

## The Biggart Family and Kilmaurs Cutlery

### Background

I have been a collector of Scottish provincial silver for almost 20 years, living in the town of Kilmarnock, only 2 miles from the village of Kilmaurs. Despite this, I was unaware of the cutlery trade that flourished in the village in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Recently a fork and knife of striking appearance, bearing the mark “**AB**”, were brought to my attention. It was suggested that they might be an example of Kilmaurs cutlery. This was when I became aware of the trade, prompting this investigation.

I started with fairly simple aims, namely to identify the “**AB**” and to clarify, if possible, the scale of the trade. In the course of the investigation it became obvious that there were many unanswered questions to be tackled. Consequently, the scope of the investigation widened considerably, leading to this article.

In the course of what follows I hope to outline what is known about the trade, to describe and illustrate the known examples of Kilmaurs cutlery, as well as to tackle some of the unanswered questions which emerged in the course of the study.

### Starting Point

A few pieces of cutlery are held in our museums<sup>(1)</sup> and, in rare cases, private hands<sup>(2)</sup>, that have been ascribed to the small village of Kilmaurs, in Ayrshire. I have identified 11 “sets” of a fork and knife, and one single fork, which are described and illustrated later in this article. As I prepared the article to go to press, I have been made aware of a further 2 “sets”, one with the maker's initials of **D.B.**, the other with **A.B.** This would bring the total of known “sets” to 14. These have all been dated to the mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century. For the most part, these items are of a very high quality, with tortoise shell handles, inlaid with silver wire, and with silver, domed pommel caps. These silver decorations explain their interest to collectors of Scottish provincial silver, as Kilmaurs does not feature in any of the standard reference works used by such collectors and, therefore, are probably not represented in most collections.

Most of these cutlery items carry the maker's stamp “**DB**”, which has been identified as referring to David Biggart (sic.) working in Kilmaurs in the 1680s. Kevingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow also holds in its collection an example of a “Hanger”, a single edged, short bladed sword of circa 1685. This also bears the “**DB**” mark, and has a tortoise shell handle, inlaid with silver wire. This item is central to both the identification of Kilmaurs as the place of origin of the cutlery, and to the dating of the items. Much more will be said later about this sword and its significance. <sup>(3)</sup> As will be seen later, a few pieces exist with the initials “**AB**”, and one set has the initials “**RT**”.

### History of the trade

The origins of the cutlery trade in the parish and village of Kilmaurs are lost, and are surrounded by often repeated legend. One story, quoted at length in an article written by William Lamberton in 1890, in a series for the Kilmarnock Standard newspaper <sup>(4)</sup> states that “... some of the Cunninghams of Kilmaurs went on the Crusades ..that while they were in Syria, they paid a visit to Damascus and ..that they brought with them from thence skilled workmen and settled them in Kilmaurs, at that time called Coninburg, and long protected and patronised them.” The Cunningham family, whose name is of Scandinavian origin (hence Coninburg?) have been associated with Kilmaurs since at least 1153 <sup>(5)</sup>, and later gained the title Earls of Glencairn.

Despite the legends, there is little documentary evidence of the cutlery trade in the parish in early times. In fact when, in 1527, the Burgh of Barony of Kilmaurs was created by Cuthbert, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Glencairn, no mention was made of any cutlers amongst the 40 “tenementers” who were granted land holdings, despite other trades being enumerated.<sup>(6)</sup> However, when the Charter was confirmed in 1667, by Alexander, the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl, no less than 7 cutlers were mentioned by name viz. - James Andrew; James Smith; John Smith; John Smith; Robert Smith; William Steel; and Robert Tod, of whom more later. <sup>(7)</sup> Further cutlers have been identified e.g. James Andro who, in 1677, acted as a witness to a legal procedure known as an Instrument of Sasine <sup>(8)</sup> and in 1681, David Biggart, cutler, of whom more later, acted as witness to the will of John Smith, perhaps one of the 2 cutlers of that name mentioned in the 1667 Charter above.<sup>(9)</sup>

The possibility of the trade pre-dating 1667 is perhaps strengthened by the strongly held belief in the area that, when he ascended to the throne of England in 1603, King James 6<sup>th</sup> of Scotland was given a gift by “..the master cutlers of Kilmaurs (who caused a case of first class goods to be made consisting of knives, forks and spoons, on each was engraved the royal arms..”<sup>(10)</sup> Unfortunately, this story cannot be confirmed. Enquiries with the Royal Collection have drawn a blank, although this should not be taken as undermining the legend, as it was made clear that very little material or documentation survived the Civil War in the 1640s and 50s. The high quality of the cutlery produced, and the regard in which the cutlers were held, are indicated in a further article by Lamberton, in which he stated “..King James, it is said, was vastly pleased with the loyalty and generosity, as well as the skill displayed by the cutlers of Kilmaurs, and declared that he would like to have them nearer himself, and he accordingly bribed them ...to come to Sheffield...and thus began an emigration which continued until the trade came to an end about 1750”.<sup>(11)</sup>

The reputation and regard in which the cutlers of the town were held is best illustrated by the proverb which continued to be in common usage in the local area until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - “As gleg as a Kilmaurs whittle”. In Scots, “gleg” means sharp, and “whittle” was a blade. The proverb was usually applied to describe a person of astute or penetrating intellect.<sup>(12)</sup> A further, if perhaps unreliable, indication of the quality of the products of the parish can be seen in the strongly held, and expressed, belief, that Kilmaurs cutlery far surpassed that of both Sheffield and Birmingham.<sup>(13)</sup> Of course, this all ended with the alleged migration from the village to these cities!

