

# THE RENAISSANCE OF BRITISH SILVER POST WORLD WAR II

By John Andrew

The 1960s was an era in the UK where decades of change took place in 10 short years, making it widely regarded as Britain's most defining decade. The post World War II baby boom resulted in 40% of the population being under 25. There was virtually no unemployment and weekly earnings outstripped the cost of living by an enormous 183%. This combination of youth and affluence led to a blossoming of music, fashion and design as if the antidote to post war austerity.

There was a fundamental change in the design of silver. Today, we refer to the Renaissance of British silver post World War II. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most of the large silver manufacturers such as Edward Barnard & Sons, William Comyns, Nayler Brothers and Wakely & Wheeler had closed, but studios mainly comprising an individual silversmith flourished. Today the UK is a centre of excellence for designer silversmiths. Individuals from continental Europe, Scandinavia and Asia have studied silversmithing in Britain and some stayed to establish their studios here. What triggered this Renaissance? Step changes do not generally happen overnight, and it took over thirty years from the first nudge towards modernism until the final catalyst for the Renaissance was launched. The story involves a king described as having a lack lustre personality<sup>1</sup>, the controller of a city's transport system; concern about the UK's borrowings during World War II; the Royal Navy's Camouflage Unit; students; an unemployed Old Etonian, an Earl's daughter and an American socialite.

Our account begins with King George V, also known as the Unexpected King as he was the second son of Edward VII, but his elder brother Prince Albert Victor died of influenza in 1892 and the line of succession altered. The following year he married his brother's fiancé Princess Mary of Teck and the couple appeared with Queen Victoria on Buckingham Palace's balcony to wave to the crowds after the wedding ceremony. He ascended the throne in 1910. During World War I he personally supported the troops visiting the front and military hospital many times. During 1917, in response to anti-Germanic sentiment in the country, he changed the Germanic House of Hanover (George I, who ascended the British throne in 1714 was Elector of Hanover) to the House of Windsor. The balcony appearance was continued in 1923 when his son the Duke of York married the Honourable Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon – later King George VI and Queen Elizabeth – with George V and Queen Mary accompanying them. A Royal tradition had been established. He was described as 'being without intellectual curiosity and suspicious of new ideas'<sup>2</sup> but the writer went on to say, 'he was responsible for the development of the monarchy as a symbol of national unity.' Certainly his 1935 Silver

<sup>1</sup> [www.biography.com/royalty/george-v](http://www.biography.com/royalty/george-v)

<sup>2</sup> Chambers Biographical Dictionary, Edinburgh 2007

Jubilee was celebrated enthusiastically, and the commemorative crown was the UK's first modern 20<sup>th</sup> century coin.

King George collected stamps, shared an interest in Queen Mary's love of antiques and both were great collectors of Fabergé adding three Imperial Eggs among other pieces to the Fabergé acquired by Queen Victoria, King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. Although the King may have been suspicious of new ideas, he liked change, especially if it embraced modern design. In the second half of June, for five consecutive days from a Tuesday, members of the Royal Family travelled (and in fact still do) in horse-drawn carriages from Windsor Castle to Ascot Racecourse. The King's task each year was to present the trophies at Royal Ascot and His Majesty became tired of presenting the same type of traditional cup. So, he sent Lord Churchill, his representative at the racecourse to see the Prime Warden and Clerk at the Goldsmiths' Company<sup>3</sup> (the Company).

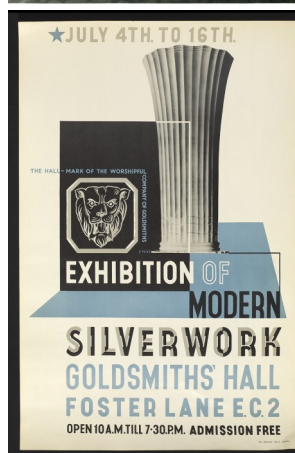
The general thrust of the message was 'Get silversmiths to design modern trophies' but put in a diplomatic way. The then Assistant Clerk was George Hughes. He had a genuine interest in silver, having undertaken a silversmithing course at the Sir John Cass Technical Institute. He had a good eye for design and could well have begun to focus on this aspect of silver. Certainly, in that year he visited the *Exposition Internationale* in Paris, which put Art Deco on the map, as well as similar exhibitions in Copenhagen and Stockholm. Lord Churchill visited the Prime Warden just before the summer recess, but despite the message from the Palace he did not reconvene the Court, the Company's governing body. Unfortunately, he appears to have forgotten all about it after the vacation for the Court was not told until January 1926, apparently triggered by an enquiry from Lord Churchill as to what progress had been made. Unfortunately, by then it was impossible to organise modern designs in time for Ascot of 1926, but a design competition was held that year in readiness for Ascot 1927. This attracted over 300 entries. The great and the good at the Company made their selection, which was reduced by Lord Churchill to the three designers awarded a first prize and two others. Unfortunately, the King subsequently rejected all five. However, some progress was made, for in 1927 the Company started its modern silver collection and a committee was formed with the objective of improving design.

Further progress was made during the 1930s. In 1933 the Board of Trade launched a quest to improve the design for manufactured goods throughout the UK. This had become a matter for public and government concern for some time. The Board formed the Council for Art and Industry. It worked on an industry basis. Frank Pick was appointed Chairman of the Council and of its Silverware Committee. He had run London Transport for years. While this may seem an odd appointment to us today, rest assured that Pick was not a 'Fat Controller' as per the Rev. W Awdry's *Thomas the Tank Engine* books. He had a superb eye for design – It was he who commissioned what we now regard as icons, Charles Holden's underground stations, London Transport's logo and Henry Beck's tube map.

<sup>3</sup>To give it its full title, The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths is one of the Twelve Great Livery Companies of the City of London. The first reference to a 'gild [guild] of Goldsmiths' was in 1179-80. Located in Foster Lane, a stone's throw from St Paul's Cathedral since 1339, no other London livery company can claim longer or earlier tenure to the same site. The Company received its first Royal Charter in 1327.

The Pick Report was published in 1935 and it gave a good analysis of the gulf between the mass silver market and that of the designer-maker. While acknowledging that the Company had made progress since 1926 it noted that only a few of the more enlightened manufacturers, makers and retail outlets took an active role. Suggestions were made as to how the design of silver may be improved. This included the formation of the Wardens' Silver Committee that comprised most of the Pick Committee and the Company's Wardens. The Committee was formed in 1937 and worked until 1940 when it had to be abandoned because of World War II. Another suggestion was that an exhibition of modern silverware should be held at Goldsmiths' Hall. This was the first exhibition of modern silver in the Company's history. The event was staged at the Hall from July 4<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> 1938. It was advertised by an attractive modern poster and even featured on the fledgling television of the day. Around 500 pieces were displayed, and it created what we would call today a certain WOW factor. It attracted 37,000 visitors, including the antique-loving Queen Mary and cost £7000 to stage, which is about £470,000 in 2019 prices. World War II broke out the following year.

