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An Interesting Family of Scottish Provincial Marks And a New Discovery Within

By Colin T Fraser, FSA Scot

While I am sure this article will provide few answers and indeed ask more questions than it resolves I hope that members will find it of interest, it did after all originate from a reader's collection. For some time now I have been researching and discussing a maker and set of marks often attributed to Dingwall, as have other interested collectors. Usually seen as 'AR' and a sunburst (but with some variation discussed below).

For many years it has been attributed to Dingwall and to my understanding with little concrete reasoning why, as is often the case for these unusual types of marks. The obvious and often used reasoning is that the sunburst (or sun in splendour) is part of the Dingwall coat of arms, and the initials 'AR' could be a relation of the illustrious family of Tain silversmiths, Ross. As an aside, confusion still shrouds these men and their work.

Now all of the above, to my mind is not provable, and is based on very shaky evidence, to say the least. The fact that the sunburst is in the town's coat of arms, is only circumstantial evidence and could in fact point to other locations. It should also be noted no firm documentary evidence associates Dingwall with any type of silversmithing.

Estelle Quick, in her book *'A Balance of Silver, The Story of the Silversmiths of Tain'* discusses these ideas but does not seem to agree with them and merely includes the maker and his work for completeness. Interestingly she could find no trace of the maker, even after exhaustive research on the silversmiths of Tain and the surrounding area. After further research post-publication, a dirk tentatively ascribed to Alexander Ross as maker, has now been concretely ascribed to Lt. Colonel Alexander Ross of Calrossie as original owner.

The marks under discussion themselves are interesting and variation does exist, the basic timeline of use and varieties are listed below:



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Figure 1: 'AR' in large but rather crudely cut punch – bottom marked on late Scottish Fiddle pattern teaspoons (In my opinion these items are not by the maker under discussion, but are just adding confusion to the matter. Not only is the date spread far too wide if these are included, but no examples with a sunburst mark and this maker's punch are recorded. They cannot therefore be included as this maker).

Figure 2: 'A.R' twice, 'S' twice (all with serrated punches) – stem marked on Hanoverian pattern flatware, this is a scare combination seldom seen. It should be noted that this punch bears no close resemblance to the makers punch above, nor do any of the following.

Figure 3: 'A.R' sunburst in small and well-executed punch – bottom marked on late Hanoverian and early Old English pattern flatware (also seen: 'A.R', sunburst, 'A.R' – as above and occasionally top marked on Fiddle pattern flatware).

Figure 4: 'A.R', bird in flight, sunburst – so far exclusively found top marked on Fiddle pattern flatware. Note: the 'bird in flight' mark is a loose cataloguer's term for a rather unusual and indistinct punch that is hard to interpret. This name is kept and used as no more appropriate name has been offered.

Figure 5: 'A.R' – makers mark only.



Fig. 3

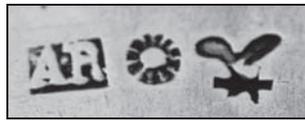


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The above combinations can be scarce, for example, items with the 'bird in flight' mark are usually highly contested when offered at auction. Until recently, these were the only combinations of marks I had come across for Dingwall and I assumed the marks were for a silversmith working in an unknown location using his own local marks. The Scottish and provincial aspects of these items seems almost definite as the marks are so 'unique' to the maker and the style and feel of the spoons are undoubtedly Scottish provincial. The confusion around these marks has been added to greatly with the discovery (within a Finial member's collection) of a Fiddle pattern teaspoon with an engraved initial gothic 'H' and marked 'J.H', bird in flight, 'J.H', sunburst. So from having one maker with a few combinations we now have two makers using the same punches, and the possibilities grow.

The maker's punch 'JH' does not correspond to any other known maker's punch. Nor do the initials match a known maker without an attributed punch. It should also be noted that the sunburst and 'bird in flight' punches are those used by the earlier maker 'AR'. As the punches are identical to AR's it must be assumed that they were inherited by 'JH' from him and it is possible 'JH' worked with or was apprenticed to 'AR'. I do not feel that the maker 'JH' was buying from 'AR' and re-marking as no evidence of overstriking is evident on the teaspoon and the style of the spoon appears later. The final telling point can be seen on the spoon; the punches are a bit worn and obviously had some age when used. It is not the case they are polished out, as the spoon is crisp and in nice condition. Sadly there is little more evidence to be gleaned from this spoon other than interesting circumstantial evidence which should be noted and judged accordingly.

The spoon is very distinctively engraved with a gothic style initial 'H'. While at present this is the only item I have seen with these 'Dingwall' marks. I have noted other items, which appear to be from a matching larger canteen but by different makers, including dessert, tablespoons, toddy ladles and forks, in all under ten items from the set have been noted. The teaspoon discussed here is the only one with the 'JH' 'Dingwall' marks but the other items were exclusively by Highland makers from the Inverness area. Items by Jamieson & Naughton and Alexander MacLeod of Inverness appear to have been the main makers for the canteen.

This would seem to present a location for the original canteen to the Inverness shire/Highland area. While this does not add any weight to the 'JH' (and by association 'AR') marks being Dingwall, it might add some weight to a general Inverness shire origin. It should be stated that this is all circumstantial evidence but none the less interesting to take into account.

A new theory has recently emerged for these marks. This new idea seems to point towards the possibility of the marks being connected with Dumfries. It is interesting to note that the Dumfries coat of arms does have a sunburst. While at present the evidence is only circumstantial it does appear to have a strong basis. The research is ongoing and is awaited with interest. As with any theory or research all evidence needs to be considered and taken into account before a conclusion can be reached. In this case, all the conflicting evidence and ideas means no concrete answer can be given, except to say that there is more to this family of marks than originally thought and rare combinations do exist, Dingwall, Dumfries or otherwise.

The spoon discussed here was consigned by a Finial member and will be sold by Lyon and Turnbull in their specialized Fine Scottish Silver sale to be held on the 13th February 2008. Any ideas or further examples/variations on these marks and makers would be gratefully received and can be sent via the editor.

With thanks to Ms E. Quick, Dr. E. Daw, Mr. K. Dobie and Mr. M. Wilson. Photographs courtesy of private collectors and Lyon & Turnbull.

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