parishes as suitable for today's requirements and have gone out of use. Some parishes consign the plate to a bank vault where it can neither be seen nor used. To help solve this problem, the Goldsmiths' Company has funded the creation of a treasury in our cathedral. This is a permanent display of important pieces of plate on loan from churches in the diocese. It relieves the parishes of the burden of insurance and security, while providing secure conditions in which the public can learn to appreciate church plate and its changing role in worship over the centuries. Fashions change however, and it may well be that with a little advice from the diocesan advisor on plate, or on liturgy, a parish may find it can use a piece thought to be inconvenient by the previous generation, especially where Holy Communion is received standing. (The advisor may be contacted through the DAC office at Church House). The Faculty Jurisdiction procedure is an important protection for church plate. Parishes wishing to sell or otherwise dispose of any object in their church must apply to the Diocesan Chancellor for a faculty. It is nowadays rare for a faculty to be granted for the sale of plate.

Care

- ❖ Plate use for every Sunday

Church silver in use needs to be treated with the same hygiene as the silver and crockery at home. Articles should be washed in soap and water after each service, very well rinsed in hot water and dried with a clean cloth. Beware of the yellow sponge with the green

back found in many kitchens as it scratches silver very badly. To avoid tarnishing and the necessity of regular cleaning, rather than just putting the silver on a shelf in the safe, try and prevent the air from circulating freely around it. For example, ask a member of the congregation to run up a velvet bag with a draw string neck, with the velvet on the inside. This in turn can be put into a simple wooden box that can be placed in the safe. Since the air cannot circulate there should be little tarnishing.

❖ Plate used at festivals or on very rare occasions

Most metalwork may be washed safely in washing up liquid and hot water. If the piece is not to be used for some time, after washing in warm soapy water, rinse very thoroughly in running water, as hot as possible, and allow it to dry naturally without using a cloth. If the piece is very old or fragile, to avoid the possibility of fine scratches from the drying-up cloth, rinse in water as hot as possible, and allow it to dry naturally without using a cloth, though water droplet may dry on the surface leaving their imprint. These water marks will do no harm and can be removed at the next great festival polishing with blue impregnated silver cloths. Avoid touching the silver with bare hands; wear cotton gloves, or handle it using a clean dry tea cloth. Otherwise, when you next come to use it you may well find a fine set of black fingerprints on the silver. As with the plate used regularly, to avoid tarnishing and the necessity of cleaning, store the silver in bags that exclude the air. Special bags made for this purpose are obtainable. (As the addresses of suppliers are liable to change, please contact the DAC Secretary for details.) Since the air cannot circulate there should be little tarnishing. If polishing is needed, use Goddard's Foaming Polish or Goddard's Long Term Polish. Most other polishes contain abrasives. If a piece is badly tarnished, Goddard's Foaming Polish, Goddard's Long Term Polish or a Silver Dip may be used. Thereafter, only occasional polishing with a clean chamois leather or a Blue Silver Cleaning Cloth will be sufficient. Duraglit silver polish is very abrasive and will erase engravings and hall marks, and should never be used. Unless they really are black, do not clean the hallmarks or they will become too worn to be read accurately. They provide important information about the maker, the date and the purity of the silver, and are the best means of identification if the piece is lost or stolen. When cleaning or polishing a piece, wear cotton or rubber gloves, otherwise your fingermarks will be left on the surface as an acidic deposit, as mentioned above. Under no circumstances should old silver be re-gilded.

In general, while it is best to avoid the necessity of cleaning by storing plate in clean, dry conditions, with the air excluded, three things are important.

- i) Plate must first be washed and very well rinsed in hot water.
- ii) Plate is liable to corrode if stored in damp conditions, and must never be stored sealed in plastic bags or Clingfilm unless it is *absolutely* dry.
- iii) Most paper, including tissue paper, and especially newspaper, is acidic and should not be used for wrapping silver. Suitable acid-free tissue paper may be obtained from specialist suppliers. (Addresses may be obtained from the DAC.)

Old metalwork is often fragile and should be polished only gently, if at all.

Pewter should be stored in a dry metal cabinet. It is particularly subject to corrosion from the acids present in wooden boxes. The scaling found on the surface of much old pewter should usually be left well alone, as it is difficult to remove without destroying the character of the piece.

Brass is especially sensitive to damp. Light red tarnishing may be removed by Duraglit metal polish but, should there be green corrosion or pustules, advice should be sought. A local museum may be able to advise, or contact the DAC or the Council for the Care of Churches, Church House Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3NZ (tel. 020 7898 1000)

Recording and security

Church plate should be carefully recorded and a copy of the record kept with your inventory and one deposited at the Diocesan Records Office. For some counties, catalogues of church plate were published in the last century and up till the 1930s, but there are few catalogues with up-to-date information. A record must be made of the dimensions of each object (in the case of a chalice or communion cup the height, diameter of the foot, diameter of the bowl and the depth of the bowl), its hallmarks and other marks, and of any inscriptions. With marks, it is most important to draw accurately the shapes of the punches, i.e. whether the outline is oblong, or a particular shape of shield and so on, or better still take photographs. General descriptions of the shape of an object are often of only limited use, because of the standard design of much church plate. A photograph, even an amateur snapshot, of each piece with a clearly marked ruler to give the scale is essential. The diocesan advisor, who can be contacted through the DAC Secretary, is happy to help with the recording and interpretation of the hallmarks, crests and any coats of arms; and to give advice or practical help with photography.

Not only silver but also antique pewter now fetches high prices, though the prices for church silver are much lower than those for domestic silver. In the case of pewter, church pieces are often as expensive as domestic ones. This puts pewter at particular risk, because many parishes have no idea that their plain, dull grey seventeenth-century flagon is of any interest.

Thefts of church plate are not new. In 1364, an organised gang raided a number of major churches, and even stole from Lincoln Cathedral the reliquary containing part of the head of St Hugh. The holy relic was found abandoned in a field, and the reliquary was recovered in London where it had been taken to be sold. If church plate is stolen, it is vital that the parish informs not only the police but also the archdeacon, who should make sure that a record is kept at the Diocesan Record Office. The police may otherwise be unable to trace the parish to which the plate belongs, should it be recovered. This is because the items may be found over a decade after the theft, when the police no longer have any record of the case. It is therefore vital that each Record Office holds a complete list of plate stolen from parish churches in the diocese.

This leaflet, produced by the Chichester DAC, is based on the leaflet "The care of church plate" published by the Council for the Care of Churches in 1989.