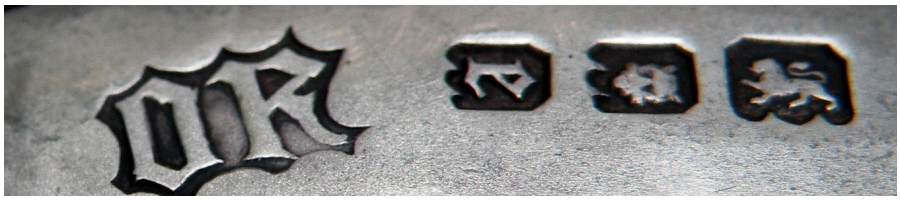
Some flatware from the St Dunstan's Studios of Omar Ramsden and Alwyn Carr

By Simon Moore



Much has been written praising the joint work of Omar Ramsden and Alwyn Carr. There has also been rumour based on an article doubting the skill of Ramsden as a silversmith (since refuted) and that Carr was the more skilful, seeing Ramsden more as the entrepreneur (which he was) and as a rather 'colourful' even maverick individual in the world of silversmithing.

When I started to collect spoons from the earlier 20th century my budget couldn't quite run to a Ramsden spoon but they were often discussed in The Trade as being rather scarce since Ramsden with or without Carr, tended only to make them when he had the time! Another misconception, as he and Carr made a great many and with much other stylish flatware besides - the bread and butter of their business. To have come from the Ramsden and Carr studio in Chelsea meant that weight of metal alone (sometimes interpreted as quality) was enough to bring instant acclaim. So much misinformation abounded and when, at last, I could actually afford my first Ramsden (alone) spoon at £55 (Fig. 1), I could start to appreciate the amazing and somewhat daring design that has been the hallmark of both Ramsden & Carr's output.

Alwyn Carr appears to have maintained more of a back seat in this partnership, likely due to the personalities of the two men as we perceive them. However, I don't wish to expound too much about their biography or upon their other remarkable work as there is more than enough literature on them already (Ashton 2018, Cannon-Brookes 1973, Moore, 2017 & 2018, Edinburgh Silver website).

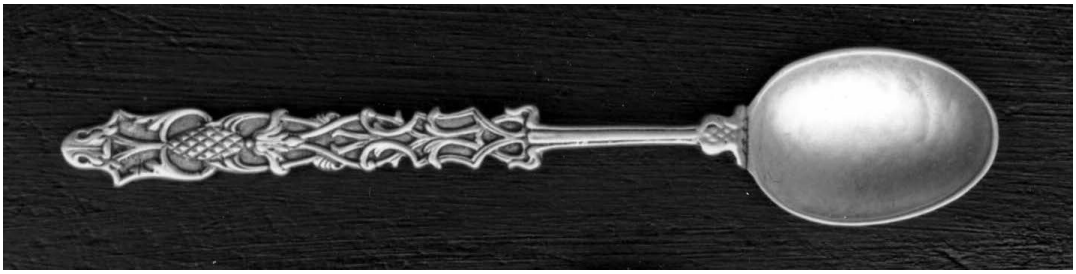


Fig. 1 Long tea-sized spoon by Ramsden, 1932

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One of the earlier designs from the partnership is the twisted trefoil spoon (Figs. 2-3). This has a hand-wrought look about it with a triple wire stem, twisted to form the handle and the ends of the wires hammered out to form the finial. This was initially made as a copper alloy maquette.

