

I

THE NEWCASTLE GOLDSMITHS AND THE CAPITAL

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WHEN WHITEHEAD and Jameson published their *Arms of the Several Companies in the Corporation of Newcastle upon Tyne* in 1776, the armorial bearings attributed to the Goldsmiths' Company were those of the Worshipful the Company of Goldsmiths of the City of London. Whether they were used by the Newcastle goldsmiths themselves is doubtful and whether the London Company would have approved of their use is even more questionable, as relations between the London goldsmiths and their provincial colleagues were at times far from cordial. The intention of this paper is to explore the relation between Newcastle and the Capital, in the effects of Parliamentary Acts on northern goldsmiths, interference on the part of the London Company, and the dealings of individual silversmiths with their southern counterparts.

Within a century, perhaps even within a few decades, of the construction of the New Castle, there were goldsmiths in the area, though the earliest reference appears in the *Pipe Rolls* of 1185 and 1186. In these annual records of the King's Exchequer, Baldwinus Aurifaber—Baldwin the Goldsmith—is noted in the Northumberland section as having been rendered an account of ten marks, of which he paid the Sheriff half in one year and discharged the remaining debt in the following. It is conceivable that he had worked as a young man at the Mint established at Newcastle by Henry II as part of his programme of recoinage and in operation for some twenty years.

The Mandate of Henry III in the middle of the thirteenth century,¹ commanding sixteen provincial towns (of which Newcastle was one) to set up mints to produce his new coinage, assumed the presence of local goldsmiths. The burgesses of each town were ordered "that in Full Town-Court they should chuse (by the Oath of four and twenty Goodmen), Four persons of the most Trusty and Prudent of their Town, for the Office of Moneyours in That Town, and other Four Like persons for the keeping of the Kings Mints There, and Two Fit and Prudent Goldsmiths to be Assayours of the money to be made There, and one Fit and Trusty Clerk for the keeping of the Exchange; And to send them to the Treasurer and Barons at the Exchequer, to do There what by Ancient Custom and Assize was to be Done in That case". A list of these officials survives,² naming Ricardus de Westmele and Willelmus Aurifaber as assayers appointed to the Newcastle Mint, presumably both goldsmiths and both sent to London for instruction. Unfortunately nothing further is known of their activities.

Of the several goldsmiths mentioned in documents of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, only Johannes Mayle is known to have had any direct dealings with the Capital, receiving in 1397 a general pardon for some unspecified offence,³ which may

or may not have been connected with the practice of his craft.

In 1300 a Statute of Edward I,⁴ governing the standard, assay and marking of wrought plate, refers to goldsmiths outside London as being subject to the same laws as at the Capital; and ordains that "one shall come from every good Town for all the Residue that be dwelling in the same, unto London, for to be ascertained of their Touch". Among the Newcastle goldsmiths at this time there probably were practising craftsmen, but there is no record to indicate whether they were aware of the Statute or felt themselves obliged to send a representative. By the following century, however, there was sufficient silverware being manufactured to warrant specific provisions in a Statute of 1423 for testing its standard.⁵ Newcastle is one of only seven provincial towns designated "that every one shall have divers Touches, according to the Ordinance of the Mayors, Bailiffs, or Governors of the same Towns".

As a result of disputes amongst local tradesmen, echoes of which reached London, a Commission of Star Chamber appointed two officials in 1515 to travel to Newcastle in order to examine witnesses on both sides. The craftsmen resented the claim by the Merchants to a monopoly on the buying and selling of merchandise, seeing no reason why they should limit their activities solely to making of the goods of their trade and not retail other commodities, as had their fathers. Among those questioned were John Langton, baker, and his brother William Langton, goldsmith, who testified that "their father, John Langton, baker, bought and retailed for thirty years, lynt, tar and soap with other merchandise".⁶

Although oppression by the powerful Company of Merchant Adventurers was foiled by the intervention of Star Chamber, disputes such as this induced craftsmen of various trades to unite into guilds in order to protect their interests. The goldsmiths, being too few in number to compose an independent guild, joined with the plumbers, glaziers, pewterers and painters to form an Associated Company and on 1st September 1536 received assent from the Mayor to their Ordinary.

