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# The Flatware of Robert & William Gray of Glasgow

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(This paper is an extended version of the presentation at the *Finial* meeting in the Hilton Hotel, Swindon, in May 2005)

## Introduction

The firm of Robert Gray & Son is considered by many to be arguably the finest Scottish maker of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Unlike many English firms who were specialists (for example in flatware, salvers, candlesticks, etc) nearly all Scottish makers of this period were generalists; Gray was no exception, making pieces from humble teaspoons to magnificent presentation cups. It is sad, therefore, that little is known in any detail about this firm – no ledgers exist, nor firm's order books, etc., although considerable general information on the extent of work produced can be found from the records of the Edinburgh Assay Office Registers. Gordon McFarlan published an extensive paper on the firm's history and work in the *Silver Society Journal* in 1999<sup>1</sup> and, in giving brief historical details where appropriate, I acknowledge with gratitude the information in his paper. McFarlan concentrates on the many spectacular pieces produced, but acknowledges that the majority of the firm's production was flatware; however, he only gives a few examples of this, and the aim of the present paper is to describe Gray's flatware in much more detail; whilst far more limited in range of patterns than that from the main London specialists of the period (Chawner & Co, Lias Brothers, Higgins, etc) it is normally at least its equal in quality and provides some patterns not seen from any other maker.

It is safe to assume that Robert Gray was born around 1755; it is impossible to be precise since his is not an uncommon name in Glasgow, and several possible candidates are found in the Registers. It can be assumed that he began his apprenticeship in 1769, first with the firm of Bayne & Napier, and subsequently with Milne & Campbell. McFarlan suggests that this change was because Gray was an ambitious young man, and Milne & Campbell were the leading goldsmiths in Glasgow at the time, responsible for many civic commissions. He obtained his freedom in 1776, paying his 'freedom fine' on 30<sup>th</sup> August to the Incorporation of Hammermen and was admitted as a burgess and one of the guild brethren.

## The period from c1776 to 1784: Robert Gray (Glasgow provincial marks)

Gray's flatware during this early period was usually of very good quality Old English pattern; the tablespoon in figure 1 is a typical example.



Fig. 1, Old English tablespoon, c.1780.

Already, however, he was beginning to show his intention to produce something rather more ambitious, and the sugar tongs from this period shown in Figure 2 are of a much more advanced design for the time.

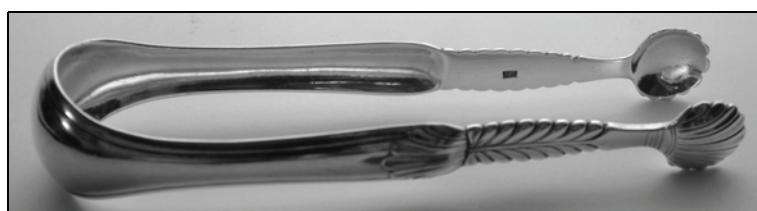


Fig. 2, Decorated sugar tongs, c.1780.

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It is worth discussing briefly the marking system on flatware of this period. Glasgow was still in effect a relatively small Scottish provincial town, and the goldsmiths marked their work themselves, with their maker's mark plus various combinations of the Glasgow town mark and rather mysterious capital letters. Jackson<sup>2</sup> shows two maker's marks for Gray, 'RG' in a rectangular punch or in a shaped punch. McFarlan quotes these two and adds a further mark, 'RG' in an oval punch. I have long been doubtful about the mark in a shaped punch, since I had only seen it on Hanoverian rattail spoons of various sizes, which had all the appearance of having been made around 1720-1730. Recently a serendipitous discovery has proved that I was correct, although at present I am not authorised to disclose the actual user of this punch – suffice it to say that it was not Robert Gray. I also have a few doubts over the oval punch and enlarge on these in the next section, since I have not actually seen it used during the early period being considered at present. Two typical examples of Gray's marking on tablespoons of around 1780 are shown in Figure 3.



Fig. 3, Typical Glasgow provincial marking on flatware by Robert Gray.

On the personal side, on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1780 Robert Gray married Marion Auchencloss and on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1781 their son William was born, the first of nine children.

