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The Flatware of Robert & William Gray of Glasgow

An Update

By Walter Brown

1. Introduction

For the May/June 2006 *Finial* I wrote a paper on Gray Flatware¹, based on the talk I gave at the 4th Silver Spoon Club meeting at the Hilton Hotel, Swindon, in May 2005. Inevitably, as a result of further discoveries, this paper soon required updating; I therefore followed up that talk with another at the *Finial* Meeting in September 2006. The present paper is based on this later talk, together with any further information gained up to the point of submission for publication. Having given some thought to presentation, I decided that the update would have to make frequent reference to the original paper (particularly to the figures in it) and so is to some extent an annexe to it, even to the extent that I have kept (and refer to) the figure numbers in the original and have therefore begun those in the current paper with Figure 26. The external reference numbers in the update are, however, unique to it; several are, of course, to the same sources as in the original.

2. The period from c1776 to 1784: Robert Gray (Glasgow Provincial marks)

There is little to add to this period, except to record an instance of a very fine top-marked Old English pattern tablespoon (all previous examples shown were bottom marked). As the London Assay Office switched from bottom marking of spoons to top marking in November 1781 it is reasonable to speculate that Gray, as an up-and-coming silversmith, made some attempt to follow suit and so this spoon can be dated with some confidence to c1782-1784. The marks, shown in Figure 26, are essentially the same as the bottom marks on the right hand photo of Figure 3. As with most Scottish made Old English pattern spoons of this period, there is a pronounced ridge down the top of the underside of the handle.



Fig. 26, marking of tablespoon c1782-1784

3. The period from 1784 to 1802: Robert Gray (Edinburgh hallmarked)

Again, there is little to add to what was described for this period in the original paper¹, except to note that Gray continued to manufacture relatively standard flatware, but frequently with unusually slender stems. This is illustrated by the sauce ladle of 1795-96, illustrated in figure 27. In figure 5, a gravy spoon of 1798-99 was illustrated; the slender stem gives this spoon most elegant proportions, whereas the sauce ladle appears to be rather clumsy – the round bowl seems too large in proportion to the slender stem.



Fig. 27, sauce ladle, 1795-96

4. The period from 1802 to 1819: Robert Gray & Son (Edinburgh hallmarked)

Figure 6 illustrated a marrow scoop of 1801-02; this was a rather ordinary scoop of unexceptional quality. However, another example, of 1813-14, still absolutely plain but of much superior quality, indicates how the firm's products develop over the years. In the Bonhams Scottish sale in Edinburgh in August 2006, one Lot was described as '*An unusual fiddle pattern fish slice by Robert Gray and Son, Glasgow, hallmarks Edinburgh, 1806*'. This is shown in Figure 28.



Fig. 28, 'fish slice' 1806-07

The blade is quite sharply curved in cross section, and the slice appears to be somewhat inefficient for serving fish. Rabinovitch² describes such servers as '*kidney servers*', and it would seem to be much better suited to serving kidneys from an entrée dish than fish from a serving dish. There appears to be no reference in contemporary literature to '*kidney servers*', but members' comments on the purpose of this piece would be welcome.

On page 8 of the earlier *Finial* article¹, reference was made to a private die comprising a moor's head. This has now been seen on a dessert fork of 1817-18, of King's Type 2 pattern (Figure 10c) and is shown in Figure 29. A later, and virtually identical example of 1827/8 has also now appeared.

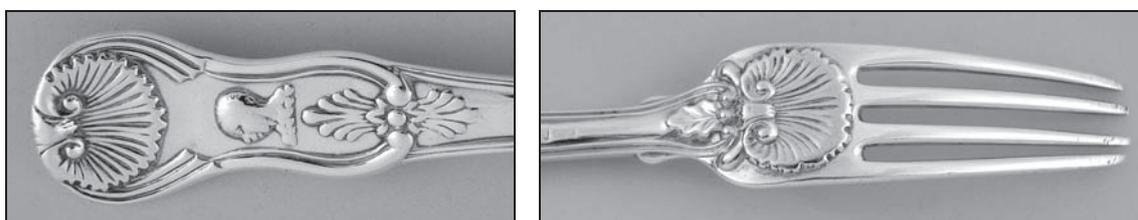


Fig. 29, details of a dessert fork of 1817-18 showing private die (front) and decorated heel (back)

This fork is by far the earliest piece of flatware made from a private die seen so far (previously the earliest seen was given as 1828-29¹); McFarlan³ notes the earliest as 1811 and the latest as 1848, although he does not say whether these are on flatware. This fork also has decoration at the back of the heel as shown on Figure 29 - a most unusual feature for any Scottish flatware. One minor point is that all later private dies struck on this basic pattern have the shell at the top modified to make way for the crest, which usually also includes the helm and mantling (Figures 18 & 19) – the crest on the fork is much more basic and so does not require modification of the shell.

