Anthony Christian and the French Plating Trade in Eighteenth-Century London

by Peter Cameron

Fig. 1: Wine flagon, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca. 1760. One of three lidded wine flagons from the Augusta Stone Communion Service. The broad baluster body on a wide-spreading molded foot. The handle is cast and seamed, forming a double scroll; opposite the handle is a cast pouring lip of triangular form, the upper part everted and the lower part with collared pendant drops. Silver plated brass. H. 12⅓, Diam. (foot) 5⅞ in. Marked *AC* to the immediate right of the handle and below the rim. Courtesy the Augusta Stone Presbyterian Church.

The alchemical and confusingly named trade of the "French plate" worker has now been largely forgotten. In the eighteenth century, however, it was a familiar craft whereby French platers reproduced contemporary silver wares in brass and then plated the objects with silver, usually in the form of applied leaf, built up layer upon layer (Fig.1).[1] While some of these wares survive, they have often been stripped of their original precious surface either through wear (Fig. 2) or deliberate mechanical polishing.[2] Yet, when first manufactured, they must have appeared little different than solid silver.

The technique of applying silver leaf to brass alloy is described in many eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century encyclopaedias, the fullest description being that of Diderot and d'Alembert in their *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des metiers,* published in thirty-two volumes between 1751 and 1777.[3] The process, referred to as "French Plating" in Britain, drew upon ancient methods and entailed heating a brass object to "blue heat" and then applying and burnishing silver leaves, up to sixty layers thick depending on the desired durability.[4] The craft was clearly laborious and the finished product relatively expensive, though still a third of the price of its equivalent in solid silver.[5] An examination of the historic trade in eighteenth-century England reveals the surprising success and resilience of the craft.

The French plate working trade seems to have appeared in London in the second decade of the eighteenth century and to have prospered and survived well into the nineteenth century. The hollowware forms, flatware, and a range of other articles were produced by a small group of specialists who crafted and re-silvered articles for trade in London and the rest of the United Kingdom, as well as the colonies. They sold the wares either directly to the public or retailed them through goldsmiths, silversmiths, hardware men, ironmongers, and brasiers.[6]

Fig. 2: Lidded tankard, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca.1755. The baluster body with a rib applied just above the belly; the cast and seamed handle forms a double scroll of "D" section. The lid, with cast scroll thumb-piece is high-domed in two stages. Brass, the exterior of which has silvering in the molding and around the applied mounts. The interior has extensive (later) silvering. H. 8, Diam. (base) 4⅓ in. Three *AC* marks to the right of the handle below the rim. Courtesy Jonathan Trace Antiques.

There are several assumptions about French plating. One is that it was easily worn and the surface tended to peel. Another is that the technique died out soon after the introduction of Sheffield plate[7] in the 1750s and was used thereafter only as a method of repair for the sheet metal used in Sheffield plating.[8] In fact, these suppositions are inaccurate. The Wakelin ledgers (1747–1805), which record a series of partnerships in the silver trade, provide some evidence of the market in articles of French plate. But they do not show that French plate rubbed off. Rather, some articles in French plate were more robust than their Sheffield plate equivalents. A survey of dish crosses sold to clients in the Wakelin ledgers shows how much more frequently Sheffield crosses were returned for repair than their French plate counterparts.[9]

Edward Wakelin, his partners, and successors were goldsmiths and silversmiths and it is clear from their ledgers that they were happy to embrace the French plating trade. Not everyone welcomed it, however, and one rather peevish retailer of secondhand silver, advertising in 1731, referred to "the Decoys and

Impositions Gentlemen are often liable to in the Goldsmith's way, from…the Excessive Deceit of Whited Brass sold only by Brasiers, and by them called French Plate."[10] Nevertheless, like Wakelin, most traders in articles of precious metal accepted French Plate as a legitimate and profitable area of business.

The French plating technique in fact had many advantages. Sheffield plate articles, however ingeniously made, could only be constructed from sheet. French plate, in common with silver, could be made from sheet and cast elements combined. The fact that parts of objects could be cast in brass and then silvered using the French plating technique meant that it remained useful for all sorts of objects, whether furniture hardware, spouts on urns, parts of plateaux, etc., many years after the 1780s when the market for French plate coffee pots, salvers, candlesticks, and so on had declined. When French plate articles did wear, they could be refurbished if necessary by reapplying the layers of silver leaf onto the base brass. In addition, French plate was free from the duties levied on silver wares, as was Sheffield plate.