The scale of the cutlery trade in the village is illustrated by the fact that up to 30 individuals were claimed to be working as cutlers in the village at one time in the 17<sup>th</sup> century <sup>(14)</sup>, although this is thought to include apprentices and other workmen. Further evidence of the scale of the industry can be seen in the fact that the debris of their trade, in the shape of worn out or broken mill stones, used to sharpen the steel blades, was so excessive, that it was used to repair the roads in the village, as well as being used in walls etc.<sup>(15)</sup>

As an aside, it must be noted that working with tortoise shell was a very skilled task. Very few items made in Scotland, of pre Act of Union date, exist using this or indeed any “non native material” such as mother of pearl, a fact confirmed by enquiries with auction houses and specialist dealers,<sup>(16)</sup> The only mention I have been able to find of such an item other than the Kilmaurs cutlery comes from an entry in the Breadalbane Muniments for 17/1/1699, an inventory of the Earl of Breadalbane, that refers to “... a little box, three cornered, of tortoise shell...” <sup>(17)</sup>, so cutlery such as this must have been very costly. It was well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century that

such materials became more common in Scotland. The explanation for this is not hard to find. The late 17<sup>th</sup> century was a very difficult period for Scotland, with the ill fated Darien Scheme destroying up to a quarter of the nation's wealth (18), and with a period of very bad weather causing famine and economic distress, often referred to as "the 7 Ill Years" (19). The market for such high quality goods must, therefore, have been quite limited, and those customers able to afford such goods must have been able to demand the highest quality.

One such customer was Sir John Foulis, whose accounts for 1697 show the purchase of "6 Kilmares (sic) knyfes (sic), a fork and kase(sic) – 3.0.0" (20). Sir John's estates at Ravelston lay on the outskirts of Edinburgh, a long way from Kilmaurs given the poor state of the roads in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that he bought cutlery from Kilmaurs indicates the high reputation the products of the village enjoyed. This entry also illustrates the fact that forks were very uncommon at this time – 6 knives purchased but only one fork! In England, although examples pre-date it, it seems that the widespread acceptance of the fork came after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, having been seen as being a continental "affectation" by most people (21). With its close links to the Continent, e.g. through the Auld Alliance with France, it is possible that Scotland was more open to such "affectations", but there is little to prove this.

In the course of writing this article, another set of cutlery has come to light, having once belonged to the Earl of Kintore, in Aberdeenshire. (See Set 5 below). This is further evidence of the regard in which the products of the Kilmaurs industry were held. In fact Sir John Foulis was related to the Earl of Kintore through marriage, which might help explain the coincidence of their both having Kilmaurs pieces.(22)

The skill shown in working with tortoise shell by the Kilmaurs cutlers may have come from the experience gained in working with the much more humble material of cows' horn. The village had a much longer history of making items of cutlery from horn, with the Marshall family being especially renowned in this trade (23). A member of the family still practised the craft as late as the 1890s.(24) Perhaps there was some transfer of skills in working with this material, that led to tortoise shell working. This must remain pure speculation, however.

The focus for this article, however, is not to provide an exhaustive history of the cutlery trade in the parish, but rather to focus on the work of the Biggart family as, although cutlery made by other Kilmaurs cutlers is likely to exist, none has been identified so far apart from the "RT" set described below, so the Biggart examples are the vast majority of what we have at the moment.

### **The Biggarts.**

Whilst not the only "family" engaged in the cutlery trade in Kilmaurs, as indicated earlier, and as demonstrated later in this article, it seems that more products of the Biggarts have survived, or at least have been identified, than of any other group. Whether this is a historical accident or represents the scale of their output may never be known. The surname "Biggart" seems to have been flexible in its spelling, with frequent variations appearing over the years, until it finally settled down as the "Biggar" with which we are familiar today, although the surname "Biggart" still features in the phone directory in the area to this day.

The first reference I have been able to find to the family in Kilmaurs, itself illustrates the major problem researching this period. In his book, D. McNaught refers to a grave stone of 1641 marking the burial place of the Biggarts, "a gifted family of cutlers" (25) .. However, in his article of April 1963, William Reid states that the date on the family tomb was 1647. (26) It seems unlikely that these represent 2 different gravestones. Rather, the discrepancy is more probably due to the illegibility of the inscription due to weathering. A recently produced list of monumental inscriptions from local graveyards, including Kilmaurs,(27) does not feature "either" of these stones, and I can personally testify that the vast majority of the old gravestones are so weathered and eroded that they are illegible, due to their being made of sandstone.

When McNaught was writing his book in 1912, it may have been possible to make out the inscription. Similarly, in his article, Reid thanks William Hannah of nearby Kilmarnock for information on the Biggart tomb.. Neither can be confirmed today. Also, although McNaught had access in 1912 to the Kilmaurs Burgh records, they have disappeared and, despite my best efforts, much of what follows continues to be drawn from secondary sources and supposition, which I recognise is not an ideal situation.

