...The Finial...

Aberdeen Silversmith's Marks 1790 - 1820

An attempt at ordering those of James Erskine

By Richard Jonas

Introduction

I first became aware of Aberdeen silver when I bought a pair of James Erskine toddy ladles in a mixed lot in about 1990. I noticed that he had a variety of marks with no apparent rationale behind them and I wondered whether it was possible to discover the chronology of them and the reasons he might have had for using them. I realise that others have attempted to unlock the symbolism behind some of his marks[1] and I have not made progress in this regard but I believe that I have reached some understanding of the chronology of their use. I will attempt to set out my thoughts and relate them to some other, contemporary, Aberdeen makers and I hope that readers will let me know if they have evidence that either confirms or contradicts my conclusions so that we can build on these.

James Erskine was apprenticed to James Smith in 1781 and admitted a member of the Hammermen in September 1792, becoming a Goldsmith Burgess in 1796[2]. When he started his business is not known but it was probably about 1790. It is believed that he retired in about 1820 and died in 1824.

Fig. 1   Fig. 2   Fig. 3

Town Marks

In the 1770s and 1780s Aberdeen marks tended to be simply in the form of town and maker's marks only, which were bottom marked on flatware using quite large rectangular punches. The town mark was usually an abbreviation of Aberdeen in roman capitals; ABD, (fig 1&2) but at least one maker used 'ABD[N]' in script (Fig. 3) which indicates that each maker used his own choice of punch. James Erskine appears to have followed the normal practice in the early part of his business career, say 1790/95 (see fig 1).

Fig. 4   Fig. 5   Fig. 6   Fig. 7

Some time in the 1790's the use of the town mark of three turrets was re-introduced after a lapse of some years. This punch was 'T' shaped and sometimes with a chamfered bottom section. Initially this appears to have been used in conjunction with 'ABD' marks and the use of smaller punches (Figs. 4 - 8a & 17). The positioning of the marks also moved up the stem until it was normal for it to be on the reverse of the terminal although this was not always consistent. These town marks continued to be used into the 1800's but less routinely.
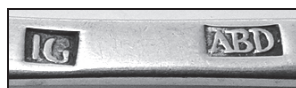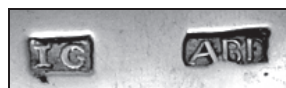

Fig. 8a   Fig. 8b   Fig. 9   Fig. 10

The consistent use of any town mark appears to have ceased, probably late 1790's to early 1800's, unless the use of a thistle punch took its place. James Erskine again reintroduced the three turret town mark in a square punch some time later, probably after 1810 (Fig. 9). The use of a town mark in the form of an abbreviated Aberdeen reappeared in the 1820's but the letters were usually struck separately (Fig 10).
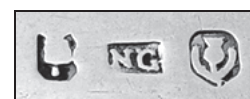

Fig. 11   Fig. 12   Fig. 13   Fig. 14

Thistle Marks

Thistle marks seem to appear in the 1790's. It is possible they were a belated recognition of the 1784 Act requiring all silver to be assayed at the Edinburgh Assay Office and to have duty paid on it, requirements which seem to have been largely ignored by Aberdeen makers until well after 1800[3]. The form of the thistle seems to have been personal to the maker and examples (Figs. 11 - 16) show thistles by James Erskine and other makers for comparison; these include some incuse examples. James Erskine's thistle is consistent in design although the shape of the punch can vary slightly. The thistle mark can appear alone with the makers mark.
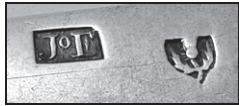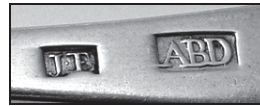

| Fig. 15 | Fig. 16 | Fig. 17 | Fig. 18 |

James Erskine's Maker Marks

'**IE**' - His early marks in the 1790's start with the large bottom marked 'IE' in the rectangular punch (Fig. 1) and then progress through smaller punches up the stem as described under town marks (Fig. 4 & 11). The recommendation of the London Assay Office in November 1781, in order to facilitate the proposed use of stubs of marks, initiated this change in position but it probably took quite a time to be accepted in Aberdeen where most silver was not assayed. At the same time the stems of Old English spoons tended to become relatively slimmer.

