

# THE CONUNDRUM OF LIBERTY'S AMAZING *CYMRIC* SPOON DESIGNS

BY SIMON MOORE

Although Liberty's English silverware is already well documented, the question of who designed what and who were the initial manufacturers, has been puzzling many ever since. Using spoons as examples, this article intends to disseminate the work of others, combined with some original material and try to clear up the confusion that still exists.

Arthur Liberty's venture into non-imported silver started publicly in May 1899 with an in-store exhibition of extraordinary items designed to appeal to his aesthetic and rather bohemian clientele. Among these pieces were a number of spoons – jam, fruit and teaspoons. This break away from normal spoon conventions: serving, table, dessert, tea, is suggestive that the spoons were not specifically designed to have a set purpose (except for the teaspoons perhaps) but might be appreciated as works of art in themselves rather than the more commonplace classification via spoon sizes. John Ruskin, who championed the Arts & Crafts Movement, desired that all objects of aesthetic taste should, at least, form part of one's daily living – furniture, metalwork and ceramics should have some use in the home. The store would have had to suggest some purpose for them else they would not so easily sell. Judging by the lack of wear to many of these during the next 100 years, this assertion may not be far from the truth as most would have found that to lay out a table with Liberty flatware would have been expensive (the teaspoons alone were priced at 7/6d each in 1900 and the larger spoons were just over £1!) Most were likely purchased as Christmas presents (or Yuletide Gifts as the catalogues listed them).

The May (1899) exhibition catalogue, drawn up in some haste, assigned classical or exotic names for the Cymric silverwares including the spoons - Labuan, Sarepta, Decos and Medea being just a few. The catalogue was not illustrated and it was not until November the same year that a fully illustrated catalogue appeared. Before this time Arthur Liberty had imported silverware from Japan, India and Norway, always with an eye for the unusual and finely-made.

This was a critical venture for Liberty; he and the store directorship had recently engaged the Birmingham manufactory of W.H. Haseler to produce all of their silver and (slightly later) pewter wares. If the store was to continue engaging public and artistic interest as it had been since its opening in 1875, then the designing of this new silverware (and spoons) had to be something both eye-catching and new.

Liberty's had already secured the services of the Manx designer, Archibald Knox whose Celtic roots had already shaped the way for his artistry. At the same time, Haseler's also had two designers working for them: one was an antique dealer working in Stratford-upon-Avon, Oliver Baker and the other was Bernard Cuzner who, with W.R. Haseler, had engaged Baker to help with the new Liberty project. All three men were to design much silverware for Liberty who in turn, also engaged many other designers from the Birmingham,



London and Glasgow and other Art Schools, many of the foremost put forward by Haseler's, but who also worked in other media or precious metal ware – jewellery being the most usual.

At this time, Knox was working at and with the Silver Studio in west London, just shortly after Arthur Silver's death in 1896 and who had designed much for Liberty, particularly wallpapers. His sons Reginald (Rex) and Harry were also to design for Liberty once they had come of age. Rex sold silver designs for the 1899 in-store exhibition that was to launch the Cymric venture but, according to the firm's ledgers, no spoon designs were sold to Liberty's at this time. Harry Silver was still too young to enter the business and didn't start selling designs to Liberty's until sometime between c. 1905 and 1910.

That the Cymric venture and exhibition were a resounding success is not surprising and in November the same year Liberty's produced its first illustrated catalogue detailing the new silverware, including the spoon designs that had been accepted at this stage.

Although Haseler's had formed the manufacturing link with Liberty's, the latter initially used silversmiths local to the store in Soho. This area had been a silversmithing center since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century and although Haseler's started production the same year, the Soho manufacturers continued to be contracted for a few more years. Among them would have been the fairly renowned firm of Pairpoint Brothers of Dean Street. They were themselves to venture into making their own A&C spoons. This explains why the earliest of Cymric wares bear a London assay rather than Birmingham.

For these spoons, Liberty and his chief buyer John Llewellyn, chose Knox's designs to be used solely for this first tranche of the Cymric spoon wares. According to the Silver Studio ledgers, Rex Silver had sold many



Fig. 1 From the November 1899 first illustrated catalogue of the Cymric spoons showing the larger spoons (above), with names, exotically printed in silver ink. Note the lower Lydian spoon with a more typical Knox interlace (*entrelac*) pattern on the terminal. Knox produced these designs whilst working at the Silver Studio.



Fig.2 Pair of Liberty 'fruit spoons' assayed in London 1899 and bearing the first of the Liberty sponsor marks, L<sup>y</sup> & C<sup>o</sup> in a rectangular cartouche. Although this pair may have been exhibited in the store exhibition, they were not listed in catalogue form until 1900.