The Ordinary of the Associated Company dealt mainly with the conduct of the brethren at meetings and in their work, "Provyded all way that noon Act nor Ordynance be made by the seyd bredren & ffelsshipp of the seid Craftes of goldsmith plumeres pudrerers glaiciers & paynters contry to Any Act or Actes her to fore made by any statut or statutes of parlament by our most doubtyd Sovereign lord the kyng that now ys & hys most honourable conncell At any tyme her to fore made by hym or hys noble progenitors".

Early statutes rarely took note of the fact that silver was produced in the provinces, though many regulations governed the manufacture of plate in the Capital. Responsibility for seeing that the standards were maintained lay with the Wardens of the powerful London Company of Goldsmiths. Regular inspections were made in the London area, but, because of the vagueness of the wording of the statutes and the inconvenience of travel, the Wardens rarely took it upon themselves to check on the country craftsmen. An eighteenth-century document listing the Charters of the London Goldsmiths comments of one dating from 15047: "Another charter, granted to the said Company . . . mentions that divers Persons, in divers Parts of this Kingdom, do work, and expose to Sale, Gold and Silver, wrought worse than Standard, and

neither fear, nor doubt to be punished, as due Search, or due Punishment, is seldom executed out of London”.

Occasionally a pair of energetic Wardens, perturbed at the rumoured activities of provincial silversmiths, did set forth to find out exactly what was happening. The first recorded visitation of Newcastle came on Tuesday 4th August 1635⁸: “At the Towne and County of Newcastle upon Tyne, Mr Richard Taylor, Mr Francis Chapman Wardens. This Day the worthy the Wardeins of the misterye of Goldsmithes of the City of London above named accordinge to the power and authoritey granted unto them by Charter (after a tedious journey of Seaven days ridinge 220 miles Northward) came unto the Towne of Newcastle afore said (where at this present is held a Comon ffayer) to search for all manner of Goldsmithes wares wrought of Gold & silver and exposed to sale in the said ffayre and repayinge unto the severall shoppes of ffancis hall, William Robinson, Thomas Bishopp and William Luck goldsmithes there The said Wardeins tooke from them several parcills of wares of goldsmithes work to bee tryed and assayed accordinge to the tenor off their said Charter”. Although a few of the articles proved to be of an acceptable standard, much of the silverware and jewellery tested was considerably substandard; these items were broken up before being returned to their owners, who were duly fined.

The record of this incident is important for several reasons: it illustrates the concern of the London goldsmiths regarding provincial plate, and their power not only to reprimand but to impose penalties. Also, it contradicts the assumption that because no goldsmiths are mentioned in the Minute Books of the Associated Company between 1600 and 1656, there were no goldsmiths in Newcastle during the first half of the seventeenth century. The London Wardens’ report mentions four and details the types of ware they were offering for sale.

In their report, the Wardens dealt separately with Francis Hall, who confessed “his eareringes to bee but of soveraigne gold contrary to the lawes and ordinance of the Company whereof hee is a member”. As he was not a member of the Associated Company nor is he known in any other Newcastle context, this statement suggests that he should be identified with his contemporary namesake who was a member of the London Company. It would seem that this London goldsmith travelled all the way to Newcastle with his jewellery and smaller wares to set up shop at the August fair, little expecting to be confronted by his own Wardens.

The other three culprits were local silversmiths, but Thomas Bishop was primarily a retailer rather than a manufacturer. As he had not made the offending articles, he was naturally upset at being fined eight pounds by the wardens. So he required satisfaction from a certain Mr. Gibbs, the supplier, who in turn appealed to the London Goldsmiths’ Company because he wanted satisfaction from Thomas Hopton goldsmith and Simon Dawes, who had actually made the substandard wares.⁹ These men appear to have been southerners, probably working in the London area, though not freemen of the Goldsmiths’ Company; like Francis Hall, they thought to palm off their inferior goods with impunity in the provinces.