The earliest known datable piece of English French plate is a sideboard dish engraved with the arms of Sir Rowland Winn (1675–1722), third Baronet of Nostell, Yorkshire. It was made en-suite with a set of silver second course dishes and a basin, hallmarked for London 1716: all except two bear the mark of the goldsmith David Willaume (London, active 1697–1728).[11] It is tempting to believe that Willaume may himself have also supplied the French plate dish, just as there is evidence that his son, David Willaume (1693–1761), supplied a set of French plate dish covers to the Earl of Carlisle in 1732.[12]

The specialists who actually manufactured French plate in London in the eighteenth century have left little documentary record of their work and lives. One clear reason for this paucity of archival evidence is that, of those so far traced, some of the earliest French plate workers were immigrants, sometimes not of the Protestant faith, and hence not traceable in parish birth and marriage registers. Though the old guild system of regulation of established trades by the City of London livery companies was breaking down by this time, it was still effective in controlling business within the old city walls. Probably for this reason, the French platers worked outside this perimeter and (at least in the beginning) outside the apprenticeship system of the livery companies, although no doubt their trading relationships included founders, silver leaf beaters, engravers, and others who worked within or under the City of London's control.

One intriguing source of evidence, however, does exist. A proportion of surviving silvered brass bears pseudo hallmarks in imitation of the legally required marks stamped on silver. Among the sets of pseudo marks, six different maker's marks appear with regularity. It is the maker's mark *AC* that is the subsequent subject of this article. Thus far, nearly a hundred examples of his work have been found.

The *AC* mark is in uppercase Roman letters in a rectangular punch and appears struck between two separate punches with pseudo lion passants in imitation of the contemporary sterling silver mark (Figs. 3, 3a). The lions are somewhat whippet-like in form, and face to the right as opposed to the left-facing lion used for

Fig. 3: Treasury Inkstand, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca. 1735. Of conventional oblong form. One lid lifts to reveal a pen compartment, the other reveals three inkwell compartments. The body of the inkstand is supported on four cast trumpet form legs with bold bun feet. Each lid is engraved with a crest, probably for Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Strafford (d. 1739), or William Wentworth, 2nd Earl (d. 1791). Brass with remnants of silvering on the interior surfaces. H. 2¼, W. 5½, L. 8⅓ in. The interior is struck with three crisp *AC* pseudo hallmarks. Courtesy private collection.

Fig. 3a: The marks of *AC* between two pseudo lions, as struck on the inkstand. Courtesy private collection.