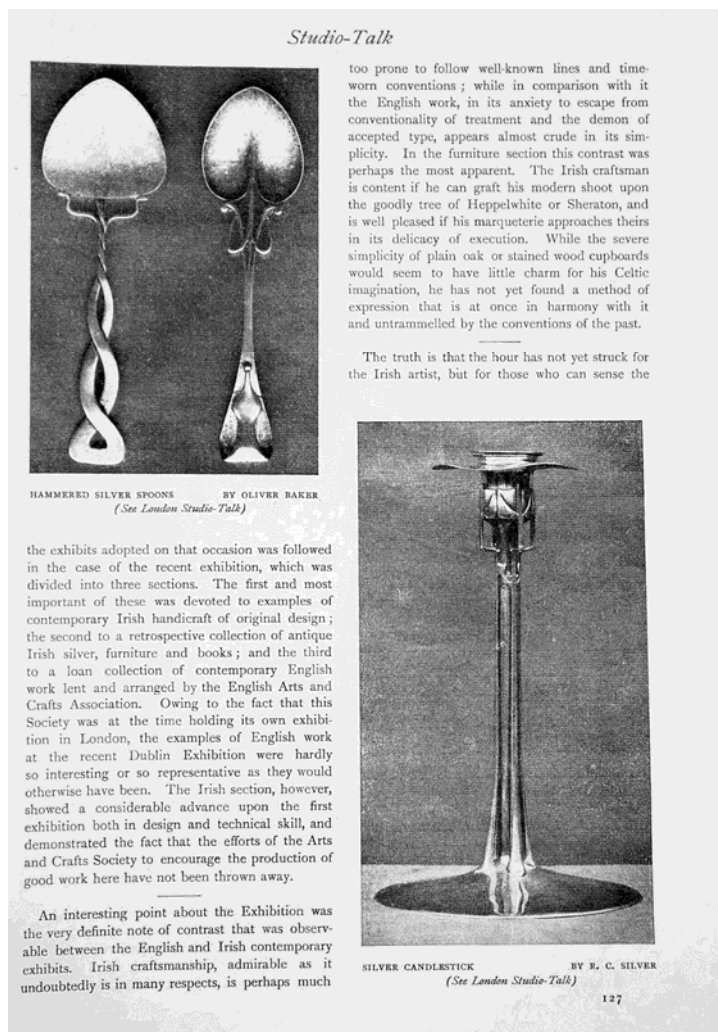


Fig. 3/4 From *The Studio Magazine*, vol. 19, 1900, showing two of Baker's spoons. The interlacing handle of the left spoon, intriguingly in the Celtic mode.

other designs for smaller silverware at the same time and Messrs' Baker's and Cuzner's spoons didn't appear until 1900. At this time Knox is often seen as 'leading' the silverware design team and many have wrongly assumed that all or most of the Liberty silverware was his work alone. This was certainly to be Knox's halcyon period and the fact that he was asked (solely it seems) to design spoons for King Edward VII's Coronation in 1902, emphasises this point.

Liberty's policy forbade the naming of his design team, conferring complete anonymity. Not until the next year when Liberty wished to publicise further his new Cymric wares at the Arts & Crafts Society exhibition, were the names of the designers submitted, as this was a condition of the exhibition. Short articles were written about them and their spoons (and other wares) appeared in *The Studio Magazine* for 1900 and 1901 revealing their names and their styles. From these 'crumbs' of information have the attributions as to who designed which (other) spoons been extrapolated with some difficulty.

The first series of Cymric spoons by Knox were duly exhibited and (presumably admired) but by the early 1900s there were many other new