The first documented proof of a cutler, named David Biggart, living in Kilmaurs comes from 1681 when he witnessed the will of a fellow cutler, John Smith mentioned earlier. 10 years later, in 1691, the Scottish government imposed a one off "Hearth Tax" of 14/- per hearth, to raise funds to pay off loans advanced to them by the shires and burghs, and to reduce the arrears of the army. All householders were due to be listed, including those deemed to be exempt due to poverty. Consequently, these lists (28) represent the most accurate picture of the Scottish population prior to the national census being introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the list for Kilmaurs, David Bigger (sic) is shown as being liable to the tax, having 3 hearths. At a time when the vast majority of the houses in the parish had only 1 hearth, this would seem to indicate a man of some wealth, with a significant property, i.e. perhaps a skilled craftsman. Another possible explanation for the number of hearths is that they represent "forges" for metal work, although this is unlikely as a forge would not be considered as a hearth under the legislation. Unfortunately, the Hearth Tax list rarely gives the occupation of the householder, so there is no way of being certain that this David Bigger is the cutler of 1681, but it seems a reasonable presumption.

The status of David Bigger (sic) is further shown by a reference for 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1699 - "...Town court of Kilmares (sic) holden, le supra be William Watson and David Bigger .." (29) . To preside at the Town Court, both William Watson and David Bigger would have had to be Baillies/Burgesses in the town i.e. people of rank such as craftsmen or merchants. This then, would seem to be the David Biggart who has been credited with the various pieces of cutlery, stamped "DB" as well as the "Hanger" sword, in the collection of Kelvingrove museum. However, I would suggest that some caution needs to be taken in this respect.

In 1719, a Baillie of Kilmaurs signed himself as David Bigger (sic), and it seems that his Baillie-ship lasted for two decades in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. He seems to have played a part in the collection of funds to erect a clock in the town. The subscription list for this showed his occupation to be a cutler. Interestingly, the list of subscribers included two other cutlers with the same surname, Bigger. (30) Unfortunately, as with so many of the original sources from this period, this subscription list has been lost. In 1731, David Biggar (sic) appears as a signatory to a bond on the customs of the burgh of Kilmaurs, with his occupation given as cutler. (31)

Given the life expectancy in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the question must be asked whether someone who had reached maturity and achieved status by 1681, as had David Biggart, was likely to still be active by 1731.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, apprenticeships tended to start at the age of 15, and last for 6 years. At 21, therefore, David would start on his career as an independent tradesman. It seems a reasonable presumption that it would be some years later before he reached a level of reputation to fulfil the role of witness to a fellow, and very well established, cutler's will in 1681, and to have amassed

enough wealth to have 3 hearths in 1691. If this is the case, as seems probable, then I would suggest that there were 2 cutlers with the initials “DB” whose work spanned the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Further evidence suggesting the existence of 2 “D.B.s” comes from the subtle change in the decoration of the pieces bearing these initials, as will be seen later.

As mentioned earlier, the records of the Burgh of Kilmaurs have been misplaced. A further problem is that it was not a legal requirement to register births, marriages or deaths in 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. Even where information is available, it is rare for the occupation of individuals to be given. Consequently, even searching through the records of the parish church does not provide all of the information that is needed in research such as this (32). I have been unable to find any information on David Biggart's life or children, if he had any, in the parish of Kilmaurs. The surname is not uncommon in the area around Kilmaurs. For example, in the 1691 Hearth Tax records for the nearby parish of “Finnick” (Fenwick today) 3 individuals with the surname Biggar (sic) are listed.(33) However, even looking outwith Kilmaurs itself, I have been unable to find David Biggart's origins.

What I have found in the church records for the parish of Kilmaurs is mention of an Alexander Biggart and his family. Could this be the “AB” of the recently discovered fork and knife? His first appearance is on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1693 when he married Jean Harper. Unfortunately, no mention is made of Alexander's parents, nor of his occupation (34). It is significant that he does not appear in the Hearth Tax lists for 1691, compiled only 2 years earlier. Either he was not resident in the village at that date or else he was not a householder. I can find no record of an Alexander Biggart elsewhere in Scotland. If he was living in Kilmaurs, his absence from the lists would be the case if he was an apprentice, or else still living with his parents.

It was not uncommon for sons to follow in their father's trade, especially when the right to practice a trade in any village at this time was strictly controlled. It is therefore at least possible that Alexander's father was an existing cutler in Kilmaurs, perhaps even David. This possibility is further supported by the similarity between the “cutlers' marks” on the “DB” and “AB” pieces, which will be described in more detail later, along with the close similarity in the decoration on the respective tortoise shell handles. In fact, there seems to be a line of continuity in the design of the pieces illustrated later, to the extent that they could be describes as a “family style.” (See later)

Subsequent entries in the parish, record the birth of 3 sons to Alexander and Jean - Alexander in 1694 ; David in 1697 and Robert in 1698. To illustrate the point of sons following in their father's footsteps, Robert, the third son, is buried in the churchyard of Paisley Oakshaw East church, some 20 miles from Kilmaurs. The stone records “Here lies the remains of Robert Biggar (sic), cutler late in Kimaurs who died Decr. the 9<sup>th</sup> 1773, aged 75 years.” (35)

Although there are no contemporary records which show Alexander Biggart as being a cutler, there is the following mention - “... Mrs Thomson produced from a leather case ....a small silver – mounted knife and fork of very plain make, but having the appearance of considerable antiquity. The knife is worn in the blade and stamped near the handle with the letters A and B, which is affirmed to stand for Alexander Bigger (sic), the maker. The fork is two pronged and has much the appearance of a miniature hay fork, the make and finish being most primitive. These specimens of ancient cutlery belonged to the great-grandmother of the late Mr Thomson by whom they were much prized.” (36) As will be seen later, “primitive” is not an adjective that could be used to describe the recently discovered pieces!