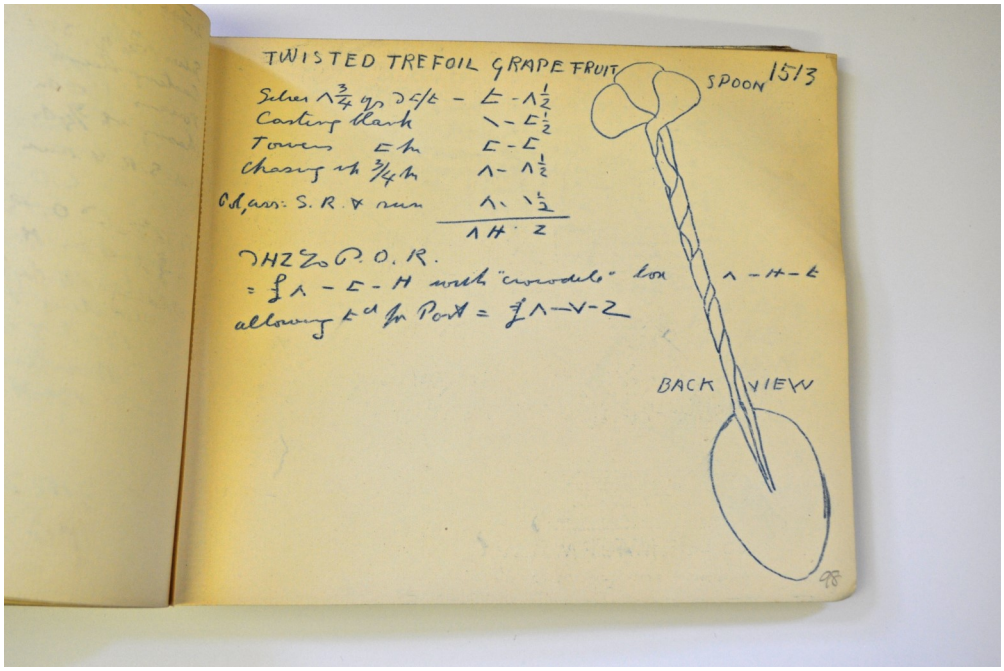


Fig. 2 Day book entry for the Twisted Trefoil design, it was one of their earlier flatware designs c. 1902-1904, each spoon costing 14 shillings to make and retailing at £1 3s 4d. [Image courtesy of Goldsmiths' Company, London]

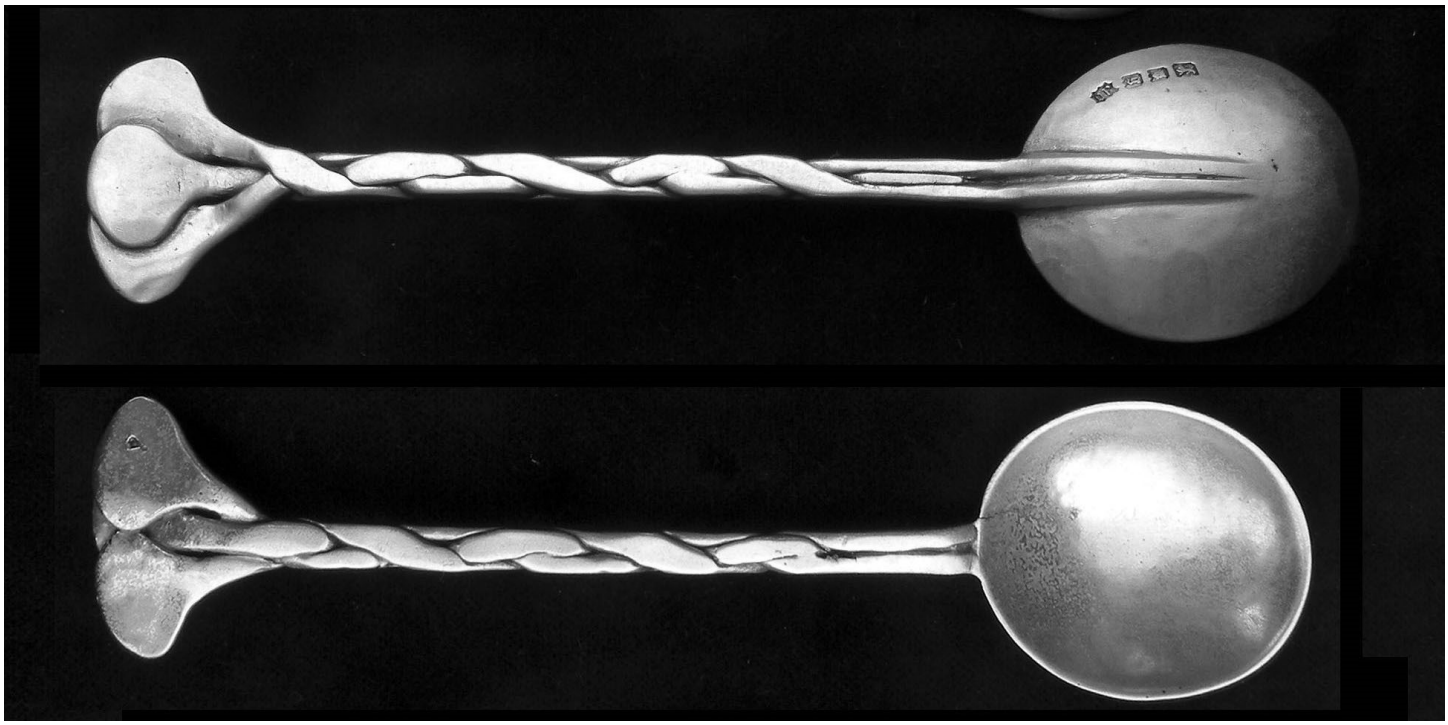


Fig. 3 A later round-bowled version of the Twisted Trefoil design 1922. Much of Ramsden's output involved casting but this spoon appears to be hand-wrought although the day book entry quotes a costing of 2s 3.5d for casting each blank. Maybe the earlier examples were hand-made but the ever-cost-conscious Ramsden would have had moulds made for them if the design was successful.