### The period from 1784 to 1802: Robert Gray (Edinburgh hallmarked)

With the reintroduction of plate duty in 1784, the provincial makers had to send their silver to Edinburgh for assay. It seems that Gray, unlike many provincial makers who carried on as before, complied with the requirement; hence, during this period, his silver carries Edinburgh hallmarks. It is now that the mark of 'RG' in an oval punch first appears, on a pair of sugar tongs shown in Figure 4. I have some doubts on whether this is actually Gray's mark, since Jackson<sup>3</sup> shows it on a teaspoon of 1806-07. As will be seen in the next section a mark of this date cannot be Robert Gray's, although it is possible that there may be an error since this is carried forward from the earlier editions of Jackson where the mark is attributed to either R. Green or R. Grierson. As against this, the tongs in Figure 4 bear considerable similarities to those shown above in Figure 2, and are of exceptionally good quality; although not having a date letter they can be dated to c.1785 since they have an incuse duty mark; they could very easily be by Gray.

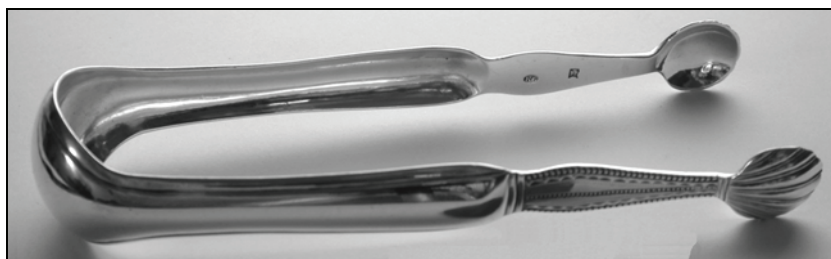


Fig. 4, Decorated sugar tongs, c.1785.

Generally flatware of this period continues to be of Old English pattern; a typical example is the extremely elegantly proportioned gravy spoon carrying the full Edinburgh hallmarks for 1798-99 and shown in Figure 5.

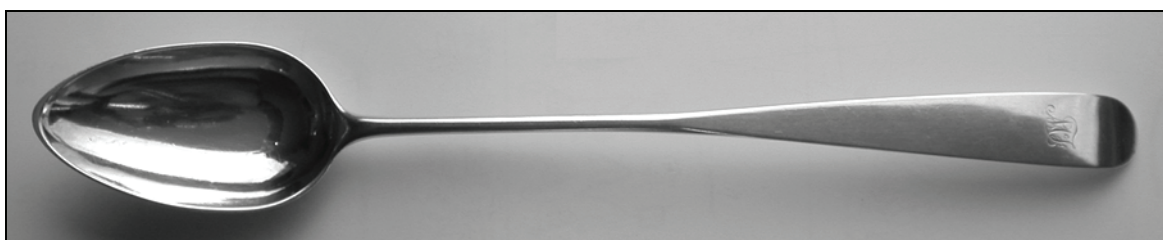


Fig. 5, Old English gravy spoon, 1798-99.

Throughout this paper I use the term 'Gravy Spoon' for large spoons rather than the Scottish term 'Hash Spoon' which I consider to be more appropriate to those of Hanoverian Pattern.

Gray, of course, made other items of flatware such as marrow scoops (Figure 6).



Fig. 6, Marrow scoop, 1801-02.

In around 1794 William Gray was apprenticed to his father; he completed his apprenticeship in 1802 and submitted his essay on 27<sup>th</sup> August of that year, although a William Gray consigned work to the Edinburgh Assay Office before this date and there is some evidence that it was the same William. However, after 1802, no further work is consigned in this name and at this time William joined his father in partnership. It appears that William was the only one of Robert's nine children ever to have any position in the firm, whose name then becomes Robert Gray & Son.

During this period Robert continues to strengthen his position within the Glasgow establishment, becoming a trustee of Anderson's Institution, the forerunner of the University of Strathclyde.

### The period from 1802 to 1819: Robert Gray & Son (Edinburgh hallmarked)

When William joined his father in partnership in 1802 the firm's mark was changed to 'RG&S' on two lines ('RG' over '&S' in a square punch (see Fig. 7). This is the reason why I believe that Jackson's ascription of the 'RG' mark in 1806-07 to Robert Gray must be incorrect. A further mark of 'RG&S' on a single line in a rectangular punch appears later and is described in the next section, since I have never seen it on a piece with Edinburgh hallmarks (I would welcome any evidence to the contrary of this!).



