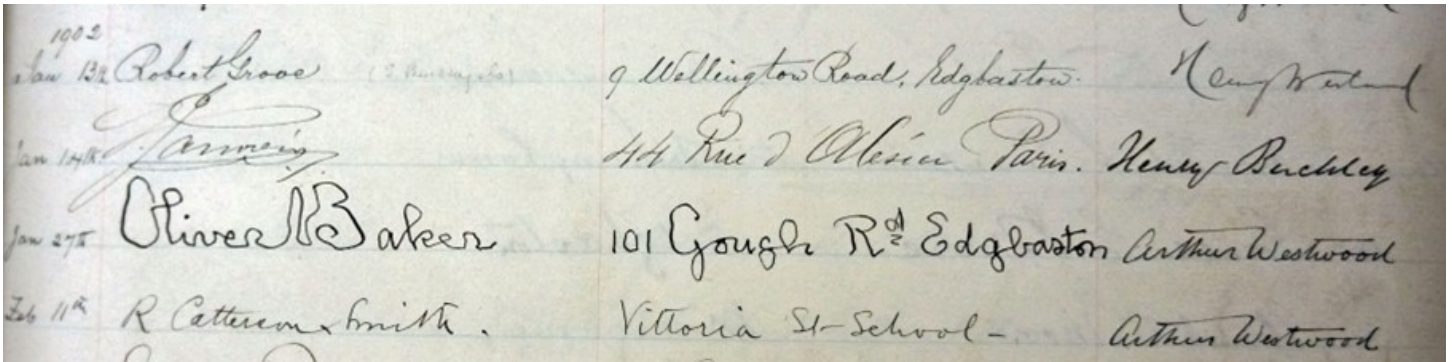


# The amazing array of flatware designs by Oliver Baker.

## Part 1. Baker's larger and earlier spoons

By Simon Moore



Baker's signing into the Birmingham Assay Office in January 1902 in a rather shaky hand. Just below is Robert Catterson-Smith, the first headmaster of the renowned Vittoria Street School - an occasional maker and designer of spoons. Arthur Westwood was the Assay Master at the time. [Courtesy of the Assay Office at Birmingham]

Mention the name of Oliver Baker in the context of a Liberty metalwork designer and many will ask "Who was he?" Most will be familiar with the name of Archibald Knox and his amazing designing skills blending the upcoming trend in Art Nouveau with his Celtic roots from the Isle of Man.

Another lesser-known designer for Liberty's was Bernard Cuzner who worked as a part-time silversmith at Liberty's manufactory, W.H. Haseler (pronounced Hayzler) for a year or two and would likely have helped Baker with the practical side of design work; the two men likely exchanging ideas. Cuzner noted that the Baker style was more at the aesthetic heart of this venture than Knox's yet the latter became a better seller for Liberty's, probably why Baker left the venture earlier c. 1902-3 (ref. Bernbaum 2010). Knox left the free-lancing design team c. 1906 although his more saleable designs continued to be used and modified for some years afterwards.



Fig. 1

Fig. 1. Sketch for a spoon from Baker's sketchbook, c. 1898 but which appears not to have come to production!

Baker was an amateur water colorist and antiquarian who lived in Gough Road, Edgbaston. He also ran an antiques business in Stratford-upon-Avon, visiting national museums, presumably to augment his knowledge. His sketchbook (Figs 1-2) reflects the designs of many classical pieces, including the odd spoon. Although there are sketches of his hollow-ware designs, there is only one that reflect this bolder and significant spoon design work from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century .

Fig. 2. This design for a hinge in Baker's sketchbook also gives a clue as to his designing the junction of a spoon handle to the bowl. This feature recurs on the reverse side of many Baker and Baker-attributed spoons.

Fig. 2



Fig. 3. A possible use of the fork-like hinge design on a Baker-designed spoon of 1901 (ref. fig. 2).

Fig. 3

Haseler's in central Birmingham, proved to be the main contender to form the celebrated business alliance, known as Cymric Ltd, for making silverware for Liberty's as the latter rapidly became the main emporium for the Arts & Crafts movement. The family firm's director, at this time, was William Rabone Haseler, eldest son of the founder William Hair Haseler and was a great admirer of the A&C movement. Baker was a personal and family friend and WRH had discovered Baker's abilities to design in a bold and modern style (The Artist, 1899) approaching Baker to design something more exciting and to elevate the firm's new wares from the universal mundanity of the time. Indeed, Baker's diary of 1898 shows many entries for visits to Haseler's and the family residence with remarks about the positive reception of his work.

*Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1898. In afternoon about 4 to town. Went to gravers. Grundy said the graver's partners did not think Fathers (?) would go in London, so to Haseler's warehouse, & talked over the proposal for making designs for plate. Had room (?) tea with them. Saw the works and then went with Will on tram to Alinde (Haseler family residence in Handsworth). Saw W and Mrs Haseler (Elizabeth nee Rabone) & Kitty (Kathleen b. 1857), also their presents made by the men after designs by Maggie (Margaret b. 1854). Had some milk and walked on to W. R's house. Had supper and home by 10 tram.*

*Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1898. Went to Haseler's at 4.30, & took detailed sketches & three new ideas for vessels. They liked them all.*





Fig. 4. A half-dozen set of teaspoons with small cruciform finials centred with turquoise beads and with bowl-stem buttresses that may be attributed to Baker's style. These would have been one of Haseler's first products for Liberty as they were assayed in 1899 before the CYMRIC punches were made to mark their silver products. These spoons were also made in some haste as the two finials on the right, have been attached back to front!

Birmingham, with its jewelry quarter and schools, was a melting pot for designers and manufacturers in 1898. Many renowned names including Arthur Gaskin and Albert E Jones were finding their feet in the designing and working of precious materials. So, it was fortuitous that WR Haseler knew Baker and his modern design style at this time, to form an alliance that must have impressed Liberty's executive team, maybe helping to cement the contract of Cymric Ltd. This was Arthur Liberty's new venture to find daring new styles from British designers and followed on from his silver import period (from Japan and India mainly) when he registered the firm's Ly & Co., sponsor mark at London Goldsmiths' Hall in February 1894.

Haseler's were also looking to escape the rather ordinary jewelry styles that would have abounded in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter in the 1890s and strike out with something more daring and modern. At the same time, Knox was also producing designs for Liberty's that they must have deemed 'safer' - more saleable. The launch of Cymric Ltd took place as an exhibition at the store, presumably when the first Cymric catalogue was printed in May 1899. However, the first tranche of spoons, produced in London and described in this catalogue, were Knox's work (Moore, 2015), although they seem not to have been mentioned in the art publications (such as *The Studio Magazine*) at that time. There is one new style spoon assayed the same year in Birmingham and that may have originated from Baker's hand (Fig. 4); the spoon was not even mentioned in either the May or November 1899 catalogues (the latter illustrated, with some spoons printed in silver ink). The suggestion of a rush to get the venture launched is itself significant. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft had been producing modern-looking and hand-crafted pieces since 1889 and the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft since the mid-1890s, plus the Arts & Crafts Society were planning to hold an exhibition of such work in the Autumn (Bernbaum 2010). Rather

ironically, none of Knox's work was mentioned in the A&C exhibition, although that of Baker, Bernard Cuzner (who worked for Haseler's) and A H Jones was mentioned. Liberty was keen to get the venture launched quickly, even by cutting a few corners! Cuzner largely took over much of the silver designing of new silverware after Baker and Knox. There were also many others who contributed to the Liberty range of Cymric silverware and, unless their designs or sketches are found in an archive, then one can only extrapolate from the small number of clues from period art periodicals such as *The Studio Magazine* and the *Bulletin of the Decorative Arts Society* (1890-1940).

Certainly, Baker's designs were bold and complex – expensive therefore to produce. His first spoons, of definite attribution, were produced at Haseler's for Liberty's in 1900 (maybe 1899, the first year of production) and were shown in the *Studio Magazine* (*Studio Talk* in vol. 19, 1900, p. 127). Liberty's were always secretive about their designers, in case of poaching, only revealing their identities for special exhibitions, such as the launch of the Cymric venture, so that a detailed examination of the two spoons shown and their characteristic design form, are the only real clues about Oliver Baker's spoon designs! Even the ensuing paragraph lauding Baker's designing skills is brief and gives no real insight into his style.