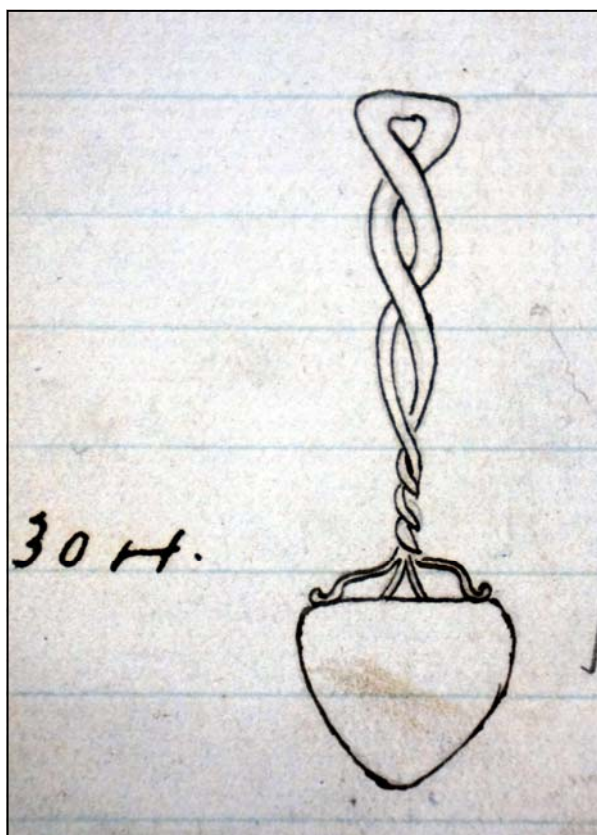
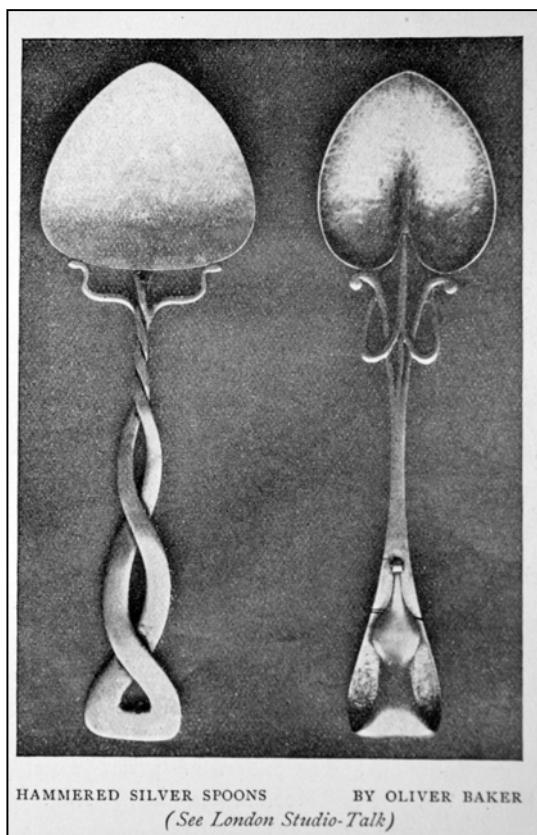


Fig.5. Design no. 304 showing Baker's interlace-handled spoon from Liberty's Silver Sketch Book. [Courtesy of City of Westminster Archive and Liberty Retail Ltd.]

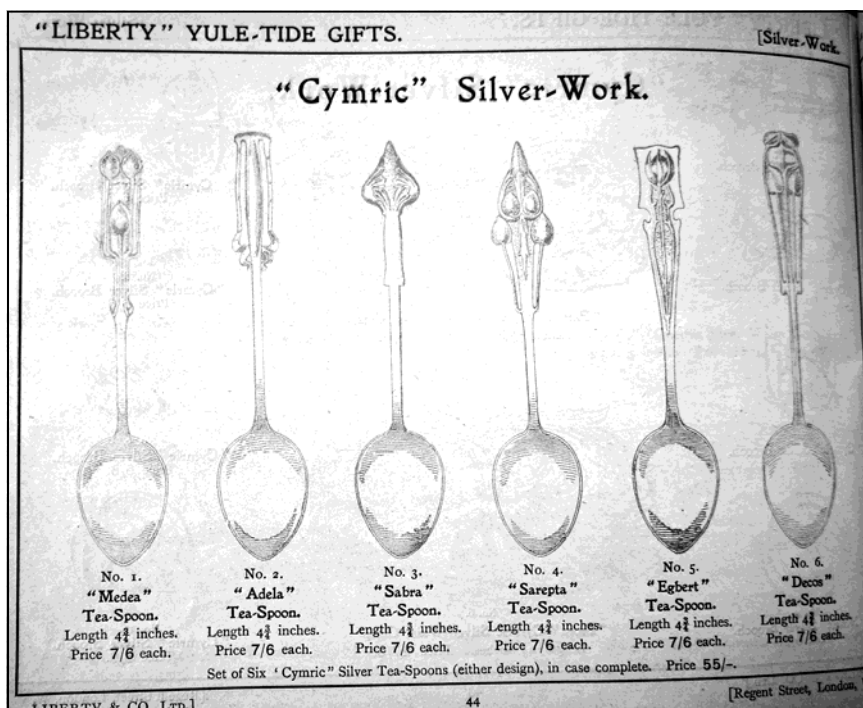


Fig.6 The first sextet of teaspoons from the same catalogue: note that six designs are listed so that they could be sold as a mixed set if desired.

designs that swiftly followed, some by Baker and some by Cuzner. All of these designs were recorded in the store's Silver Sketch Book in pen outline and assigned a design number. Although a few pages are missing or have sections cut out, most record the designs and sometimes the purposes for the spoons as well; some flatware patterns were designed to be part of a Christening set or to accompany a jam pot or (a knife for a) cake plate.