Kilmarnock is less than 2 miles from Kilmaurs. Although written some 200 years after the event, it remains significant that the name Alexander Bigger was assigned to this cutlery. Folk memory was especially strong in rural areas when travel was very restricted.

Nor was it only in Kilmaurs that cutlers with the surname Biggart, or its variants, were to be found. In the Royal Burgh of Irvine, only 2 or 3 miles from Kilmaurs as the crow flies, it is recorded that one Thomas Biggart, cutler, was Deacon Convener of the Irvine Incorporated Trades between 1725 and 1727, and again between 1731 and 1733 (37). He was probably the same individual who, in 1739, is recorded as being the “..collector of the town's import” (38) .The change in his job possibly reflects the demise of the cutlery trade in Ayrshire by the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. In his article of 1963, William Reid refers to a folding knife and fork with tortoise shell handles, the blade of the knife stamped “Irvin” (sic) (39). In design, they are very similar to the set held in the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, suggesting some kind of link between the makers. This will be discussed in greater detail later. ( See items 9 and 10)

*The Glasgow “Hanger”* ( These images are included courtesy of the Glasgow Museum Service.)(40)



The significance of this object for this study cannot be overstated. As can be seen from the photographs, the silver hilt is stamped with the word “Kilmaurs”, the old name for the village of Kilmaurs, along with the initials “DB”. It is this combination that identifies all the other items of cutlery as being of Kilmaurs origin. No other item has yet been found with the name of the village stamped on it. What has been found is the “DB” stamp within a heart shaped punch, which appears on some of the other items described below, a stamp which is almost identical in every case. Another common factor, as can be seen in the subsequent photographs, is the use of tortoise shell and silver for the handles, with the decoration being almost identical, even when different makers seem to be responsible. It would seem to have been almost a “house or family style”.

As well as these marks, the other common factor is the apparent cutler's mark of a scimitar surmounted by the letter "B". For many years, this mark on the sword was considered to be that of Wim Bugel from Solingen in Germany, meaning that the blade was imported and then mounted on a hilt made locally. (41) However, with the same mark appearing on the blades of table knives made by at least 3 different makers, as shown below, this attribution seems far less likely. It seems far more likely that the same maker is responsible for the sword blade and for the knives, and was using the same cutler's mark or, given the spread of years of manufacture, the same "family" of makers.

It is interesting to speculate on the origin of the "scimitar" mark. Could it be a reference to the legend of the origins of the craftsmen being in Damascus, as discussed earlier? This was certainly the explanation given in the series of articles in the Kilmarnock Standard in the 1890s, referred to earlier.(42) However fanciful the story, if it was widely accepted by the cutlers themselves in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there has to be a possibility that the scimitar mark relates to this legend.

As mentioned earlier, the dating of the sword has traditionally been on the basis of David Biggart acting as witness to the will of John Smith in 1681. For the reasons given earlier relating to a David Biggart appearing both in 1681 and the 1720s, I would suggest that this date should be reconsidered. A further factor is the use of the "tulip" decoration on the handle in silver wire, as illustrated below.



The tulip came to be associated as a sign of support for William and Mary, after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and as a counter to the Jacobite Rose, often seen engraved on the famous Jacobite drinking glasses. While there are examples of artefacts pre-dating the 1688 revolution that use the tulip motif, e.g. a quaich of 1681, these are very scarce. Although not conclusive, I would suggest that this might be further reason for reconsidering the dating of the sword, and perhaps placing it into the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and thus the work of the second "D.B."

***The Cutlery ( in possible chronological order.)***



1) "Fork and Knife Set" by R.T. ((C) National Museum of Scotland)(43)

Until near the end of this investigation, I believed that the Biggart family were responsible for all of the examples of Kilmars cutlery that were held in collections. However, I now realise that this is not the case.

These images are taken from a fork and knife set, in a leather case, of strikingly similar appearance to those which follow. The handles are of tortoise shell, inlaid with silver wire, and with 3 bands of silver, including the pommel cap, which itself has a distinctive shape that recurs in most of the items illustrated below. The initials of the maker, stamped into the silver band, are "RT", so clearly, not a member of the Biggart family. The obvious candidate for the maker would seem to be the Robert Tod, named in the Burgh of Barony charter of 1667 mentioned earlier, although there is no conclusive proof for this.

As with the "hanger" sword seen above, the blade of the "RT" knife bears the cutler's mark of the scimitar and the letter "B". At

the start of this investigation, I had presumed that this letter “B” stood for “Biggart”. As it appears on this blade however, this now seems unlikely. Its meaning remains unclear. What is clear however, is that the mark continued in use by the Biggarts, both David and Alexander. Could David have been Robert Tod's apprentice and have continued to use his master's mark, in the same way as Alexander continued to use David's? It can only be speculation, but it provides a working hypothesis until a better explanation can be found. The fact that the “RT” set conforms to what might be described as the “Kilmaurs Pattern”, with the silver bands on the tortoise shell; with the silver wire inlay and the silver pommel caps, might be seen as further indication that David Biggart was Robert Tod's apprentice and continued making implements in the style set by his master.

**2) Fork and Knife Set by “D.B.”** ( These images are included courtesy of Woolley and Wallis Auctioneers, Salisbury) (44)



In April 2004, the set above was offered for sale by Woolley and Wallis, Lot 494.