As Newcastle was so remote and such visitations rare, it is unlikely that the search by the London Wardens had any lasting effect; William Badcock’s reproach some forty

years later was probably as applicable to Newcastle as elsewhere.¹⁰ "The Magistrates in the seven Touch Towns", he complained, "have been and now are very remiss in prosecuting their Authority in making search and Assaying and marking the Goldsmiths Work, and that the Wardens of the Goldsmiths of the city of London, do very seldom make search in the Country. Great part of the Gold and Silver Works (especially the small works) made and sold remote from London, are notoriously known to be exceedingly Adulterated and debased, and great part of what is made by the London Workers and sent into the Country to the Traders there, are as notoriously known to be as bad as any".

Meanwhile, trade flourished. With the Restoration of the Monarchy and return of prosperity, there was a great demand for silverware throughout the country. In Newcastle William Ramsay I, son-in-law of one of the 1635 offenders, joined the Associated Company in 1656 (the first goldsmith to do so since the turn of the century), and after him came a succession of goldsmiths. Indirect influence from London may be seen in the marks they used.

An Act of 1576 for "Reformation of Abuses in Goldsmiths",¹¹ which defined the fineness of gold and silver to be used in plate, had been ambiguous on the subject of assaying and marking, but did state clearly that "no Goldsmith shall ... put to sale, exchange or sell any Plate or Goldsmith's Work of Silver, before he hath set his own Mark to so much thereof as conveniently may bear the same; upon Pain to forfeit the Value of the Thing so sold or exchanged". Accordingly many provincial goldsmiths in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries applied only their maker's mark to their wares with no further marks as guarantee of their quality. The London Wardens of 1635 seem to have accepted this practice, recording without comment: "William Robinson affirmeth that his marke wherewth he stampeth his plate and wares is the Rose and soe promiseth to continue the same".

There was still no local assay office in the second half of the seventeenth century to test and mark the silver, so that each silversmith marked his own as he saw fit. Realizing that properly stamped London plate carried four marks, the Newcastle goldsmiths seem to have imitated the practice, producing by duplication the correct number of impressions, since none had more than three different punches. One of the stamps used by John Wilkinson and his successors John Dowthwaite and Francis Batty I was a lion passant, similar to that certifying Sterling quality on London plate but reversed. Possibly it represents their attempt at copying London-style marks more closely, but it may be no more than a reproduction of their shop signs. At different times William Ramsay used a variety of marks, versions of his own initials, the town-mark and the shop sign. Later in his career, he surmounted the initials with a crown or coronet, which may refer to a new shop sign or be an expression of his loyalty to the Monarch. In 1687, he was elected Sheriff at Michaelmas only to be deposed at Christmas by the Mandate of James II; under William III in 1690 he became Mayor of Newcastle.

The Ordinary of the Associated Company provided "that every one of the seid bredren of the seyde ffyve craftes that now ar ffre or in tyme to come shalbe ffre every man of them shall swer Apon the holy evangelist toched with their mouthes that they & every of them shalbe trewe to our seid Sovereign lord & hys heires". In 1696, after there

had been "a horrid & detestable Conspiracy formed & Carried on by papists & others wicked & traitorous persons for assassinateing his majesties Royall person in order to incourage an invasion from ffrance to subvert our Religion Lawes & Liberty", the whole company met by order of the Mayor to sign a testimonial that "his persone majestie King William is Rightfull & Lawfull King of these Relms & wee doe mutually promisse & engage to stand by & each other to the utmost of our power In the Support & Defence of his majesties most sacred person & Governement against the late King James & all his adherents".¹²