Incredibly, the Government turned its attention to design as early as 1941 when there were discussions regarding the country's ability to produce consumer durables that were both modern and aesthetically pleasing. It was considered that British workmanship, as well as the materials used were fine, but what was being produced did not feel or look 'right'. In brief, while the nation could manufacture goods, it was somewhat lacking in the design department. The Government's aim was not to cheer to mood of the nation's inhabitants with more aesthetically pleasing or satisfactory design, but to increase the demand for exports. During World War II, Britain was forced to borrow



### 1938 Exhibition

About 500 pieces were displayed in 1938 at what was the Company's first exhibition of modern silver. While some were from the Company's collection, City companies, educational establishments, clubs, corporations and private individuals lent many pieces. The Company also commissioned some. After the exhibition these were either gifted or placed in the Company's collection.

*Courtesy of The Goldsmiths' Company*

### 1938 Exhibition Poster

The poster for the 1938 Exhibition of Modern Silverwork staged by the Goldsmiths' Company was designed by E M Kauffer. The fluted vase featured was designed by R M Y Gleadowe and was a key image from the event. It attracted a record 37,000 visitors. This record was only broken twice during the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Courtesy The Goldsmiths' Company, photographer Richard Valencia*



#### COID Poster

This exhibition conceived by the Council of Industrial Design was a post-war 'showcase' of the best that modern British industry could produce. The aim was to generate much-needed foreign currency via exporting.

*Courtesy Design Council/Brighton Design Archives*

<sup>4</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-American\\_loan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-American_loan)

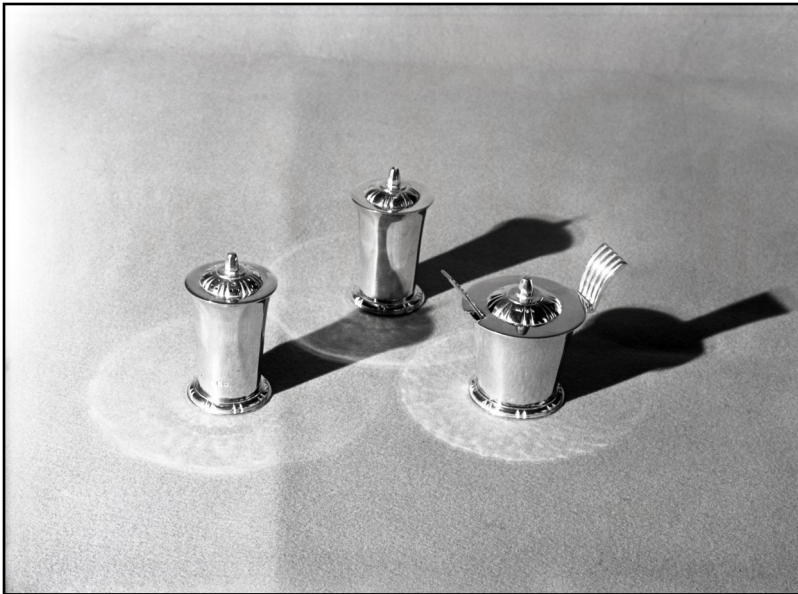
<sup>5</sup>A successful textile industrialist and public servant. He was a director of the family textile business Barlow and Jones Ltd and one of the most prominent men in the cotton spinning and weaving industry. Although also a distinguished banker, he was deeply passionate about art and design in the industrial sphere, hence his appointment as Chairman of the Council until 1947.

<sup>6</sup>A *Dictionary of Modern Design* by Jonathan M Woodham (Oxford, 2004)

heavily from both Canada and the United States.<sup>4</sup> I was born in 1951 and as a small child can remember being told that the nation owed an enormous sum of money to the North Americans, which had to be paid back. The final payment was made on 31 January 2006.

The Council of Industrial Design (CoID) was established in December 1944 with the objective of promoting, 'by all practical means the improvement of design in the products of British Industry'. It was seen as the spiritual successor to the Council for Art and Industry. Its 18 members were mainly industrialists, all of whom promoted 'good design'. The CoID's chairman was Sir Thomas Barlow<sup>5</sup> who said of the task ahead of the Council: 'The war years of rigidity and limited production of consumer goods brought matters to a head. The prospect of our facing increased post-war competition with nations which have no lee-way to make up and which have, perhaps, been able to advance while we could not, present a formidable challenge.' Despite the economic woes of the UK after the War, the CoID was well funded. The combination of support from the State and input from eminent industrialists under the chairmanship of Sir Thomas signalled a new era where the Government took more than a cursory interest in industrial production and was using private enterprise to help achieve its goal. The result was a body that perhaps was the world's most influential state-funded design promotion organisation of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>.

It set up co-operative Design Centres that were supported by firms in each industry. Training programmes were started which incorporated examinations. This initiative was of course devised to provide a supply of designers who were in a position to meet the requirements of industrial companies. It also established a savvy information machine to emphasise that good design was good for business. This all-embracing organisation was directed towards industry, designers,



### SILVER CRUET

There was little silver in the *Britain Can Make It* exhibition, but there was more silver plate. This three-piece condiment set was designed by R E Stone, who ran a traditional silver workshop. Height of salt 6.9cm (2.7in). London 1946

*Courtesy Design Council/Brighton Design Archives*

lecturers in higher education, students and of course those who wrote about design which would be disseminated to the consumer.

It also maintained lists of designers from which the Council would select potential candidates when manufacturers asked for help with design matters from third party professionals. It lost no time in planning to make an impact, for in September 1945, just a month after World War II ended, the Council announced by way of a release to trade associations that it was to stage an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum from September to November 1946. The proposed event was outlined in the Council's Minutes: '... a national exhibition of design in all the main range of consumer goods – clothing, household furnishings and equipment, office equipment and civil transport.... It will represent the best and only the best that modern British industry can produce... [it will be] British industry's first great post-war gesture to the British people and the world.'<sup>7</sup> One of the world's greatest museum of art and design was a natural choice for the venue. Part of the reason for choosing it was that its main exhibits were still in store away from the capital and the Museum had not suffered war damage.

The exhibition was called *Britain Can Make It* (BCMI) and it was made clear from the start that the items displayed would not be available to the British general public for the time being as the object was to obtain bulk orders from overseas so that the UK could obtain much needed revenue. This fact resulted in the event being

<sup>7</sup>Design Council Archive, Design History Research Centre, University of Brighton: ID/361 Summer Exhibition 1946: Policy Committee Minutes.

### The Lion & Unicorn Pavilion

Early students studying silver at the Royal College of Art post-war benefited from excitement generated by the Festival of Britain. Professor Goodden was asked with his former architectural partner Richard Russell to design one of the pavilions. This is the interior of Lion and the Unicorn Pavilion showing the mechanical white doves Goodden designed to periodically fly its length.