Attributing much of Baker's work in other metalwork media has not been so difficult or tenuous and Shirley Bury (1977), who masterminded the 1975 centenary exhibition at London's V&A Museum, succinctly sums up his style as Renaissance braggadocio! The hinge design (Fig. 2) gives a clue as it appears on the reverses of many of his attributed spoons, vindicated by the reverse of the right-hand spoon in figures 3 & 5. The reverse of the 'interlace-handled' spoon to the left in figure 5 also shows a slightly complex attachment of the bowl to the

Fig. 5

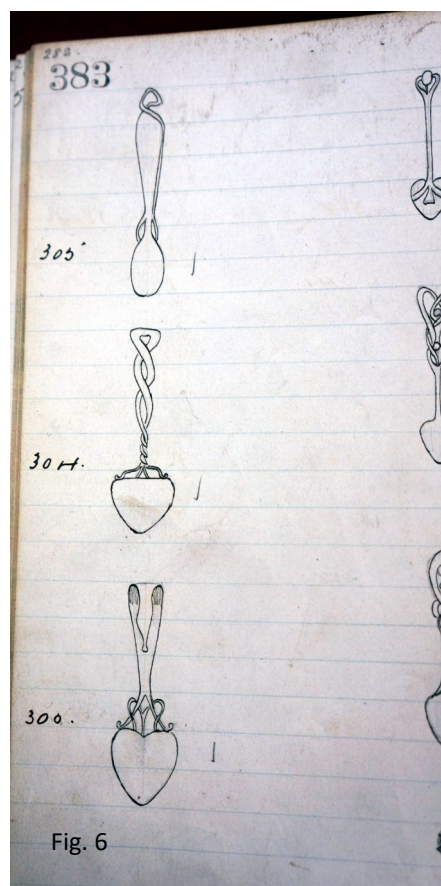


Fig. 6

Fig. 5. The two spoons designed by Baker and as shown in the 1900 *Studio Magazine*.

Fig. 6. Page from Liberty's *Silver Sketch Book* showing three of Baker's accepted table-spoon designs, just below these are his (attributed) caddy spoon designs of which, more in part 2.





Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Fig. 7. Reverse view of the 'woven' handle spoon, again extrapolating on the hinge design.

Fig. 8. Baker's Art Nouveau spoon of 1901 (and bearing the CYMRIC mark by this time), showing the elaborate bowl attachment.

handle (Fig. 7). These designs, known to be by Baker, open up further possibilities for a few less-firmly-attributed spoons from Liberty's store. His Art Nouveau spoon with its quirky finial (Fig. 8) is quite rare, perhaps reflecting Liberty's attitude to not dwelling overlong on passing fashions (excepting a few of Knox's best-selling spoon patterns).

Another spoon with a strange anthropomorphic bowl to handle junction (Fig. 9) may even be unique or have had a very short production run. Its quirky / eccentric design could only have been from Baker's hand!

The initial success of the Cymric venture led to a more 'glossy' catalogue production in 1900, sometimes referred to as the Trade catalogue. With larger pages and some in color, it showed a large range of Liberty spoons by both Knox and Baker. The cloisonné spoon (Fig. 10), was especially shown in color on pages 82-83, along with a desk seal and napkin ring that also reflect Baker's style.

Two other spectacular spoon designs were also purchased by Liberty's, one of great complexity that must have tested Haseler's craftworkers to their utmost. This was the spoon design 378.

Design no. 378 is a highly-complex spoon and many might wonder why the bowl junction was so complicated or was Baker showing off his design prowess to impress the board at Liberty's? It has been mentioned that Haseler's used machinery to produce much of their Cymric wares (against the hand-made ethos of the A&C movement) but the finished products show skill and pride in their workmanship. The enameling, especially, has been skillfully and sympathetically rendered on many of Liberty's Cymric (and some Tudric) wares and which makes them so desirable to present-day collectors. Kate Allen, who designed for Hutton's, also designed her own version of this complex bowl junction (Moore, 2017, p. 203), although who produced this type of design first is currently unknown.



Fig. 9 front



Fig. 9 back

Fig. 9. This spoon of 1901, may be unique as it has not been listed in the Silver Sketch Book or in Liberty's catalogues, to my knowledge. The anthropomorphic bowl junction and curlicues, echoed on the doubled-over handle, are highly suggestive of Baker's designing handiwork and has a more hand-wrought appearance.



Fig. 10

The Silver Sketch book drawing for spoon in Fig. 10

Fig. 10. Design no. 311, a spectacular spoon with asymmetric finial in gold wire cloisonné and enamel, 1903.

Fig. 11. From pages 387 and 384 (right) of the Silver Sketch Book are the two spoon designs 378 and 367.





Fig. 12. A trio of the spectacular and highly complex Baker-attributed table-spoons, design number 378. All the spoons have their design numbers stamped on their stems instead of the CYMRIC mark. All three were assayed in 1903.