In this same year, legislation was passed by Parliament that was to have a considerable effect on the history of silver manufacture in Newcastle.¹³ To protect William III's new coinage and prevent coins and clippings from disappearing into the silversmiths' crucibles, the standard of silver to be wrought into plate was raised from Sterling to Britannia standard, eight pennyweight higher. In itself this was not too great a hardship, though inconvenient. However, the Britannia Silver Standard Act of 1696 not only defined the proportion of base metal to silver allowable, but also stipulated how the plate was to be marked: "with the Worker's Mark, to be expressed by the two first Letters of his Surname, the Marks of the Mystery or Craft of the Goldsmiths, which, instead of the Leopard's Head and Lion, shall for this plate be the Figure of a Lion's Head erased, and the Figure of a Woman, commonly called Britannia, and a distinct variable Mark to be used by the Warden of the said Mystery, to denote the Year in which such plate is made". The marks of the mystery of goldsmiths described in the Act were those used by London; town-marks hitherto used in the provinces received no mention. Therefore by implication, when the Act came into force all plate should have been sent to London for assay. Of course it was not, and after a while the London Wardens suspected that many provincial goldsmiths were ignoring the Act and continuing to produce silverware of Sterling standard, if not worse. So they made another inspection of the North, as a consequence of which in February 1699 five Newcastle goldsmiths were summoned to appear at their court and charged with putting to sale gold and silver wares worse than standard.¹⁴

John Hewitt paid his fine in full without question, but later in the year Robert Shrive appeared before the Warden's Court for a second time to plead for leniency on behalf also of Eli Bilton, Augustin Floate and William Ramsay II.¹⁵ This resulted in a reduction of the fines by one third. Neither Hewitt nor Floate were members of the Associated Company, but whereas the former was regarded with antagonism and some years later referred to as "a foreigner who trades in selling Plate in Gateshead & att Durham",¹⁶ Augustin Floate would seem to have been on friendly terms with the Company. In view of his London connections the members may have felt it to their advantage to associate themselves with him when applying for abatement of the charges; for, the son of a Sussex yeoman, Floate had been apprenticed to a freeman of the London Goldsmiths' Company before setting up shop at the south end of the Tyne Bridge. Later he apprenticed two of his sons to London goldsmiths.

Reaction to the search made by the London Wardens varied. Eli Bilton took the lesson to heart, ordered new punches, stamped his plate with the correct style of maker's mark and a town-mark, and despatched at least one parcel of plate to London

for assay and the addition of the lion's head erased, Britannia and the London date-letter. Those who had not been prosecuted showed less concern. Francis Batty I compromised by adopting the new form of maker's mark, but stamped it four times, using no other punch; John Ramsay seems to have continued to ignore the provisions of the Act by marking his silver with his initials as before. However Thomas Hewitson marked his wares at this time, he failed to conform to the higher Britannia standard, as he was charged with putting to sale silver worse than standard, when the London Wardens made a follow-up investigation in 1701.¹⁷

Until the early years of the eighteenth century the goldsmiths had been members of the Associated Company of various trades; their incorporation as a Company of Goldsmiths may be said almost to be an outcome of the 1699 visitation by the London Wardens. Newcastle was not the only place where provincial goldsmiths suffered prosecution; and as a result of petitions to Parliament from the citizens of Exeter, Chester and Norwich, a new Act was passed.¹⁸ Parliament had become aware that artizans "remote from the City of London, are under great Difficulties and Hardships in the Exercise of their Trade, for want of Assayers in convenient Places to assay and touch their Wrought Plate", and by way of remedy enacted that cities "where the Mints were lately erected for recoinng the Silver Money of this Kingdom ... are hereby appointed for the assaying and marking of Wrought Plate". That solved the problem for York, Exeter, Bristol, Chester and Norwich, but there had been no mint in Newcastle for nearly four hundred years, so the Newcastle goldsmiths were no better off from this legislation. If anything, their situation was worse, in that there was no ambiguity in the new Act and they could no longer plead ignorance of the law. Led by Francis Batty, they first of all submitted a petition to the Newcastle Common Council "setting forth the inconvenience they lie under in these parts for want of an assay master",¹⁹ and accordingly the local Members of Parliament were directed "to give them what assistance and encouragement they can at the Petitioner's charge". Then on 9th February 1702 they petitioned the House of Commons, "setting forth, That the Petitioners are under great Inconvenience in the Management of their Trades, by reason of an Act of Parliament, made in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Years of his Majesty's Reign, for appointing Wardens and Assay-Masters, for assaying wrought Plate, in the Cities of York, Exeter, Bristoll, Chester, and Norwich; by which the Petitioners are obliged to send their Plate to York, being Sixty Miles from Newcastle, or some of the other more remote places, to be assayed and marked as the said Act directs; whereby the Petitioners are in Danger of losing the greatest Part of their Trade, which chiefly consists of Plate bespoke to be wrought up in a short time, and they cannot have it returned from York in less than a Fortnight's Time; And praying, That an Assay-master may be appointed for assaying and marking wrought Plate in the Said Town of Newcastle".²⁰