Although not clear from the photograph (which has had to be taken of the original catalogue as no digital image exists) the blade of the knife has the cutler's mark of “B” below a scimitar stamped on it, as with 1) above and all of the succeeding items. It also contains the elements that are common to almost all of the images that follow – tortoiseshell handles; silver pommel caps; corded wire inlay; steel blade and fork tines.

On the silver pommel cap, where it meets the tortoiseshell, appears the maker's mark “D.B.” within a heart shaped punch, and the initials “I.R.” appear on each of the handles, probably for the first owner.

**3) Fork and Knife Set by “D.B.”** (These images are included by kind permission of the National Museum of Scotland) (45)

( These items appear to be identical to the set illustrated on page 190 of Simon Moore's book) (46)

At first glance, this set seems identical to those shown above and, in many respects, they are. The tortoise shell handles are



inlaid with silver wire; the pommel cap is of the familiar shape; the initials “DB” appear in a heart shaped punch on the pommel cap etc. However, there are 2 significant differences – the middle silver band is missing from both pieces and, more significantly, there is no cutler's mark clearly visible on the blade of the knife. There are indistinct marks on the blade which may be the remnants of the cutler's marks, now worn away by repeated sharpening, but this is speculation. It is probable that there was a leather case for this, as with the previous sets, but this is missing.

However, even without the evidence of the cutler's mark, there can be no doubt that these items belong to the cannon of Kilmaurs pieces. The fork in this set has 2 tines, as does that of the “RT” set and the Woolley and Wallis set described above. The Woolley and Wallis set shown later has a fork with 3 tines. This may be a significant factor in arranging the pieces in chronological order. It would seem a reasonable conclusion to reach that forks with 2 tines came first, then 3 tines leading eventually to the 4 tines common today. When the transition from one stage to another took place is not an exact science.(47)

**4) Fork and Knife set by ?D.B.?** ( These images are included courtesy of Bonhams Auctioneers, Glasgow)(48)



In August 2010, the above set was included in the Antique Arms and Armour sale in the London, Knightsbridge saleroom of Bonhams.

They appear to be almost identical to set 3 above, with all of the “standard” features of Kilmaurs pieces, but missing the middle silver band. Unlike set 3 above however, there are no maker's initials stamped on the silver “collars” of the items. Given the obvious similarities, however, there can be little doubt that they were made by David Biggart although the chronology has to remain uncertain. Whether David made these pieces before he became an independent craftsman, hence the lack of his initials, or omitted them for another reason, is unlikely ever to be known.

**5) Fork and Knife set by D.B.** (These images are included courtesy of Lyon and Turnbull Auctioneers) <sup>(49)</sup>

This recently discovered set, ex Earl of Kintore, conforms to the standard pattern of Kilmaurs pieces – the silver pommel caps; the silver bands on the tortoise shell handles; the inlaid silver wire to the handles; the scimitar and “B” cutler's mark to the knife blade etc. The pommel caps are stamped “DB”, for David Biggart. All would seem as usual. However, there are two very significant differences with this set, perhaps explained by the very high status of its first owner. Firstly, unlike all of the other sets identified so far, the tines of the fork in this set are made of silver rather than steel. Secondly, the items are smaller and much finer in manufacture. It is possible that these two differences reflect a later date of manufacture than the “earlier” “D.B.” pieces, but this must remain conjecture.



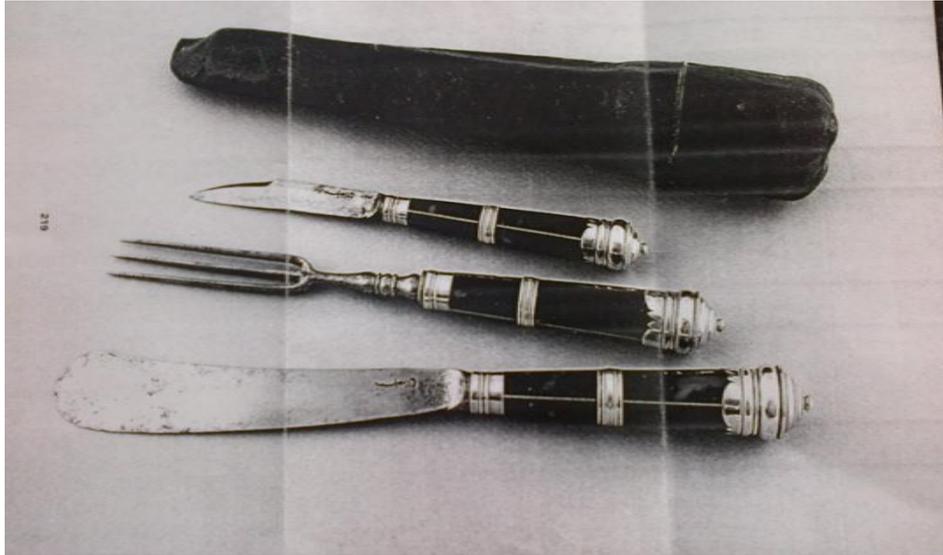
**6) Fork and knife set by D.B.** (These images are included courtesy of Woolley and Wallis, Auctioneers, Salisbury) <sup>(50)</sup>

In October 2003, the following set of cutlery was sold in the Woolley and Wallis saleroom in Salisbury. While no digital image of the items was available, the similarities with the other items discussed here are clear, although the fact that the fork has 3 tines rather than 2 suggests that the set might be of a later date than the others. Also, the inclusion of the “bye knife” in the set may indicate a later date.

