

JEWELLERY OF QUEEN ELIZABETH I

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Jewels were so much part of the legend of Queen Elizabeth I that it was considered a national tragedy when her successor, James I, began the process of dispersal completed by his son, Charles I. By 1626 so much had gone that Sir John Eliot demanded a parliamentary investigation and expressed the sense of national loss in an outburst of patriotic fervour "O, those jewels! The pride and glory of this kingdom! which have made it so far shining beyond others! Would they were here, within the compass of these walls to be viewed and seen by us to be examined in this place. Their very name and memory have transported me!"

If so much had already disappeared by 1626 even less remains today, and there are very few jewels which have a reasonable claim to have belonged to Queen Elizabeth. However, all is not lost, because portraits, miniatures and other surviving jewels provide a reasonably comprehensive picture of what she wore and how they were made. Documents also help, and the most useful is the list of six-hundred and twenty-eight jewels drawn up by Mrs. Blanche Parry on her retirement as Gentlewoman of the Bedchamber in 1587 for her successor, Mrs. Mary Radclyffe.¹ As all Queen Elizabeth's jewels with her wardrobe containing over two thousand dresses were inherited by James I an inventory of the jewels of his wife Queen Anne, which is in the National Library of Scotland is of the greatest importance. Dated 1607, it contains many pieces which belonged to Queen Elizabeth and which she herself had inherited from her predecessors.²

In fact, the nucleus of Queen Elizabeth's collection came from her father, King Henry VIII who made vast additions to the jewels left him by his rich and frugal father, King Henry VII. Portraits depict him bejewelled, sometimes with his famous ruby collar, the stones as big as walnuts, and his slashed sleeves and doublet trimmed with gem-studded clasps. Henry VIII's passion for jewels was inflamed by rivalry with the French king, François I when they met at the Field of Cloth of Gold in 1520. This occasion became a byword for extravagance as each monarch tried to outdo the other in an opulent display of luxury and riches. It was also typical of King Henry, that having quarrelled with the Pope, and dissolved the monasteries in 1536, he should have appropriated for his own use all the gold, silver and gem-stones remaining in the church treasuries. Besides this tremendous windfall he also regarded the jewels of each of his six wives as his own property. He insisted that the first, Katherine of Aragon, return to him every single piece in her possession at the time of their divorce in 1533, and some were still in Queen Elizabeth's collection in 1587,

identifiable because decorated with the pomegranate of Granada which was Queen Katherine's emblem. His last wife, Queen Catherine Parr was equally unfortunate, and when King Henry died in 1547 her ten year old stepson, King Edward VI ordered her to return all her jewellery to the Crown, just as her predecessors had done.

Although so young, King Edward loved finery and before his death at the age of sixteen in 1553 he had added to the ancestral collection. His most spectacular purchase was the jewel called *The Brethren* or the Three Brothers consisting of three large rose-coloured spinels – hence the name brothers- set without foil round a huge point-cut diamond with three pearls between. In the 15th Century it had been part of the treasure of the rich and elegant Dukes of Burgundy and Queen Elizabeth wears it as a pendant on her breast in the Ermine portrait at Hatfield.

Mary I, the daughter of Katherine of Aragon was sixteen years older than Queen Elizabeth, her half sister. She had a difficult reign plagued by religious conflict, and would have bought jewels like her father and brother if the money had been available, for she shared their enthusiasm for the rich and precious. Some of her best pieces were gifts from her husband, Philip II of Spain who gave her wonderful jewels at the time of their wedding, including a diamond and pearl collar composed of their joint initials, P and M. As this collar is listed in Queen Anne's inventory of 1607 – and she is known to have worn it – it must have belonged to Queen Elizabeth too. When Queen Mary died in 1558 she willed that all the jewels King Philip had given her should go back to Spain, but with the exception of the Peregrina pearl and a large diamond, he left them all for Queen Elizabeth. This explains why Queen Elizabeth owned so many jewels with King Philip's portrait, his initials and the Hapsburg emblems of eagle, twin columns and motto PLUS OLTRE.

King Philip's example was followed by Queen Elizabeth's courtiers. As it was the custom to offer gifts to the Queen each New Year's Day many decided to give her jewels rather than plate or clothes, and on January 1st 1587 she received no less than eighty different pieces of jewellery. They are recorded in the Gift Rolls for each year preserved in the Public Record Office. The most splendid came from her two favourites, Sir Christopher Hatton and the Earl of Leicester. Lord Leicester also started the ritual of welcoming the Queen on her arrival at his country house with a gift of a jewel, and giving her another as a keepsake on her departure. These visits, or Progresses as they were called, were a

severe trial to those who were not as rich as Sir Christopher and Lord Leicester, for they entailed the huge expense of providing food, drink and entertainment for the Queen and her escort – numbering some hundreds – for several days as well as the cost of the presents.