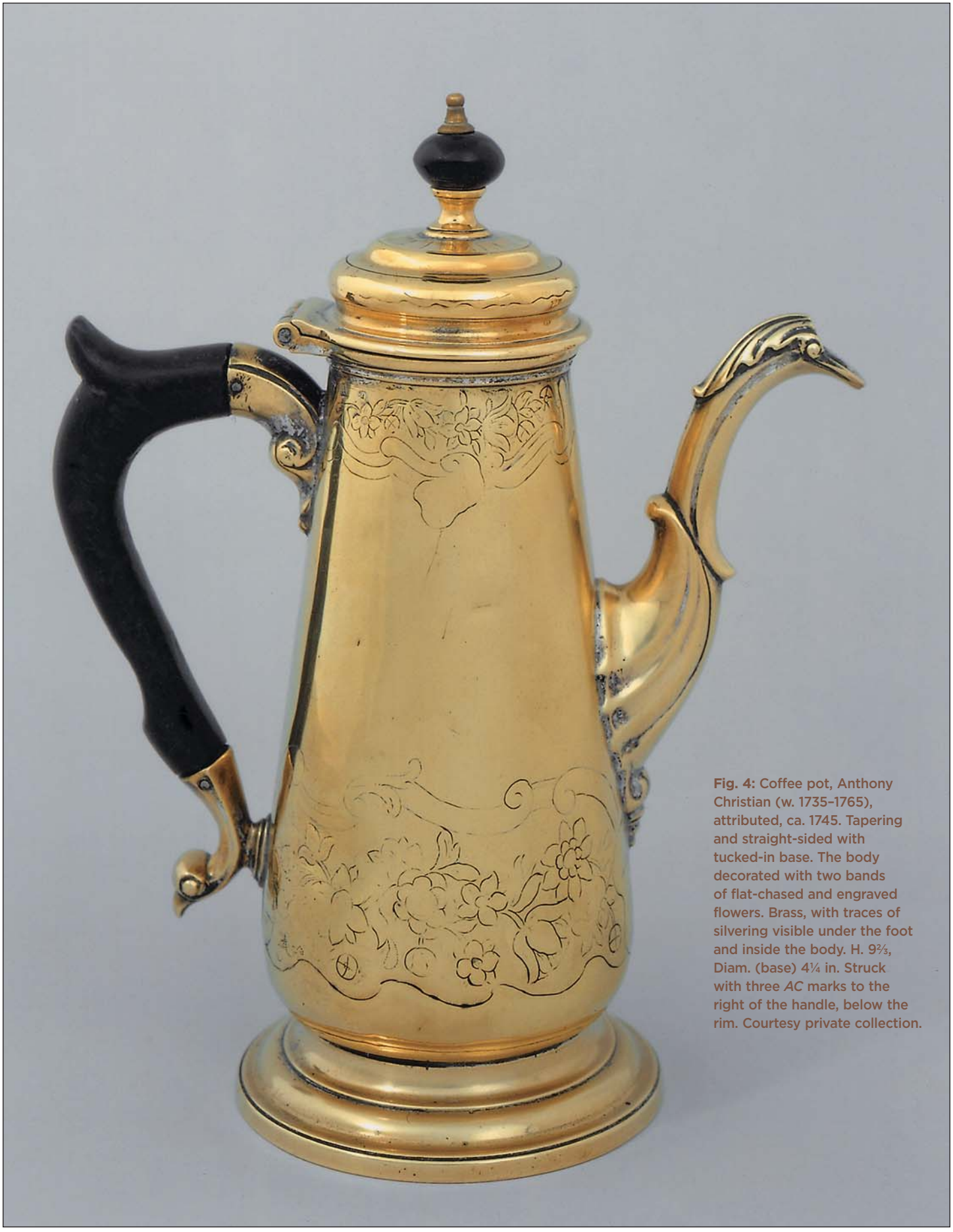

Fig. 4: Coffee pot, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca. 1745. Tapering and straight-sided with tucked-in base. The body decorated with two bands of flat-chased and engraved flowers. Brass, with traces of silvering visible under the foot and inside the body. H. 9⅔, Diam. (base) 4¼ in. Struck with three *AC* marks to the right of the handle, below the rim. Courtesy private collection.

Fig. 5: Two-handled cup, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca. 1750. Substantial inverted bell-form. Brass. The interior of the cup retains extensive silvering and traces of silvering adhere to the detail of the exterior. Marked *AC*. H. 8⅛, W. 11 in. Courtesy Mark and Marjorie

sterling silver. The marks represent a clear attempt to suggest that the silvered brass article is made of solid silver. In common with the other makers, *AC* struck his marks in a manner and in a position that makes them easily visible. Coffee pots (Fig. 4), tankards, lidded jugs, and a mug have been noted with the marks struck on the upper edge of the body, immediately to the right of the handle sockets. A two-handled cup (Figs. 5, 5a) is marked on the upper edge between the handles, and a sauce boat is marked on the upper interior of the boat.