*Courtesy Design Council Slide Collection at Manchester Metropolitan University*



nicknamed the *Britain Can't Have It* exhibition. BCMI occupied 90,000 square feet, which was then half of the Museum's exhibition space. The Council appointed James Gardner<sup>8</sup> as the exhibition's Chief Display Designer. The Council also appointed Basil Spence<sup>9</sup> as Exhibition Architect and the two men worked together. Gardner's challenge was that the number and type of goods were unknown, and the design of the exhibition had to look complete without anything being displayed. He cleverly addressed this issue by not putting the exhibits on open view, as was the norm, but by tucking them into alcoves, behind screens and around corners. It is possibly no coincidence that Gardner was attached to the Army Camouflage Unit during the hostilities! When a visitor entered a section of the exhibition, all they saw was the décor: the display of goods was his element of surprise.

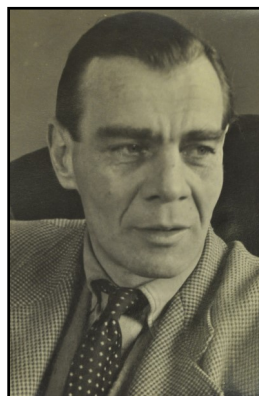
<sup>8</sup>James Gardner (1907-95) went on to become Britain's most important post-war exhibition and museum designer. Following the BCMI exhibition, he joined the design group that worked on the Festival of Britain. From the early 1950s he returned to designing exhibitions, shop interiors and other projects, including in 1966, the superstructure of the QE2 ocean liner.

<sup>9</sup>This was after consultation with the Royal Institute of British Architects. Spence, later Sir Basil Spence, became one of Britain's most celebrated post war architect, famously associated with the modern design for the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral following the bombing of the old edifice during World War II.

The designer of the displays in the Sports and Leisure Section was Robert Goodden, an architect and one of the visitors was David Mellor, a student at the Sheffield School of Art. Four years later, their paths would cross. Without doubt, the exhibition was a great success. The design critic John Cloag sent a telegram to the Chairman of the CoID that read, 'Sincere congratulations on superb showmanship, excellent designs, stupendous feat of organisation.' However, the CoID was but one initiative to improve the standard of design in Britain. The Royal College of Art (RCA) had been identified early on as a suitable vehicle to help achieve the government's goal. In 1948 the artist Robin Darwin was appointed the College's Rector. He knew Goodden, from his time at the Royal Navy's Camouflage Directorate and also when he was at the CoID where Darwin wrote the introduction to *Britain Can Make It* catalogue.

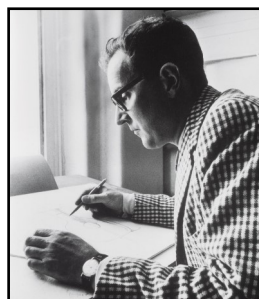
As a result of the 'old boys' network', the new Rector offered Goodden the Department of Wood, Metal and Plastics, but he opted for the Department of Silver and Glass, later to become the School of Silversmithing and Jewellery. Goodden probably favoured silver and glass as he had designed pressed domestic glassware for Chance Brothers and had also designed a silver trophy for the Architect's Golf Society while a student. Furthermore, his uncle was R M Y Gleadowe, Slade Professor of Art, Oxford University and then later Art Master at Winchester College. Gleadowe had a passion for silver, his most famous work being the design for The Sword of Honour for Stalingrad (now Volgograd), which Winston Churchill presented to Marshall Stalin on behalf of King George VI to commemorate Stalingrad's citizens heroic stand for the defence of their city from the besieging German army<sup>10</sup>.

The seeds had been sown and when the hostilities were over, they began to sprout. Later a group of enthusiastic youngsters wanting to make an impact in the world of metalwork were given the opportunity, and encouragement to do so. Having a determination to make a difference, they succeeded, and the designer-silversmith wafted like a breath of fresh air into the fusty world of a traditional craft. Goodden was Professor at the RCA from 1948-74 during which time his students included such eminent designer-silversmiths or silver designers as: Eric Clements, David Mellor, Gerald Benney, Robert Welch, Stuart Devlin, Malcolm Appleby, Kevin Coates, Michael Lloyd and many more. So, how did Goodden manage to achieve this result? The early students would have benefited from the excitement of the Festival of Britain with a feeling of optimism sweeping the country. Robert Goodden and Richard Russell<sup>11</sup> were asked to design one of the pavilions that Goodden named The Lion and the Unicorn. The professors at the RCA designing for the Festival involved their students. Brian Asquith spoke of the event, 'I couldn't believe it. All these wonderful things together in one place, so much visual excitement. It was an enormous boost to me, a great inspiration.'



**Robert Yorke Goodden**, an architect by profession, was Professor of the School of Silversmithing and Jewellery at the Royal College of Art from 1948-74.

*Courtesy The Goldsmiths' Company*



**Young Gerald Benney**

Early in his career Gerald Benney designed items for mass production ranging from clocks to prams, from desk lamps to a percolator. However, today his name is synonymous with finely crafted silver. *Courtesy Simon Benney*



**Stuart Devlin**

Looking at Stuart Devlin's career that stretches over 50 years, one can see why he has been called 'Renaissance man, sub species Australasius'. His roles have included educationalist, silversmith, sculptor, jeweller, architect as well as a designer of items as diverse as instruments for keyhole surgery, aids for the disabled, furniture and coinage.

*© Stuart Devlin, Archive, photographer the late Lord Lichfield*

<sup>10</sup>By the time the German's were finally defeated, 1 million citizens had lost their lives.

<sup>11</sup>A friend of Robert Goodden. The two formed an architectural partnership after the War.

Goodden's success can be judged by the reaction to a 1966 RCA exhibition of silver entitled *Hallmarks*. It featured both silver and jewellery by current students as well as those who had graduated from 1950. In its edition of May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1966, *The Times* hailed it as 'the brightest show in town'. Goodden explained the goal of the School to the paper's reporter, 'We aim to supply industry with the designers they need but a few prefer to set up their own silver and jewellery workshops and to train workers to carry out their ideas.' He added, 'We like to study the special characteristics of each student and help him to realise his own capabilities - rather than keep telling him what's wrong and what's right.' He explained that in the past 'designing' meant becoming a draughtsman, but at the RCA students learnt to design, 'through doing, through working with the materials in which they are designing.' The journalist noted that Goodden was not a formal educationist, but, 'has the gift of making ideas ferment in students' minds.' By way of an aside, the apprentices of both the silversmithing companies also taught their apprentices incredible silversmithing skills, which was supplemented with day release study at art colleges and embraced designing. A few went on to become designer-silversmiths, while many worked as unsung heroes who made the designs of others all their working lives.