Interestingly, a single ended marrow scoop from this design of die is illustrated in an article by Hyman in the *Silver Society Journal* for Autumn 1997⁴.

5. The period from 1819 to c1850: Robert Gray & Son (Glasgow hallmarked)

It is during the latter part of this period (after 1830) that Robert Gray & Son really became established as a producer of flatware of outstanding quality. It is surprising to note that, during the 1820's, flatware seems rather scarce, although a fair number of pieces of the pattern of Figure 10a or 10b exist. So far nothing of the pattern of Figure 10c between a salt spoon of 1820-21 and a fish slice of 1829-30 (Figure 20) has been seen. All examples of this pattern up to and including the fish slice have shoulders at the bottom of the stem; no pieces later than this have (and the basic pattern becomes very common again in the 1830's). Any contrary findings by members would be welcome.

An example of the superb quality is the Soup Ladle of 1832-33 shown in Figure 30 - this is essentially the same pattern as the very heavy gravy spoon shown in Figure 15 but, of course, without shoulders, and is even heavier, weighing just under nine troy ounces. Most unusually for a piece of Gray silver it has no engraved initials or crest, and no sign of any erasure (its condition is such that it might never have been used!).

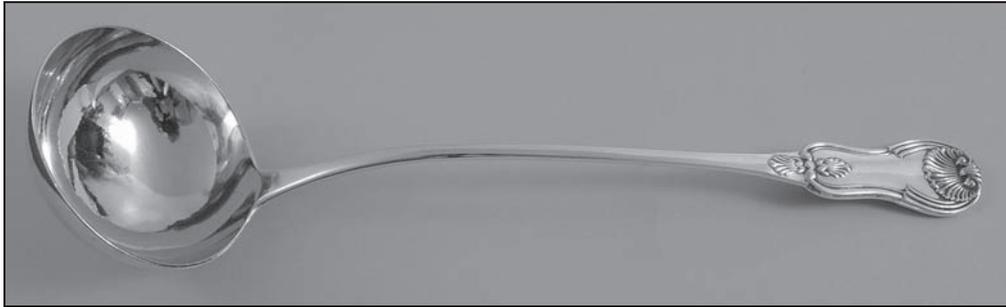


Fig. 30, very heavy gauge soup ladle, 1832-33

All previous patterns continue to be found, with Gray's only single struck variation of King's pattern (Figure 10a or 10b) being struck right up to the end of the firm's existence; indeed a set of six table forks of 1848-49 in this pattern are extremely sharply struck (probably indicating a new die) despite this being within a year of McFarlan's³ 'latest recorded piece of silver bearing the firm's marks'. As this pattern has been recorded from as early as 1813-14 it was in continuous use for at least 35 years on virtually all types of flatware. This particular example is of additional interest in that three of the six have a very unusual journeyman's mark as illustrated in Figure 31 (the other three have no visible journeyman's mark).



Fig. 31, Marking on table forks of 1848-49

It is interesting to note that this journeyman's mark has also been seen recently on one of a set of six dessert spoons in what is probably Gray's most advanced pattern – double struck Scottish King's shape (rococo end), as Figure 23. The example with this mark is hallmarked for 1846-47, whilst the other five have no visible journeyman's mark and are hallmarked for 1838-39, but otherwise appear identical even to the extent of the initial (a Gothic B) engraved at the top.

It is, however, in the variety of pieces produced from private dies that the maximum interest of this period arises. Recently three lots have appeared at auction and throw some new light on the range and quantities that must have been produced. The first has already been mentioned in section 4, being fourteen dessert forks with a die struck moor's head crest as described.

The second lot was a large one, all hallmarked 1833-34, the pattern being the fiddle and thread variant of Figure 18a, but with a die struck crest, virtually identical to that of Figure 18b, probably ascribed to Bartholomew of Glasgow. As well as one table fork, five dessert forks, and eight teaspoons there were two 'salad servers', a marrow scoop and five matching knives. Strangely there were no table or dessert spoons, the only pieces of this pattern with this crest that had previously been seen! The 'salad servers' have been put in inverted commas, since they were much smaller than normal (dessert spoon size) and the 'tines' were rather roughly cut. The suspicion must be that they are conversions from dessert spoons, whether by Robert Gray & Son or by the owners must be open to question. Comments from members would be welcome!

The marrow scoop is single ended of the same general form as the 'Marrowbone Club' examples, but with the Bartholomew crest. It is interesting that an identical example is shown in Hyman's article⁵, together with the other referred to in section 4. The 'salad servers' and marrow scoop are shown in Figure 32.