Stylistically, *AC*'s French Plate suggests dates of manufacture between circa 1735 and circa 1765. Outstanding amongst his work is a communion service supplied to the Augusta Stone Presbyterian Church, Fort Defiance, Virginia (Fig. 6). The extensive service comprises three lidded flagons, six chalices, and three alms basins, together with six unmarked footed patens. It was acquired about 1760, soon after the building of the stone church and during the life of the first pastor at the church, Dr. John Craig, who died in 1774. According to tradition, the service was ordered by the congregation from England and arrived via New Castle, Delaware. It was so costly that its return was contemplated. Now electroplated, it has remained in regular use by the congregation since it was acquired.[13]

What evidence is there to determine who *AC* might have been? A most interesting will survives, dated 1774 and proved the following year, for Anthony Christian of St. Clement Danes parish, London, "Gilder and French Plate maker." There is also, among the archives of the Earl of Stafford, a receipt for a payment in 1747 by Lady Arundell to Anthony Christian for a brass censer (Fig. 7).[14] Christian, therefore, was not only a gilder and silver plater but a supplier of articles in brass. It seems very probable that he was indeed the maker *AC*. By collating this information with other evidence, some of the life of Anthony Christian can be reconstructed.

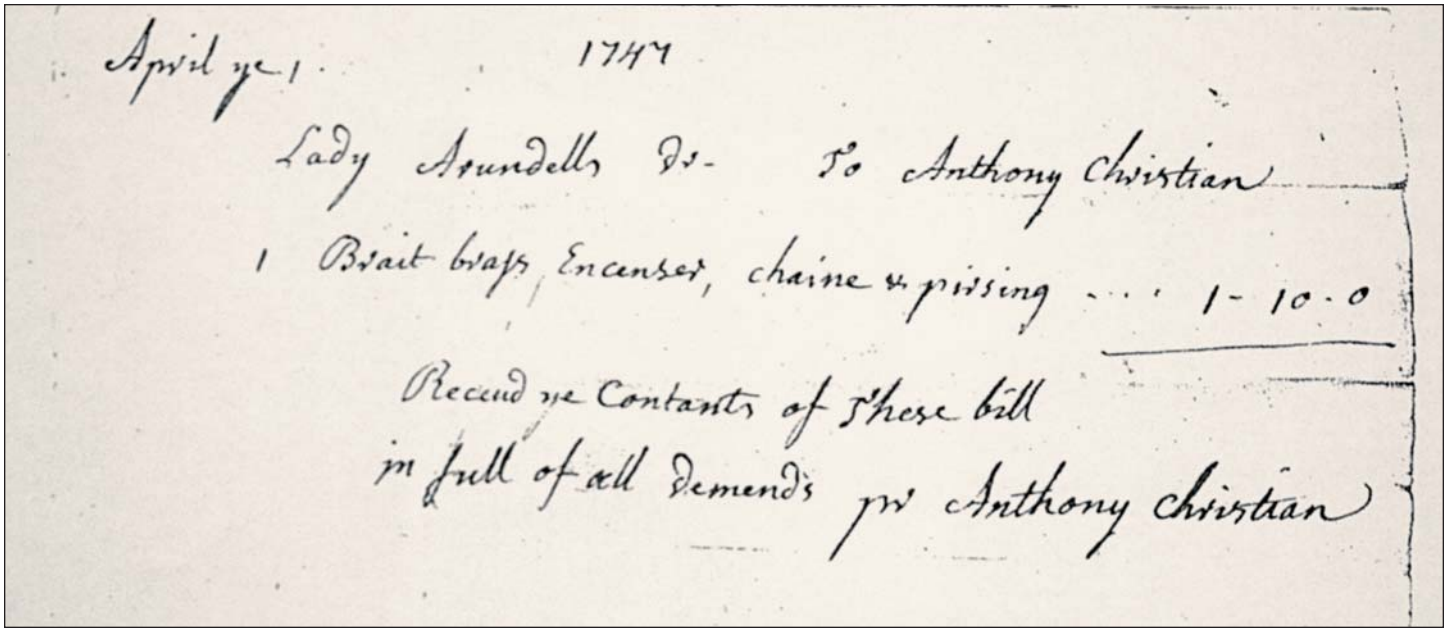

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Fig. 5a: Detail of figure 5. Courtesy Mark and Marjorie Allen.