When I started researching silversmithing of the post World War II era, I thought Goodden was going to be the main catalyst for improving design. When the writer Fiona McCarthy, the wife of David Mellor, wrote Goodden's obituary in *The Guardian*, she stated that his 'qualities as teacher are vouched for by an early generation of his students', adding, 'there is hardly a metalworker in this country not touched at some point by the Goodden influence.' By contrast, Gerald Benney who wrote a personal memoir for Goodden's obituary in the *Goldsmiths' Review* 2001/2002, said, 'Robert has been described as a teacher, but the funny thing is that he didn't appear to teach at all.' Stuart Devlin agrees that he did not teach, adding, 'This is not the function of the RCA.'<sup>12</sup> When Devlin was asked what were Goodden's outstanding qualities, the response was immediate, 'He gave students the maximum opportunity and the minimum of interference. He was very rarely in the studio, but he was always available.' However, he later added that an appointment was needed to see the professor. Interestingly, Robert Welch like Fiona McCarthy described Goodden as a teacher, but continued, 'His philosophy was to leave his students pretty much alone on a day-to-day basis, so that varying talents worked and reacted on each other, and together they simmered in a gentle stew with only an occasional stir from the Professor, aided by a number of firm directions that he had established.'<sup>13</sup> The 'directions' included work experience and 'things to do' during the vacations.

In his personal memoir in the *Goldsmiths' Review*, Benney (RCA 1951-54) posed questions about Goodden's period at the RCA by asking, 'What did he do?' and 'What did he achieve during this period?' These he answered with: 'His achievements were many and are well-documented but for those of us who were there, the memory remains of a man presiding over a bush fire of excitement during that heady period of the emergence of wonderfully original design.....' Stuart Devlin (RCA 1958-60) recalls the College was really buzzing in

<sup>12</sup>The conversation took place at the Devlins' penthouse at Chichester on 17 May 2011.

<sup>13</sup>Welch, Robert *Hand & Machine – Robert Welch: Designer \* Silversmith* (Chipping Campden 1986).

<sup>14</sup>Interestingly the triumvirate plus Geoffrey Bellamy, Eric Clements and Stuart Devlin all designed cutlery or objects in stainless steel. Stainless steel was one of the reasons why the demand for silver decreased.





Above: **David Mellor** working at 1 Park Lane, Sheffield in the mid-1960s. Combining his living accommodation with his studio and workshop, this allowed David to abolish what he thought as false distinctions between work and leisure, where work was viewed as drudgery and leisure the longed for respite.

*Courtesy John Garner/David Mellor*

Below: **Robert Welch** (standing) with **John Limbrey** his design assistant, model-maker and silversmith. The two met when students at Birmingham College of Art in 1950-2. John started working for Robert in 1958 and retired from his full-time role in 1998, but made the last piece of silver Robert designed in 2000.

*Courtesy Robert Welch Designs Limited*

the late 1950s. Janey Ironside, who built closer relationships with the industry, was Professor of the Fashion School. It was this area that became the real hot spot, receiving considerable press coverage. The arrival of Raymond Ossie Clark as a student in 1961, who became a major figure in the Swinging Sixties, gave the buzz a further boost. The RCA's Fashion School really began to feed the newly arrived colour supplements. Devlin's view is that the silver department buzzed for a different reason. With the freedom from its professor, people started to develop their own ideas. In the first half of the 1950s, the department was blessed in having three great designer-silversmiths: David Mellor, Robert Welch and Gerald Benney. All three produced silver though not necessarily for the entire period of their career<sup>14</sup>; all three were also industrial designers and all three saw the businesses that they established being continued by a son. It is also true to say that while not necessarily 'household



**Mellor Coffee Pot & Milk 1950**

A David Mellor was among the first group of students to study at the Royal College of Art under Professor Goodden. This coffee pot and milk jug was made by David Mellor while a student and has a Scandinavian 'feel', whereas his 1950s silver does not. Height of coffee pot 27.5cm (10.82in). London 1950

*Courtesy The Goldsmiths' Company*

names', they are extremely well known in their fields. The impact of the triumvirate was impressive.

Mellor, as indeed were all those at the RCA in the 1950s, was influenced to by Scandinavian design<sup>15</sup>. When Mellor won a travelling scholarship in 1952, he not surprisingly chose Sweden and Denmark as his destinations. The visit had a considerable impact on his life as he warmed to all things Scandinavian from their use of 'new' materials such as stainless steel and aluminium to stylish quality objects offered in their shops. Additionally, he liked the clean lines of their public buildings and even the street furniture. It was at this early stage that he saw himself not just as a traditional silversmith but also as a designer working in other media for mass production. The following year he spent six months at the British School in Rome and became impressed with the Italians' general stylish approach to life. Back at the RCA he decided, appropriately for someone born and bred in Sheffield, to design cutlery to be machine produced. By chance Peter Inchbald, the maternal grandson of Sir Albert Bingham of Walker and Hall, the large Sheffield firm of silverware producers, was attending the RCA one day a week. After he graduated from the RCA, Mellor was appointed design consultant to Walker and Hall on a salary of £1000 a year, a considerable sum in those days. He established his own studio-workshop nearby and over a long career designed everything from silver to traffic lights. After he became a cutlery manufacturer as well as a designer, he became known as the *Cutlery King*. Although he did not design much silver after the 1970s, Mellor Design Limited still produces some of his earlier silver designs. The company has a shop in London's Sloane Square and at Hathersage, a village near Chatsworth in the Peak District National Park. The Hathersage site includes a cutlery factory together with a Visitor Centre embracing a design museum and café and shop as well as the retail outlet.

Robert Welch also embraced Scandinavia visiting Norway in 1953 with the help of a travelling scholarship awarded by the Birmingham College of Art. Not only was he impressed, 'by the simple, everyday objects that were functional and beautiful and which most people could afford', but Theodore Olsen whose Bergen factory specialised in enamelware, offered him



#### **Welch Candelabrum**

This candelabrum perhaps Robert Welch's most iconic early piece of silver. In the late 1950s. His break with convention was inspired by visiting a major exhibition of 'action painting' by the US painter Paul Pollock where the paint is dribbled, splashed and smeared as opposed to being carefully applied to the canvas. The result is a piece that has movement. He later commented, 'Looking back on the design, I felt elated with my pursuit of the accidental effect. It was marvelous to tackle silver in this free, casual way.' Height 37cm (14.6in). Birmingham 1958

