A George II Flagon of Historical Significance

By William Reeve

Fig. 1 Livery pot, parcel gilt, London 1591

The church is the source of most silver artefacts in the Western world from the late Roman Empire to the Middle Ages and beyond. Silversmiths created every implement necessary to celebrate the Eucharist both in the Roman Catholic and later Anglican Churches. These pieces included a chalice or communion cup for the consecrated wine, the ciborium in which the host is brought to the congregation, the monstrance, a vessel designed to exhibit the host, the pyx, a small box intended to carry a single serving of the consecrated host to a sick parishioner or the paten, a plate employed to bear the communion bread. The least mentioned item of ecclesiastical plate, the flagon, is a receptacle in which the consecrated wine is conveyed to the altar in order to refill the communion chalice or cup. Since the congregation attending the mass in early times could be quite numerous, the chalice had to be frequently replenished during the service, hence the need for a container large enough to hold a sufficient volume of liquid for all the participants in the mass. Flagons are rare, except for copies and gothic revivals made after 1760.[1]

The earliest surviving examples were called livery pots while the term flagon from the French *flacon* (Latin *flaso*), a glass bottle, came into use after 1640 shortly after their utilization became compulsory in 1630. The earliest surviving livery pots typically lack any decoration, carry an “S”-shaped handle, assume a bellied form below a pronounced neck and stand on a

1. Holland, Margaret. *Phaidon Guide to Silver*, Oxford, Phaidon Publishing, p. 94

Fig. 2 Flagon, London 1735, Fig. 3 Hinged and stepped dome cove

high, raised stepped foot (Fig. 1). In England, towards the end of the 16th century, they evolved into a tall, tapered cylindrical shape that adhered to the prevalent tankard style,[2] the model on which most flagons were based.

The flagon also took on a secular function in taverns or public bars. It could be made of leather, metal, glass or ceramic and was designed for both storage and serving drinks of ale or other liquids. Although it sported a handle and, on some models, a spout, it was never intended to serve as a drinking vessel, especially in view of its considerable height and weight. It could hold different volumes of beer or wine, but a flagon of two imperial pints (1.1 litres) was the most common size in general use.

The silver flagon depicted in Fig. 2 was sold recently in England. With a height of 13 ¼ inches and a considerable weight of 1721 g, it comes across as a solid, hefty piece of silver plate. It carries a cast baluster finial soldered to the lid. The hinged dome (Fig. 3) comprises two flat round discs, the smaller one above the other, soldered on top of a sizable convex step followed by an ovolo, a half-round and a concave/cavetto step with line or small raised convex

Wees, Beth Carver: *English, Irish and Scottish Silver at the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute*, New York, Hudson Hills Publishing, 1997, p. 50-52

Fig. 4 Hallmarks: date letter, lion passant and crowned leopard

Fig. 5 Raised and stepped skirted base

Fig. 6 Inscription on the bottom

accents between each section, a demanding, labour-intensive technique of silversmithing. The lip has an applied bezel the side of which bears the date letter "V" for 1735 and the lion passant. The cylindrical body, slightly tapering from 13 ½ inches to 15 inches in circumference, has been raised from a single sheet of silver (there is no evidence of a soldered seam) and is surmounted by a 5/32 inch-square applied moulding above an applied double beading. Below the cover and adjacent to the handle, there are three hallmarks: the date letter, the lion passant and the crowned leopard for London (Fig. 4). The "S"-shaped handle, assuming a "D" section with a straight outer edge, was cast in two parts and then soldered together. The upper part of the handle was soldered directly onto the body whereas the lower end was soldered to an applied round disc one inch above the base. A heart-shaped terminal embellishes the lower end of the handle. A cast scroll thumbpiece with four fingers and a cast five-lugged hinge with a pendant drop join the upper surface of the handle to the rim of the lid. The curve formed by the lower end of the "S"-scroll handle carries the sponsor's mark: a cross with the initials R G and T C for Richard Gurney and Thomas Cook II (Grimwade 2324). This location rather than the customary inclusion of the sponsor's mark with the three hallmarks below the lid represents an anomaly. The skirted base, raised and stepped, mirrors the lid's design (Fig. 5). Soldered to the body, it has an exceptional width of 7 ½ inches in diameter deemed necessary to support and stabilize the considerable height and weight of the flagon.

The engraved inscription in cursive on its bottom: "The Gift of Mr. Robt. Dawe to the Church of St. Lawrence in Exeter A. D. 1735" (Fig. 6) renders this flagon particularly noteworthy. It was a well-established practice for distinguished and wealthy patrons of a church to donate items

of silver to enhance the visual splendour and elegance of the mass. The fact that the two date letters for 1735 correspond to the “A. D. 1735” engraved on the base strongly suggests a bespoke piece commissioned from London

silversmiths. The Church of St. Lawrence (Fig. 7) stood on the High Street in Exeter, an ancient city on the River Exe in southwestern England founded in Roman times. The church itself can trace its roots back to the Middle Ages. Although its south wall was restored in 1674 and its west wall in 1830, except for these repairs, most of the church building dated back to the

Fig. 7

fifteenth century.

In a failed attempt to weaken the resolve of the British people to resist Hitler, Goering’s *Luftwaffe* (air force) initiated a series of bombing raids on English cities in April and May of 1942 known as the Baedeker Blitz. The name originates in Baedeker, a series of German tourist

Fig. 8 15th century oak screen destroyed by Baedecker Blitz Raid of May 4, 1942

guidebooks that included many detailed maps of important English historical towns. The Germans used these maps to select targets for their bombers. As a result of the Baedeker Raid of May 4, 1942, the Church of St. Lawrence was severely damaged. “All the shops and houses both opposite and next to the church were destroyed. The church itself was completely gutted by fire with only the south wall and tower left standing. Nothing at all survived of the interior; the medieval roof or the fifteenth century oak screen”[3] The latter refers to a magnificent screen carved out of oak and featuring gothic arches and architectural ball-flower pinnacles (Fig. 8). Fortunately, portable items of value such as silver plate had been removed and stored beforehand in a secure location. Since St. Lawrence’s remains were removed as part of a demolition and no effort was forthcoming to rebuild, the silver flagon with its historically significant inscription remains an important surviving relic and reminder of a medieval parish church with a 700-year-old past and the many parishioners who once worshipped within its walls.

3. Demolition Exeter. A Century of Destruction in an English Cathedral City. 8 January 2011

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