Seven weeks later additional clauses appended to the Provincial Assay Offices Act received royal assent.²¹ Provision was made for Newcastle to have an Assay Office and the goldsmiths to be incorporated as a Company, though for several years they continued as members of the Associated Company. At the first meeting on 24th June 1702, Francis Batty was elected Assay Master.

After the setting up of the provincial Assay Offices, the London goldsmiths did not interfere for almost three-quarters of a century. Although they were unhappy about the situation, the establishment of the country offices meant that responsibility for the standard of wrought plate rested with the local Assay Masters and Wardens. This does not mean that Newcastle was isolated from the Capital. The first two Assay Masters went in person to the London Hall to receive instruction, and when in need of advice on matters relating to the conduct of the Assay Office, the Wardens or Assay Master wrote to the Clerk of the London Company. Acts of Parliament passed in the Capital continued to affect the provinces; the Britannia Silver Standard Act was repealed and various new Statutes came into effect governing the marking of plate and payment of duty.²² But most of the communications with the Capital were now on a personal level.

One or two Newcastle youths were apprenticed to London goldsmiths; others, having completed their apprenticeships in the north, migrated south to set up their own businesses in the Capital. Among those were Robert Abercrombie and George Hindmarsh in the 1730s, a little later Hesilrigg Metcalfe (who is probably to be identified with the London jeweller of the same name, though local tradition suggests that he emigrated to Jamaica as a merchant),²³ and one of George Bulman's former apprentices (who was perhaps the same Charles Storey of Soho, friend of John Langlands I and father-in-law of John Langlands II). When Robert Makepeace senior died in 1755, his son soon sold up and moved to London where he purchased his freedom of the London Goldsmiths' Company in 1759 and established a dynasty of goldsmiths; but he still retained an interest in the north, periodically returning to vote at parliamentary elections²⁴ and to visit old acquaintances. George William Chalmers likewise came back to vote at the Newcastle polls. After admission to freedom of the London Goldsmiths' Company by servitude, Samuel Weddell son of a Newcastle barber set up shop as a jeweller in Bloomsbury, with his brother George as an apprentice, but the latter returned to trade in Newcastle as a goldsmith and jeweller.

Of those who made only temporary stays in the Capital, Isaac Cookson, having completed his apprenticeship to Francis Batty, seems to have worked there for a few months as a journeyman before starting his own business. Unfortunately, we do not know with whom he worked, but it is possible that at this time he established a friendship with Paul de Lamerie, some of whose designs he later reproduced. The only evidence of his sojourn in the south is an advertisement in the *Newcastle Courant* 8th June 1728: "At the Gold Ring on the Side, Newcastle upon Tyne, the Shop of Mr Francis Batty, Goldsmith deceased, now lives Isaac Cookson, Jun. who serv'd his Time to Mr Batty, and hath since been at London and work'd in the most noted shops for Improvement, now having taken the Shop, bought his late Master's Tools, and one Moity of the Stock in Trade, thinks fit to give Notice that he will serve any who has occasion with good Work in Gold, and Silver Plate, and Rings, of any Sort, &c. at reasonable Rates".

John Langlands I travelled to London probably first as Cookson's journeyman and later made the occasional visit in connection with his own flourishing business. There he renewed his acquaintance with Charles Storey, so that when he decided to enter his partnership marks at the London Assay Office, it was Storey who signed the register.²⁵

Relations between the two families were more than mere acquaintance; when in turn business took him to London, Langlands' son probably lodged with his father's old friend and there met Dorothy Storey, his future wife. When John Langlands II died after only a few years of marriage, instead of returning to the south, Dorothy remained in Newcastle to carry on the business in her own name for another ten years.