Fig. 7, Typical Edinburgh marks of Robert Gray & Son, 1807-08.

It is after William joined his father that we really begin to see the development of the firm as a leader in flatware production. Up until now most of the flatware had been Old English, but now fiddle pattern, fiddle and thread, and a number of variations of King's Pattern peculiar to Robert Gray & Son make their appearance. Again, this work is of heavy gauge and even routine pieces often have magnificent thick bowls. Typical examples are the elegant fiddle pattern gravy spoon and the fiddle and thread tablespoon, both of 1807-08, and shown in Figures 8 & 9.

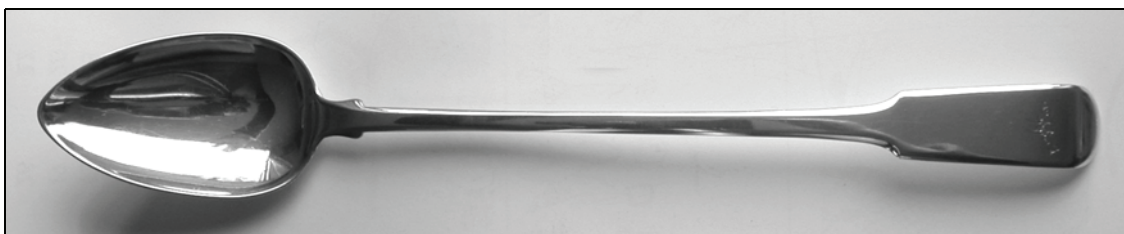


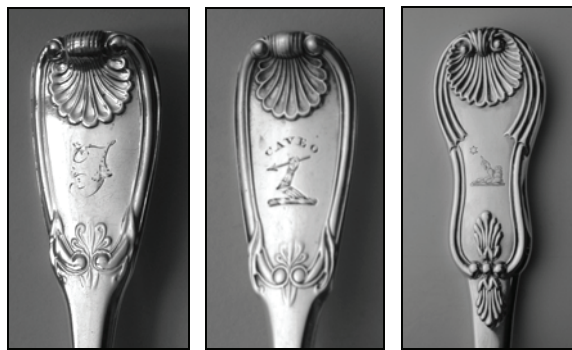
Fig. 8, Fiddle pattern gravy spoon, 1807-08.



Fig. 9, Fiddle & Thread tablespoon, 1807-08.

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Sometime during this period the firm began producing its unique variants of King's Pattern. Provisionally I have classed them as Type 1 (Figs. 10a & b) and Type 2 (Fig. 10c); Type 1 is single struck (as is most Scottish flatware) but Type 2 is double struck, with the backs as shown in Figures 11a or 11b.



a (Type 1a)      b (Type 1b)      c (Type 2)

Fig. 10, Variants of King's, Type 1  
– front of handles.



a      b

Fig. 11, Variants of King's, Type 2  
– back of handles

It would be interesting to discover the earliest appearance of each type – the earliest I have seen is 1813-14 for Type 1 and 1817-18 for Type 2. In all cases the base of the handle at the join with the bowl is by means of a simple single drop.

These patterns continue throughout the full life of the firm in virtually the same form (apart from minor differences when new dies have presumably had to be made).

During this period other flatware items (forks, condiment spoons, toddy ladles, fish slices, butter knives, skewers, etc) become increasingly frequent, although McFarlan comments on the relative scarcity of forks. It is particularly interesting to comment on Gray & Son's fish slices: Rabinovitch<sup>4</sup> shows one of a type described as an '*Acorn Fish Slice*', with a fiddle type handle and the description referring to the blade shape. It is engraved with a stylistic dolphin and rather minimal piercing and is dated to c.1810 (date letter indecipherable). A very similar one of 1809-10 is shown in Figure 12.

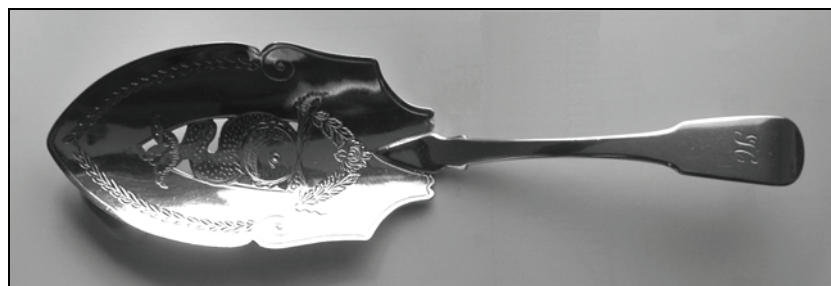


Fig. 12, '*Acorn*' fish slice, 1809-10.

