The Four Peers ring - an important mid 18th century Jacobite gold and enamel ring
the shaped rectangular head of white enamel with four initials and coronets to corners with dates surrounding an executioner's axe to centre in gold, the shoulders formed as a rose and thistle in green, white and pink enamels, the interwoven shank with gold detailed initials and dates on a white enamel ground

Provenance:
Commissioned by Lord Francis Oliphant of Gask
Gifted to Judge James Graham of Airth or his son William Graham of Airth.
By direct descent to Mrs Ann Graham of Airth (née Stirling of Ardoch)
By direct descent to her great grandson Colonel Stirling of Kippendavie
By direct descent
£15,000-25,000
The Four Peers Ring is perhaps one of the most iconic and romantic examples of Jacobite jewellery and contemporary relic. While relic normally denotes a fragment or part of a revered place, person or object these important rings were created at a contemporary moment as a commemorative memorial for the Peers and high-ranking Officers who gave the greatest sacrifice for the cause they so staunchly upheld. The execution of these men was not only a defining moment in the aftermath of the uprising and Jacobite history but shows the fear and recrimination of the Scots and the Clans which the Hanoverian dynasty dealt after the defeat of Culloden. The aftermath of the battle was not the only recrimination for the nation, the butchery on the field of battle, the humiliation of the Prince and Stuarts, and the seizing of lands and titles from those involved was not enough. A public face had to be put to the defeat and in the absence of a Stuart the closest thing were his most trusted and closest advisors and supporters.

Those who had not fled and were captured were punished to varied degrees but those of the ‘Four Peers’ no doubt the harshest. This important ring is one of only four recorded examples, the only in private hands and of them, arguably, the finest in survival and provenance.

Three others are known to survive, all within institutional collections, National Museums Scotland (H N1 154, two with the British Museum (1418 and 1490, the latter Ex Sir A. W. Franks Collection).

Although unmarked, it has long been considered within the Jacobite families who owned these rings that they originated from Oliphant of Gask family and were presented to surviving and staunch Jacobite families for their work and effort within the cause. It has long been considered, although never proven, that these rings were commissioned from Ebenezer Oliphant, Goldsmith in Edinburgh, by Lord Francis Oliphant of Gask. While not proven a more likely candidate cannot be considered. Ebenezer Oliphant’s place within the Jacobite establishment as brother of the Laird of Gask, cousin to Laurence Oliphant, Goldsmith and Aide de Campe to Prince Charles Edward Stuart, and his own place as renowned Jacobite Goldsmith all make him the likely, if not the only, candidate. Indeed, the production of such rings supporting the Jacobites would have been a very dangerous offence and so close to the defeat at Culloden could only have been made by the staunchest of supporters. It is not surprising that the ring is unmarked as any 18th century hallmarked Scottish jewellery is scarce. Also advertising the maker of such a piece, if it were found by Hanoverian supporters, would surely have guaranteed problems and re-crimination for the craftsmen.

The Oliphants had been key supporters of the Stuart claim and had been vocal opposition to the Act of Union in 1707. They had been with King James in the uprising of 1715 and played an active role in support, funding and propaganda for the 1745. The 10th Lord escaped after Culloden to Sweden and latterly lived in France. He bought his Amnesty in 1763 and returned to Scotland but did not stop his staunch and open Jacobite support.

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The original owner of this example of ‘The Four Peers Ring’ could not have been closer to the uprising and its aftermath, John Graham of Airth being not only a supporter but self-proclaimed defender of the Jacobites after the defeat in 1715. James Graham worked on behalf of the Peers and other captives at their trials in 1716 trying to provide some defence for the prisoners and while his duty seemed destined to fail, with the full weight of Hanoverian monarchy and hierarchy against him, the case he fought was considered a victory. Although appealing for leniency, and not the death penalty, was obviously his goal the likelihood of winning such terms was minimal.

Some consider the precedents he set in 1716 as the cornerstone for the treatment of prisoners after the ‘45, in particular the Peers, nobleman of the nation, undisturbed, the whole day with his drummer, enlisting all who offered themselves. To each of whom a white cockade was given, and a bounty of five guineas promised.