In accordance with the ritual of courtship Queen Elizabeth's suitors gave her jewels. The most persistent of them, the Duc d'Alençon son of the formidable Dowager Queen of France, Catherine de Medicis, was twenty years her junior. Undersized, with a large nose and skin pitted by smallpox, he was nonetheless amusing and very good company. When he died in 1584 the Queen called herself his widow, and while he was alive she flirted with him in public, kissing him on the mouth and calling him her own little frog. This nickname must have inspired two frog jewels which he gave her, one containing his miniature, the other studded with emeralds. He also gave her a diamond engagement ring, a bracelet composed of the letters of his name FRANÇOIS DE VALOIS, and a pendant set with a sardonyx cameo of Diana, for many years at Burghley House.³ (plate 1)



1. Onyx cameo of Diana set in enamelled gold frame with four loops for sewing on to brim of the hat, said to have been a gift from the Duke d'Alençon, and from the Queen to Lord Burghley. British Museum.

Queen Elizabeth made important purchases of her own. In 1568 Queen Mary of Scotland, widow of François II of France took refuge in England leaving her jewels behind in Edinburgh, among them the celebrated rope of pearls which her mother-in-law, Catherine de Medicis had given her as a wedding present. The Regent of Scotland who governed in her place, being desperate for money, offered the pearls to Queen Elizabeth at a

bargain price. There were twenty five single pearls, each as big as a nutmeg, and six long ropes of pearls threaded together as in a rosary.⁴

She was just as hard-headed in her dealings with other monarchs, and did not return diamonds which the King of Navarre had left as security for a loan, in spite of his protests that the money had been repaid. Similarly the Mirror of Portugal, a 30 carat table diamond valued at £5000 on which she lent the Pretender to the throne of Portugal £3000 became hers for far less than its real value when he failed to repay the loan. She was also a client of the London jewellers, and told Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, her ambassador in France, to keep an eye open for any remarkable jewels and watches on the Paris market, and to encourage French jewellers to go over to London.

Plunder was another source of jewellery, looted from Spanish ships returning home laden with treasures from the Empire of South America. The Queen invested in Sir Francis Drake who was the most successful of the British seamen involved in these ventures, and they exchanged gifts of jewellery.

Portraits depict a variety of head ornaments. As a young princess she wore a French hood trimmed with two rows of jewels called bilaments. The lower bilament consisted of a narrow row of pearls alternating with gold beads, and the upper bilament – which was wider – was composed of clusters of five pearls between enamelled gold quatrefoils set with table-cut gems on scrolled bases.⁵ At the time of her accession in 1558 she was painted in full coronation regalia. The official crown was made of a circlet of single rubies and sapphires set alternately between pairs of pearls supporting a row of fleurs-de-lis and crosses also set with rubies, sapphires and pearls with arches meeting at a small sapphire cross at the top. Below the cross was the large cabochon spinel – about five cms. long – named after the Black Prince, eldest son of Edward III who went into battle wearing black armour and had a passion for rubies and rose red spinels.⁶ In the Ditchley portrait (plate 2) Queen Elizabeth wears the Black Prince's spinel at the top of a ruby and diamond obelisk crowning a mass of high padded artificial hair.⁷ The French hood disappears in the second half of the 16th Century but the Queen continued to wear bilaments, but only in a single row. One of the most magnificent is in the Pelican portrait. It is like a garland composed of clusters of five pearls piled high alternating with gems in settings enamelled with white daisies to each side of a large pointed diamond framed in rubies.⁸ In the Ermine portrait she wore a new style of head jewel, an attire, composed of pearls standing up in points and arranged in sprigs mounted on a wire frame and encircling the back of the head like a halo.⁹ The attire of large pear-shaped pearls depicted in the portrait celebrating victory over the Armada in 1588 was worn with a large bodkin designed as a fleur-de-lis, backed by an aigrette of feathers¹⁰ and this introduces the most numerous category of Queen Elizabeth's head jewellery. (plate 3)



2. The "Ditchley" portrait of Queen Elizabeth by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger. The large red cabochon stone above the diamond and ruby obelisk crowning her head might be the Black Prince's spinel. Her dress is richly studded with jewelled brooches, and the armillary sphere in her ear is symbolic of her concern for things spiritual.