Fig. 13. Two of the 367 design spoons, the one with full enamel and the other with just a single enamelled spot. Assayed in 1903 and 1902 respectively, the CYMRIC stamp has been used instead of the design number. The reverse side again shows a typical but slightly less complex 'Baker Junction'.



# The amazing array of flatware designs by Oliver Baker.

## Part 2. Smaller spoons attributed to Baker's designs

By Simon Moore

Although there has been some debate over the 'curious' caddy spoon design (Knox or Baker), I feel that this caddy spoon is attributable to Baker based on its complexity and quirkiness. The Hinge design (part 1, fig. 2) is present once again and the use of rivets is virtually unknown on any Knox piece nor is Knox known to have worked with the mixed metal medium. The maquette was produced, presumably at Haseler's in a mix of copper and silver, rivetted together - unmarked but another in silver and copper was at least, marked with the L&Co triple lozenge mark and the CYMRIC stamp. So, this may have been experimentally marketed as a cheaper version at the Store, maybe to fit in with the Arts & Crafts objectives by using mixed metals and being affordable to suit all pockets. The all-silver version was also produced at the same time and the example shown was assayed in 1899. For later versions, the rivets were only impressions and the whole would have involved much less labour / cost. The sales experiment, if that's what it was, showed that the all-silver version was preferred and the mixed metal versions are subsequently very scarce.

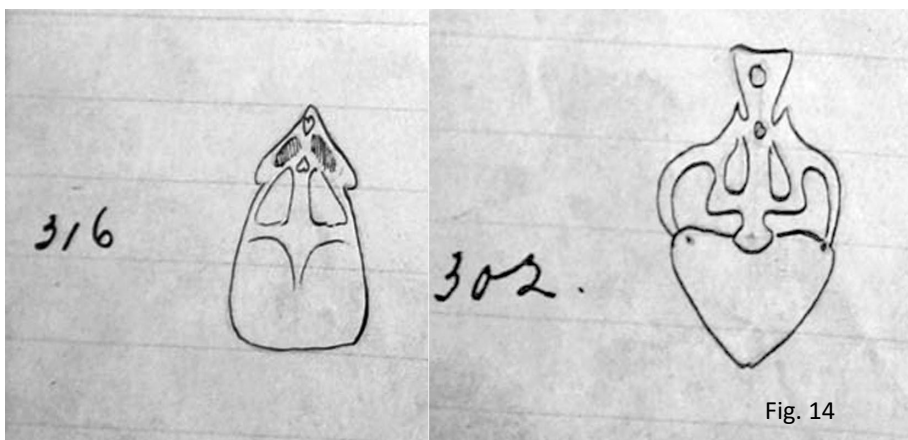


Fig. 14 Page 383 from the Silver Sketch Book, further down just below Baker's table spoon designs, are these two caddy spoon sketches (rearranged side by side).



Fig. 15 Another possibly unique piece, as this may be the unmarked maquette produced by Haseler's in 1899 for another bold and complex design by Baker.



Fig. 16



Fig. 16 A similar rivetted mixed piece but with the handle metals reversed. Although marked with Liberty L&Co sponsor mark and the CYMRIC stamp, the mixed metals would not be permitted to be hall-marked. (Image Courtesy of Steppes Hill Farm Antiques).



Fig. 17

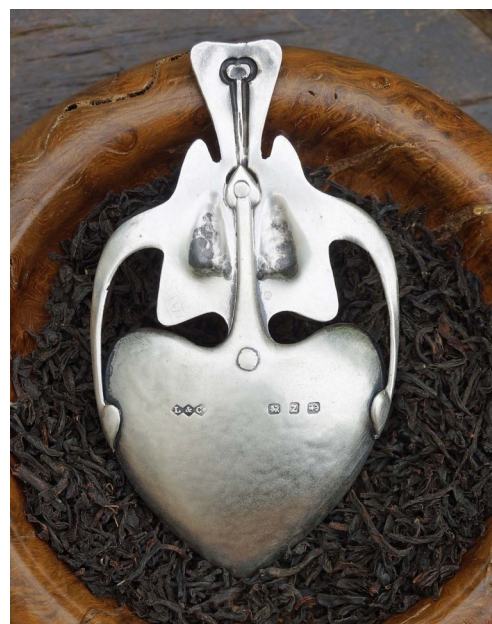


Fig. 17 Finally, the silver caddy spoon of 1899 with a Birmingham assay, suggesting an early Haseler manufacture, design number 302.