As will be seen in the next section, minimal piercing seems to be a regular feature of Gray's fish slices.

Two other items are worth noting – a severely plain but fine and heavy skewer of 1818-19 shown in Figure 13, and an interesting butter knife of c.1810 (date letter indistinct) shown in Figure 14. The latter is of a form of fiddle and shell pattern that I have not seen on any other Gray & Son flatware, and the handle is engraved with a particularly interesting crest (see Appendix B for a discussion of this).



Fig. 13, Skewer, 1818-19.



Fig. 14, Butter knife, c1810.

It is also clear that the firm undertook specific commissions; a pair of completely ‘out-of-period’ Old English bead edge spoons of 1816-17 have been noted; these are identical to, and carry the same crest as, some London made spoons of the ‘correct’ period by George Smith III, hallmarked for 1781-82; they were probably made to replace missing pieces or increase a service (it is worth noting that the Gray spoons are of better quality than those by Smith!). Finally, in this section, a superb quality gravy spoon in King’s variant Type 2 pattern, shown in Figure 15 and weighing close to 8 troy ounces, shows that Gray & Son could and did achieve the very highest standards of manufacture.

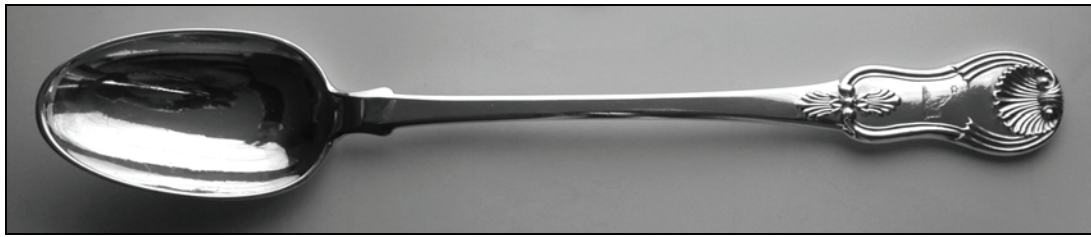


Fig. 15, Very heavy gauge gravy spoon, 1817-18.

### The period from 1819 to c1850: Robert Gray & Son (Glasgow hallmarked)

In 1819 an Assay Office opened in Glasgow, and it is clear that Robert Gray and Son lost no time in using it, as is shown by a pair of salt spoons in King’s variant Type 2 marked with the date letter ‘A’ (Fig. 16). These are also interesting in that they are the first examples I have seen of the second mark of the firm, ‘RG&S’ on a single line in a rectangular punch. It is tempting to conclude that this punch was used for small items; however I have seen an example of this mark being used on a tablespoon, and other examples where the square mark has been used on relatively small items. I have never seen the rectangular mark on an Edinburgh marked piece (pre-1819) (indeed I have seen Edinburgh marked mustard spoons where the square (‘RG’ over ‘&S’) mark overlaps both sides of the handle!) but I would welcome further input on this.



Fig. 16, Pair of salt spoons, 1819-20 (first year of the Glasgow Assay Office).

There appears to have been one further change at this time: most flatware by Robert Gray & Son after 1819 carries journeymen’s marks, whereas little prior to this date does (I have only seen two Edinburgh marked pieces of 1815-16, with two small dots, whereas many Glasgow marked pieces have journeymen’s marks which are quite distinct and varied). Typical Glasgow marks are: various small dots (1822-28), a hollow circle (1828-44), a ‘window’ (1834), and a six-pointed star (1836-40). A few are illustrated in Figure 17.



Fig. 17, Various journeymen’s marks, 1822-44.

Robert Gray himself seems to have retired from day to day involvement with the firm in around 1825, a well respected and successful businessman, and died in 1829, aged around 73. The firm continued to prosper under William, retained the same name of Robert Gray & Son and used the same marks.

