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A Path through the Thistles

A Family of Related Marks on Scottish Silver

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Fig. 1

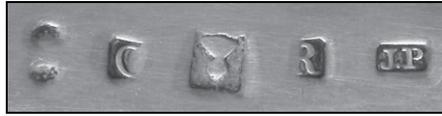


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

An earlier article on this subject showed the similarity of punches used on three spoons (Figs. 1, 2 and 3): a stylised thistle, referred to here as ‘thistle A’, and a ‘G.R.’ stamp used in full or half-stamped (*An Unascribed Thistle Mark*, The Finial, July/August 2008). Since publication of that article several other spoons bearing similar marks have come to light, most recently at Woolley & Wallis’s sale in January 2009. These spoons, ascribed to George Ritchie of Arbroath in the catalogue, though Henry Stuart Fotheringham, writing on the Assay Office Scotland website, expresses reservations about this attribution, comprised: Lot 98, three fiddle & shell tablespoons, two marked ‘G.R.’/‘thistle A’/‘G.R.’ and a third bearing Glasgow marks for 1836 (Figs. 4 & 5);



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Lot 99, a Kings pattern tablespoon, bearing a very different kind of thistle, referred to here as ‘thistle B’ – marked ‘G.R.’/‘thistle B’/‘G.R.’/‘thistle B’ (Fig. 6); and, Lot 100, a fiddle & shell toddy ladle marked ‘G.R.’/‘thistle A’/‘G.R.’ (Fig. 7). The two thistle punches, A and B, along with the ‘G.R.’ stamp, provide links to other loosely related groups of marks.



Fig. 6

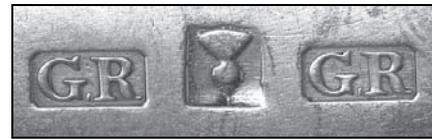


Fig. 7

‘Thistle A’, in conjunction with ‘J.’ and ‘S.’ marks that appear to be have been half-stamped from the same punch, and an ‘A.C.’ mark, is also seen on an item sold as part of Lot 372 of the Martin Gubbins collection sold at Bonhams in 2002 (Fig. 8). Another item in Lot 372 shows the same ‘A.C.’ mark with ‘thistle B’, a capital letter ‘I’, and a stylised tree/exclamation mark punch (Fig. 9). ‘Thistle B’ also appears with the ‘A.C.’ mark, along with an anchor and the stylised tree/exclamation mark punch, on an item in the Greenock folder of Richard Turner’s CD *A Directory of Scottish Provincial Silversmiths and Their Marks* (Fig. 10).



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

This ‘A.C.’ mark appears to be the common denominator of a whole sub-family of marks, many of which feature the stylised tree/exclamation mark punch and capital letter ‘I’, including those appearing on Lot 230 from the same Woolley & Wallis auction referred to above, an oar pattern tablespoon attributed to Alexander Campbell of Greenock (Fig. 11), and on a toddy ladle attributed to this same maker that appeared on the Coritani website (Fig. 12). The first of the last two mentioned items (Fig. 11) also features a ‘G’ punch that appears to be the same half-stamped ‘G.R.’ punch that occurs with ‘thistle A’ (Figs. 1, 2 & 3). However, there is another ‘G’ stamp in this ‘A.C.’ family marks, which I shall refer to as ‘G2’.¹



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

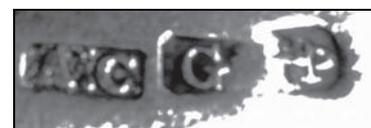


Fig. 13

A photograph of this mark can be found on Richard Turner's CD, again in the Greenock folder, where its name is given as "A.C, G, anchor Greenock – TD" (Fig. 13). This 'G2' punch, in which the form of the letter is much further from the left-hand edge of the indented portion, seems to connect to a couple of items apparently outside the main body of this family marks: a soup ladle sold at Curr and Dewar in Dundee in April last year, and a teaspoon purchased at Spitalfields market in the same month (Figs. 14 & 15). The Pot of Lilies stamps on these last two items clearly indicates a connection with Dundee, and this connection will be explored at a later date.



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

But there is one further mystifying connection: look at this mark (Fig. 16) taken from a Hanoverian tablespoon of around 1760 made by William Crow of Canongate and sold at the Woolley & Wallis auction in January 2009, where it was Lot 130. Now look again at the unascrbed thistle mark (Thistle A) mentioned at the beginning of this article (Figs. 1– 4, 7 & 8) and observe the two curved indentations in the top of the punch, above the thistle itself: they are in exactly the right place to be the vestiges of the two 'balls' floating above the thistle in the William Crow punch. Part of the William Crow punch appears to have been deliberately filed away at some stage, and the punch re-used. The measurements of both marks confirms that this is a plausible explanation², and a superimposition of one image on the other in Adobe Photoshop (Fig. 7 on Fig 16) shows that they are an exact fit, even down to the triangular indent on the right-hand edge of the punch (Fig. 17).



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

In his *Scottish and Gold and Silver Work* (rev Henry Steuart Fotheringham 1999) Ian Finlay writes: "There are in addition some anomalous marks, particularly two associated with William Crow. One of them is an animal usually described as a cat, which may be meant to mimic the English lion passant mark. The other is a crowned thistle, which Jackson illustrated upside-down in his table of unascrbed Scottish marks. The significance of these two marks, if there is any, has not yet come to light. It must be remembered that Crow moved to Dumfries and the crowned thistle mark may therefore relate to his work there, rather than in Canongate"³.

With the exception of the William Crow spoon, all of the items mentioned in this article fall stylistically within a date range of 1810 – 40. The unascrbed thistle mark (Thistle A), which in its complete undamaged form belonged to Crow 50 years earlier, is the only clue that reaches outside the family of marks, but it seems to be insufficient evidence on which to hazard a guess at a location for these items. The anchor, and possibly also the stylised tree/exclamation mark, might suggest Greenock as a possible source of manufacture, but wherever these spoons originate, it looks to be a long way from George Ritchie's Arbroath.

I would, of course, be delighted to hear from any Finial members possessing items with marks that fall within the family described above, especially if they occur in combination with any other mark that links them to a person, a place or a time.

Notes

1. Please note that the two G punches mentioned in this article do not resemble the G punch found on pieces by David Gray at Dumfries.
2. The Thistle A mark shown in figs 1 and 17 measures 3.0mm along its base with sides each of 3.25mm narrowing to the indented top, which measures 2.8mm across. The William Crow mark shown in fig 16 measures 3.0mm along its base with sides each of 5.5mm.
3. William Crow became a burges in Dumfries by purchase as a stranger on 18 December 1769, and the Edinburgh Assay Office site gives 1798 as the last mention.