*Courtesy The Goldsmiths' Company*

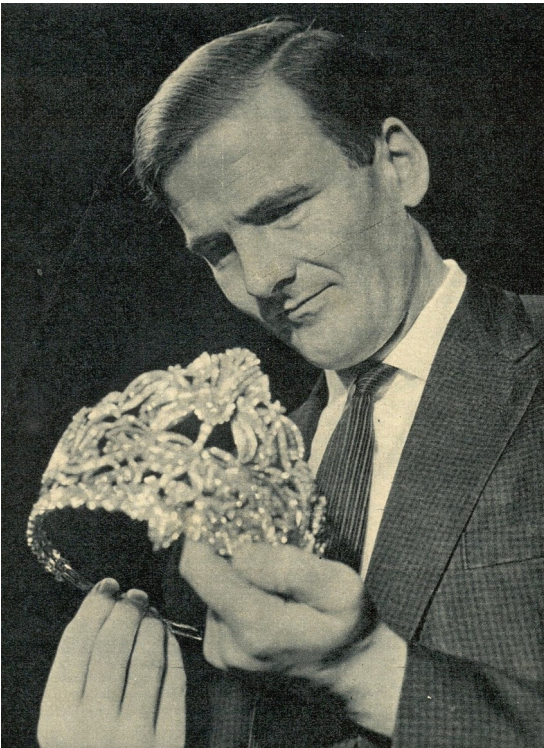
<sup>15</sup>With Alex Styles' work, post war modernism mostly prevails, but some Scandinavian influences are there as late as the early 1960s. Alex's response to this observation was 'We were all influenced by the Scandinavians'.

a post as a designer. The following year with the assistance of a scholarship from the Swedish Council of Design, he visited Sweden. Upon seeing a display of drawings, dies, models and finished pieces of domestic stainless steel, he saw the possibility of designing objects to be made in this metal. Indeed, in his last year at the RCA, he decided to specialise in stainless steel and visited the company that made Old Hall, then the UK's only range of tableware made in the metal. During the Easter of 1955 he visited Copenhagen in connection with researching his diploma thesis that was entitled *The Design and Production of Stainless-Steel Tableware*. By the time he graduated from the RCA, he had been appointed a design consultant for Old Hall. In 1955 he established his studio and workshop on the top floor of the Silk Mill at Chipping Camden and started work on his silver commissions and designing for Old Hall. While the name Robert Welch has long been associated with cutlery, the repertoire of Welch's designs ranged from clocks to lighting, glassware to kitchen tools and also included products in cast iron. A shop at Chipping Camden opened in 1969 and continues to this day and includes a few small silver pieces.

After he graduated Gerald Benney established his studio and workshop in central London. In addition to establishing his silversmithing business, he was also involved in designing a range of products from clocks to prams and was a partner in a fibreglass business on the south coast that made among other things, dispensers for Eldorado Ice Cream and the casings for John Bloom's<sup>16</sup> washing machines. Although Benney was receiving both small and large commissions for silver the business was initially small, albeit a very busy one. Indeed, up until 1961, he only employed one craftsman. Nevertheless, the foundation for his financial success was established within three years of graduating. In 1957 he was appointed a design consultant to Viners, the Sheffield silver and cutlery manufacturers. He negotiated an annual salary of £2000 and in addition a royalty of a modest 1.5 per cent of the wholesale price of the annual sales of his designs. Although he only designed four cutlery patterns that were mass produced in stainless steel, the royalties earned him up to £60,000 a year. The appointment ended in 1969.

In his memoir of Goodden, Gerald Benney wrote, 'Robert realised, more than anyone, that if the British silver industry were to survive it had to employ designers who had a good knowledge of engineering and who were not afraid of quantity production. In the 1940s, silver had consisted mainly of period reproduction, and stainless steel was only just emerging, so Robert's students were sent off to the main industrial centres such as Sheffield and Birmingham to assess the possibilities.' Benney was the only one of the three who concentrated on silver for his entire career. Although he did make 'stock items', most of his work was commissioned. His son Simon, who trained as a jeweller, has followed in his father's footsteps. Indeed, in January 2008 Gerald Benney saw his son Simon unveil the *Three Sisters Candelabra* at Goldsmiths' Hall. Weighing over 50 kilograms, it was the largest piece of silver to have been made in the UK for many years.

<sup>16</sup>Bloom was an entrepreneur who in 1958 started to sell twin tub washing machines direct to the public for 39 guineas (£40.90), which was about half the price of those offered in the High Street. The business expanded rapidly into other white goods and later package holidays to Bulgaria. By 1963, Bloom was the UK's largest press advertiser and a household name. In 1964 his main bank withdrew its support and his business empire collapsed. Gerald Benney sensed all was not well and did not lose out financially.



**Graham Hughes 1961**

From 1951 through to 1981, Graham Hughes worked at The Goldsmiths' Company (the Company) tirelessly promoting both contemporary silver and jewellery. An important person in getting modern silver on the map, he secured commissions for up and coming silversmiths, staged exhibitions both at Goldsmiths' Hall, at other UK venues and overseas.

*Courtesy The Goldsmiths' Company*

When George V initially made overtures to the Company in 1925, George Hughes was the Assistant Clerk. He had an interest in design and later the title Art Secretary was added to his working repertoire. In 1939 he was promoted to Clerk (equivalent to CEO in a commercial company) in 1939, a post he held until 1953. He assisted the Government in 1941 with regard to improving the nation's design capability after the hostilities were over. The new Assistant Clerk was not interested in design and therefore the role of Art Secretary lapsed. In 1951, George's son Graham Hughes was looking for a job after Eton, naval service during the war and Cambridge. The Festival of Britain, a national exhibition was opening that summer to give the UK's population a 'lift' following World War II as well as promoting the nation's contribution to science, technology, industrial design, architecture and design. To co-ordinate with the Festival, the Company staged two large exhibitions *Festival of Britain: The Historic Plate of the City of London* (which attracted 27,000 visitors) and the *Modern Silver Exhibition* (which attracted 12,500 visitors). Graham Hughes was appointed Exhibition Secretary and later became the Art Secretary (his title was changed to Art Director in 1962). Graham Hughes took over from where his father left off following the outbreak of War, but unlike his father he had a whole galaxy of up and coming stars at the RCA to draw upon and encourage. When he assumed the role, he was a contemporary of those studying at the RCA during the first seven years of Goodden's tenure.