There were nine officers from the Manchester Regiment executed on 30th July 1746. While many regimental histories are crowded with conflicting accounts, families and men felt the force of Hanoverian recrimination those laid down on the Manchester regiment were ferocious, a regiment of English men in the service of the Scots (as was seen by the Hanoverians) had to be punished. It is said “This unit indeed was treated with a ferocity which indicated that its degree of culpability was held to be higher than that of any other in the Jacobite army”.

JN – James Nicolson who was an owner of a coffee house in Leith, and held a commission as Lieutenant in the Duke of Perth’s regiment. It was stated at his trial that he was an uncle of Donald McDonald. DMD – Donald McDonald or McDonell was a Captain in Keppoch’s regiment.

WO – Walter Ogilvie was a Lieutenant in Lord Lewis of Gordon’s Regiment.

28th November 1746

‘I am come here to pay the last debt to nature, and I think myself happy in having an opportunity of enclosing all who offered themselves. To each of whom a white cockade was given, and a bounty of five guineas promised.’

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executioner cried out “God save King George!”

The bodies were quartered and delivered to the keeper of the New Gaol, who buried them: the heads were set on fire while the proper officers were present at Culloden and in the rear guard, but in the heat of the closing stages of the battle they mistook the Hanoverian Royal Dragoons as a Jacobite regiment and were captured.

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imprisoned at Inverness he was transported to London and tried for High Treason at the House of Lords, with Earl Cromarty and Lord Balmerino. While he pled guilty he repented for his part in the Jacobite actions, however to little avail. Even with supporters such as the Duke of Hamilton and Lady Townshend making pleas for leniency he was sentenced to death. As with Lord Balmerino, he was accused of acting upon Prince Charles’s, apparent order to ‘give no quarter’, he and Balmerino opposed this view and were publicly interviewed of the facts. Although repenting his part in the ’45 he and Balmerino (staunch to the end) ended their lives together as and friends.

Dressed in black, he met his final moments bravely and in his statement said that “his punishment was just”.

Unlike many others executed in London, Boyd’s head was not displayed and was reunited with his body in the coffin, buried within the Tower of London, perhaps allowed due to his attempt to repent his part in the uprising or as a small gesture to the fact he was the highest-ranked peer to be executed for these crimes.

Arthur Elphinstone was a member of a family with the tradition of ‘fierce Episcopalian nationalism’, his father before him had been an opponent to the Act of Union in 1707, however Arthur wrestled with his beliefs and accepted (as many other Jacobite did) a commission under Queen Anne in Lord Shannon’s regiment. Fighting in the 15 for the Hanoverians he deserted to the Jacobites and on the eventual defeat of the uprising had to flee to Avignon where he appears as a Lieutenant Colonel in the refugee lists.

By October 1745 he joined Prince Charles Edward Stuart as an Honorary Colonel commanding forty horse in the Life Guards. He was present on the march south to England and was the first commander to take his troops into Derby.

Charles Radcliffe, 5th Earl of Derwentwater (1693-1746)

Of the four Peers commemorated on the ring, Charles Radcliffe was the only one to be executed for his part in the 1715 uprising along with that of his involvement in 1745.

The connection of the Radcliffe family and the Stuarts was close from an early time. Their titles had been bestowed by King James II and made them amongst the most feared Jacobite families in England. Charles, along with his brothers Francis and James, were sent to the Stuart court at St Germain at the request of Queen Mary, widow of James II, to be companions and fellow pupils of Prince James Francis Edward. Charles and his elder brother James were involved in the uprising of 1715 and both surrendered at Preston. Charles was tried on 18th May 1716 and found guilty and sentenced to death. This sentence was deferred until July and he latterly obtained a further stay of execution because of the change in public mood. The success of the ’15 had been limited and the defeat so definite the public mood seemed not to demand public retribution. Eventually, with several other Jacobites he escaped Newgate prison in December and fled to the continent, living in Urbino. He was appointed the Chevalier’s agent in Paris and was presumably an important and ever present member of the Stuarts inner circle and court.