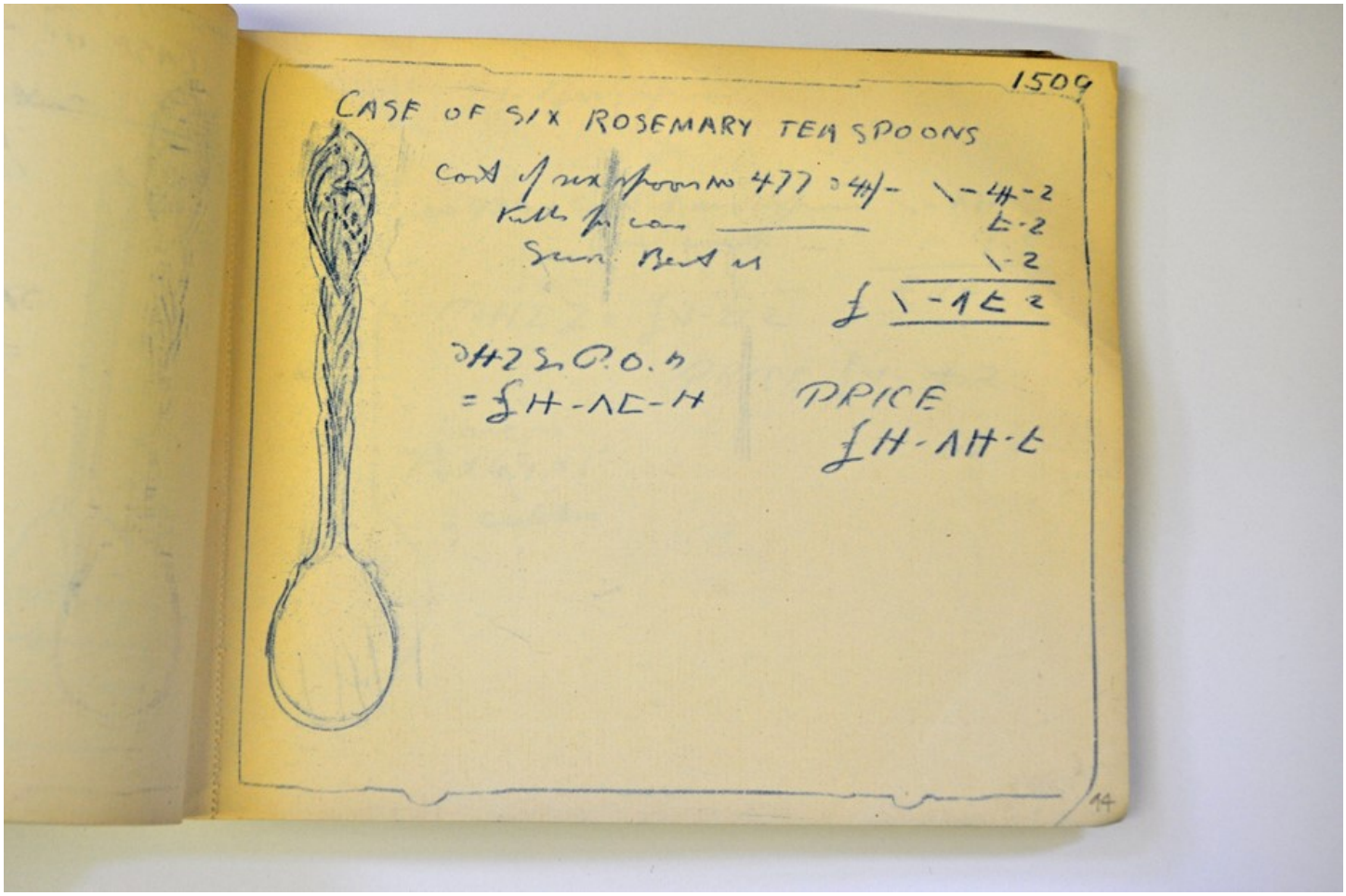
Fig. 4 Dessert / tea set of silver knives and forks based on the Agrell pattern (knife blades) and an unknown pattern (fork blades), the handle design based on an early form of the Lingford pattern. A range of date letters, mainly from 1925 but with one fork (left) from the partnership days, 1908. The right-hand fork shows the reverse side.