In January 2007, Woolley and Wallis sold another “set” which, from the photograph would appear to be identical to that sold in 2003. Unfortunately, from their records, the saleroom are unable to confirm that it was the same set. I include both of the illustrations for the purpose of comparison, and leave it up to the reader to form their own opinion!

In “both” cases, the cutler's mark of a scimitar and the letter “B” can be clearly made out; the tortoise shell handles are decorated with inlaid silver wire; the pommel caps are of the now familiar shape; and the 3 bands of silver are evident. The catalogue description states that “ the silver end caps with maker's mark “DB” within a heart shaped punch”, just as shown in the picture of the Glasgow “Hanger”. As with the R.T. set above, the items are contained in a specially made leather “travelling case”. This reflects the

common practice of taking your own cutlery with you, rather than it being provided by your host. Even in metropolitan London as late as 1663, Samuel Pepys was complaining about not being provided with a knife at a function at a Guildhall supper! (51)



7) **Fork and Knife set by A.B.** (These images are included courtesy of the National Museums of Scotland) (52)

This set bears the initials “AB” as the maker, who would seem to be the Alexander Biggart discussed earlier in the article. The similarities with the “earlier” items are obvious – tortoise shell handles; pommel cap of similar design; middle silver ring; a cutler’s mark on the knife blade, with a letter “B” and another indistinct mark that might be the remnants of a scimitar etc., although there are differences. The knife blade is noticeably more curved than any of the other items shown here, and there is no inlaid silver wire decoration.



Also, the shaping of the “bridge” of the tines on the fork is noticeably more curved than in the examples illustrated so far. A

further difference would seem to be the absence of the “engrilled border” seen on the “D.B.” pieces. As will be seen below, this absence seems to be common to all the known “A.B.” pieces. Whether these differences are significant is uncertain.



**8) Single Fork by “A.B.”** (This image is included courtesy of Woolley and Wallis, Auctioneers, Salisbury)<sup>(53)</sup>



Although this item is missing its accompanying knife, there can be no doubt of its origins. The Kilmaurs style is evident in the use of silver and tortoise shell, the shape of the tines etc. and is stamped on the silver ring with the initials “A.B.” As with 7) above, it is missing both the inlaid silver wire decoration, and the engrilled border of the “D.B.” pieces. Also, it would appear from the photograph that the pommel cap is of a different, squarer shape, than all of the other pieces illustrated here. This may be more to do with the angle at which the photograph was taken for the Auction Catalogue, or may indeed reflect an actual difference.

**9) Fork and Knife Set by A.B.** (From a private collection, with permission of the owner) <sup>(54)</sup>

As with the preceding items, this set also bears the maker's initials “AB”. Although missing the tip of the knife blade, it also displays all of the typical Kilmaurs features with silver pommel caps; tortoise shell handles; silver bands to the handles; and with the cutler's mark of “B” and a scimitar. As with the examples above of “A.B.'s.” work, the pommel caps do not have the engrilled border seen on D.B's. work Unlike the earlier examples above, these items do have inlaid silver wire Engraved onto the tortoise shell handle of both the knife and the fork are the ornate initials “IS”, probably for the original owner of the set. It is possible that these initials originally had silver wire inlay. The following two sets are different in form as they are obviously designed as travelling pieces, as they not only have their fitted and “tooled” leather cases, but actually fold into the handles. As such they are similar to the “campaign cutlery” which became common during and after the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>(55)</sup> Such folding pieces of cutlery were first seen in the early to mid 17<sup>th</sup> century in England, but were certainly not common. That they were made by the cutlers of Kilmaurs ( and surrounding centres?) is testament to the fact that the craftsmen were keeping up with the most modern initiatives, despite the problems of travel and communications at that time.

**10) Folding (Travelling) Fork and Knife Set. By ?????** ((C) National Museum of Scotland) <sup>(56)</sup>



At first appearance, this set seems very different from those shown before. There are no silver rings decorating the handles; the pommel caps are lacking, and there are no maker's marks to be found. However, the knife blade does have the "usual" cutler's mark of the scimitar and the letter "B". This fact, along with the use of the tortoise shell handles would seem to strongly indicate that the items were indeed made in or around Kilmaurs. However, it is possible that this was produced in the nearby town of Irvine, by another member of the "Biggart clan" see 11) below.

The unusual shape of the handles seems to be explained by the need to accommodate the blades when they were folded closed.

Taking your own cutlery with you when travelling, or even visiting another household, was not uncommon at a time when such items were rare. As well as having a practical purpose, it was also a way for the wealthy to "show off". Some of the items already discussed also had tooled leather cases, even although they did not fold up, as did the set referred to in the "Rambles round Kilmarnock" referred to earlier. (57)

**11) Folding (Travelling) Fork and Knife set from "Irvine".** (These images are included courtesy Glasgow Museum Service) (58)

At first sight, the following items would appear to be the twins of Set 10, above. They have the same roundels decorating the top of the handles, and use the same "stud" pattern as decoration. They are roughly the same length, although this cannot be stated with confidence as the blades are seized up in the closed position, which also prevents any cutler's mark being examined. However, it would seem a reasonable conclusion that the two sets were made by the same maker and, as Set 10 has the "Kilmaurs" cutler's mark, it might seem reasonable to assume that Set 11 might also have been made in Kilmaurs.

However, as discussed earlier, it is recorded that a cutler called Thomas Biggart was operating in Irvine in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is quite possible that he was responsible for these two, quite different sets of cutlery, with the cutler's mark being explained by a close, perhaps familial, relationship with the Kilmaurs workers. The very different nature of these two sets from all of the others would seem to require an explanation such as this.