Graham Hughes played a very important role in the development of silversmithing for 30 years. His enthusiasm knew no bounds and his energy never seemed to wane. In the 1950s he staged up to a dozen selling exhibitions a year in the UK and from the late 1950s he travelled the world promoting modern British silver and jewellery. When he left the Goldsmiths' Company, Gerald Benney wrote the following tribute: 'A man of many parts, Graham Hughes has a reputation for positive thinking and total commitment to the flowering of modern silver and jewellery design. Realising that the most essential need of any craft, if it is to flourish, is patronage, he used his amazing energy and enthusiasm to convince many of the big companies in the City and elsewhere that

modern silver, designed and made to furnish their new head offices and boardrooms, would show how advanced and forward-looking that particular company was. In the early 50s if silver was present at all, it was either reproduction or antique. More than any other person at that time, he was aware that most people, when purchasing silver, would not have knowledge of any other alternative. By greatly enlarging the scope of exhibitions at the Hall and by purchasing new pieces for the City to comment upon, Graham, rather like the conductor of an orchestra, drew out the very best solo performances and sometimes made the ears ring with a crescendo of disciplined teamwork. Sometimes, also, a virtuoso performance would get out of hand and run amok! In the main, however, from very small beginnings a steady growth of new work was achieved. By the end of the 60s the number of new enterprises had escalated to hundreds, which partly compensated for the decline in manufacturing industrial output in the silver trade.<sup>17</sup>

Traditionally the story of the Renaissance of British silver post World War II ended here. However, I felt that while we had the firework, no one had actually lit the blue touch paper – in other words, something was missing. I researched and found nothing. During one of my periodic visits to Stuart Devlin I asked him what he thought caused the Renaissance. His answer took me by surprise, ‘Gerald Benney. He had a huge impact – Gerald broke the idiom. He brought a richness to silver.’<sup>18</sup> In other words he moved away from the Scandinavian/Bauhaus<sup>19</sup> influence. He added, ‘Coming second was a better place to be.’ Although I had many conversations with Gerald Benney over the years, we had never discussed the Renaissance. He had died in 2008 and I thought all was lost. A few weeks later I received an e-mail from Janet, his widow. She had found a letter that she thought I ought to see, so I drove down to Wiltshire. The letter was interesting, but it was not what I was looking for. Gerald’s father Sallis, who was Principal of Brighton College of Art (where Gerald first trained), had written to Goodden to thank him for making the course so enjoyable for his son. The letter was Goodden’s response. After the anticipated, ‘there is not the least occasion for you to thank me’, Goodden revealed, ‘he missed the highest class by a hair’s breadth.’<sup>20</sup> A handwritten PS reads, ‘Will you please burn this letter when you have read it! I am not supposed to disclose details which throw any light on the class awarded in the final exam. RMG’ The letter was carefully pasted on to the inside front cover of a leather-bound scrapbook!

Then Janet said, ‘I do not think we have ever told you this. In the second half of the 1950s Patrick Plunket, an Equerry to the Queen<sup>21</sup> was asked by Lady Alexandra Metcalfe if he could recommend where to take her American friend to see modern British silver. He recommended that the ladies go to Gerald Benney’s studio

<sup>17</sup> The Goldsmiths’ Company, *Goldsmiths’ Review 1981-2*

<sup>18</sup> Said during a conversation with John Andrew in Chichester on 17 May 2011.

<sup>19</sup> The Staatliches Bauhaus was a school of design that was founded in Germany in 1919. It is more familiarly known as the Bauhaus. It was closed in 1933 following pressure from the Nazis. It taught its students giving the same emphasis to both art and to technical expertise in craftsmanship. The school’s impact on design is regarded as the most influential in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ironically the school’s early closure by the Nazi’s helped the Bauhaus movement having a considerable international influence. For example, Ludwig Mies van der Roche (the School’s last director) emigrated to the US for the directorship of the School of Architecture at the Armour Institute, Chicago.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald Benney graduated with an upper second.

<sup>21</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> Baron Plunkett. The Queen’s Equerry supports Her Majesty at official engagements such as regional visits and audiences at Buckingham Palace and is an officer from one of the armed services. They serve for a period of three years.



**Benney Chalice**

Gerald Benney told a Daily Telegraph journalist that in the late 1950s he was consciously 'trying to break away from the long, cool, Scandinavian design' that was dominating British silver. This chalice was made speculatively by him in 1957. It appears to be his first conscious attempt to do something completely different. Height 30.3cm (11.9in). London 1957

*Courtesy The Goldsmiths' Company*

and workshop at Whitfield Place, which was just off London's Tottenham Court Road. The American Mrs Lasky looked at Gerald's work and declared in a booming voice, 'This is not modern British silver, it is *all* Scandinavian.' Janet Benney well remembers him returning home that evening 'shaken rigid by the comment' but could not recall the exact year<sup>22</sup>. Benney's early stock items certainly were influenced by Scandinavian design, as indeed were those of most crafts at the time, but his commissioned pieces were not.

The first signs of something radically different appearing from Gerald's studio dates to 1957. This is a chalice made speculatively and was bought by the Company. It was a very sculptural piece with a tapering stem featuring an oval knob with a hole through it reminiscent of the work of the British sculptors Henry Moore or Barbara Hepworth. However, this is not the only interesting aspect of the piece. Its stem has been finely engraved by hand to give it a textured surface. Graham wrote with great enthusiasm in his *Modern Silver*<sup>23</sup>, 'Probably the world's first piece of silver since the 18<sup>th</sup> century to be made with an original textured surface of a type now becoming popular with several silversmiths...'. In 1961, Gerald Benney accidentally used a planishing hammer with a damaged head on a piece of silver. What should have resulted in a smooth surface resulted in one with a pattern imposed on it. After some experimentation what became known as 'Benney Bark Finish' – a textured surface with random horizontal striations resembling a miniature version of tree bark – was born. This became Gerald's 'trademark' (though he also made silver with a plain polished surface too) and continues to be used by his son Simon. Graham described the Benney studio and its output in *The Studio* of January 1960, 'His workshop off the Tottenham Court Road is a forcing bed of new ideas greeted always with surprise and wonder, sometimes by the older school of craftsmen with rather a shocked innocence. His work is intensely sure and bold: the silversmiths' Henry Moore.'

<sup>22</sup>Janet Benney died in 2013.

<sup>23</sup>*Modern Silver Throughout the World 1880-1967* by Graham Hughes (New York, 1967), p125.

I searched the Benney Archive for evidence to support Gerald taking action to break from the Scandinavian influence. Eventually I discovered an interview feature on Gerald that appeared in the June 1962 edition of *House Beautiful*. He made no

mention of Mrs Lasky, but the message is clear, 'What I am trying to do, and what four or five others in my field are trying to do, is to recreate an international image of English silver in modern terms.' He then talked of 18<sup>th</sup> century antique silver and reproductions of it, but continued, 'But what we want to do is to bring the whole craft up to date with all the skill in the making that made the earlier silver famous, coupled to ideas in design that fit with the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am trying to design silver that is immediately recognisable as English. How can I explain it? Well, Scandinavian design seems to be particularly clinical; American design tends to be brittle – beautiful, yes, but very obviously American. I think English silver should be rugged, solid and functional, but at the same time modern.' Gerald told a Daily Telegraph journalist that in the late 1950s he was consciously 'trying to break away from the long, cool Scandinavian design' that was dominating British silver.<sup>24</sup> While Gerald discussed the need to break away from the Scandinavian influence with colleagues, all worked independently.

