

# GRAHAM STEWART

## An Appreciation of his Life and Work

By John Andrew



Graham Stewart at his Dunblane home. *Courtesy Elizabeth Stewart, photographer David McIntyre*



Graham Stewart working in his Dunblane workshop. *Courtesy Elizabeth Stewart, photographer David McIntyre*

**G**raham Leishman Stewart, who has died aged 65, was one of Scotland's foremost gold and silversmiths of his era. The most prestigious of his many commissions is a large abstract silver sculpture displayed in the Main Hall of the Scottish Parliament. It is arguably the most viewed piece of modern silver in Britain today as more than five million visitors have started tours of the building which opened in 2004 where Graham's sculpture sits.

Born at Bridge of Allan in 1955 he was educated at Dollar Academy (1960-73). His father William Morrice Stewart, an industrial designer, was a leading influence in his life as he had a keen interest in silversmithing. Indeed, when the lecturer who ran the local silversmithing evening class he attended retired, he asked Mr Stewart to take over. Graham would periodically sit-in on the classes his father taught. At the Academy his Art Master suggested he apply to Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen. He did, but was not sure whether he would be accepted, so he sought summer work experience with Norman Grant, the Fife jeweller.

Gray's accepted Graham and with encouragement from Grant, he seized the opportunity.



Following an article on contemporary British silver in the *Financial Times' How to Spend It* magazine, which featured Graham's work, a commission for this piece was received from Singapore. An Anglo Irish gentleman wanted something very special to present to his Chinese wife for their wedding anniversary. Having looked at the websites of the silversmiths featured in the article, he decided Graham was his man. Discussing the project by phone and e-mail a vase was decided on. Graham was sent images of the couple's minimalist home and even of the table on which the piece was to be placed. Graham decided on a Chinese style with the recipient's name in gold lettering on a chased background. Catering to both nationalities of recipient and donor the vase features a peony in a gilded recess and on the reverse a Celtic knot.

Height 22ins. Edinburgh 2012. *Courtesy Elizabeth Stewart, photographer Shannon Toft*

<sup>1</sup> This is an exclusive non-profit making society where the membership is by invitation only for people with a positive record of association with Scotch whisky. Its membership includes leading representatives of the Scotch whisky industry.

From 1973-77 he studied for the Art and Design Diploma and in his penultimate year was a finalist in the Young Designer of the Year competition. A one-year Art and Design Post Graduate Scholarship followed. Malcolm Appleby, whose forte was engraving, asked the School to recommend a student who could help him in his studio. There was only one candidate considered satisfactory for such a role – Graham. So this is how he added engraving to his skill bank. Before graduating he spent the summer obtaining further work experience with the award-winning London jeweller Roger Doyle.

His parents had moved to Dunblane and Graham decided to establish his roots there too. With the help of the Scottish Development Agency, his father and brother Iain, an engineer, he began renovating a derelict building in the town. Initially he concentrated on making jewellery and undertaking outwork for other silversmiths. An early range of jewellery included a series of mainly silver bird brooches that proved popular. Their simple stylised forms had an indefinable quality that was charming.

During the 1980s his reputation spread and the commissions rolled in. His output ranged from hand-wrought spoons to maces; from hand-raised drinking cups to a Bishop's crozier and from boxes to vases. One of his more unusual commissions of the 1980s was to design and make the Great Quaich for the Keepers of the Quaich<sup>1</sup> at Blair Castle. Although it sounds as if this is a body steeped in history, it was in fact only founded in 1988. However, the quaich, Scotland's small bowl for drinking whisky, dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Its ancestor was the scallop shell from which drams of whisky were drunk in the Highlands and Islands. Graham had a great respect for tradition and appreciated early Scottish silver, but he liked to bring something fresh to his forms.

Although the basic shape of the quaich has been established for centuries, Graham did not reproduce what went before. The handles may have varied, or its interior may be engraved with anything from salmon to barley. Of course, clients will not necessarily use a quaich for its traditional purpose. Indeed, one client used his for his daily porridge and not surprisingly its interior was engraved with oats. From the second half of the 1980s, he started to reach a wider audience. From 1986 through to 2018, when he became unwell, he attended the annual Goldsmiths' Fairs in London. He was a very popular exhibitor and built-up a strong international clientele as well as an English one.

Graham's inspiration was mainly nature, his work does not replicate what he saw, but is organic. Certainly he lived in a beautiful part of the world. Dunblane is an attractive small town with a 13<sup>th</sup> century cathedral and is an entrance to the Scottish Highlands. Adjacent to the town there are rural estates as well as farmland and countryside. Whether he was walking his dogs or cycling (he would consider it nothing to cycle 25 miles). Flora and fauna was everywhere to be enjoyed together with stunning scenery. Nature's influence seemingly crept into his drawings without effort. On one occasion he remarked to his wife Elizabeth that the couple's whippets had 'not yet made it into silver'. She pointed out some handles of jugs – intuitively they had!

