

Collectable spoons by Winifred King & Mildred Murphy of Coventry.

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With a workforce comprising about eight women and girls, the firm of King & Murphy is known to some but not so many collectors. These days they have quite a following in spoon collector circles with sets of half dozens of their artier spoons fetching near four figures. They belong to the genre of craftswomen, inspired by Arts & Crafts, that existed in the post WW1 years. The Company was based in the lovely old town part of Coventry in Old Palace Yard - alas, no more as it was bombed during the Luftwaffe raid on Coventry in November 1940 after which King & Co. ceased trading.

The principal, Winifred King was born in 1891 as was her business partner, Mildred Murphy and their business was rooted in lifelong friendship. Despite extensive research, it is

Photograph taken by Beryl Burrows outside the premises in Old Palace Yard, maybe as a memento of completing her apprenticeship in August 1933 as Mildred Murphy is described as Mrs Attenborough; she married in Jun 1930.

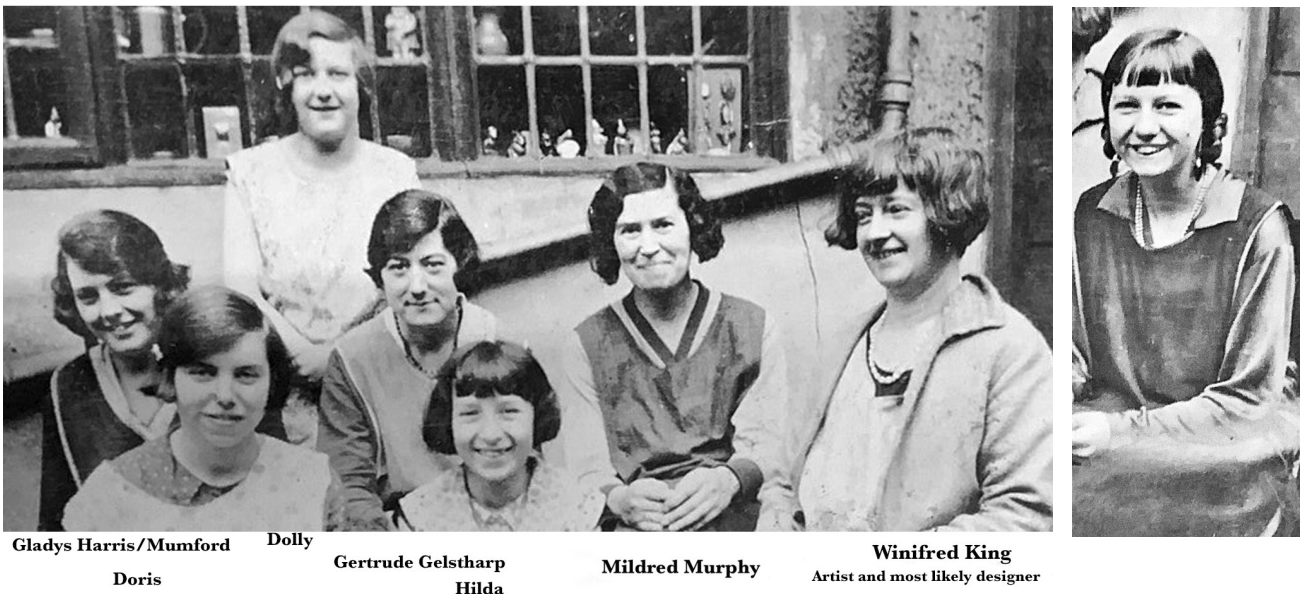


Fig. 1. The workforce of Winifred King & Co. in 1933 minus Beryl Burrows who was holding the camera (inset below) This may have been on the occasion of Burrows completing her apprenticeship. Interesting that she and Gladys are wearing similar smocks (Courtesy of Culture Coventry Trust/Coventry Archives).



Fig. 2. The sponsor mark of WK&Co, registered in 1923.

not always apparent who undertook what activities within the business. Although some newspaper reports do differentiate between tasks, individual responsibility for tasks is not consistent. Whilst King undertook formal training at two Art Schools, to date no record has been found of Murphy pursuing any art

qualification or training.

The two would have met at Wheatley Street school in Coventry, being in the same class but both moving to the newly-opened Barr's Hill school in 1908. Due to their financially comfortable backgrounds, both remained there after the age of 14 where their formidable headmistress, Grace Howell set the highest academic standards that would have imbued them with a fiercely independent outlook.

