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The Introduction of the Thistle Mark

At Edinburgh in 1759

By Laurence Joyce

For over three hundred years, silver assayed in Edinburgh bore the marks of both the goldsmith who made it and the deacon (from 1681 the assaymaster) of the Edinburgh goldsmiths. The practice began in 1457 during the reign of James II (of Scotland) and the wording of the act of that year reads: *“And the said goldsmyt sall tak his werk or he gif it furthe and pass to the dene of the craft and ger examyn that it be sa fine as is befor wrettyn. And the said dene of the craft sall set his merk and takyn thairto togidder wt the said goldsmytis”* (Taken from the Rev Thomas Burns, *Old Scottish Communion Plate*, p535, where the relevant chapter, *Old Scottish Hallmarks*, appears to have been written by Alexander JS Brook).

A date letter was added in 1681, when the deacon’s mark was abolished, replaced by that of the assaymaster, but no further changes were made to the way in which items assayed in Edinburgh were marked until 1759, when the thistle mark was introduced. The minutes of the Incorporation of Goldsmiths for 15th September record the change as follows: *“Thereafter Hugh Gordon the Assaymaster being called in and having delivered the last year’s puncheon to the Deacon, the Incorporation did unanimously nominate and re-elect the said Hugh Gordon to be Assaymaster to the Incorporation for the ensuing year and appointed him the Saxon letter E to be put on the plate said year with the stamp or impression of a Scots thistle in place of the initial letters of the Assaymaster’s name which initial letters they discharge in time coming”* (This passage can be found in both *Old Scottish Communion Plate*, p537 and in *Jackson’s*, p536.)



Fig. 1

Figure 1 shows the marks on a table spoon of 1759 marked according to these instructions. But what are we to make of the marks shown in Figure 2, which also occur on a table spoon bearing the date letter ‘E’ for 1759?



Fig. 2

One possible explanation is that Hugh Gordon was already in possession of the Saxon letter ‘E’ puncheon before 15th September 1759 and, as yet unaware of the new instructions from the Incorporation, marked this item in the same way that he had been doing for the past 15 years since he was first appointed assaymaster in 1744. Another is that on some occasion after 15th September 1759, and therefore aware of the new instructions, he had what we now call ‘a senior moment’ and marked this spoon in the old style, assuming, of course, that his old ‘HG’ assaymaster’s punch was close to hand. If this were the case, and if he had then noticed his mistake, he could still have rectified the situation by overstriking with the thistle puncheon.

I would be very interested to hear from Finial readers of any other items with similar marks. Moreover, a copy of the photograph shown in Figure 2 was sent to the Incorporation of Goldsmiths in Edinburgh, where it was shown to Henry Steuart Fotheringham who said that he had never seen such a set of marks before and that, according to his reading of the minutes, *“the combination of Hugh Gordon’s initials with the date-letter ‘E’ ought not to exist, yet it clearly does”*.

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