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The Hallmarks of William Robb of Ballater

By Colin T Fraser

Since I started research into Ballater silver and particularly that of William Robb, I am still turning up anomalies and variations. This short article attempts to give a fuller idea of which punches Robb was using and indeed a rough idea of a timescale. The article is only aimed at showing the variation of Robb's Ballater marks. It does not cover the other towns he worked in and the other makers in Ballater. When asked about this subject previously I would have said, "see Jackson's" but on further research it does not seem so clear!

There are obviously the three main punches known, as catalogued and illustrated in Pickford's revised edition of Jackson: incuse 'ROBB BLTR'; 'W.R' & 'BLTR' (in rectangular punches with cut away corners) and 'ROBB' over 'BALLATER' (in a triangular punch), which have been seen over the years with and without official Edinburgh hallmarks. The only exception is the incuse set, which has so far only been seen in conjunction with Edinburgh marks. There are also two 'unofficial' punches, which were not registered at the Edinburgh assay office. Interestingly both have only been noted with Edinburgh marks and therefore cannot be considered 'workshop punches'.

The first noted reference to William Robb sending items to Edinburgh for assay goes as far back as 1884 when over the course of the year he sent in 4 parcels for hallmarking including items such as a goblet and a knife handle mount. Parcels were sent periodically until 1893 when his output becomes more continuous. Unfortunately one and probably the most important, assay work book for the period around 1889 till late 1904 is missing and no longer available for research, so exact output and dates can never be known until examples are found in collections and auctions etc. From examples seen and the remaining assay duty and workbook references the following information has been gathered:



Fig. 1

- 'ROBB BLTR' incuse – used over the period 1893 – 1904 only seen with full Edinburgh marks (fig. 1).
- 'W.R' & 'BLTR' in rectangular punches with cut away corners – used over the period 1903 until his death in 1927 also noted quite regularly without any Edinburgh hallmarks (fig 2).
- 'ROBB' over 'BALLATER' in triangular punch – used over the period 1898 until 1923 also noted without Edinburgh marks (fig 3).



Fig. 2

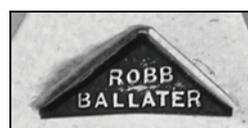


Fig. 3

It should be noted that variations of most of these punches exist and in the case of the triangular punch at least three variations exist. These are only detectable on very close examination with comparable examples and do not warrant separate mention or listings.

Also interesting to note is there is an obvious dip in work around WW1 and while items were sent for assay the amount is smaller and therefore extant examples are rarer (I still need to see items for some of these years).

There does not seem to have been any system to determine which punches were used on particular items, as all marks are seen on a wide range of pieces (including all the known marks on flatware). Where space was an issue the triangular punch was obviously not first choice! It does however say in Jackson's that the triangular punch "is only found on larger pieces" (Jackson's revised edition page 589); this however has not always proved to be the case and I have seen it on a very interesting small pair of miniature oil lamps no larger across the bowl, where they have been marked, than 20mm.

As already mentioned there are other 'unofficial' punches used by Robb, these could be considered more interesting than the official ones listed above. So far these have only been noted on very few items and are indeed quite rare in comparison to the three main punches.

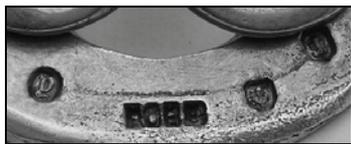


Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

- A small Celtic styled shoe buckle similar in style to those produced for the Balmoral Highlanders, dated Edinburgh 1904 exists with 'ROBB' incuse (as usual) & 'BLTR' in a rectangular punch (not with cut away corners), and with the 'T' being set slightly higher and larger than the surrounding letters (fig. 4 a & b).
- A punch has been noted on a pair of (as termed by Robb) butter / pickle forks of the standard part twisted stem design with collet set citrine to the finial dated Edinburgh 1923, that uses 'BALLATER' & 'ROBB' to form a 'T' shaped punch, being struck with Ballater down the stem of the fork and Robb across the top with Edinburgh marks below (fig 5).
- A different combination of the 'W.R' & 'BLTR' (rectangular cut away corners punch) has recently been noted on a small Celtic knot work brooch with central citrine, struck with 'W.R' & 'BLTR' above engraved 'SILVER' (fig 6).

A thought should be given to the quantity of items that come onto the market, marked with just the maker's and Ballater town punches. Why does such an amount exist with no Edinburgh hallmarks, when his official work seems so well recorded and continuous from approx 1893 onwards? My current theory on this subject is going to be very difficult to prove, but not so hard to believe! In 1928 after her father's death in 1927, Evelyn Wilson Robb re-registered the triangular punch and 'W.R' & 'BLTR' punches. Yet so far no recorded examples dated after 1927 with official hallmarks have been noted. Also it is worth remembering that it is only these two punches that are ever seen without Edinburgh marks. It therefore seems safe to assume that Evelyn was using these punches without sending for assay to Edinburgh. I have been unable to prove this beyond doubt. I hope that my research may lead to a definite conclusion.

While this is just a snapshot of one marker's marks in Ballater I hope this might spur readers to have a closer look at what might be in their collections, possibly unnoticed. I am currently researching silversmiths in Ballater and those in the surrounding areas. Any information that could be supplied about examples would be gratefully received. So if you have any items of Ballater or associated silver please get in touch.

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