'**JE**' - The use of 'I' for Iacobus instead of 'J' for James was a fashion which persisted into the late 1790's and beyond and there may have been a period when 'IE' and 'JE' were interchangeable before 'JE' was used consistently (Fig 5 & 18). The use of a pellet between the two initials appears to have been indiscriminate and may have depended on the punch engraver's interpretation of his instructions (Fig. 1 & 17). However, the only possible exception is towards the end of the use of the 'JE' mark when the pellet may have been used more consistently (Fig 26b). Apart from this exception, it seems unlikely that the inclusion or otherwise of a pellet was a conscious policy but this may be impossible to prove one way or the other!

'**JE**'/'**J.E**' - appears to have been used at the end of the 1790's and for the first ten to fifteen years after 1800. 'JE' does appear with 'E' in a square punch, three turrets in a square punch and fist & dagger at what was presumably a transition to the new 'E' maker's mark system.

'**E**' in square punch - At some time between 1810 and 1815, James Erskine appears to have had a major reorganisation of his system for marking his products. In consequence he introduced his 'E' mark in a square punch which, although it can appear by itself or in a variety of combinations, is always associated with the town mark of three turrets in a square punch and/or a punch showing a fist & dagger (Fig. 9). This latter mark appears to be the Erskine crest[4]. Although the 'E' in square punch and associated marks appear on Old English pattern items, I have only seen a very small number of Fiddle pattern items (none of which had shoulders) that were NOT marked with these marks. Oar pattern also appears always to have these marks. Although I do not know precisely when Fiddle or Oar pattern became fashionable in Aberdeen, this evidence leads me to conclude that the 'E' in square punch and associated marks were introduced during the period 1810 to 1815, probably about 1812.

'**ERSKINE**' (incuse) - The only example of this that I have seen is overstruck on an 'IE' mark. It has additional marks of thistle, 'bm' and boar's head (Fig. 21). It probably dates from 1800/05.

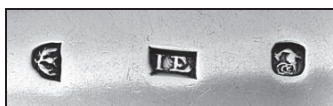| Fig. 19 | Fig. 20 | Fig. 21 |

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

Fig. 25

Fig. 26a

Fig. 26b

Additional Marks

The additional marks occur singly with others in addition to a maker's mark and, sometimes, town marks or a thistle. In probable date order, they are:

- 'k' - lower case in trapezoidal punch (Fig 5 & 22).
- 'Boar's Head' in rectangular punch with slightly cut corners (Fig. 23).
- 'Cockerel' in almost square punch with rounded corners (Fig 24).
- 'bm' in rectangular punch (Fig. 21 & 25).
- Gothic 'Q' (Fig. 26).
- 'u' lower case gothic 'u' or 'n' (Figs. 18); The reason for this punch is unknown but it was also used by several other Aberdeen makers and may have had a currency through the whole period of these additional marks, namely, from the late 1790's to 1812 or later.
- 'fist and dagger' in vertical rectangular punch with base chamfered to point (Figs 9, 19 & 20).

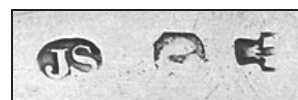
Fig. 27

Fig. 28

Fig. 29

Fig. 30

I have observed that each of these marks, either on its own or with others and with or without thistle marks and/or town marks, is usually associated with either James Erskine's 'IE', 'JE' or 'E' marks, with two exceptions, 'k' and the boar's head, which occur with both 'IE' and 'JE' and their use presumably spans the transition from 'IE' to 'JE' and probably indicates a longer period of use. I set these out in what I believe to be chronological order.

With 'IE':
- 'k' with or without town mark of Three Turrets in 'T' shaped punch.
- 'Cockerel'.
- 'Boar's Head' with or without thistle.