Charles participation in the ’45 seems never to have been in doubt and indeed he was involved in the organisation from the continent. He, along with his son James, were captured before their part could be played. In 1745 they were travelling abroad the French privateer ship, Esperance, enroute to Scotland with arms for the Jacobite army. On this voyage they were captured by the British ship Sheerness and sent directly to the Tower of London where he was retried and condemned to death for his involvement and escape of the ’15h and his obvious support and involvement in the ’45.

William Boyd, 4th Earl of Kilmarnock (1705-1746)

Boyd’s career as a Jacobite is marred with conflicting sides and evidence. He appears to have been perhaps a soldier chasing fortune, not the complete political or religious ideal. In the uprising of 1715 he followed his father, the 3rd Earl of Kilmarnock, into battle under their own regiment in support of the government. His father died in 1717 and he succeeded him to lands and titles. Sadly, his land by this point was encumbered and Boyd later confessed his was a ‘careless and dissolute life’ marked by ‘vanity, and addicitedness to impurity and sensual pleasure’. He played an active part in the peer’s elections and rarely, if ever, voted against the ministry and establishment. In the hostile contested 1734 election, it was noted by the opposition, he was brought back from France by the government, indeed at their expense, and both he and his wife received pensions of £200.

However, by the time Walpole left office his pension had been withdrawn and his leanings change markedly to becoming a high profile Jacobite - for which he will forever be remembered. He is quoted as telling the Duke of Argyll “for the two Kings and their rights, I cared not a farthing which prevailed, but I was starving, and, by God, if Mahommed had set up his standard in the Highlands I had been a good Mussulman for bread, and stuck close to the party, for I must eat”.

He was relatively late in joining the cause, in October of 1745, and had no part in the planning of the uprising. He was one of the few lowland Peers who followed Prince Charles and it can still be debated if this was with the view to restoring his fortunes alone. After joining he quickly rose through the ranks and was named to the Privy Council. Although an advisor he generally followed the will of Charles and was not as outspoken as many other important figures. He commanded a troop of Horse Guards and led their march south into England. His local knowledge helped him distinguish himself on 17th January 1746 at the battle of Falkirk.


At Culloden he was at Prince Charles side and as the battle led to defeat, he helped Charles away from the field and to his eventual escape.

After the defeat, and against Lord Elcho’s advice, Balmerino gave himself up to the Hanoverian troops. His thinking behind this is unclear, as a nobleman so closely involved in the ’45 and in ’15 (and worse as a deserter to the Hanoverians). He was charged on 29th July with high treason and pled not guilty. He conducted his own defence and, unlike Kilmarnock and Cromarty, he did not request mercy.

He is perhaps best remembered, along with Kilmarnock, as the two voices which stood beside Prince Charles and defended the Hanoverian claims that Charles had ordered no quarter be given to Hanoverian prisoners or soldiers. Not only did Balmerino refute this in a public interview with Kilmarnock but also in his final moments from the gallows before his death.

On the gallows he wore a plaid cap under his wig, showing his loyalty to Scotland to his final moments. He also handed the executioner, John Thrift, 3 guineas requesting he carry his work out professionally and swiftly. It however still took three blows to sever his head.

His final words upon the gallows of Tower Hill were a prayer. Adamant to the end, he ended his support for the cause in such staunch manner no doubt to his commitment could be levied, “O Almighty God, I humbly beseech Thee to bless the King, the Prince, and Duke of York, and the dutiful commitment could be levied, among the Four Peers and 120 Jacobite executed he time was described by the Gentleman’s Magazine: “Lord Lovat makes an odd figure, being generally more loaded with clothes than a Dutchman with his ten pair of breeches; he is tall, walks very upright considering his great age, and is tolerably well shaped; he has a large mouth and a short nose, with eyes very much contracted and down-looking, a very small forehead, almost all covered with a large perwig; this gives him a grim aspect, but upon addressing anyone he puts on a smiling countenance. He was tried for High Treason before the House of Lords and gave his own defence. At the end of his case, in inimitable fashion and charm he replied “, ‘Nothing except to thank your lordship for your goodness to me. God bless you all, and I wish you an eternal farewell. We shall not meet again in the same place; I am sure of that’. While public executions always attracted crowds, that of Simon Lord Lovat attracted a huge crowd by any measure. Perhaps the larger than life character, his life story and advanced age convinced more to turn out for this. Due to this popularity the crowds were huge and too much for the erected scaffolding platforms to hold, resulting in their destruction under the weight of the crowd, killing 20 spectators. In his larger than life character, Lovat found this implausibly funny and was seen to laugh heartily and loud all the way to the executioner’s block. It is reputed that this is the origin of the saying to laugh your head off! Lovat apparently laughing till his final moments. This seems a little extension of the truth as his final words are recorded, taken from Horace, ‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’ (‘It is sweet and proper to die for one’s country’), then turned to moralising by quoting Ovid’s ‘Nam genus et pravos, et quae non fecimus ipsis, Vix ea nostravoco’ (‘For those things, which were ourselves had no share, I can scarcely call our own’).