Knox's handiwork is often recognisable due to the Celtic interlace and other related features that were cleverly blended into his style but the spoons are more difficult. Apart from the fruit spoon named Lydian (and which continued to be popular into the 1920s), none of the others have a 'Knoxy' feel to them. Going deeper into Celtic style however reveals more of the man's psyche and which has been much researched and written by Messrs Tilbrook (1976) and Martin (2001). Looking at Knox's jewellery for Liberty also reveals the patterns for the 1899 teaspoons with their triangular leaves amid polychrome enamelling.

Liberty's new silverware was a great success, judging by the amount of sets sold (for £2 15 shillings a set) and the amount of spoons that are currently in Trade circulation or in museums and private collections. By 1900, the work of the Haseler designers (Baker and Cuzner) was introduced via a more elaborate catalogue for the Trade (and with some coloured illustrations) for 1900-01 when Liberty launched his second tier of teaspoons. By 1902-3, these mixed in with Knox's work in the form of 'Sample Sets' of six teaspoons with different terminals, mostly enamelled although a few were not designed for this enrichment. Baker's style is bold and some find it occasionally ugly ("Too many studs and lumpy bits!") whereas Cuzner, who was a renowned silversmith in his own right, was slightly more reserved, combining his technical knowledge with less radical but appealing period style and probably overseeing the manufacture.



Fig.7 Liberty Sample Set of six Cymric teaspoons assayed between 1902 and 1905. The designs are attributed (L-R): Knox/Cuzner, Baker, Cuzner, Knox/Baker, Cuzner, Knox ("Medea" pattern). Boxed sample sets were offered at 55/- at this time.



Fig. 8—11. Four out of the six first tier of teaspoon design terminals, all attributed to Knox, mainly via his jewellery designs and named (L-R): Medea, Sarepta, Egbert and Sabra.





Fig. 12. Two examples of the CYMRIC mark on teaspoon stems. Note that the upper incuse mark appeared with the older Liberty quatrefoil mark (registered at London Goldsmiths' Hall in April 1899) whereas the cameo mark in the rectangle was used with the more familiar triple lozenge sponsor mark for Liberty that was supposedly used from 1902 onwards (the date letter for both of these spoons). The triple lozenge mark was actually registered by Haseler's at Birmingham Assay Office in 1899 and has appeared on a few spoons from this year – note how it has been rather elongated as opposed to the normal set below.



Fig.13. 1899 set of Liberty hallmarks carefully applied to the bowl so as not to show through to the other side. Note the lozenge set of marks, which were registered by Haseler's at the Birmingham Assay Office in 1899 but which have not been stretched by any sort of re-shaping after marking.

The silver items, now manufactured by Haseler's alone, were marked with a new brand name among the hallmarks – CYMRIC in a rectangle. The name was, apparently chosen by Liberty to gratify the excellent work of John Llewellyn, his chief buyer / design chooser, and who had put so much work into the venture. For pewter wares (launched in 1902) the name TUDRIC was devised.

For spoons and other flatware, the random application of the Cymric (pronounced Koom-ric) mark has given rise to much confusion. It was used on the first and early editions, sporadically phasing out between c. 1905 and 1910, although the brand name and link to Haseler's continued until 1927 when the Cymric Limited Company was wound up. The Cymric mark on teaspoons was difficult to apply to stems and a few examples show the L&Co mark to have been rather stretched in the manner of bottom-marked early 18<sup>th</sup> century spoons, suggesting extra work to eliminate the stem distortion from marking. Some teaspoons were bowl-marked but carefully so that the marks didn't show from the other side! This is most likely why some of the earlier teaspoons were marked instead with the design register numbers instead. Both these and the Cymric marks would have been applied by Haseler's prior to assay.