Bodkins could be stuck in the hair since the jewelled ornaments were mounted on long pins. Most were decorative arrangements of gem-stones, or pear-shaped pearls, but others represented insects and flowers, military and sporting motifs, and even homely genre objects such as a pair of bellows, a cradle and gardening tools. The most sensational of all the bodkins was the crescent pinned to the headdress worn in the Rainbow portrait. The Queen personifies the Sun who brings the Rainbow, symbolic of Peace after storms, and the crescent, the attribute of Diana or Cynthia, goddess of the Moon and Empress of the Oceans, also symbolises her authority over seas and rivers- an allusion to the Armada victory. The crescent is set with a ruby, and diamonds and it is tipped with pearls: below is a red cabochon stone which could be the Black Prince's spinel. It forms the pinnacle of an elaborate headdress copied from a contemporary Italian engraving of the picturesque costume of a Greek bride from what is modern Salonika.

From her ears hung a chandelier style earring with cross bar of three diamonds supporting a large lozenge shaped diamond between two hanging pearls, then three ruby drops and finally a pear pearl.¹¹ In those days earrings



3. The "Armada" portrait of 1588 in which Queen Elizabeth's head is crowned with an "attire" of pear pearls. Nos. 2-5 National Portrait Gallery.

were not necessarily worn in pairs and we know that Sir Thomas Heneage, Vice-Chamberlain to her household gave her one single pendant for her ear, accompanied by a fulsome message of devotion. She sent him her thanks in a very amusing letter promising that whenever she wore his earring she would never listen to a word said against him. Although the majority of her earrings were pear-pearls her inventories also list chains of diamonds, pearls, cabochon emeralds, rubies and figurative motifs such as snakes and doves.

Her neck jewellery was magnificent. In the Pelican portrait the necklace of pearl clusters with ruby links framed in white daisies centred on a point-cut diamond in a red strapwork mount matches her bilament, and each section is a jewel in its own right.¹² Most were pearls worn in single or double rows as a choker at the throat, or in a fringe hanging from strings of diamonds. She continued to wear low-cut dresses even at an advanced age, and with them her bib style necklaces with gem-stones and pearls in multiple rows. No less than sixty-seven chains were listed in the 1587 inventory: designs varied from plain gold links to elaborate figurative compositions of black men climbing trees. Grandest of all were the collars she inherited from her father. That in the Phoenix portrait (plate 4) was strongly dynastic in character being composed of large Tudor roses set with precious gem-stones linked by alternate clusters of pearls and of diamonds or coloured stones in cartouches.¹³ In the Ermine portrait her collar consists of pearls in groups of eight enclosed in filigree, with rubies to each side of the large point-cut diamond in the centre.¹⁴



4. The "Phoenix" portrait attributed to Nicholas Hilliard. The Queen's jewelled bilament matches her necklace, and there are three Tudor roses set with gems at the centre and on the shoulders of her collar. Th enamelled gold phoenix rising from its own ashes which she wears as a pendant signifies her incomparable virtues.



5. The "Darnley" portrait in which Queen Elizabeth wears a tablet on her skirt. The centre gem-stone is framed by mythological figures: Minerva, Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Cupid.

Hanging below this collar is the Three Brothers jewel bought by King Edward VI, described in her inventory as "a faire flower with three great ballas and in the middes a great pointed diamond and three pearls called The Brethren with a faire great pendant pearl". It is these flowers or pendants or brooches- which illustrate the widest range of motifs in her jewellery collection.

The Three Brothers which was the most celebrated of the flowers designed to show off fine gem-stones and which is in the medieval tradition. There were however others incorporating motifs taken from classical art. The huge stone in the portrait of the Queen as the chaste vestal Tuccia at Siena was flanked by figures of a nymph and a satyr¹⁵ while a jewel in the Darnley portrait (plate 5) has a frame surmounted by Minerva, Jupiter at the base, with female breasted hybrids, Venus, Cupid and Mars – all with their attributes- at the sides.¹⁶ A pendant hanging on a platform on the skirt represents a diamond obelisk on a platform with two golden figures of Fame to each side sounding the Queen's praises: this is depicted on a portrait at Hardwick Hall.¹⁷ These classicising jewels, like cameos, which are also a revival of the art of antiquity, must have had a special significance for Queen Elizabeth who was a true product of the Renaissance, being highly educated and quite capable of making an impromptu speech in elegant and witty Latin.

Even more significant were the jewels which expressed her role as Queen. She wore the lesser George, or badge of the Order of the Garter which showed the nation's patron saint in the act of killing the dragon, from a blue ribbon or jewelled chain. It linked her with her Plantagenet ancestors, and at Windsor Castle each St. George's Day she reenacted the picturesque Garter ceremonies in this historic atmosphere, the Knights of the Order, lead by Lord Leicester, would affirm their loyalty to her. Emblems which she adopted as symbolic of her sovereign role – the pelican who fed its young with its own blood¹⁸, and the phoenix, which rising from its own ashes was a unique and wondrous creature-¹⁹ were also made into jewels, represented in portraits attributed to Nicholas Hilliard.