Fig. 18

Fig. 18 Later and weightier version of the same spoon, 1911 and lacking the rivets. (Image Courtesy of Old Corkscrew Antiques).



## Baker's teaspoons

Although none have been listed as definitely from Baker's design hand, there are also a few items that crop up in Liberty's large array of artistic teaspoons that fit with his design ethic (Figs 19-20). There are, however, two designs that could be equally be by Knox or Baker (Figs 21-23). Neither design has been traced to any particular source as yet and so attribution has been made loosely-based on the design mindset of each man! Knox tended to prefer symmetry to his design whereas Baker often preferred the opposite.



Fig. 19

Fig. 19 Trio of teaspoons from the Liberty harlequin set, bearing either the L&Co store mark or that of Haseler's W.H.H. c.1902-1906. The central spoon may be by Bernhard Cuzner but the two on either side have been attributed to Baker. The spoon to the right bears enough similarity to be included in this group as well.

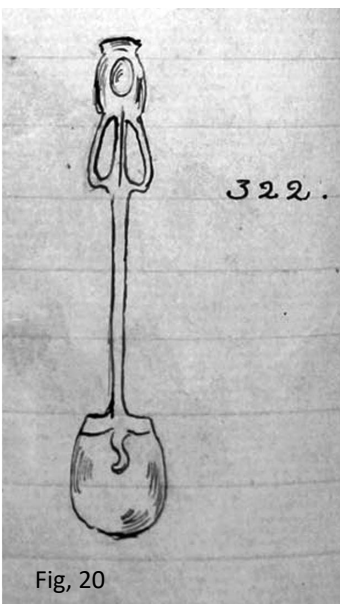


Fig. 20

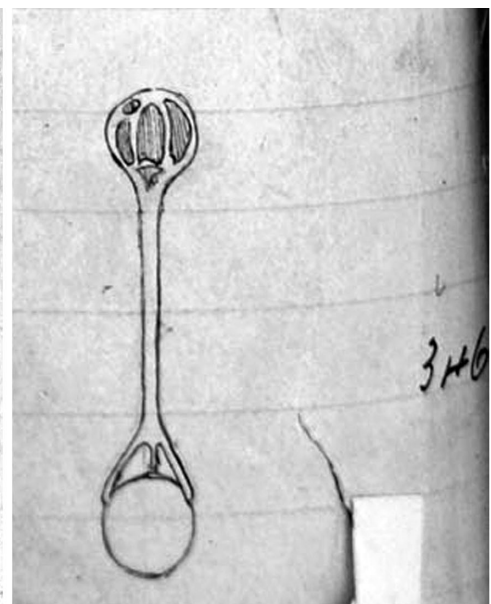
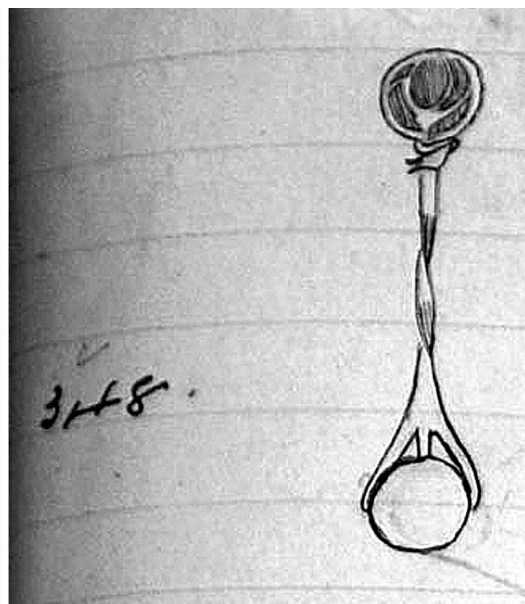


Fig. 20 The three Baker-attributed teaspoons as they appear in the Silver Sketch Book, along with their design numbers.





Fig. 21

Fig. 21 Teaspoon with interlace (*entrelac*) finial and enameled, hallmarked for Liberty's 1902. The bowl buttresses and slight asymmetry of the finial might be Baker's design but this finial was also based upon a brooch that many say is attributed (but not confirmed) to being by Know.