What makes this set particularly interesting and important is that, just visible on the knife blade, is impressed the word “Irvin”, the old name for the Royal Burgh and important port of Irvine, which lies just a few miles from Kilmaurs. The engraved initials “ES” on the silver end piece of both handles would seem likely to have been the owner for whom the set was made. No doubt it originally had a leather case like 10) above, but this has been lost.

**12) Fork and Knife “Set”** (These images are included courtesy Glasgow Museum Service) (59)



These items bear a striking similarity with each other, and with other “sets” of Kilmaurs cutlery. The knife has the cutler’s mark of a scimitar surmounted with a letter “B”; the way the fork tines join the handle; the tortoiseshell with silver wire decoration used for the handle and the silver pommel caps all conform to what might be described as the standard pattern. However, it would

appear that they are not a true set as the knife is missing the silver band in the middle of the handle. The fork has this, as do the other sets described previously. It seems likely, therefore, that these items originally belonged to 2 different sets.

One final factor common to all of the sets, apart from the folding ones, is that the tortoise shell handles are almost identical in size, usually being 8.5 cms. long. Taken along with the materials used, the shape of the silver pommel caps, the cutler's mark that appears on so many of them etc., it seems that there can be no doubt that there was a common thread running through the manufacture of these items in Kilmaurs (and the surrounding area) in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the master/apprentice link being the most likely explanation.

## Conclusion

I started this investigation from a position of ignorance. I knew nothing about the cutlery trade in Kilmaurs; about those involved; the beauty of the products nor the scale of the industry. At the end, what is obvious is that those involved were highly skilled, producing items fit to grace the noblest households. There were obviously close connections between the craftsmen involved with common patterns being used for well over half a century, probably reflecting the master/apprentice links, which themselves seem to have been family connections.

However, many questions remain unanswered. What was the meaning of the cutler's mark, the scimitar and the letter "B"? Were the blades, including that for the "Hanger", made locally? Was there more than one "DB"? Most importantly, perhaps, is where are the other examples of the work of the village? For a trade that lasted for more than 50 years, and involved so many skilled craftsmen, there must be more than 12 examples of their products out there. 2 more "sets" have possibly been identified since news of this article appeared, but there must be more. Where are they?

## Footnotes

- 1) For example National Museum of Scotland, K.2007.70.1
- 2) For example see Woolley and Wallis, October 2003, Lot 219, and Bonhams, Knightsbridge, July 2010, Lot 428
- 3) Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery, A728
- 4) Kilmarnock Standard newspaper, 12/4/890
- 5) "Kilmaurs, Past and Present" by Robert Beattie on behalf of the Kilmaurs Historical Association, page 12
- 6) "Kilmaurs Parish and Burgh" by D. McNaught, published by Alexander Gardner, Paisley 1912, Pages 336-346
- 7) IBID, Page 356
- 8) National Records of Scotland, reference GD1/22/7
- 9) "Scottish Arms Makers" by Charles E. Whitelaw, Arms and Armour Press, page 253, quoting from the Glasgow Commissariat Testaments, ref. SRO, CC9/7 – 8.
- 10) Kilmarnock Standard, 12/11/1890
- 11) Kilmarnock Standard, 22/11/1890
- 12) D. McNaught, op. cit., page 48
- 13) Old Statistical Account of Scotland, Ayrshire volume, Kilmaurs Parish page 331.
- 14) Ibid., page 331.
- 15) Kilmarnock Standard, 1/11/1890
- 16) Thanks to Lyon and Turnbull Auctions Edinburgh; Bonhams Edinburgh; Wooley and Wallis, Salisbury; M. Wilson, Highland Antiques, Aberdeen; Gordon Foster; Michael Baggott; V. Bowman, Coritani Antiques; and Daniel Bexfield, among others.
- 17) National Records of Scotland, reference GD112/1
- 18) T.M. Devine -The Scottish Nation, 1700- 2000, Allen Lane 1999, page 49
- 19) Ibid, page 49
- 20) Publications of the Scottish History Society – The Account Book of Sir John Foulis of Ravelston, edited by Rev. A.W. Cornelius Hallen, 1894, page 208
- 21) Simon Moore, Cutlery for the Table, The Hallamshire Press, 1999, pages 187 – 190.
- 22) Sir John's first wife, Margaret Primrose, was the daughter of Sir Archibald Primrose and Elizabeth Keith who was herself the daughter of Sir James Keith, brother of John Keith, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Kintore; i.e. Earl of Kintore was the great uncle of John Foulis' wife.
- 23) D. McNaught, op. cit. Page 271
- 24) Kilmarnock Standard 22/11/1890
- 25) D. McNaught, op. cit. Page 45
- 26) "A rare Scottish silver hilted hanger" by William Reid, in the Connoisseur periodical, April 1963.
- 27) Pre 1855 Gravestone Inscriptions in Kilmarnock and Loudoun District – Edited by Alastair G. and Margaret H. Beattie – Published by the Scottish Genealogy Society, 1985.
- 28) Records of the Exchequer, Scottish Records Office, E69/2/1 – 3.
- 29) Society of Antiquaries for Scotland, 1908 -09, page 285.
- 30) William Reid, The Connoisseur op. cit. Page 239
- 31) D. McNaught, op. cit. Pages 227/228
- 32) Scotlandspeople.gov.uk website
- 33) Records of the Exchequer op. cit.
- 34) Scotlandspeople.gov.uk website
- 35) Listed on "happyhaggis.co.uk
- 36) Archibald A Adamson, Ramble Round Kilmarnock, Chapter 9, 1874.
- 37) www.irvinetrades.org
- 38) Ayrshire Archives = www.ayrshirearchives.org.uk
- 39) William Reid, The Connoisseur, op. cit., page 239