On finishing school, Mildred enrolled at Birmingham University graduating with a General Arts degree in 1913. Winifred took a more specialized route and began her studies at Coventry School of Art, gaining an Art Teachers Certificate and winning a Bronze Medal in a national competition for Studies in Lettering. A Spencer Arts Trust scholarship of £60 a year for 3 years, enabled her to continue her studies at Birmingham Municipal School of Art and their records show she completed government awards in silversmith and enamel work alongside industrial design.

In an interview in the late 1930s Winifred stated she had worked as an artist since 1915 and there is evidence that she was involved in The Old Palace Club based in Old Palace Yard around that time. However, the first mention of King & Murphy's partnership appears in 1920 in a Coventry Herald report about the Coventry & Warwickshire Society of Artists annual exhibition to which they submitted rings, brooches, bracelets and "an exquisite piece of enamel work, being a copy of a Limoges 'The Madonna'". The enamel work rarely extended to spoon-making, perhaps as the area for such work was rather too small.

The business was already well established as the following year they exhibited at The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists autumn exhibition. The catalogue stated 'They displayed a Silver Triptych and an Opal, Garnet & Pearl Necklace.' Credited alongside them with work on the necklace, was Gertrude Gelstharp, their 17-year-old apprentice. Gertrude also had an Opal, Garnet & Pearl bracelet exhibited in her own name.

The business started trading in 1920, utilising an upstairs studio for the workforce and a downstairs shop in Old Palace Yard, Coventry (Fig. 3). A prime site given that Earl Street (one of the main thoroughfares) was only yards away from their premises.

This appears to be the earliest date for their work, although their joint sponsor mark wasn't registered at the Birmingham Assay Office until the 16th of August, 1923 (3 punches) and again on the 24th of October 1932. This suggests that they only made jewelry before 1923 as the small quantity of metals used in such mixed media pieces would have been exempt from hallmarking. King's wares had been exhibited

Fig. 3, showing a view through the gateway of Old Palace Yard and the premises of Old Palace Chambers for King & Co on the right (note the windows and diagonal pipe as in Fig. 1).

at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists Exhibitions in 1921 and thereafter each year and included enamel work.

Winifred King was also an executive (and selection) committee member of the Coventry and Warwickshire Society of Artists, presided over by no less than Dame Laura Knight (Fig. 4). Mildred Murphy was also a member but likely used her married name at that time.



Fig. 4. Shows the arrival of Dame Laura Knight at the 21st celebratory banquet at the Corn Exchange on Friday the 5th of May, 1933. Alas, Winifred King is just out of camera but note how the guests are seated surrounded by the exhibition paintings. [Courtesy of Culture Coventry Trust/Coventry Archives]

Although Mildred married (Attenborough in June 1930), the business appears to have been theirs alone with a workforce comprising local girls, from middle class backgrounds, wishing to try their hand at jewelry making and maybe silversmithing. How the roles of each worker were applied can only be

guessed at but most of the younger workers would likely have started on the simpler tasks of jewelry making, including basic precious metalsmithing, soldering and stone setting. As with some apprenticeships, not all would have continued with this type of work during their adult lives. However, the output of small silver, especially spoons has largely been remarkable in its fine quality and following the ethos of the Arts & Crafts Movement from the 1890s. Whether they sub-contracted some of this work to larger companies with time-saving machinery is doubtful as their wares invariably have a handwrought appearance.

One of the job perks was that each apprentice or employee was presented with a silver ring on her 21st birthday and Mrs. D Ball, who was a sales assistant in their shop, had her sapphire and diamond engagement ring made by her bosses. When she left their employment after 11 years, she was presented with a case of silver teaspoons set with semi-precious stones and with panels of enamel. This is the only mention of enamel work on spoons thus far.

There were opportunities for their apprentices to show pieces at King & Co's. annual exhibition in late November/early December and in 1926 Gertrude Gelstharp and Gladys Harris are mentioned in a write up of the exhibition as displaying jewelry & silverwork.

The spoons of Winifred King & Co.



Although the workers at WK & Co were largely jewelry workers, a few would have taken their silversmithing skills a bit further as a part of their training. Ms King and Mrs Murphy, as the business owners, seem to have performed all or most of this work but likely helped out by the workforce; some of the spoons they made show a great attention to detail. At the more basic end were those made with cast or stamped out finials such as the squirrel finialled teaspoons (Fig. 5) or the more apposite finial of Lady Godiva yet even these were well-finished with saw and file.

Fig. 5. Two small spoons with cast finials of a squirrel, 1930 and of the famed Lady Godiva (1934) riding naked to free the town of a despoised tax levied by her husband Leofric c. 1030. The image for the finial may have been that from the famous picture by John Collier of 1897.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

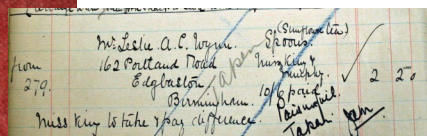


Fig. 8

Fig. 6. Half-dozen set of teaspoons (1937) with cross-legged pixie finials; in their original box. This would have been made when Murphy had left the partnership.