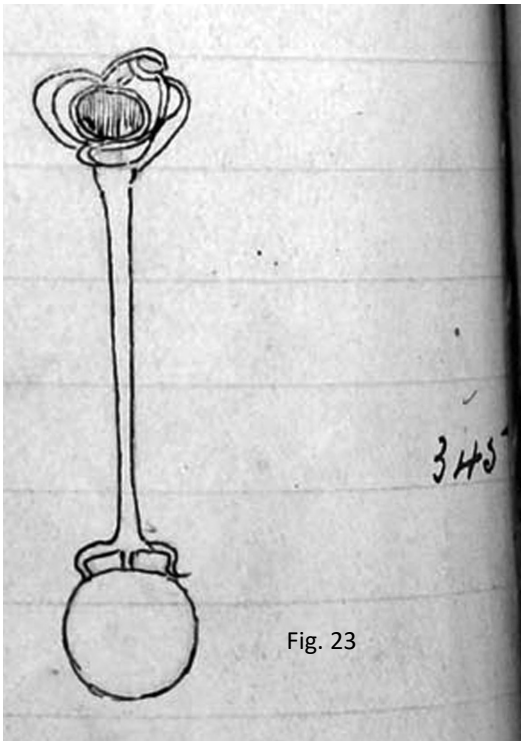


Fig. 23

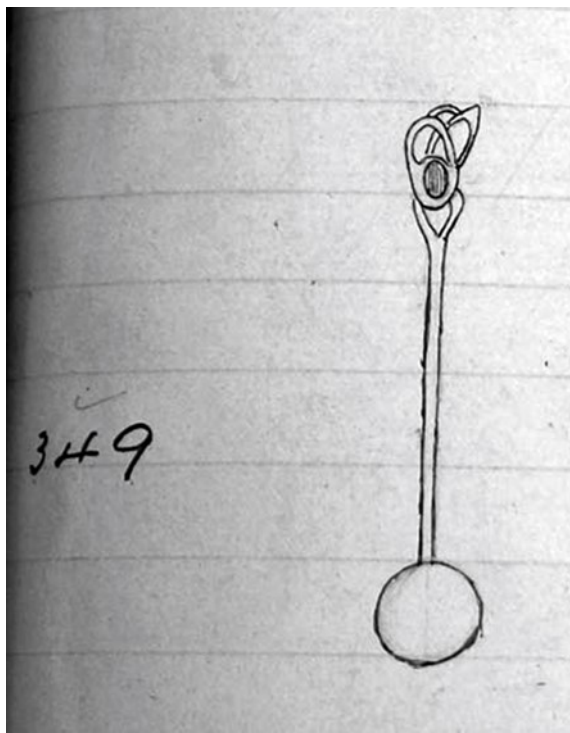


Fig. 23 The teaspoons with the near symmetrical and asymmetrical interlac finials, as they appear, with their design numbers in the Liberty Silver Sketch Book.





Fig. 24

Fig. 24 An amazing set of teaspoons in three variant patterns based on Baker's heart-bowl spoon design (Fig. 3). The tongs and spoons on the right are more Art Nouveau in style and slightly breaking away from Baker's original. Made by Heath & Middleton, 1901. [The Dognose finial design, Rd 371432, used by J&J Maxfield, 1904]

Messrs Levi & Salaman (of good-quality souvenir spoon fame), also used this design to produce a more Art Nouveau knife, fork and spoon with a new styled finial modified twinned falcate-shaped leaves.



Fig. 25 The knife and fork made by Levi & Salaman. The fork was assayed in 1900 and the knife in 1902, suggesting a production line of a few years.

Fig. 25

Other makers were quick to produce a variety of (mainly) spoons based on the elaborate heart-shaped bowl spoon with the interwoven junction (Fig. 2, part 1). Messrs Heath & Middleton who succeeded Hukin & Heath, were a Birmingham-based firm of some standing and innovation in design, embracing the Arts & Crafts and Art Nouveau movements (Bernbaum, Pers. Comm.). Hukin & Heath had employed Christopher Dresser to produce radical designs for metalwork in the 1870s and 80s. Heath & Middleton produced an extraordinary set of teaspoons and tongs and daringly included some Art Nouveau modifications. Baker may



well have sold his designs to them and to Messrs Levi & Salaman (below). Art Nouveau was not always loved in Birmingham by art and aesthetic cognoscenti and many producers defined it as The Squirm! Oliver Baker's design mindset was at the centre of Arts & Crafts, often combining new concepts with medieval as did many of his associates at that time. Like many of the Liberty designers, his work has often been overlooked. Although most of the spoons shown here are attributions, I hope that they will be even better appreciated.

Fig. 26 Small pewter spoon with a Stanhope peep in the finial containing a brief poem by Dennis Devlin entitled *Tomorrow*.

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