- 40) Glasgow Museum Service – Acquisition No. A.1972.8; dimensions = 66.5 cms. total length; handle= 14 cms.
- 41) William Reid, *The Connoisseur*, op. cit., page 239
- 42) Lamberton, op. cit.
- 43) National Museum of Scotland – Acquisition Nos. - Knife = K2007.69.1; dimensions = 20cms in total ;handle =8.5 cms : Fork = K2007.69.2; dimensions = 20cms in total ; handle = 8.5 cms; case =K2007.69.3; dimensions = 21 cms in total.
- 44) Woolley and Wallis, Salisbury, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2004, Lot 494. Catalogue description = “An extremely rare William 111 Scottish provincial steel knife and two pronged fork, with mounted tortoiseshell cannon handles decorated with corded wire inlay and initials “IR”, the blade with cutler's mark (“B” below a scimitar) the silver end caps with maker's mark (“DB” within a heart shaped punch) for David Biggar or Biggart of Kilmaurs c.1700, contained in original fitted sheath, the knife 7.75ins (19.5cms.) long, the fork 7.1ins. (18cms.) long.
- 45) National Museums of Scotland – Acquisition Nos. - Knife = H.SK.146A; dimensions = 19.5cms. in total; handle = 8.5cms: Fork = H.SK.146B; dimensions = 17.5cms. in total; handle = 8.5cms.
- 46) Simon Moore, *Cutlery for the Table* op cit.
- 47) *Ibid.* p.187 – 192
- 48) Bonhams, Knightsbridge, 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2010, Lot 428. Catalogue description = “A silver mounted Knife and Fork circa 1700; almost certainly Scottish (Kilmaurs). The knife with bright scimitar blade struck on one side with cutler's mark, “B” below a scimitar, and cannon handle covered with tortoise shell (minor damage) and with turned silver collar and pommel with engrailed border, the fork en suite and with two slender tines and baluster stem, in associated velvet lined fish covered case.” Provenance – John Wallace Collection.
- 49) Lyon and Turnbull, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2014, Lot 414. Catalogue description = “Kilmaurs – a rare Scottish provincial late 17<sup>th</sup> century knife and fork by David Biggart, marked to pommel caps DB and to blade B and scimitar, the canon handles formed from panel of tortoiseshell with twisted wire between, with reeded mounted and domed pommel caps, with shaped steel blade and two pronged silver fork, in later shagreen covered spoon box”. Dimensions = knife = 16.2cms in total; handle = 7.6cms; fork = 14.9 cms in total; handle = 7.6 cms.
- 50) Woolley and Wallis, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> October, 2003. Catalogue description = “An extremely rare William 111 Scottish Provincial knife, fork and by-knife, decorated with corded wire inlay, the blades with cutler's mark (a “B” below a scimitar) the silver end caps with maker's mark (DB within a heart shaped punch) for David Biggar or Biggart of Kilmaurs c.1700, contained in original fitted, tooled leather travelling case, the knife 21cms long, the fork 18.2cms long, the by-knife 14,3cms long.”  
The catalogue description for the January 31st, 2007, Lot 132, sale = “An extremely rare William 111 Scottish provincial, steel knife, fork and smaller knife, with mounted tortoiseshell cannon handles with corded wire inlay, the blades with cutler's marks ( a “B” below a scimitar), the end caps with maker's mark “DB” (in a heart shaped punch) for David Biggar or Biggart, Kilmaurs circa 1700 (in a fitted case). The larger knife 8.25 ins (21cms)
- 51) *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, October 29<sup>th</sup> 1663.
- 52) National Museums of Scotland – Acquisition Nos. - Knife= HS.1993.603; dimensions = 18cms. in total; handle = 8.5cms: Fork = HS.1993.604; dimensions = 16cms. in total; handle = 8.5cms.
- 53) Woolley and Wallis, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2009, Lot 580. Catalogue description = “ An extremely rare, late 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish provincial two pronged fork, with steel tines and a mounted tortoiseshell cannon handle with maker's mark only “AB”, for one of the Biggart family of Kilmaurs, c.1700. 7ins(18cms) long.
- 54) Private Collection; Dimensions = Knife = 18.25 cms. in total to broken end; handle = 8.5cms; Fork = 17cms total length; handle = 8.5cms.
- 55) Simon Moore op.cit. Page 222
- 56) National Museums of Scotland – Acquisition Nos. -Knife = K.2007.70.1; dimensions = 16cms. in total; handle = 8cms: Fork = K2007.70.2 ; dimensions = 14.5cms. in total; handle = 7cms.
- 57) Archibald A Adamson, *Ramble Round Kilmarnock*, Chapter 9, 1874. op. cit.
- 58) Glasgow Museum Service – Acquisition Nos. - Knife = 1924.5.7.bw.1; dimensions- neither item can be opened – closed = 8cms: Fork = 192457.bw.2 = 7.5 cms.
- 59) Glasgow Museum Service –Acquisition Nos. -Knife =AHNN 177 ; dimensions=16cms. in total; handle = 8.5cms: -Fork = AHNN176 ; dimensions = 18cms. In total; handle = 8.5cms.

