

# Bath's Doubtful Silversmiths

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**Fig. 1: George III silver teapot, 1789. Hallmarked in London with Bath maker's mark for Thomas Graham and Jacob Willis**

Like most provincial towns and cities in England, before the start of the eighteenth century, Bath supported a rather modest local silver trade. The demand from Bath residents would have been mostly for smaller utilitarian items like spoons, small bowls and cups and wedding rings. Such pieces were considered essentials not luxuries to those commissioning them. The alternative to a silver spoon being one made from latten, or worse, wood. Being an 'inert metal', silver, uniquely, has no taste and so offered the owner of a silver spoon the flavour of the food only without the pewter or yesterday's onions.

Only a tiny minority of the population could afford to buy the elaborate and expensive silver services of London-made silver. The big bowls, salvers and cups we see in museums from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were produced largely for display, but a simple spoon, only costing about ten per cent more than its value of metal, was selling well within the price

range of the middle class. The cost of a spoon was equivalent to about two weeks semi-skilled labour and beside which, the intrinsic value of the metal could always be recouped if the wolf snarled at the door.

Over the centuries there must have been many silversmiths working in the city of Bath to supply the local demand but, out of all the craftsmen, only one family of maker's marks is attributed to Bath with any degree of certainty.

George Reeve (working c.1650-70) and his sons Spencer and George made and marked metal, mostly spoons, for their Bath clientele. There is a plaque in the Abbey commemorating the family, who presumably were successful in their trade to have been able to afford such a memorial.

Other silversmiths are recorded in Bath as being in business at the end of the seventeenth century; names like George Watkins and John Shelton are mentioned in old documents but sadly, if they used a mark to identify their outputs, it has been lost to history.

The beginning of the eighteenth century brought with it a sea change to the economy of Bath and consequently in the demand for and supply of silver. The wealthy and aristocratic visitors to Bath were used to the finer things in life and would have had a taste for more sophisticated, even if more frivolous, items. From 1700 onward, the volume of silver in Bath increased dramatically and so did the variety of the items on sale.

The standard work on the silvermakers' marks, *London Goldsmiths 1697 to 1837 Their Marks & Lives* by Arthur Grimwade, lists Bath-based silversmiths with their marks registered at the Goldsmiths' Hall (see **table 1**).

As well as the silvermakers, the Bath trade directories list numerous retail business offering a wide range of silverware both to tourists and Bath residents.

The sudden boom in Bath's fortunes in the first half of the eighteenth century gave rise to a vast expansion in the retail luxury trade especially during the Bath season when the great and the good descended on the city with their healthy appetites for souvenirs and presents. The local silver sellers had to up their game to cater for this new market; they did exactly that. As the century wore on the silver trade continued to grow.

Curiously, the silversmiths listed, although registered as working in Bath, all marked their wares at the Goldsmiths' Hall in London. At first glance this

Name(s)	First registered at Goldsmiths Hall
Thomas Wynne	18/10/1754
William Townsend	07/09/1774
John Ford and John William	06/05/1782
John Townsend	10/09/1783
Thomas Howell	27/05/1784
William Basnett	03/09/1784
Lionel Bretton	18/11/1784
Thomas Graham and Jacob Willis	26/06/1789
Thomas Graham	14/05/1792
Peter Merrett	28/01/1793
William Bottle and Jeremiah Willsher	27/10/1796
James Welshman	22/07/1813
James Bottle	16/01/1819

Table 1: **Bath-based registered silversmiths at the Goldsmiths' Hall**

seems an odd decision to make as the assay office in Exeter is somewhat nearer to Bath. In fact, most of the silversmiths working in Bristol did go to Exeter for assay marking and only very rarely to London. Even more difficult to understand is the doubling of the risk of transportation having to make the return journey. The Bath to London road was littered with highwaymen and Hounslow Heath in particular was considered one of the most dangerous passages in England. There are many tales of wealthy travellers being robbed, and a waggon full of fresh silverware would have been very tempting.

Whereas most provincial centres of silversmithing, Newcastle, Exeter, Bristol etc., had their own unique styles and repertoire of objects, the silver marked by Bath makers is indistinguishable from London-made goods. Since even spoon making was, at this period, a specialist occupation, it is unusual to find a silversmith able to produce a wide variety of objects. The small permanent population of Bath could not be expected to provide enough work for a specialist spoon or candlestick maker but the demand especially from tourists for all manner of items meant that the Bath makers had to try to provide as

comprehensive a range of silver wares as possible.

The expansion for Bath's unusual system of trade is cleared up by examination of the legal affairs of the individual silversmiths. The list of names above, though fully trained and apprenticed in the craft of silver manufacture, were in fact merely middlemen and shop keepers. The Goldsmiths' Company records show that each one had a place partnership agreement with London-based silversmiths in the form of powers of attorney held by a London firm allowing them to use the mark of a British silversmith and to stamp London-made items with it.

The silver maker's mark exists in the form of a steel punch cut with initials cut into it. Technically known as a sponsor's mark, the maker's initials must be struck onto silver items before their submission to the assay office (the Goldsmiths' Hall in London) for testing and for the rest of the 'hallmarks' to be struck. Should the assay office find that the metal was sub-standard, the maker could be easily identified. On occasion, the mark of a Bath maker is found struck over the existing mark of another silversmith. This system provided a full range of luxury silver to the Bath buying public with the commercial necessity of Bath silversmiths' brand names being attached to the goods.

In short, despite the various claims of the trade in Bath [Trade cards], the last Bath silversmith was Mr Spencer.

## About the Author

Duncan Campbell worked in the City of London and then followed his growing interest in silver by working in the Portobello Road. He is a respected expert on silver on the BBC's *Antiques Road Show* and has his own business, Beau Nash, at Brock Street in Bath. This article is an example of his new research on the working relationships between Bath and London silversmiths and Goldsmiths' Hall.