Among the Four Peers and 120 Jacobite executed he was last and indeed the last person to be publicly beheaded in Britain.

References:
Catalogue of Finger Rings in the British Museum, O M Dalton, 1932, No. 1419

At the end of this prayer he immediately gave the signal for the executioner to complete his task.

Simon Fraser, 11th Lord Lovat (1667/1674-1747)
Simon Fraser came from a line of Jacobites including his father, Thomas, who had played a powerful role in the Jacobite rising under John Graham of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee, in 1689, for which he suffered imprisonment. In 1690 Thomas Fraser served with the Jacobite general Thomas Buchan, and six years later he allied with James, Lord Drummond (later second Duke of Perth) and other noblemen in an attempt to capture Edinburgh Castle for James VII and II.

Simon had a rather colourful and, in some cases, unseemly early life, trying to bribe family members to change inheritance and lands to his benefit. Trying to force his cousin to marry him when his bribery failed, however marrying her protector under duress in her stead, only to call the marriage a sham joke years later when its value was not apparent - having married two other women while not divorced from her.

Trouble followed him most of his early life and it took a pardon from King William, only after he had been found guilty of High Treason. However, this plea to King William was for personal gain only and he was still harboring his Jacobite feelings. Shortly after he made two trips to the Jacobite Court in St Germaine. To further cement his relationship in the Stuart court, and after King William’s death, he converted to Catholicism and met with Mary of Modena and the titular James VIII and III. He aligned himself with the Duke of Perth’s factions and was promoting an uprising from as early as 1703.

By 1715 he had bought his pardon and return to British soil and was based in London. By this time the Duke or Argyll had convinced him to support King George I. He headed north towards Inverness and took and held the city on behalf of King George. His fortunes now changing for the better, he appeared a Hanoverian. However, the disbandment of his forces and the city handed to others meant his income fell and his rise was short lived. This likely helped push him away from the Hanoverians and before long back to the Jacobites.

This toing and froing of side to side was as blatant as it was regular and it appears it was only his highly renowned charm got him not only into, but more often out of, some rather tricky situations between King George and King James on both sides.

By 1745 it was clear that his Whig allegiances had not given him the power, land and full title he had promised him reward for his support such, as Lieutenant-General of the Highlands; furthermore, Dukeor Argyll had convinced him to support King George and King James on both sides. Even throughout the campaigns. once he had pledged the Lovat Frasers and himself to the cause, he was keeping all avenues open and wrote regularly to the Whig hierarchy, with them still hoping that if they could not turn him they could at least secure his neutrality.

By 1746 Lovat was in his 80s and hardly a player on the battlefield. This fell to his son and heir who was threatened by disinheritance not to take part. He indeed was captured and imprisoned in Inverness, only to escape with help from local friends.

After the defeat of Culloden, Prince Charles fled and sought shelter from Lovat, who urged him on and promised men for another battle, presumably seeing his hopes, land, fortune and life slipping from his grasp. Charles declined and left, and Lovat fled his home too. In his escape he was captured by Hanoverian troops sailing up Loch Morar as he hid in a hollow tree to evade capture. However, the tree could not hide him and he was spotted and captured and taken prisoner to Fort William.

Transorted to London, he was interviewed and famously sketched by William Hogarth. Lovat at this Effigies of the late Earl of Kilmarnock, and the late Lord Balmerino.