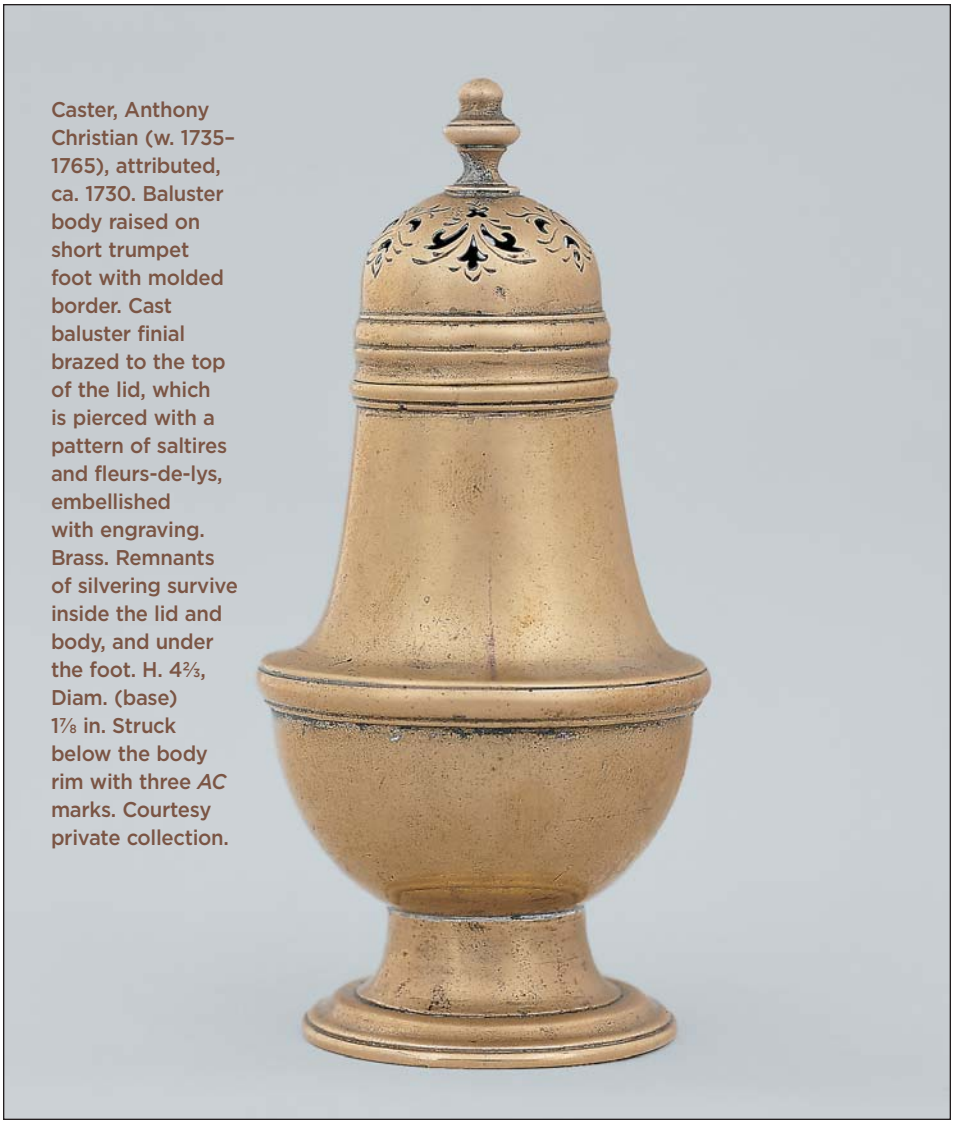
Fig. 6: The Augusta Stone Communion Service, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca. 1760. Brass. Currently electroplated. Marked *AC*. Courtesy the Augusta Stone Presbyterian Church.

Fig. 7: Anthony Christian Invoice for a brass "Encenser," 1747. Courtesy Staffordshire Record Office.

The will refers to a brother, Theodore Christian, or "Chretien," which would suggest that Anthony and his brother were French immigrants. Though there is little reference to Anthony's trade, other than a bequest of £5 to a workman, Thomas Adams, the will is that of a prosperous man who was owner of stocks and shares. His wife Frances was appointed sole executrix and had the power to sell his property to further the maintenance and advancement of their children. Anthony refers to his marriage agreement with his wife and her rights to bequests from her mother, Ann Langhorne.