Before entering partnership with the elder Langlands, John Robertson I was "well known and much respected in almost every principal town in Britain . . . as a travelling silversmith and jeweller".²⁶ During the partnership, he undoubtedly visited London many times, apart from the occasion recorded in a letter of 1784.²⁷ It had been the custom for non-freemen to pay an additional tariff above the rate charged to freemen of the Company for the privilege of using the Newcastle Assay Office. While in London on his own affairs, Robertson visited the Goldsmiths' Hall at the Company's request to discuss the process for testing gold. In the course of conversation with the Assay Master, Fendall Rushforth, he discovered that no distinction was made between the rates charged to members and non-members at London for assaying. Rushforth helpfully procured for him copies of Acts of Parliament and made out a list of the London charges; equipped with these, Robertson wrote to the Stewards and members of the Newcastle Company refusing payment of the balance on their last account and questioning their authority for charging him the additional rate. Consequently the extra tariffs were suppressed. In a postscript to this letter, he informed the Company that "in Complience to your former request Mr. Rushford has promis'd to send a compleat appuratus for assaying Gold and will likewise give every assistance in his power to make you Masters of the Process". So grateful were they for the co-operation of the London Assay Master, that the Stewards despatched a salmon to him as an expression of their gratitude,²⁸ and perhaps as a small bribe, a gesture signifying their desire to remain on friendly terms with the powerful London Company.

Some ten years earlier, relations had been strained. For over seventy years, since the beginning of the century, the London Company had practically ignored the existence of the Newcastle goldsmiths and their Assay Office. However, in 1773, when the goldsmiths of Sheffield and Birmingham petitioned Parliament for the establishment of assay offices in their towns,²⁹ the London Wardens and goldsmiths reacted promptly by submitting counterpetitions.³⁰ Should new assay offices be established, they claimed, "the standards appointed for the Wrought Plate of this Kingdom will not be carefully observed, and various Frauds and Deceits, in the manufacturing of Gold and Silver Wares, will be committed in the said Towns". Because of the implication that irregularities were being practised outside London, the House of Commons ordered a Committee to "enquire into the Manner of conducting the several Assay Offices . . . and the Manner in which Wrought Plate is assayed and marked, and also into Frauds and Abuses that have been committed and attempted to be committed, by the Manufacturers or Venders of Gold and Silver Plate, and Plated Work".³¹

While the Committee was assembling witnesses, the London Wardens drew up their case against the establishment of the new offices, supported by extracts from Acts of Parliament and their own Company Charters.³² To the summary of a Statute of 1758, they appended the remark: "Note: The Assay-offices at York, Bristol, and Norwich, if

ever established, have been long discontinued; and it is fortunate for the Public, that very little wrought Plate hath been assayed and marked either at Exeter, Chester, or Newcastle upon Tyne", though, in fact, about twelve thousand ounces of silver was being assayed annually in Newcastle at this time.³³

The Newcastle Assay Master, Matthew Prior, was summoned to appear before the Committee and examined in detail as to his qualifications and the performance of his duties. Impressed by his replies, the Committee came to the resolution "That the Assay Office at Newcastle upon Tyne had been conducted with Fidelity and Skill".³⁴ Though the outcome was favourable, the incident had seemed at the time a very real threat to the existence of the Assay Office and the livelihood of the local goldsmiths, who showed their gratitude to Prior by paying not only all his expenses but an extra five guineas "for his trouble in going to London on ye Assay Office Buisness".³⁵ No doubt over the years, Prior regaled his drinking companions many times with the tale of his confrontation with the Parliamentary Committee and his repartee, but twenty years after his death the incident was still remembered.³⁶ Later still, Thomas Bewick recalled it in his *Memoir*, although it had happened so many years before, when he was merely an apprentice.³⁷ The potential disaster had been averted by the shrewdness of Matthew Prior, but it was not forgotten.