The range of Liberty spoons seemed to hit a period of stalemate between 1905 and 1910 with no new designs being executed or produced. In 1910, the Liberty catalogue illustrated a 'new' range of different-purpose spoons based on many of the more popular and easier-to-produce patterns from 1899 to 1905. Baker's Interlace (Fig. 14) was re-listed as a Pattie Spoon, although in form it had not changed at all! Some of Knox's teaspoon designs were still listed although several had also been modified into oyster forks, ice cream

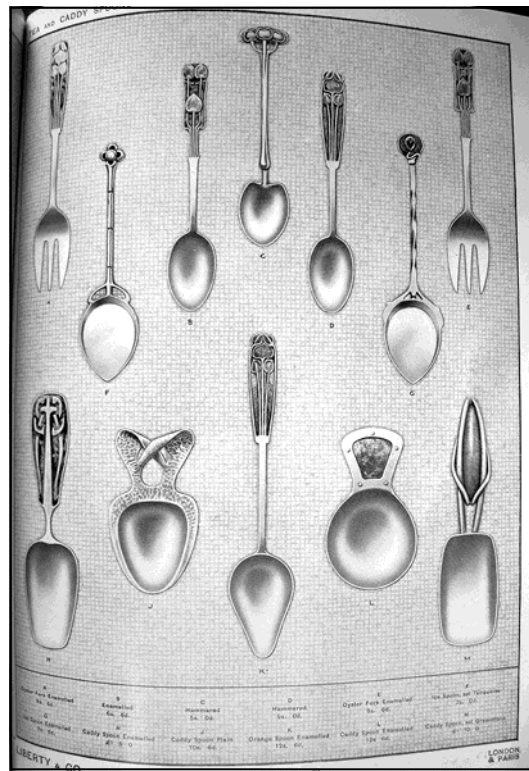
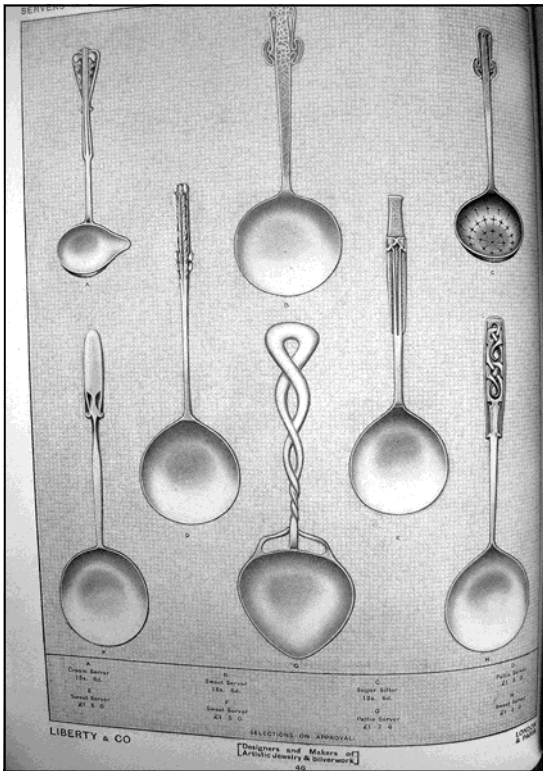


Fig.14/15 Two pages from the 1910 catalogue, showing many of the older Cymric design spoons re-hashed as oyster forks, ice cream and an orange spoon (right page, lower centre).



Fig.16 Set of Liberty Deco coffee spoons, 1941. Made and marked by Haseler's, some continued to be sold in Liberty boxes after Cymric Ltd had been wound up in 1927. Whether this pattern was designed by Cuzner or not is debatable.

spoons with a flat bowl and even an orange/grapefruit spoon. This was typical of Liberty's entrepreneurialism to modify well-designed lines that were probably flagging, to suit current trends.

During the Art Deco era Bernard Cuzner was almost the sole designer. It is said that Bernard Instone, another of the Birmingham School of Art 'fraternity' who had set up manufacturing jewellery and small silverware, ably assisted him. This fact is presently based on stylistic supposition as Instone preferred to be totally independent. Cuzner certainly designed some very fine Deco coffee spoons with enamelled terminals in the traditional blue and green colours. Because coffee was more fashionable at this time, teaspoons were produced

in smaller numbers so a reduction in size became the norm in line with the demitasse cups. Many of these spoon terminals reflect the Deco style.

For many, this was a very confusing period and much scholarly research has been done by the likes of Shirley Bury, whose foresight led her to interview some of those involved such as Frank Haseler before he died. She published many leading articles during the 1960s and 70s when wider interest, in this type of silverware, was only just starting.

***This article is intended as a leader for a book about British Arts & Crafts flatware from c. 1870 to 1940 and so encompassing the 'fuller' period of the Arts & Crafts movement. For further updates, watch this space!***

***If anyone has any useful comments about this article, please feel free to make them.***

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