There are two objects that I particularly associate with Graham - bowls and jugs. 'Claret jugs are lovely to make', he once commented. 'You can express a lot with a jug – generosity, a convivial gathering – they are such an expressive thing.' Certainly when designed by Graham they are. By sweeping the handles to the necks of the jugs and seemingly into the pronounced spouts resulted in giving the vessels great fluidity, turning a functional object into a work of art.



The Salmon Tail Quaich is hand engraved. Edinburgh 2006. Courtesy Elizabeth Stewart, photographer Shannon Tofts



This is one of the last pieces of silver Graham designed and made and the last piece he specifically made for an exhibition. Possessing an innate love of nature and inspired and nourished by the landscape that surrounded his home, it was inspired by a group of spring lapwings he saw in flight. Engraved with the words *Lapwings in Spring* in his cursive script around a stylised bird, it is an object of great beauty. It was exhibited in *Lettering Art & Illusion* at Ruthin Craft Centre in North Wales from 19 October 2019 – 12 January 2020. The interior of the bowl is matt, while its exterior is highly polished. Diameter 9ins, Edinburgh 2019. Courtesy Elizabeth Stewart, photographer Shannon Toft



It is sometimes strange how objects originate. Graham had made money boxes in the form of pillar boxes for a client to give to his grandsons. When granddaughters arrived, the client felt that money post boxes were not appropriate for little girls. After some thought, Graham proposed one in the form of a beehive or skep. The client liked the idea and ordered three. A beekeeper saw one and commissioned a honeypot in the same style designed to take a standard pound jar of honey. When exhibited at Goldsmiths' Fair in 2011 it was greatly admired by visitors. The interior is gilded and the inside of the cover features a honeycomb. Traditionally skeps were placed on a square short-legged stand raising it just above the ground. The Collection commissioned a round base with no legs. Height 7.5in. Edinburgh 2018. *Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Bill Burnett*

Over many years Graham had made numerous large pieces for the family who commissioned this piece. Having decided that they required a pair of candelabra to set off their table, they made a visit to Dunblane. While chatting away, Graham sketched a design that met with immediate approval. He likes the spontaneity of working with private clients. The design was the easy part, working out how to make it took a little longer as each of the arms for the candles only has one seam. Graham likes a technical challenge. Always with an eye to the practical aspects of the pieces he creates, each candelabrum can be dismantled for the ease of cleaning. Height 15in. Edinburgh 2011. *Courtesy Elizabeth Stewart, photographer Shannon Tofts*



This pair of claret jugs was made for the first British Silver Week (BSW) held from 2008-2012. One of the events was a trail of modern silver through the State Rooms of Chatsworth House, the seat of the Duke of Devonshire, together with a display of the work of a dozen of the country's leading silversmiths being exhibited in the Great Dining Room. The jugs featured on the cover of the guide to the BSW's displays in the stately home. Graham commented, 'I wanted the handles with a fuller grip than achieved by a forged one, so they are hollow.' The sweep of the handles to the necks of the jugs and seemingly into the pronounced elongated spouts, certainly give the vessels great fluidity. Height 15in. Edinburgh 2008. *Courtesy Elizabeth Stewart, photographer Shannon Tofts*



Hannah's tea kettle with a swing overhead black wood handle was one of three pieces Graham entered into the exhibition *Silver and Tea: a perfect blend* staged by the Goldsmiths' Company in London from 28<sup>th</sup> May to 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1998. Teapots were a fascination of Graham's over his career as he strived to design 'the perfect one'. The model for this design had been placed on a table that he often passed when he noticed his small daughter Hannah had placed a small bird on the lid. The piece here was not the one in the exhibition, but was made the year afterwards. In this later example, the bird is encased in black wood, whereas the original one was just silver. Ht 8½in. Edinburgh 1999. Courtesy *The Pearson Silver Collection*, photographer *Bill Burnett*

Graham had a great respect for words and read poetry and attended readings. He was a devotee of the Irish bard Seamus Heaney. He discovered that Heaney's favourite piece of prose was the BBC Radio's *Shipping Forecast*, this resulted in a series of bowls that have been much admired. The Forecast with such names as: East Dogger, Northwest German Bight and Cromarty, has an almost hypnotic quality. Graham engraved his selected words on to a flat circular disc, a technique he learnt at Malcolm Appleby's in the 1970s, and subsequently hand-raised it into a bowl using the traditional centuries old method of working with hammers and stakes. He never cut corners and had the bowl formed by spinning, which simplistically, is a skilled mechanical method of raising silver. He chose and arranged the words with the flow of a poet. The series was expanded to other themes.