Figs 7-8. Sifter and teaspoon with the popular sunflower design, 1928, and a receipt from the CWSA exhibition sales book (1927) showing the sale of 6 sunflower teaspoons to Mr Leslie Wynn of Edgbaston for 2 guineas. [Courtesy of Culture Coventry Trust/Coventry Archives.]

Who was responsible for the mold-making for these and other figural spoons is presently unknown but the bowls were made separately and hand-soldered to the handles. These and other similar spoons, such as the famed Lady Godiva all show hand-hammering marks to the bowls and it's possible that these bowls were hand-raised by the apprentices as part of their training. They also produced a set of cross-legged pixies as finials (Fig. 6) and the sunflowers for which they were, apparently quite well known: a set of these has been noted from one of the sales records of the CWSA annual exhibition, 1927 (Figs 7-8).

Zodiacal symbols also figured heavily amongst their spoon and jewelry designs and although the spoons often turn up as singles, a full set of 12 is not uncommon (Fig. 9). Once again, these spoons have a hand-wrought appearance - a slight asymmetry in the bowl, and the handles have been made from twinned lengths of co-soldered silver wire.

The jewelry craft often mixed with their spoon-making and another spoon finial has been mounted with an opal cabochon, likely a doublet (slice) set



Fig. 9

Fig. 9. Cased dozen set of small spoons, 1930, each with a zodiacal symbol finial. The handles made from hardened silver wires soldered together.

Fig. 10. Single small spoon with an opal doublet finial as with many Australian souvenir spoons but this was hand-wrought; the finial enhanced with wire work and silver beads, 1925.

Fig. 11. Four teaspoons, perhaps designed as prizes for bridge players, set with black and red hardstone cabochons 1926.

Fig. 12. Finely-proportioned acorn knop spoon by King & Co but using their standard bowl shape, 1928.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

above a scrolling wire S and ornamented with small silver beads (Fig. 10).

Another set (of four) with playing card symbols, may have been reserved for fashionable bridge parties, the finials set with hardstones (Fig. 11). They also advertised in local paper that they made prizes for whist drives and bridge parties

Antique styled spoons were also occasionally produced that included a medieval acorn knop but using their standard small spoon bowl shape (Fig. 12) rather than the more usual fuculate bowl of period spoons.

The top of their craft, in spoon terms, is demonstrated by two half dozen sets and showing skill levels that rival the Artificers' Guild in London. The set with halo finials and differing hardstone cabochons (Fig. 13), would also have been handmade but shows very little diversification at all. Whether this was a team effort with one of the apprentices making the S-coils and haloes of silver wire can only be divined. The haloes with the symmetrical loops halfway down, would also have been applied at the same time: a lot of work and skill for a set of teaspoons!

Each set was offered for sale in boxes with the firm's name and address in the lid and the brown wispy art deco design on the exterior has been loosely attributed to Murphy's handiwork (Fig. 14).



Fig. 13 back and front

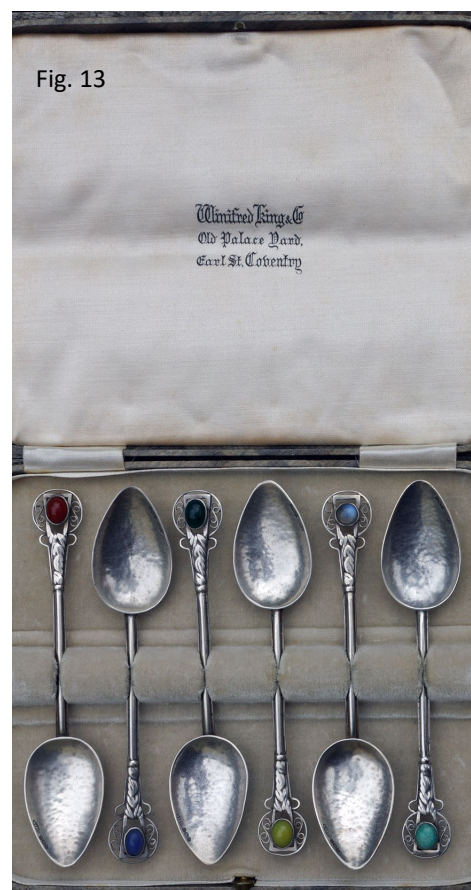


Fig. 13. Beautifully-designed and crafted set of teaspoons (1932) in an original box, the finials set with various hardstones and enhanced with applique wirework haloes.