Fig. 32, 'Salad server' and marrow scoop, 1833-34

The third lot comprised five dessert spoons, a single table fork, dessert fork and teaspoon, the pattern and die being identical to Figure 18b. Interestingly, the forks are hallmarked for 1837-38, and all spoons (including toddy ladles previously seen from this die and with this crest) for 1838-39. It is an interesting question why there are two services with essentially the same crest, but of different patterns and some four or five years apart – did two branches of the same family have them, or what?

Finally, the question was raised in the original *Finial* article¹ whether more items with the pattern and crest of Figure 19 exist. Some matching knives of 1837-38 are described in section 6, and a set of twelve dessert forks have been seen, five by Robert Gray & Son (four hallmarked 1837-38, one hallmarked 1838-39), and seven later by another maker. These are discussed further in section 7. It is interesting that the pieces in the original *Finial* article¹ were both hallmarked 1844-45, so it seems that this service was produced in stages!

6. Knives and other “filled handle” pieces

One thing that has become apparent is that knives by Gray (with the exception of the butter knife in Figures 14 and 25) do not seem to occur. McFarlan⁶ shows a page from the Edinburgh Assay Office Registers for 1812, in which the silver sent by Robert Gray for Assay in that year is listed. A number of butter knives feature, as do a few ‘fish knives’ (could these actually be fish slices?). There are also a few “knife blades”. However, there is no mention of table or dessert knives.

As mentioned above, the Bartholomew service of 1833-34 had with it five matching knives. These filled handle table knives are in poor condition, with later steel blades (some by John Round of Sheffield), but on some the marks on the handles can just be made out as those of William Eaton of London, 1833-34, i.e. the same year. The handles have the same die stamped crest as the rest of the service.

Furthermore, there is a set of six fruit knives and forks, with filled silver handles and silver blades/tines, all by William Eaton, and again with the same crest and of the same date. In this case, the condition is excellent. Both these and the table knives above have the crests struck ‘French’ style (i.e. the crest is upright when the piece is laid ‘vertically’ on the table with the handle towards the user). All flatware, plus the table knives described in the next paragraph, have the crests struck in the opposite, normal “English” style.

Finally, twelve filled handle table knives with the crest of Figure 19 appeared in a recent *Finial* auction. These were yet again by William Eaton, hallmarked for 1837-38 (i.e. the same as some of the dessert forks described in the last paragraph of section 5); in this case the condition is excellent, and the unmarked steel blades appear to be original, of the typical tapering form of the period.

This raises the obvious question of whether William Eaton and Robert Gray & Son had any formal association, with Eaton producing filled handle knives and other pieces for Gray. McFarlan⁷ mentions instances of Gray acting as retailer for London makers, but makes no mention of Eaton or, indeed, of flatware. So far no progress has been made in finding any connection, but members’ comments would be welcome. These items are shown in Figures 33 and 34.

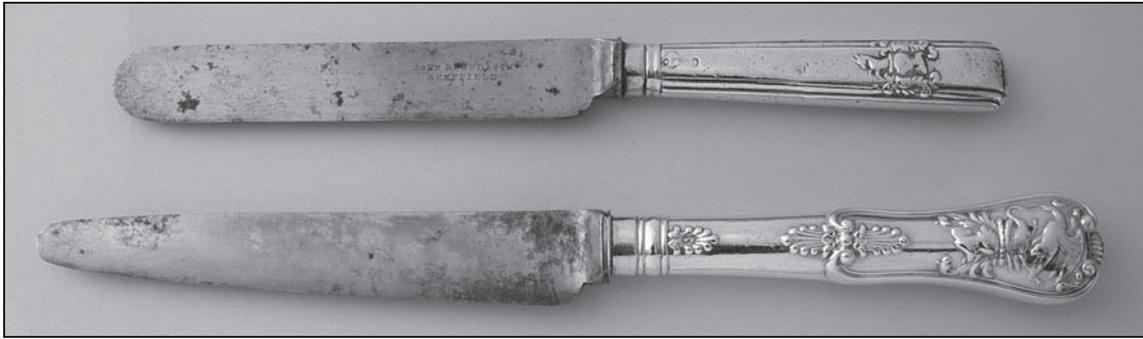


Fig. 33, crested table knives by William Eaton, London, 1833-34 (top), 1837-38 (bottom)