A typical conundrum often appears with the assembling of sets of spoons either as dozens, half dozens and even as single spoons. I have viewed many sets of spoons that match perfectly in design and size but which are, what some would call, a harlequin set – different dates and some made by R&C but mostly by OR alone. So why the mix of dates so often? I used to think that Traders were just filling in gaps where items were damaged or missing but Trade gossip informed me that Ramsden could often dip into drawers of surplus stock to make up a set. An example of this is found in a lovely half-dozen set of dessert / tea knives and forks (Fig. 4) and with the usual mix of dates from 1922 and 1923 (mainly), one from 1925 and one fork from 1908 bearing the partnership sponsor mark.

A set of Rosemary design spoons in their box looking most impressive (Fig. 5) but turn them over and they are an assortment of dates from 1930 to 1935 but at least all by Ramsden alone as the partnership had been dissolved in 1919.

Fig. 5 Set of Rosemary pattern spoons, too large for tea and rather small for dessert, with an assortment of dates between 1930 and 1935.

People often ask what size is a spoon as in table, dessert, tea? For individual Arts & Crafts and later A&C-style spoons, this can be an irrelevant question. The Rosemary spoons do not have knife or fork counterparts and are slightly too large for tea or coffee but too small for dessert so this compartmentalisation can often obfuscate the purpose of art spoons. True that many of Ramsden's larger flatware sets had designated knife, fork and spoon sizes that adhered to these conventions but most of the individual spoons were just made as usable works of art. Many have scarcely been out of their manufacturer's boxes with only a few showing any wear and tear of daily usage. Although this conflicts with Ruskin's view that A&C objects were made to be used, it shows the reality of human nature!



Daybook entry for the Rosemary spoon as a case of six. Retail price: £4 14s 6d. [Image courtesy of Goldsmiths' Company, London]

The Studio's boxes were quite modest and (according to the Studio's Day Book records, held at Goldsmiths' Hall library) appear to be known as Crocodile boxes. These were made from plain and stained wood, lined with white satin with the Studio's logo printed in dark blue lettering under the lid and cost around 1 shilling to 15 shillings depending on their size and complexity. Hinged clasps of electro-plate completed each box.

For more modest sets, teaspoons for example, a green cardboard box was provided stamped with the studio's flamboyant logo in gold but due to their vulnerability, few seem to have survived.

The Ramsden & Carr archive is owned by the Goldsmiths' Company in Foster Lane, East Central London; it includes a great source of information contained in the Day / Work Books. Only the carbon copies remain but reveal much in the day-to-day running of the studio and the coded costings for the work that they produced. Ramsden & Carr's designs were often tested by making bronze maquettes first, especially the earlier pieces that appear to have been hand-raised. The designs were drawn and the names of the designs chosen. The cost of the metal used, the processes involved to turn the silver into the finished object, presentation boxes and the profit to the studio, all were carefully written out by Ramsden using a personal code. This code has since been deciphered by one of the cryptographers who used to work at wartime Bletchley Park, giving us an insight into how much the pieces cost to make and how much profit was being added to the retail price. Many of these entries have been photographed and appear, with permission in Moore, 2017 (updated in 2018). At times the works studio manager A.E. Ulyett, from Ramsden & Carr's Sheffield days, may have added further annotations but whether he was privy to Ramsden's code is unknown.

Ramsden appears to have taken the role of the lead partner, running the business, even though he and Carr were on an equal footing and sharing the designing work. St Dunstan's in Seymour place was their house and showroom and they worked and lived together harmoniously, reflected in quality of their work.

The studio's success was self-evident, hiring promising and recently graduated students from the Central School in Holborn. The thrifty Ramsden was able to keep costs reduced and using a highly-skilled workforce; doubtless the cachet of having worked at the Maxwell Road workshop near to St Dunstan's, would have enabled any of the workforce an easy entrée if they wished to set up independently or move on to another firm. The flatware, as well as the individual spoons produced both during and after the partnership period, are testament to skilled workmanship and original designing.

Simon Moore has written extensively about flatware and cutlery. His most famous book is ***Cutlery for the Table, A History of British Table and Pocket Cutlery,*** The Hallamshire Press, 1999