Gerald Benney's silver workshop was a lone 'forcing bed of new ideas' in London for the first half of the swinging sixties, but that altered. In 1965 Stuart Devlin decided to open a workshop in the capital. He had trained as an art teacher (specialising in metalwork) in his native Australia and taught for five years. He then studied gold and silversmithing in Melbourne and went on to study silversmithing and industrial design over two years at the RCA in London<sup>25</sup>. He then spent two years at Colombia University in the US where he developed a career as a sculptor. Back home, as agreed, he returned to his role as an educationalist, but also became involved in a competition to design the Australian coinage – his designs were chosen. At the age of 32, he had achieved his ambition of being appointed Inspector of Art Schools in Victoria but did not like the role. During a visit to London supervising the cutting of the dies for decimal coinage, the seeds were sown for establishing himself as a silversmith in London. The decision was not taken lightly as he realised that the old craft was facing competition from a new medium – stainless steel. It was less expensive, but more durable than silver. Like most students at the RCA during the 1950s, Stuart was influenced by Scandinavian design that had developed from the German Bauhaus movement. However, he considered that the Bauhaus and Scandinavian influences were both alien to him and that is why he turned his attention to sculpture in the States. Analysing the silver works he had made, he regarded his public work as sterile, while the gifts he made for his wife were romantic in nature. This revelation was the beginning of what became the distinctive Devlin style. He recognised that the way forward was to enrich his work, but the only problem was that the traditional forms of embellishment used by silversmiths were expensive.

However, unlike his contemporaries, he brought a new dimension to silversmithing. His exploration of making sculpture in the States gave him skills of working with molten metal. He adapted and refined the techniques he had learnt to a wide variety of textures on the surface of silver as well as making filigree forms. The result was silver, the likes of which had never been seen before. Indeed, Godfrey Winn, the writer and actor described Stuart's workshop as 'a veritable Aladdin's cave' and the objects he saw as 'the work of a

<sup>24</sup>*Silver Turns to Gold* by Gwyn Jones, Daily Telegraph Supplement April 27<sup>th</sup> 1973

<sup>25</sup> Initially Stuart persuaded the RCA to let him do the silversmithing course over two as opposed to three years. He completed it in one and undertook the industrial design course in one as opposed to three years.



### Benney Bug Bowl

This centrepiece was specifically commissioned by The Goldsmiths' Company in 1962 for display at prestigious exhibitions overseas as an example of superb British contemporary design and craftsmanship. Its design was inspired by an enlarged image of a water beetle. The piece also received exposure in the UK. It was displayed at the Ideal Home Exhibition in 1963, while in 1964 it featured in national newspapers ranging from the Times to the Daily Worker as well as the regional press. Silversmiths would be delighted at such extensive coverage today. Its value in 1964 was said to be £1500, around £25,000 at 2013 prices. Diameter 53.2cm (20.7in). London 1962,

*Courtesy The Goldsmiths' Company*



### Benney Liberty Cruet

There is no doubting the Scandinavian influence on the design of this Benney cruet set. Arthur Liberty ordered some for his store, but when they were delivered the Liberty's Buyer rejected them. Length of mustard 9.5cm (3.7in). London 1958-9

*Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Bill Burnett*



### Benney Boxes

With boxes, Gerald added a new dimension to the genre. Back row from left to right: 1. A plain silver box, length 15.4cm (5.7in). London 1958 2. The feather box, length 17.9cm (7in). London 1966 3. Dark green and white enamel stripes, length 15cm (5,9in). London 1970 Second row from left right: 4. Silver and 18ct gold, the cover with allusion engraving of pyramids, a gold sphere set at the top of each 'apex', length 9.65cm (3.8in). London 1967 5. One of a pair in enamel, an opal set in an 18 carat gold sunburst and silver gilt. Length 12.7cm (5cm). London 1974. 6. An 18ct gold and silver box. Length 10cm. London 1970. Front group from left to right: 7. Silver gilt and enamel circular box. Diameter 4.8cm (1.9in). London 1973 8. Small silver and enamel box. Diameter 3.6cm (1.4in). London 1989. 9. Silver-gilt and enamel eye-shaped box. Purchased in 2010, Length 10.1cm (4in). London 1973

*Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Bill Burnett*





Left: **Devlin Café au lait**

It is ironic that this café au lait, which Stuart designed in 1959, is today an icon of 1960s silver design. The underside of each of the pots' covers are engraved *Des S Devlin*. Height 32.5cm (12.8in). Maker's mark Waklely & Wheeler, London 1960

*Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Robin Maggs, National Museum of Wales*



**Devlin Decanter**

In 1973 Stuart devised a scheme to acknowledge talent among his team. This took the form of a mark such as a key or a hand and was awarded to his silversmiths when elected by their peers to the status of Master Craftsman. Its use was to be at the discretion of the craftsman to put on pieces that he considered to be 'Masterpieces'. However, the team's standards were very high and the marks were applied extremely sparingly Devlin's Master Craftsman Rodney Hingston hand-raised this decanter and it bears his mark, an 'Eye' on the neck of the piece. Height 40.6cm (16in). London 1976

*Both images courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Bill Burnett*



Above: **Devlin Large Centrepiece**

For a number of years from the late 1960s, Stuart speculatively made a number of large centrepieces. The one shown here shown here with a large fluorite crystal at its centre, is ideal for a lunch party. For the evening the crystal can be replaced by a candelabrum for a dozen candles with a fitting which allows them to be positioned at any angle, or indeed vertically. This is hallmarked a year later than the base. Diameter 40cm (15.8in). London 1968 and 1969

*Both images courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Bill Burnett*



Above: **Devlin Small Flower Box**

A Stuart Devlin silver and silver gilt circular box, the silver pull-off lid applied with silver gilt, silver and oxidised silver flowers. Plain silver base. Diameter 7cm (2.8"). London 1980

magician<sup>26</sup>. Winn was so impressed that he persuaded his friend F R Morrell, the Chairman of Collingwood of Conduit Street Limited<sup>27</sup>, to visit the workshop, which he did out of politeness. However, he too was bowled over and instead of paying a short visit spent hours there and spent thousands of pounds. He also offered Stuart a summer exhibition. Members of the Royal Family attended the private view. Stuart Devlin was a phenomenon.

Gerald and Stuart had completely different styles. Both used textured surfaces, but whereas Stuart introduced colour to his work through the use of gilt, on occasions using matt to dramatic effect to contrast with polished silver surfaces and the use of amethysts, Gerald had a different approach. He recalled, 'One day in Peter Jones I saw these banks of towels. They were just great banks of colour. I thought, now that is one thing missing in silver – colour.' He thought it was time for enamel to blossom again. After World War I the demand from wealthy patrons dwindled and the art was lost to all but a handful of craftsmen working principally on jewellery. He therefore journeyed to Zürich to search for craftsmen who had worked for Meinrad Burch-Korrodi, then the last well-known studio to have undertaken fine enamelling<sup>28</sup>. The Burch-Korrodi enamellers had inherited some of their skills from Fabergé's craftsmen as Berger Bergersen, its head enameller, had worked for Bolin, a rival of Fabergé. After the Russian Revolution some of Fabergé's enamellers fled to Bolin's workshop that had been established in Stockholm during 1916.