Anthony Christian was a Roman Catholic. In eighteenth-century London, Catholics attended Mass either in private chapels or in the chapels of the embassies of Catholic states. The earliest, but at present uncorroborated, reference to Anthony Christian is his marriage in 1738 to Sarah Audry. In April 1746 he is named in the registers of the Venetian Embassy Chapel as a godparent to Mary, daughter of his brother Theodore. The following year, the burial of Anthony's daughter, Elizabeth, is recorded in the registers of the parish of St. Paul Covent Garden, and two years later, in December 1749, his wife Sarah was buried in the same parish. From this year Christian was living in Rose Street, Covent Garden, where he remained until 1760.

In November 1754, Christian obtained a licence for his marriage with Frances Langhorne. He is described in the licence as a widower of the parish of St. Paul, Covent Garden, and declares his intention to marry Frances, a spinster, of St. Giles in the Fields,



Caster, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca. 1730. Baluster body raised on short trumpet foot with molded border. Cast baluster finial brazed to the top of the lid, which is pierced with a pattern of saltires and fleurs-de-lys, embellished with engraving. Brass. Remnants of silvering survive inside the lid and body, and under the foot. H. 4⅔, Diam. (base) 1⅞ in. Struck below the body rim with three *AC* marks. Courtesy private collection.

aged twenty-seven.[15] At least two children were born from this marriage: Edward, born circa 1757, and John, born circa 1760.[16] From the second quarter of 1760, Anthony was living in Duke Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, in the parish of St. Clement Danes, near the Catholic Sardinian Chapel. He was still living there at the time of his death in November 1775. He was buried in the burial ground of St. Giles in the Fields, where his widow, Frances, was buried on 16 March 1777.[17] Nothing further is known of Anthony Christian's life at present.

French plate manufacturing was a hybrid occupation, forming an interface between precious and base-metal specialist trades. There has been much research into silver and pewter work but, with the remarkable exception of Robert Sherlock, who has looked at brass chandelier-makers, there has been almost no work on the other metal trades, despite their huge importance within the London trades as a whole.[18] There has also been little attempt to grasp the interconnectedness of trades and the willingness of individual tradesmen to work or deal in a variety of media—base and precious—as opportunity arose. To cite a few examples of this complexity: the silversmith, Hugh Mills, a silver salver maker, was at the same time a brass sieve manufacturer; Joseph Lewis, the goldsmith of Aldgate, London, supplied the brass chandelier purchased by St. Michael's, Charleston, S. Carolina, although the maker was George Penton, brass founder;[19] when silversmith William Cripps died his business was managed by his cousin Mark Cripps, a pewterer. It is within this multidimensional web of enterprise and opportunism that the careers of Anthony Christian and his fellow French plate workers must be explored. As more pieces of surviving French plate come to light and as archives are more fully catalogued, it is to be hoped that the history of the French plate trade can be appreciated anew. AFA

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All photography, unless noted, by Andy Johnson.

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1. The word "plate" stems from the French word "plat," meaning "flat." Since the late medieval period it came to mean articles made of solid silver as well as any flat piece of sheet metal. "Plate" is still the correct word for articles in solid silver. As techniques were introduced to coat one kind of metal with another, no specific vocabulary evolved to distinguish between solid silver and what we now know as silver-plated base metal. Among English Statutes, one of 1403 legislated against domestic objects made of Copper and Latten "over gilt and silver Like to Gold or Silver." In 1672 the Goldsmiths' Company in London issued an edict in vain concerning "several Pieces of Brass Plate covered over with Silver... and stamped with Counterfeit Marks." In the eighteenth century, when French craftsmen introduced their method of plating with silver leaf, the process came to be known as "French plate." But to add confusion, the term could equally mean solid silver from France and, later in the century, French plate was also used to describe high quality French sheet glass.
2. Over the last fifty years, through an inversion of taste, pieces have been collected not as substitute silver but for the rather warmer tones of their underlying brass.
3. The French craftsmen who carried out the silvering [not the brass manufacture] in France were called "argenteurs."
4. Recently, Mark Erdmann, a student at West Dean College in Sussex, England, successfully recreated the process. It took him ten hours to silver a small taperstick. See Mark Erdmann, *French Plating, an exploration of the historical technique with practical experiments in silvering* (West Dean College, June 2003).
5. The Edinburgh silversmiths Ker and Dempster charged Lord Deskfoord £3 4s 6d for a pair of French plate candlesticks in 1756. Deskfoord would have paid perhaps three times more for the equivalent in solid silver. French plate was thus an attractive alternative to silver and there was a steady demand for it throughout Britain, Ireland, and the colonies. National Archives of Scotland, AS GD248/967/5.
6. French plate was included in the long list of items "just imported in the Philadelphia Packet, Captain Richard Budden" and offered for sale by Anne Hume of Burlington in West Jersey in 1764. New Jersey Archives, Newspaper Extracts, p. 292.
7. Early Sheffield, or "fused" plate, consisted of a layer of copper fused with silver, with early examples having only one side of silver and later examples having the copper sandwiched between silver layers. In both cases, the metal was heated, cooled, and rolled into sheets.
8. Most recently in Helen Clifford, *Silver in London, the Parker and Wakelin Partnership 1760–1776* (Yale 2004), 92–93. Clifford drew on Eric Turner, "Silver