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Whilst the previous patterns were continued, some new varieties were introduced. Perhaps the most interesting and attractive is flatware struck from private dies (the earliest of which I have seen being on a fiddle and thread variant teaspoon of 1828-29. Most private dies were, however, based on the Type 2 King's variant with a small modification to remove the shell on the front of the handle (to make room for the die struck crest). Two examples are shown in Figure 18a & b (teaspoons 1828 & 1838).



Fig. 18a



Fig. 18b



Fig. 19

One of the finest examples of a private die is from a service of 1844-45 with a crest possibly of Graham or Moir (an eagle preying on a heron)<sup>5</sup>. This is shown in Figure 19, from the top of the handle of a very heavy gauge sauce ladle. A very slightly smaller version occurs on each arm of an equally heavy gauge pair of sugar tongs. There must be some more pieces of this service around!

I am also aware of (but do not have details of) a private die of a moor's head on a spoon, which (most unusually for Gray & Son) also has decoration on the back of the bowl at the joint with the handle.

Various fish slices have also been seen – Rabinovitch<sup>6</sup> shows a severely plain example of 1830-31 with no engraving and very simple piercing of six square holes in a line; the handle is King's Type 1 variant. Figure 20 shows a basically similar one of 1829-30 but with a King's Type 2 variant handle, seven holes and a double reeded border to the top edge. A somewhat more interesting fish slice of 1835-6 with a plain fiddle handle and an un-pierced blade, engraved with various fabulous sea monsters, is shown in Figure 21.



Fig. 20, Fish slice of 1829-30.



Fig. 21, Fish slice of 1835-36.

A double bowled spoon of dessert size has been noted and is shown in Figure 22. Commonly referred to as a medicine spoon there is now some doubt about this (particularly for the larger ones) and the suggestion has been made that they are travelling spoons. Scottish examples appear to be unusual.



Fig. 22, Medicine or travelling spoon of 1844-45.

Late in this period a quite different variation of King's Pattern by Gray & Son made its appearance. Referred to as Scottish King's shape (rococo end), it is double struck with rococo type decoration on both front and back of the handle, sometimes with a die struck crest (private die). The ends (back & front) of the handle of a typical dessert fork of 1838-39, with a simple private die struck shield,

are shown in Figure 23a & b. Another, even later, example of 1845-49, again with a die struck crest, is shown in McFarlan. I am not aware of this pattern having been produced before the late 1830's, but more information would be welcome.



Fig. 23a (front)



Fig. 23b (back)

As in the previous period, occasional out-of-period pieces appear; the only true Hanoverian spoon by Gray & Son that I have seen is the gravy spoon shown in Figure 24. It is very plain, and frankly rather dull in appearance although of some historical interest, and has hallmarks for 1841-42.

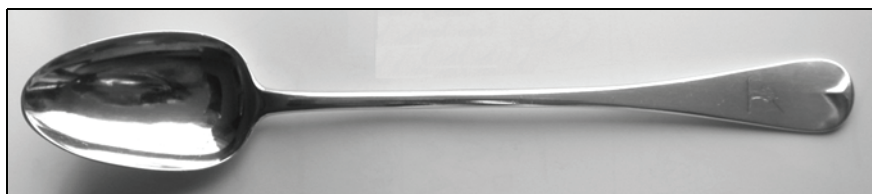


Fig. 24, Hanoverian pattern gravy spoon, 1841-42.

### The Final Stages

It seems likely that after a successful career, during which he had become Chairman of the Glasgow Goldsmiths' Company, William Gray retired from active participation in the firm around 1845, and died on 13<sup>th</sup> February 1850. No silver bearing the firm's mark has been recorded after 1849-50, and Robert Gray & Son finally closed in 1852 or 1853.

### Conclusions

Some people have asked, "*why such interest in flatware from a single maker?*" I think the answer must be along the lines of:-

Some ten years or so ago I found my first piece of Robert Gray & Son's flatware, and was immediately impressed by the quality. Few of my fellow collectors seemed to know much about the Grays, and it soon became obvious that, whilst not producing a huge range of patterns, they did produce interesting variants not produced in London or elsewhere. Furthermore examples of high quality were fairly readily available at generally reasonable cost. Hence it seemed that it might be possible to build up a reasonably comprehensive collection (clearly impossible with the work of a large London maker).