While walking along the city's main shopping street Gerald Benney slipped and sprained his ankle outside Turler's the jewellers. Herr Turler came to his assistance. While Gerald was recovering, he revealed his mission. By chance Turler knew the Norwegian Berger Bergersen and intro-



#### Devlin Millennium Dish

It took Stuart fifteen months to carve the component parts of the Millennium Dish for The Goldsmiths' Company. He maintains it would not have been possible had he not become involved in carving extremely accurate plasters for his coin designs. 'So, all the skills that I developed over the years came to bear with the intricate modelling and perspectives involved in creating this massive and complex commission. It is the most spectacular piece of silver that I have ever designed and carved.' It has a diameter of 77cm (30,3in). London 1999

*Courtesy The Goldsmiths' Company*

<sup>26</sup>From the Introduction of *Stuart Devlin 1970 Exhibition* at Collingwood of Conduit Street Limited.

<sup>27</sup>From the Introduction of *Stuart Devlin 1970 Exhibition* at Collingwood of Conduit Street Limited.

<sup>28</sup>The company had Royal Warrants from HM Queen Elizabeth II and HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother.

<sup>30</sup>*The Viceroy's Daughters – The lives of the Curzon Sisters*, London 2000. The volume is available on amazon.com



### Lady Mary Curzon

A painting of Mary Victoria Leiter, Lady Curzon painted after her death by William Logsdail. She is wearing the Peacock Gown made by Worth of Paris, which she wore at the Delhi Durbar in 1903 to celebrate the Coronation of Edward VII. The gown was embroidered in India with gold and silver thread. The 'eyes' of the peacock feathers are beetle wings but are often mistaken for emeralds. The neckline is accentuated with lace embellished with rhinestones and spangles, etc. The painting and the dress are both displayed at Kedleston.

©National Trust Images/John Hammond

### Inset: Lord Curzon

A contemporary photograph of Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India at the Delhi Durbar in 1903

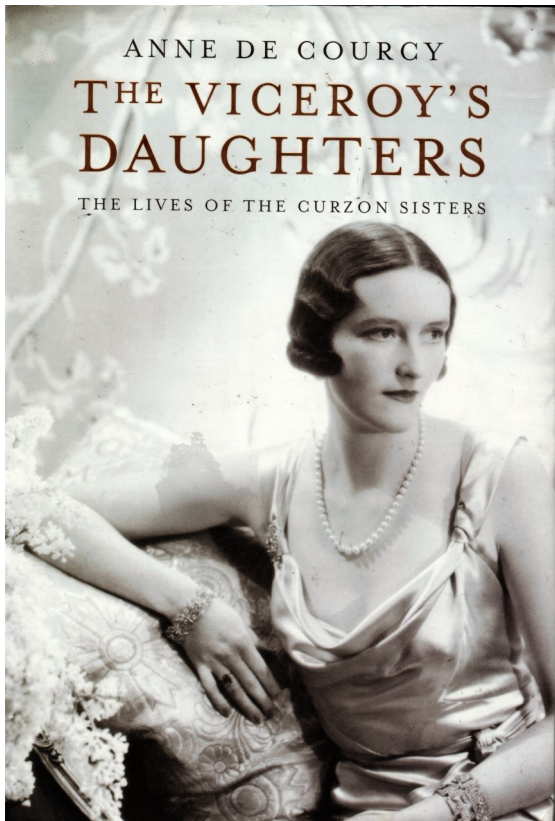
Source: Library of Congress, Courtesy Wikimedia Commons



duced him to Gerald. Mr Bergersen was persuaded to travel to England to advise on enamelling techniques. So, the slow process of reviving a virtually extinct craft began. Bergersen stayed several months at Beenham House teaching Gerald Benney's team everything he knew. Eventually Benney exceeded in enamelling larger surfaces than Fabergé.

When Gerald broke the idiom, Stuart seized the opportunity to return to silversmithing as he realised that coming second was the better place to be. The public had accepted the changes brought by Gerald and therefore were more than likely to warm to Stuart's innovations. He was right. Gerald may have triggered the Renaissance, but Stuart's 'out of the box creativity' certainly gave it momentum to blossom. Although more than 60 years have elapsed since the Renaissance was triggered, designer-silversmiths in the UK have gone from strength to strength. But what about Mrs Lasky who triggered this Renaissance? We know nothing about her, but given Lady Alexander Metcalfe's American connections, it should be easy to identify her family. It is extraordinary that a resident of the United States should unwittingly have had such an influence over British silver design.

Lady Alexandra Victoria Metcalfe was the daughter of George Curzon, 1<sup>st</sup> Marquess Curzon of Kedleston and her mother Mary Victoria Leiter, the daughter of Levi Ziegler Leiter and Mary Theresa (née Carver). Levi Leiter was a very wealthy Chicago businessman who was a co-founder of what became the Marshall Field retail empire but left to concentrate on real estate. Mary Leiter married Lord Curzon (as he was commonly known) in 1895. Curzon was made a Baron in 1898 and served as Viceroy of India from 1898-1905 with Lady Mary as his Vicereine. Lady Mary died in 1906 and is buried in the church at Kedleston. Alexandra Naldera Curzon was the last of Lord and Lady Curzon's three daughters and was born in 1904. She was named Alexandra after her godmother Queen Alexandra, while her middle



#### Lady Alexandra Metcalfe

Lady Alexandra Metcalfe features on the cover of Anne de Courcy's *The Viceroy's Daughters*. Although published in 2000, new copies are still available on Amazon

name is after the Vice regal refuge 17 miles from the hill station of Shimla. In 1929, she married Major Edward Dudley Metcalfe (known as 'Fruity'), the equerry and close friend of the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII. Lady Alexandra and Fruity divorced in the early 1950s. Anne de Courcy's *The Viceroy's Daughters* gives an excellent account of Lady Alexandra's interesting life.

Major Metcalfe died in 1957, which is about the time Mrs Lasky visited London. The only reference to 'the Laskys' in *The Viceroy's Daughters* is in 1926 when Irene, the eldest of the Curzon sisters, travelled by ship from Tokyo to Vancouver and then by train to Los Angeles, arriving on 1<sup>st</sup> September where 'Hollywood high society was at her disposal'. First, she dined with the Chaplins and then with 'the Laskys in their Early American beach house' after which they watched 'a ghastly film'. Wartski, the London jewellers specialising in Fabergé had a Mrs Lasky who was an American customer who visited their shop in London for about ten years from the late 1950s. Lady Alexandra died in 1995 and I expect Mrs Lasky is no longer with us. However, if you know anyone who had a Mrs Lasky in their family who visited Lady Alexandra Metcalfe in London during the late 1950s, I would be very interested to hear from you.

**John Andrew** can be reached at

[curator@pearsonsilvercollection.com](mailto:curator@pearsonsilvercollection.com)