With 'JE':
- 'Gothic Q' with three turrets in 'T' shaped punch.
- 'k' with or without boar's head or thistle.
- 'boar's head' with or without 'bm' or thistle 'bm'.

With 'JE' & 'J.E':
- Gothic 'u', with or without 'ABD'.

With 'E':
- fist & dagger by itself or with three turrets in square punch.
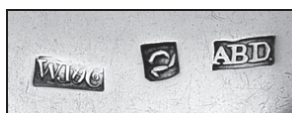

Fig. 31

Fig. 32

Fig. 33

Fig. 34

Other Makers

There were a number of other Aberdeen makers who used some of the same marks as James Erskine but others, such as Nathaniel Gillet (worked 1785-1824), never appear to have done so. These makers were:

- James Gordon 1766-1810 (died)[5] also used gothic 'u'[6].
- John Leslie 1774-1837 (died) also used gothic 'u' (Fig 12 & 13).
- John Ewen 1770-1821 (died) also used gothic 'u'[7].
- James Smith 1780-1828 (died) also used gothic 'u' (Fig 30).
- Wm Byres 1792-1811 (died) worked in Banff 1778-1792 also used gothic 'u' and gothic 'Q' (Fig 31 & 32).
- David Izat finished apprenticeship with James Gordon June 1793, worked in Banff 1794-97[8] and returned to Aberdeen but uncertain whether he worked for himself; died 1836, also used gothic 'Q'.
- John Allan pre-1794, post-1799[9]. Also used gothic 'u'[10].
- Wm Jamieson & Co 1806-1813, 'WJ' continued under own name and died 1841, also used gothic 'u' (Fig. 33). When he reverted to his sole name sometime before 1813, he also used gothic 'u'[11].
- Peter Gill 1783-1850, worked in Banff 1778-1783, mainly as a watch/clock maker, also used gothic 'Q' (Fig. 34).

Anomalies

Stylised thistle (Figs 35 & 36); although Jackson shows this as one of James Erskine's marks[12] I have not included it as I am not certain that it is one of his marks. The 'JE' marks illustrated (Fig. 35 & 36), which differ, both have a feel to them unlike the earlier 'JE' marks. Comparison of the stylised thistle could be made with that of Wm Filian c.1840[13]. The town mark (Fig. 36) has 'A','B' & 'D' in separate marks which I think is after 1820; this set of marks shows different levels of wear between the 'JE' and the other marks which may indicate that the marks were struck at different times. Another, similar, example of this is illustrated, in this case Nathaniel Rae (Fig. 36b).

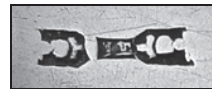Fig. 35   Fig. 36a   Fig. 36b   Fig. 37   Fig. 38

A fiddle pattern toddy ladle came on the market recently with the three turrets in a square punch and fist & dagger marks[14] but with a 'WW' maker's mark (Willliam Whitecross). This might make sense because William Whitecross was apprenticed to James Erskine in 1800 and is thought to have been still working for him when James Erskine retired in about 1820. Whitecross then set up his own business at a different address but it seems rational that he may have taken over James Erskine's stock, which could have included this ladle.

I am aware of examples of spoons and a toddy ladle with both James Erskine's and William Byre's maker's marks on them but whether this indicates any close link between them is uncertain. One oddity, which may have indicated an off day in the workshop, is a fiddle teaspoon (Fig. 37) with two fist & dagger marks, each pointing towards the 'JE' mark!

There are also examples where there is a very deliberate second makers mark of 'E' in square punch (Fig. 38) but this may not have any great significance unless it was an attempt to look superficially more like an Edinburgh marked item.

Conclusions

My tentative conclusions are based on a number of arguments, none of which is totally watertight, namely, style. It is possible to look at the many varied styles of Aberdeen spoons and put them into a rough date order but it is equally easy to be misled by items which were produced later than the original flowering of the style. This occurred frequently and for all sorts of reasons including conservative taste, extending a set, replacing a damaged item or the style returning to fashion. Items were also restyled to keep up with fashion.