In this paper I have tried to put on paper what I have found out so far. I accept that there is still a long way to go, and I would be very happy to hear where my conclusions are doubtful, or even plain wrong, and I hope that there may be some response via *The Finial* or other means of communication. If I can update any observations I will be happy that the paper has served a useful purpose.

### Appendix A – An anecdote of William Gray

Whilst little is known of the Gray family as people, an interesting light is thrown on William's respect for his craft by an anecdote quoted in McFarlan, taken from an anonymous manuscript held in the Strathclyde Regional Archive<sup>7</sup>.

In 1919, a celebration dinner was held to mark the centenary of the Glasgow Goldsmiths Company, at which one James Black, who had been apprenticed to Robert Gray & Son, recalled that: "*On the first visit to Scotland of Her Majesty Queen Victoria (in 1842) it was arranged that she should stay at Inverary Castle. In preparation for the visit, the Duke of Argyll called on Mr Gray and desired the loan of some silver spoons and forks to augment his service; and Mr Gray undertook to send the quantities required. Feeling that it would be most appropriate for the ancestral home of an old*

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family, Mr Gray got together a collection of old fine pieces, and sent them to Inverary. But they were immediately returned to him by special messenger on horseback, with an indignant message from the Duke that he did not wish to insult Her Majesty by putting old second hand things before her, but required the newest and handsomest things that could be procured”.

## Appendix B – A note on crests

Much of Robert Gray & Son’s flatware is crested; mention has been made of the superb private dies in which the firm specialised, where the crest is an integral part of the die. Many engraved crests of interest have also been seen, quite often with a coronet of rank engraved above them; as with much crested Scottish silver, a motto above the crest is sometimes present, thus easing the task of identifying the original owner. A particularly interesting example of an engraved crest appears on the butter knife of c1810 shown in Figure 14.

The crest itself is described as ‘on a chapeau, a salamander in flames’<sup>8</sup>. This crest belongs to a number of Scottish families, but I believe that by far the most likely is Douglas, of which there are many branches including several peerages. Engraved below the crest, but quite separate from it, is a ducal coronet, this is shown in Figure 25.



Fig. 25, Crest on butter knife of c1810.

If the coronet had appeared above the crest, it would signify ownership by a duke; if the crest was attached to, but issuing from, a ducal coronet it would mean nothing in particular, except that the family might be aspiring to a position above their station! However, having a separate ducal coronet below the crest is unusual to say the least. The Duke of Hamilton’s family name is Douglas-Hamilton; although the crest is certainly not that of the Duke, I looked up some history in the splendid book *The Dukes* by Brian Masters<sup>9</sup>. The dukedom of Hamilton was unusual in that it could pass through the female line, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> duke (in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century) was, in fact, a duchess (Anne). She further complicated matters by marrying William Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, and persuaded the king to grant him what we would now call a life peerage as Duke of Hamilton. So we have the beginning of the Douglas-Hamilton strain, but subsequent inheritors take their title from Duchess Anne rather than ‘life-Duke’ William.

Hence, what I am now suggesting is that some past Duke of Hamilton (perhaps around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century) was visiting his lower ranking Douglas relatives, and decided he liked their butter knife and somehow came into possession of it. As befitted his station he had to engrave his ducal coronet on it but as can be seen there was no room in the proper place above the crest; moreover, as stated above, the crest is not even his. Therefore where better to put his coronet than below the crest? An interesting conjecture – comments please!

### Notes

1. McFarlan, Gordon: Robert Gray & Son Goldsmiths of Glasgow, *The Silver Society Journal* 11: Autumn 1999: pp211-222.
2. Jackson’s *Silver & Gold Marks*, ed Ian Pickford, Antique Collectors’ Club 1989: p570.
3. Jackson, loc cit: p551.
4. Rabinovitch, Benton Seymour: *Antique Silver Servers for the Dining Table*, Joslin Hall Publishing, 1991: p234/5.
5. Fairbairn’s *Book of Crests*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1905: plate 79, crest 7 (or “Butters” Edition, plate 17, crest 8).
6. Rabinovitch, loc cit: p 182/3.
7. Glasgow City Archives, T-TH 1/40/1.
8. Fairbairn, loc cit: plate 138, crest 2 (or “Butters” Edition, plate 86, crest 14).
9. Masters, Brian: *The Dukes*, Pimlico, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2001: p 261