Fig. 14. Exterior of King & Co box showing the wispy Art Deco design loosely-attributed to Mildred Murphy.



Fig. 15. A single zodiac teaspoon for Leo with lyre-shaped finials, assayed in 1924, which feels slightly too short, given the gauge of silver used for the handle.

to other outlets, especially in nearby Birmingham and vice-versa. They also sent out work on sale or return to shops on the coast (communication

from Mrs. D. Ball, their former shop assistant).

On rare occasions they produced some flatware that seems oddly proportioned. One of their zodiac teaspoons is shown (Fig. 15) that seems rather too short, given the weight of silver used. This is purely subjective.

By contrast, the attention to their craft is also echoed in another set that came to sale in 2021 (Fig. 16). The handles have been edged with fine silver wire that expands to form part of the individual finials, also enhanced with silver wire twist and with differing hardstone



Fig. 16

Fig. 16. Maybe the finest set of teaspoons produced by King & Co, 1928. Upon close examination, the spoons reveal much advanced silversmithing technology. Various hardstone cabochons include moonstone, chrysoprase and carnelian.

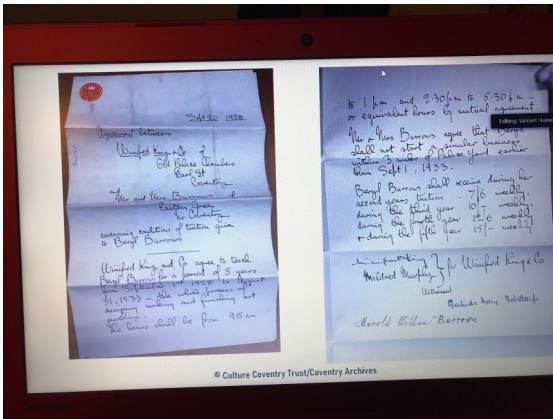
cabochons. This set was assayed in 1928 and may mark a zenith in skill and design for King & Co.

They also produced small holloware in the form of tea sets, small dishes inlaid with blister pearl and other small table silver and often enhanced with borders of silver wire twist. An enamel and silver dish was apparently sold to HM Queen Mary in 1923, and from 1933, a silver condiment set exhibited at The Women's Academy, Princes Gallery, London. In 1929 the workshop made a silver and enamel badge for the local Venture club (later Soroptimists) chain of office.

After the air raid on Coventry in November and the destruction of Old Palace Yard, Winifred King wound up their business there, maybe salvaging what she could from the wreckage although Old Palace Yard sustained a direct hit! By then their workforce had, at least sufficient skills to continue making jewelry. Gladys Harris and her husband Charles Mumford later moved to Falmouth in Cornwall setting up a small jewelry business in the 1950s, presumably to catch the tourist trade. Gladys and maybe her husband Charles, who was a grocer, made many brooches and some necklaces using silver wirework, small silver leaves and mounted hardstones. All of these were small or lightweight enough to be exempt from hallmarking at this time, so she appears not to have registered a sponsor mark anywhere. The nearest assay office in Exeter had closed in 1883 so it was likely considered too much trouble! Winifred King bequeathed her jewellery working tools to Gladys. During the pre-war years, the partnership flourished, catching the patronage of Queen Mary and later, selling their pieces on the QEII liner until the 1980s.

Mildred Murphy / Attenborough, gradually withdrew from the partnership sometime after her marriage in 1930 and stopped being a member of the Coventry Arts Society in 1932, apparently devoting herself to home life and horticulture (market gardening) with her husband, listed as such in the 1939 register. King & Murphy last exhibited as a partnership in 1932.

Further arty wares were added to the stock including Poole pottery, Moncrieff glass and Orrefors glass presumably to boost the business and maintain a less specialised stock. Winifred King did war work for Warwickshire County Council from 1941, and there is no further record after this date. One can only suppose that she could have worked with the Birmingham jewelry companies post war or retired entirely? She died in 1964.



B. Burrows apprenticeship document

For the remaining workforce, there is scant information but two others, Beryl Burrows and Gertrude Gelstharp, exercised their rights as time-served apprentices to become Freeman of the City of Coventry in 1972. They were sponsored at the Freeman's admission court by 80-year-old Mildred, as former partner in Winifred King & Co who signed their indentures. Gertrude had a career in teaching silversmithing, latterly at Wallasey College of Art. Beryl had initially set up her own business at Priory Studios, Much Park

Street, Coventry trading as B. Clifton Burrows where she manufactured jewellery. Post-war, she taught jewelry making and silversmithing at a college in Somerset.

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