Other emblematic jewels worn as pendants include ships, which to the educated 16th Century mind signified happiness, deriving from a Roman coin struck at the time of the Emperor Hadrian which represented a ship with the inscription FELICITAS. A pearl, gold and diamond ship jewel with Cupid and a trumpeter on deck is among the Hunsdon heirlooms at Berkeley Castle, said to be gifts from the Queen to her cousin, the first Lord Hunsdon.²⁰ A diamond crossbow jewel in her collection symbolised – according to Geoffrey Whitney's *Choice of Emblems* (1586) – the triumph of human brain power over brute strength. The number

of jewels of military character – helmets, guns, gauntlets trophies of arms- recorded in the Gift Rolls of the 1580's echo confidence in her leadership during the years when the country was threatened by invasion by the Spanish.

As a young Princess she wore a diamond cross with arms and upright linked by filigree knotwork²¹ and she left her successor, Queen Anne, many such crosses, and also jewels of the monogram of Christ, IHS. She also showed her concern for things eternal by adopting the emblem of the celestial sphere. A book of Psalms which she owned and which is at Windsor Castle contains a drawing of such a sphere above a Bible- inscribed VERBUM DOMINI-, and there is an Italian inscription beneath which translates HE WHO PLACES HIS TRUST IN THINGS MORTAL IS UNFORTUNATE. The Queen wore a ruby and diamond celestial sphere over her ear in the Ditchley portrait²² and in the Rainbow portrait as a pendant on her sleeve²³ with a heart jewel emerging from a serpent just below. This emblem alludes to her compassionate care for her people.

She was proud of her hands, and one of her favourite gestures as Queen was to pull off her gloves and offer her fingers, sparkling with rings, to those presenting letters and gifts. A mother-of-pearl ring which has every chance of having belonged to her is at Chequers, country home of the Prime Minister. The bezel is set with diamonds in the form of her initial E, with R in blue enamel, and the sides and shoulders are set with rubies while at the back there is her emblem of the crowned phoenix. There are two tiny enamelled gold busts of women inside, one representing the Queen wearing a ruby brooch, the other of her mother, Anne Boleyn wearing a diamond brooch. Portraits usually show her fingers laden with rings, and one which she is said to have worn consistently for forty three years was her coronation ring which had to be filed off after it became embedded in her skin forty-three years after her accession. She was extremely upset by this operation and fell into a depression which lasted until she died.

Although Queen Elizabeth is usually shown wearing strings of pearls at her wrists in portraits, she also owned bracelets of goldsmith's work. Among the Hunsdon heirlooms at Berkeley Castle is a Mughal rock crystal bangle mounted in gold studded with cabochon rubies

and with sapphires in four clusters which corresponds to an entry in her 1587 inventory, confirming the royal provenance of this unique collection.²⁴ In the Pelican portrait she has a magnificent armlet above her elbow: a mosaic of great cabochon rubies, pointed diamonds and a sapphire, some set as stars in richly wrought enamelled gold.²⁵

For the Queen the Renaissance goldsmith made jewels of the objects necessary for comfortable living. Whether grand, like her jewelled fan handles and sable heads, or humble toothpicks, like everything else in her wonderful collection they served to set her apart from the rest of the world, and created the aura of divinity which she believed to be an essential attribute of monarchy. They were political weapons, and that was why she cherished her ancestral heritage of jewels so much, why she bargained so hard for more and welcomed so many as presents.

Footnotes

- ¹ BL Royal Ms. App. 68
- ² NLS Ad. Ms. 31.1.10
- ³ O.M. Dalton, *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems of the Post-Classical Periods in the British Museum* (1915) no. 73
- ⁴ R. Strong, *Gloriana* (1987) pl. 180
- ⁵ *ibid* pl. 28
- ⁶ *ibid* pl. 183
- ⁷ *ibid* pl. 141
- ⁸ *ibid* pl. 64
- ⁹ *ibid* pl. 111
- ¹⁰ *ibid* pl. 138
- ¹¹ *ibid* pl. 172
- ¹² *ibid* pl. 64
- ¹³ *ibid* pl. 65
- ¹⁴ *ibid* pl. 111
- ¹⁵ *ibid* pl. 84
- ¹⁶ *ibid* pl. 68
- ¹⁷ *ibid* pl. 168
- ¹⁸ *ibid* pl. 64
- ¹⁹ *ibid* pl. 65
- ²⁰ H. Clifford Smith, *Jewellery* (1908 reprint 1973) pl. XXXV no.2
- ²¹ Strong op. cit., pl. 28
- ²² *ibid* pl. 139 and pl. 146
- ²³ *ibid* pl. 172
- ²⁴ BL Royal Ms. App. 68 no. 218
- ²⁵ Strong, op. cit., pl. 64