

“BRUMMAGEM” JEWELLERY.

BY BERNARD MCEVOY.

THE gilt jewellery to which the term “Brummagem” owes its rise, was probably made in the Warwickshire town of Birmingham early in the last century, when the population of the place was only about five thousand. The name Birmingham was originally “Bromwycham,” and this ancient Saxon appellation was corrupted by common usage into the less scholarly “Brummagem,” a pronunciation which is still common in the Midlands. In 1704 there was at least one “gilt-toy maker,” as the manufacturer of seals, “fob-chains,” and buckles was then designated. The ordinary way of wearing one of the large turnip-shaped watches of those and many succeeding days was in a separate, narrow and deep pocket, in front of a man’s breeches, from whence it had to be extracted by the “fob-chain,” terminating in one or more seals and articles of jewellery—charms as we should call them now—which hung down in front. Readers of Dickens will remember that of Mr. Weller, Senior, it is said that “a copper watch-chain, terminating in one seal, and a key of the same material, dangled loosely from his capacious waistband;” and also when Sam Weller is telling the story of the fat man, “as hadn’t caught a glimpse of his own shoes for five and forty year,” he describes him as having “a very handsome gold watch-chain hanging out about a foot and a quarter, and a gold watch in his fob pocket.”

It was the making of these chains, seals, and watch-keys of “gilding metal”—a mixture of copper and zinc—and gilding them by what is called the mercury process, that led to the term “Brummagem” coming to describe, as it ultimately did, something that was

merely an imitation of what it pretended to be. Tony Weller’s copper watch chain was no doubt of Birmingham manufacture, but with the gilding worn off it. These articles when new looked just as good as gold, and had the merit of being useful even when their true character became apparent, and the base metal of which they were composed showed through the thin coating of gold that covered them. Women’s brooches, and various other knickknacks were also made in the same way, and at the beginning of the present century a flourishing trade was carried on in them.

The “gilding metal” which served as their foundation was an alloy in considerable demand. It was produced in the following way. A brass was made by melting together in a crucible fifty pounds of copper with forty pounds of zinc. This brass was run into small ingots, and a subsequent alloy was made by melting thirty-five pounds of it with fifty-two pounds of copper. The metal was then run into flat ingots, and rolled or drawn into wire in the usual manner. In making the various articles the parts were soldered together with what was called “hard” solder, a brass containing such a proportion of zinc as to be brittle when red hot. In that state it was pounded, in an iron mortar, with a heavy iron pestle about four feet long, until it was reduced to powder, and afterwards was passed through sieves of varying degrees of coarseness. For use in the “Brummagem jewellery” it was required to be tolerably fine, and, for the purposes of manufacture, was made into a sort of paste with water and borax which had been previously calcined and powdered. The borax served as a flux to