

Greenock Provincial Silver at the McLean Museum, Greenock



Silver is a precious metal second only to gold in the value placed on it. In its pure form silver is too soft for metalworking, so it is alloyed with another metal, generally copper, in different proportions. In consequence, a system of marking silverware was developed which gives a guarantee of the percentage amount of the precious metal in the article.

Hallmarking of silver in Scotland in the 18th and early 19th centuries was carried out in the main assay offices of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen along with several small, provincial assay offices. Wares were marked with distinctive symbols for each office, such as a rose mark for Montrose and the lion and banner of St John for Perth. Greenock, too, had its own assay office and one of its town marks was a green oak - a pun on the town name.

Although there was little or no silversmithing taking place in the early 1700s, by the end of the century a new wave of prosperity in the town caused by the setting up of sugar refineries created a demand for silverware. This was met by a number of notable craftsmen working locally, and foremost amongst these was John Heron. Greenock directories spanning the period from 1815 to 1829 list him in their trade section and record that his jewellery and watch shop stood at 1 William Street, Greenock. Other makers whose names are still known to us include Thomas Davie and John Menzies, who worked in Greenock around 1800. Some makers are only known by their initials stamped on their wares. In 1836 a Statute was passed which required that all Scottish silver had to be assayed either in Glasgow or Edinburgh. The provincial offices, including Greenock, were closed down.

GREENOCK HALLMARKS

Hallmarks associated with Greenock are:-

- a green oak
- an anchor
- a ship in sail
- and the letter C

These marks may occur singly or in combination and may be placed in different orientations. Occasionally the same mark was stamped twice.

In the past, it was thought that Greenock was a very busy centre for provincial silversmithing because many wares appeared to bear the town marks. It was discovered, however, that silverware bearing the initials JH, an anchor and a thistle mark previously thought to originate in Greenock had in fact been made in Calcutta by the maker John Hunt. Care must also be taken when identifying silverware bearing an anchor mark as the Birmingham city mark is also an anchor.