

The Ayr Spoon Bequest

The Society received a very special bequest at the end of last year. Here, Fellow **George Dagleish**, Keeper, Scottish History and Archaeology, National Museums Scotland, explains its significance.

We all know the old saw 'born with a silver spoon in one's mouth' denoting someone with the good fortune to be born into a wealthy or aristocratic family. Well, the Society has recently experienced its own moment of great good fortune through the recent generous bequest of – a silver spoon! The late Mrs Dorothy Davies bequeathed the spoon to us in memory of her father, Andrew Muir Sharp FSA. He was one of the partners in Wilson and Sharp, goldsmiths and jewellers, originally situated at 139, Princes Street, Edinburgh.

But this is no ordinary spoon. Known as a 'trefid' spoon from the tri-lobed shape of the end, it is a type which became fashionable in Scotland and England in the latter part of the 17th century. However, the importance of this particular trefid is due to its extreme rarity as the work of an Ayr silversmith.

It was probably made by Matthew Colquhoun, who worked in that burgh from c 1682 to 1691. Colquhoun is one of the 13 provincial goldsmiths mentioned in a letter by the Incorporation of Goldsmiths sent out in 1689, exhorting them all to work to the correct standard of fineness and to mark their wares in accordance to the hallmarking legislation of 1681. This demanded that each item be tested, or assayed, for the quality of the silver. If it passed, it was to be struck with a maker's mark, a town mark, an assay master's mark and date letter. This is what happened in Edinburgh but, as was often the case, the further one moved from the bureaucratic centre, the application of such laws became more haphazard. The fact that this spoon has his maker's mark 'MC' stamped twice, either side of a mark which in all probability is the only known representation of the Ayr town mark, may be an indication that it was made after the date of the Incorporation's letter and shows the maker trying to comply with national legislation. As he was the only working silversmith in the burgh at the



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Michael Davies presents the spoon to Simon Gilmour, Director

time, there was obviously no other independent assay-master to test the silver.

Colquhoun is recorded as working in Ayr, but served his apprenticeship with Thomas Moncur in Glasgow. Despite having a reasonably long career, very little of his work survives. In fact the only other piece with his mark is a Quach, now in the collection of National Museums Scotland, making this spoon a rarity indeed.

We know the spoon was in the possession of Messrs Wilson and Sharp from the 1930s until the 1970s. It was published in the standard work on early Scottish spoons by Commander G E P How in *PSAS* 49

(1934–5), pp 145–6. It is fascinating to know that it remained in the possession of the descendants of Andrew Muir Sharp.

Further recent research has indicated that we now probably know the names of the people it was originally made for. The stem is engraved with the initials 'MIA' and 'KH'; this grouping usually indicates a married couple, with the first 'M' indicating the title *Magister* meaning a University graduate and almost universally indicating a Minister in the church. A trawl through the *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* for the synod of Ayr tuned up a possible candidate in James Arbuckle MA, minister of the parish of Riccarton in Ayrshire. He was called to the parish in 1686 and demitted office in 1689 (possibly as part of the political and religious upheavals when King James VII was deposed). He died in 1717 and was buried in Glasgow Cathedral churchyard. He married Katherine Hamilton at an unknown date, but possibly in the 1680s – she outlived him by a year, dying in 1718. It is possible that the spoon (which would almost certainly be one of a set) was commissioned to mark their marriage or some other important event in their lives.

The Society is delighted to be given this rare and important example of Scottish burgh silver, particularly as it commemorates the long association of a former Fellow with the Society.

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