

A history of Gray's Inn

IN 20 OBJECTS

NO 2: A PAIR OF WILLIAM III TAZZAE

MASTER TIMOTHY SHUTTLEWORTH

One of the finest pieces of silver in the Inn's collection is a pair of tazzae or trays, dating from 1701, by Benjamin Pyne of London. Each is engraved with the Bettenham Arms within a plumed cartouche and rests on central capstan-shaped feet. While otherwise plain, the attraction of the trays lies in their simplicity and exquisite proportions, and, as such, they were greatly admired in the early 18th century.

Each tray bears an inscription attesting that the trays were the gift of Jeremy Bettenham and the date '1650'.

Betttenham has the distinction of being the first donor of plate to the Inn. He died, however, in 1606, and I shall return to this apparent conflict of dates.

Jeremy Bettenham, who was Called by the Inn in 1569, and Francis Bacon were the greatest of friends. Both lived at the Inn and worked closely together on Inn affairs. Such was their closeness that you can almost visualise them gossiping over a glass of wine before a log fire on a winter evening in Betttenham's Chambers.

Betttenham was appointed Reader at the Inn in 1590 and became Treasurer in 1595. Following his Readership, Pension passed a unique order that he was to be awarded 20 marks because he was: 'a continual and diligent keeper of learning in the house ... [but] hath byn no great gayner by the lawe ...' So, while obviously a distinguished lawyer, he had not earned much in the profession. What is more, being Reader was often very expensive, because a Reader was required to provide the refreshments at the Reading – and expectations were high! It was a measure of the Inn's affection for him that this payment was made.



Bacon's fondness for his old colleague was amply demonstrated when, following Betttenham's death, Bacon added a summer house to his scheme for the Walks. The summer house was inscribed to Betttenham's memory and stood where No 5 Raymond Buildings is today.

Betttenham's will provided that his executors should purchase a bason and ewer for the Society to the value £30. Tracing the history is not easy, but in 1701 various items of silver belonging to the Inn went to the melting pot, including

apparently the bason and ewer. They were replaced by the tazzae and some candlesticks (also engraved with the Betttenham Arms). Their liquidation was possibly decided on because the bason and ewer were no longer deemed fashionable silverware, or it might have been thought the tazzae and candlesticks would prove more useful to the Inn. What is beyond doubt is that our forebears were not sentimental about the Society's silver.

The late Master Sir Leonard Stone, who investigated this, is almost certainly correct when he suggested that the date '1650' on the tazzae refers to when the bason and ewer were first purchased for the Inn, the likely explanation for the gap of 44 years between Betttenham's death and the acquisition of the bason and ewer being that the bequest could not be raised for the Inn until after certain life interests set up under the will had been exhausted. This would probably have occurred in about 1650.

The tazzae are often used or on display on Guest Nights. Next time you see them, drink a quiet toast to a man valued for himself, his dedication to the Inn and his learning rather than the depth of his pockets or his financial success at the Bar. ■