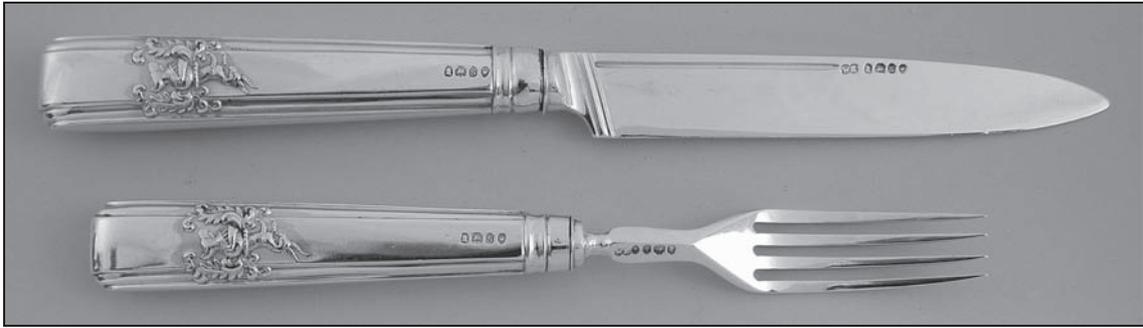


Fig. 34, crested fruit knife and fork by William Eaton, London, 1833-34

7. Finally, after 1850: Gray patterns by other makers

As well as the filled handle pieces described in section 6 above, two examples have been found of pieces produced by other makers from dies almost identical to Gray's in years after Robert Gray & Son finally closed in 1852 or 1853³.

The first example is referred to earlier, and comprises seven dessert forks by Chawner & Co. Figure 35 shows a comparison of examples by Robert Gray & Son of 1837-38 and Chawner & Co of 1865-66. Whilst certainly not identical, the dies are very similar, and it would seem likely that the family wanted additional/replacement pieces, and Chawner's sunk new dies. A comparison is shown in Figures 35 and 36, with the Gray pieces on the left and Chawner on the right.



Fig. 35, front of forks by Gray/Chawner



Fig. 36, back of forks by Gray/Chawner

The second example is of two sets of teaspoons of double struck Scottish King's shape (rococo end) teaspoons. These do not have die struck crests; the first set has an engraved Gothic 'B' and is by Robert Gray & Son, 1838-39, and the second has an engraved Gothic 'D' and is by a (so far) unattributed Glasgow maker 'MSAB', 1858-59. A comparison is shown in Figures 37 and 38, with the Gray pieces on the left and those by 'MSAB' on the right. In this case the dies could, possibly, be the same; it is not impossible that 'MSAB' acquired the actual Gray dies after Robert Gray and Son ceased trading in around 1852 or 1853³.



Fig. 37, front of teaspoons by Gray/MSAB



Fig. 38, back of teaspoons by Gray/MSAB

8. Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge help from Chris Bell who drew my attention to various Gray pieces (including the very interesting Auction Lots) that he had found via the Internet.

APPENDIX – Another note on crests

One of the joys of silver by Robert Gray and Robert Gray & Son is that it is frequently crested, and quite often carries a motto. When the crests are die stamped, however, they do not normally have a motto, and attribution is sometimes rather difficult. However, a possible recent connection has been found between the moor's head crest (Figure 29) and the armorial shield (Figure 23a). Hyman⁴ attributes the moor's head to McClelland, and indeed Fairbairn⁸ quotes many families who used it including McClelland (several possible spellings). The shield of Figure 23a (or, two chevrons sable) is also used by many families but again include McClelland (several possible spellings)⁹. It is known that Gray had a faithful clientele, so it is speculated that these might belong to the same family. If so, why should they want two services? It should be remembered that in the early 19th century the abolition of slavery was one of the hottest political issues; indeed, one wonders how McClelland chose their moor's head crest! Perhaps by 1838, by which time slavery had finally been abolished throughout the British Empire, they might have been embarrassed when entertaining guests using this service; hence they went back to Robert Gray & Son and asked them to make a new service in their latest style (Scottish King's shape (rococo end)). In an unusual example of early 19th century political correctness they perhaps also asked for their shield rather than their crest to be incorporated in the die! Once again, members' comments would be welcome.

Notes

1. Walter Brown, The Flatware of Robert and William Gray of Glasgow, *The Finial*, Volume 16/05, May/June 2006: pp3-10.
2. Rabinovitch, Benton Seymour: *Antique Silver Servers for the Dining Table*, Joslin Hall Publishing, 1991: p236-8.
3. McFarlan, Gordon: Robert Gray & Son, Goldsmiths of Glasgow, *The Silver Society Journal* 11:Autumn 1999: p218.
4. Hyman, John A: Marrow scoops and spoons at Colonial Williamsburg, *The Silver Society Journal* 9:Autumn 1997: p604, fig 37.
5. Hyman, loc cit, fig 36.
6. McFarlan, loc cit, p222.
7. McFarlan, loc cit, p220-221.
8. Fairbairn's *Book of Crests*, 4th edition, 1905 page 366.
9. Ian Pickford, private communication