It is interesting to hear what Emmet Smith, a fellow senior member of the Hand Engraving Association of Great Britain had to say about Graham. 'He was an absolute pleasure to work with, I really enjoyed talking about the projects he was working on. I felt I could talk to him as a fellow craftsman and more importantly as a friend. He understood and valued what we did as hand engravers, he knew hand engraving brought his bowls alive and he celebrated and invested in this. Drawing was an obvious talent he had; he would always supply hand drawn artwork for me to follow. Lettering is a notoriously difficult thing to get right, and I was always blown away at how well he could sketch out the words and sentences in an ever-decreasing circle into the centre of the bowl. The finesse of the letters and the spacing was always spot on. He was an incredibly talented silversmith. In my experience, the very best are humble, they want to listen more than talk. This was Graham, the work he produced is a testament to the focus he had on craftsmanship and his talent and humility won the respect of the very best in the industry.'

During the winter of 2003, Graham and three other Scottish silversmiths were invited by the Incorporation of Goldsmiths

in Edinburgh (the Incorporation) to compete in a closed competition to design a contemporary version of the Three Honours of Scotland.<sup>2</sup> Graham's objective was to get the sword, sceptre and crown 'in one flowing whole'. He knew what he wanted, but trying to get there was a lengthy process. Elizabeth looked at some of his designs and asked, 'What's the message?' That acted as a key and eventually a breakthrough was made. Graham won the competition. Designing the sculpture was one thing, making it was another challenge. It was all hands to the deck at Dunblane – all four people in the workshop. Vigorous hammer work was required to forge certain components, but a hydraulic press, which Iain constructed, was also needed. HM Queen Elizabeth II presented the finished creation to the Scottish Parliament upon the opening of its new building on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2004.

It was not long before the Incorporation was commissioning another exciting project of which Graham was part – the *Silver of the Stars* where 10 international Scottish celebrities from Sir Sean Connery to Ian Rankin were paired with 10 of Scotland's finest silversmiths. Each celebrity had to design a piece of silver on the scenario of a drink with a close friend, and the smith to make the object. Graham was paired with Alexander McQueen from the world of fashion who designed a heavy absinthe goblet and spoon, the former bearing the gargoyle-type heads of Punch and Judy. While beautifully crafted by Graham, it was as far from his style as anything could be. The *Silver of the Stars* was to travel the world and Graham gently asked Mary Michel, the then Director of the Incorporation, if he could make a piece to accompany it. He designed and crafted a large Möbius Bowl. It was greatly admired by many on its journey from St. Petersburg to Kyoto, a round trip of three -quarters million miles.



This is undoubtedly Graham's most prestigious commission and as it is located in a prominent place in the Main Hall of the Scottish Parliament Building. Having won the Incorporation of the Goldsmiths of the City of Edinburgh's (the Incorporation's) competition with his design, the sculpture was duly commissioned. When Buckingham Palace advised that the Queen wished to make a presentation to the new Parliament, the Incorporation advised that a piece was already being made. Graham's silver model of the sculpture was shown to Her Majesty. It met with Royal approval and Her Majesty formally presented the *Honours of Scotland* when she opened the Scottish Parliament on October 9<sup>th</sup> 2004. Height 34in. Edinburgh 2004. *Courtesy Elizabeth Stewart, photographer Shannon Tofts*

<sup>2</sup> The Honours of Scotland, informally known as the Scottish Crown Jewels, date from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and are the oldest surviving set of regalia in the British Isles. The Three Honours of Scotland refer to the three primary elements.



This is one of Graham's most admired pieces, which accompanied the *Silver of the Stars* for its ¾-million-mile world tour. The rim of the bowl is a Möbius strip. Imagine the rim is a strip of a flexible material with two sides. By holding one end and twisting the other through 180° and then joining them together creates a loop with only one surface. Google 'mobius strip' and you can watch a video showing how you can create your own with a strip of paper. This is a stunning reflective piece of silver. Diameter 15½in. Edinburgh 2005. *Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Shannon Tofts*

After Mary's brother Thomas died, the family commissioned Graham to make a trophy awarded each year in his memory at the Edinburgh Pipe Band Championships. Mary recalls, 'On the day of the championships Graham was there, with his lovely smile. This is for me a snapshot of Graham—a thoughtful and imaginative designer, an incredibly talented silversmith who could encapsulate so much meaning into a single piece; above all, a gentle man with whom it was always a pleasure to work.'

A selection of Graham Stewart's work may be viewed on The Gallery of his website: [www.grahamstewartsilversmith.co.uk/gallery.php](http://www.grahamstewartsilversmith.co.uk/gallery.php)

Graham died on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020. He is survived by his wife Elizabeth, their children Thomas and Hannah and their grandson Ivor.

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