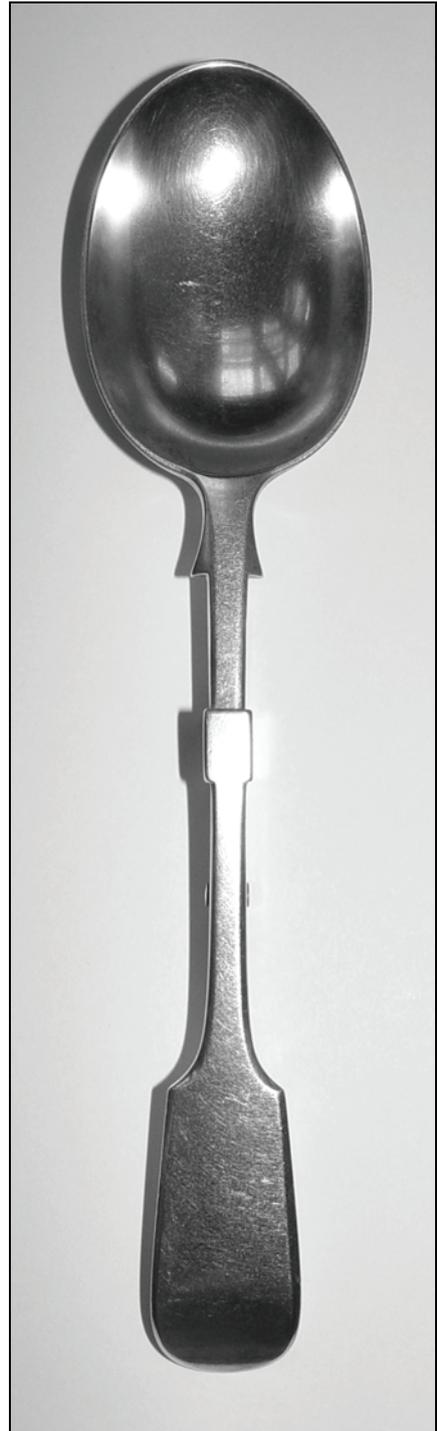


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The 'Thistle-b-Thistle' Series of Marks

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For some time now - and from a source unknown to me - there has been an attribution among collectors, dealers, auctioneers and some writers regarding a group of marks believed to be Scottish provincial. What they usually have in common is the combination 'thistle; b; thistle'. The commonly accepted attribution is that they come from Banff and the most common maker's mark seen with these marks is 'I.A' (Fig. 1), supposedly for John Argo (admitted into the Hammermen of Banff in 1771). However it is my feeling, and that of a growing number of other interested parties, that there is no connection between these marks and Banff, let alone John Argo.



Fig. 1, maker 'I.A', type 1 (two types known)

It should be noted that there are four other sets of un-attributed initials found in association with the 'thistle; b; thistle' marks:

- 'HS' incuse (Fig.2).
- 'PS' in a rectangular punch (Fig. 3)
- 'WA' in a rectangular punch (Fig. 4)
- 'RHT' ('H' & 'T' conjoined) - although not noted with the standard combination of 'thistle-b-thistle' but has been seen with the same 'thistle' and 'b' punches as above (Fig. 5).



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

In addition, there are two known punches of the 'thistle' and 'b' marks.

The Current Attribution

It is unknown to me where the case for the current John Argo attribution comes from and indeed why it has stood for so long with little question. There appears to be no evidence on which these marks could be attributed to Banff. Rather the attribution seems to be founded on guesswork or supposition and is therefore unsustainable unless proper evidence is forthcoming. There are good reasons for rejecting the attribution to Banff.

The 'I.A' punch is different from any of those firmly attributed, on evidence, to John Argo and could therefore pertain to anyone else of the same initials, working in Banff or elsewhere. The work on which the punch is found is usually Kings or Queens pattern flatware, apparently dating from about 1825 onwards. This alone precludes it from being that of John Argo.

The lower-case 'b' is most unlikely to stand for Banff. Such a suggestion is merely wishful thinking. There is no instance of a lower-case 'b' being firmly established, on evidence, as a Banff mark. As discussed below it seems more likely that it is a pseudo date letter.

The Makers and the Marks

The one thing that all these makers or retailers have in common is that they are using the same 'thistle-b-thistle' punches and combinations. It is seen almost all the time as: 'maker's mark', 'thistle', 'b' & 'thistle'.

There are two varieties of the 'thistle' and 'b' punches. In the less common combination the 'thistle' is more crudely executed with less detail and set slightly higher and off center to the right and the

'b' is a thicker shape and also not central to the shield. At present only a few examples of this variety are known and it is somewhat scarcer than the standard set of marks. All these marks are seen on a variety of flatware of Fiddle, Kings and Queens pattern which seems to date after 1810 and possibly as late as 1845. Generally it is all of good quality and gauge with little variety between the maker's styles, if any. There are also a few items of hollowware with these marks including a silver-mounted horn beaker and a pair of dividers (Fig. 6) as used on board ships for navigating, both these are by 'I.A'. For further details on both these items see Lyon and Turnbull's Edinburgh silver sale, May 2006, Lots 333 & 334.



Fig. 5, 'RHT' standard marks.



Fig. 6, maker 'I.A', type 2 (scarcer set of marks)

The only maker or retailer with a variation of punches is 'RHT' who has been noted as follows: unknown incuse tablet-type mark; 'castle', 'b', 'thistle' & 'RHT' ('H' & 'T, conjoined). This combination only adds to the overall confusion. Little more can be gleaned from it other than it is evidence of variety and other possible mark combinations. It is clearly a pseudo hallmark.

We need to question whether these marks are Scottish or not. While thistle-type marks usually point to a Scottish origin it is not a guarantee, as such a wealth of Scottish silversmiths went to work colonially and used Scottish-type marks including a thistle on their foreign wares. However, looking at the items of silver and their style and appearance, I do feel they are Scottish. I have also noted over recent years a semi-regular occurrence of items within this group of marks coming up for sale in small provincial auction houses in Scotland. Where they appear to have come from local private sources, including house clearances, a colonial origin seems doubtful. While this is inconclusive, it does seem to build a case for a Scottish origin. There has been no obvious link between the areas where the items have been sold and their place of manufacture, as it has been widespread, with a small concentration in the North East.

So who was the maker of these items? It does seem possible that all the items were made by one individual and sold on to other traders, who added their own initials as retailers of the work. My feelings on this point are that the obvious candidate as maker of all the work under discussion is 'I.A', as more exists for him than for any of the others, including all the known items of hollowware. As the only maker associated with both known varieties of the 'thistle' and 'b' punches it seems likely that they belonged to him.

What do the marks mean? In all probability they are nothing more than pseudo hallmarks. The details (punch shape, lettering style etc.) of the 'thistle' and 'b' punches closely mimic those for Edinburgh 1807-08. Though not identical they are very close. The addition of a 'castle' punch in the case of 'RHT' lends weight to this theory. As none of the work in question seems to date any earlier than about 1810, the date-letter imitation is compatible with the theory.

There are still no firm answers but, with more research and more discoveries of silver, a definite conclusion might not be far away.

I hope that readers will find this of interest and make their own minds up on the evidence, or lack of evidence. In this ever-expanding field of interest and research the vital point to bear in mind is that real evidence, not ill-considered guesswork, is what matters.

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