Plating in the 18th Century" in Susan La Niece and Paul Craddock, eds., *Metal Plating and Patination: Cultural Technical and Historical Developments*, Butterworth-Heinemann (Oxford 1993).

9. V&A Museum archives, Wickes/Wakelin Ledgers AAD/1995/7.
10. John Hopkins, Goldsmith: see British Library, Burney Colln. Daily Post (6 May, 1729).
11. The sideboard dish was sold at Dreweatt Neate Auction, August 14, 2005; the other wares are at the property.
12. The dish covers are in the V&A, Colonial Williamsburg, and a private American collection.
13. James Van Devanter, *History of the Augusta Church, from 1737 to 1900* (The Ross Printing Company, Staunton, VA, 1900).
14. Staffordshire Record Office, Stafford, Jerningham Papers, Earl of Stafford's Accounts, D641/3/P/1/3/ bundle 5.
15. See the Marriage Index compiled by Percival Boyd, genealogist, died 1955. See also Vicar-General Marriage Licence Allegations 11/21/1754. Microfilms in Society of Genealogists, London.
16. Edward became a partner in the firm of Wine Merchants and Distillers, Christian and Bassett, in Arundel Street, Holborn; nothing is known of the life of John until his death is reported in April 1810.
17. For their wills, see Anthony Christian, National Archives, PCC Probate 11/reel 1012/sig. 409, Middx. Nov. 1775; Frances Christian, Nat. Arch. PCC Prob. 11/reel 1029/sig104; Middx. Mar. 1777. For their Burials see St. Giles in the Fields Burial Register on microfilm at the Metropolitan Archives, London, film X105/024. The Burial ground of St. Giles was a popular choice for Catholics. See also the Rate books for St. Paul Covent Garden and St. Clement Danes in the Westminster Archives, London. The property in Duke Street is there recorded as having "burnt down" at the end of 1759.
18. See Robert Sherlock, "Some London Makers of Chandeliers," in *The Journal of the Antique Metalware Society*, vol. 16 (June 2008), 32–43. For research on sword-cutlers, see Leslie Southwick, *London Silver-hilted Swords: Their Makers, Suppliers and Allied Traders with Directory* (Royal Armouries 2003).
19. Sherlock, ibid.

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Salver, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca. 1740. Good gauge with raised rim and applied moulding, the shaped edge formed as a "Bath" border, the whole supported by three double scrolled cast feet with hoof ends. Brass, with traces of silvering visible. H. 1¼, Diam. 9 in. Engraved on the upper side with an asymmetrical cartouche of scrolls and foliage with initials within. Struck with three *AC* marks near the rim on the upper side. Courtesy private collection.

Tea caddy, Anthony Christian (w. 1735–1765), attributed, ca. 1730. "Cut-corner" rectangular form with hinged lid, which is slightly domed and applied in the center with a cast baluster finial of conforming shape. Brass. All traces of silvering have been removed and the surface is now lacquered. H. 4¾, W. 3⅔, D. 2 in. Struck *AC* below the rim of the body, and with three marks on the opposite side to the hinge. Courtesy private collection.