There are one or two major changes in style that can be largely relied on. Hanoverian is normally earlier than Old English (which includes a myriad of variations); Old English is earlier than fiddle

pattern. Having said that, it is difficult to allocate dates to these changes in fashion or to identify a date when the new style started. The mainstream change may, in any case, have taken place over a number of years and have been distorted by reversion to old styles for the reasons cited above. I have used the transition to Fiddle pattern for placing the 'E' in square punch maker's mark in the last part of James Erskine's working life but I have noted that the precise date of the introduction of this change cannot be identified. In other respects, I have used style as a guide with caution. The fashion for latinising Christian names was, I think, particularly prevalent during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and had probably largely fizzled out by the early 1800's. I think that this evidence can be safely used to put makers mark 'IE' before 'JE'.

The use of gothic 'u' and gothic 'Q' by other contemporary Aberdeen makers may give some guidance as to the currency of these marks, for instance, William Jamieson & Co is known to have existed from 1806 until sometime before 1813 when William Jamieson reverted to his sole name. The Company used the gothic 'u' mark and it seems that he did as well after the change of name, but probably not for very long. This could give a latest cut off date for the use of this mark as about 1813 or a little later. It is not so easy to identify when this mark was first used because all the other makers who used this mark operated before 1800 and most before 1790. However, my hunch is that it started no earlier than the late 1790's.

The Banff connection between William Byres, David Izat and Peter Gill seems obvious but what the use of the gothic 'Q' symbolised is unknown to me. This mark was also used on objects made in Banff by William Byres and David Izat. Why James Erskine should have used this mark as well I do not know unless it indicated that the item was to be sold in Banff. To judge by the style of the spoons that I have seen with this mark, I think that the use of it did not continue much beyond 1800 although there was renewed use of it in the 1820's.

Summary
It would be interesting to have more information on two points of background. The first is why there should have been such a proliferation of marks in the thirty or so years between about 1795 and 1825. The second is whether the significance of each individual mark would have been readily and widely recognised at the time. Perhaps any member, who has knowledge of life in Aberdeen around 1800, could put some thoughts together on these aspects.

I hope that I have interpreted sensibly such facts that are before me but I am well aware that there may be other evidence which, had I known of it, would render my conclusions wrong. I have written this in the hope that it may encourage additional information to help enlarge or alter the tentative conclusions that I have reached. Please could readers provide any further information that they may have through The Finial or to me directly.

Acknowledgements
I am grateful to a number of people who have provided information & comments, particularly Peter Bentley.

Notes
1. See *Scottish Gold & Silver Work*, by Ian Findlay, revised by Henry Stewart Fotheringham, 1991, page 191.
2. See *The Goldsmiths of Aberdeen* by I. E. James, 1981, pages 87-89, for a fuller biography.
3. See *Scottish Gold & Silver Work*, page 189.
4. See *Fairbairn's Book of Crests*, 1983, Plate 212-19, page 132 & 189.
5. James Gordon retired in about 1796 and the firm was run by George Roger (his brother-in-law and partner from 1782). See *Scottish Gold & Silver Work*, page 189 and *The Goldsmiths of Aberdeen*, pages 76-78 & pages 79-80.
6. See Bonhams Sale 19/08/04, Lot 115.
7. See Phillips (Edinburgh) Sale 22/10/82, Lot 69.
8. See *The Goldsmiths of Aberdeen*, page 119.
9. John Allan was apprenticed to Nat Gillet in 1785 and he must have been in business before 1794. See *The Goldsmiths of Aberdeen*, page 92 & 103 for fuller details.
10. See Thomson, Roddick & Metcalf sale 24/04/01, Lot 12.
11. See Thomson, Roddick & Metcalf sale 28/03/06, Lot 23.
12. See *Jackson's Silver & Gold Marks*, by Ian Pickford, 1987, page 585.
13. See *Jackson's Silver & Gold Marks*, page 584.
14. See also Bonhams (Bond St), Martin Gubbins Sale, 18/07/02, Lot 281.