The next crisis was one that affected silversmiths throughout England. In 1784 a new tax was introduced,³⁸ a tax on wrought plate "over and above all other Duties already imposed thereupon", a tax of sixpence an ounce on silver and eight shillings an ounce on gold. Advance notice of its proposed introduction was given, so the Newcastle manufacturers worked frantically throughout the autumn to build up stocks at pre-tax prices. The annual production for 1784 thus exceeded that of 1783 by half, whereas the total for 1785 was down by almost as much; and the decline continued until in 1794 production was only a little over one-third of the pre-tax figure. However, recovery came in the following year and continued. Strangely, a further Act doubling the duty payable on wrought plate had little effect other than exceptionally large assays on the day preceding the Act coming into force and a minor recession following.³⁹ Production reached a peak in 1810 with an annual total of some twenty-two thousand ounces, and thereafter there was a gradual decline.

In the first half of the nineteenth century contacts with London were again mainly on a personal basis. As well as manufacturing silver, the Scottish born Christian Ker Reid imported articles from London, Birmingham and Sheffield for sale in his Newcastle shop, and sent two of his sons to London where they married daughters of Edward Barnard, to whom one or both may have been apprenticed. To the elder, William Ker who became a freeman of the London Company by redemption, Reid advanced money when he wished to start his own business in the Capital, while the younger, David, returned north to be taken into partnership by his father. Over the years, David Reid made many journeys back to London to purchase stock and register new marks at the Goldsmiths' Hall.

While the Newcastle goldsmith Thomas Green found it more profitable to migrate to London, three London silversmiths set up shop in Newcastle. Announcing the opening of his shop in 1802, Alexander Kelty from the Minories, informed the

inhabitants of Newcastle that "his Stock consists of the Choicest and most fashionable Goods London can produce, and at such Prices, as he hopes will meet with Public Approbation".⁴⁰ When he retired ten years later, his business was taken over by George Samuel Lewis and John Wright, jewellers from London, who advertised that "their long Residence and Connexion with one of the first Jewellers at the West End of London, will enable them at all times (they presume) to offer a fashionable and select Stock".⁴¹ After the dissolution of the partnership, Wright made numerous visits to London to replenish his stock of "elegant and fashionable Jewellery, Plate, Plated Goods, Watches &c . . . from the first Manufacturers in the various Branches of his Business".⁴²

In 1844 the Newcastle Assay Office was again threatened with closure. On the 12th March the House of Commons had "resolved to resolve itself into a Committee to consider laws for preventing Frauds and Abuses in marking Gold and Silver Wares",⁴³ and the Bill had been read for the first time. Advised of this by his Member of Parliament, one of the Exeter Wardens warned other provincial officers by post that "should it contain Clauses similar to the Bill introduced some years since it would effectually prevent the Working of all Country Halls and confine it to London".⁴⁴ The Newcastle goldsmiths were alarmed and there was a great flurry of correspondence. The Exeter Warden had written on the 20th March; on the 22nd the Newcastle Wardens, Assay Master and principal manufacturers met to discuss it at the George Inn and on the following day letters were sent to London to the Newcastle Members of Parliament, who replied on the 25th. As it turned out there was only one objectionable clause in the new Bill, which would subject the provincial offices to the London Goldsmiths' Company. After further correspondence and discussion the provincial Members of Parliament managed to have this amended so that London and the provinces were on an equality, able to sue or be sued for any neglect in the running of the respective Assay Offices.⁴⁵

Agitations against provincial goldsmiths continued. In 1849 the Wardens of the London Company submitted a Minute to the consideration of the Chancellor of the Exchequer: "For many years past the attention of the Goldsmiths' Company has from time to time been drawn to numerous cases of wares below standard which had been marked at the country halls . . . In most of these places there are a few manufacturers, who themselves compose the management of the company, and whose work forms the chief part of the work assayed and marked. The assayer is subject to their influence if not under their direct control . . . The wardens . . . having been asked to suggest the remedy for these abuses, their answer is, the entire abolition of the country halls".⁴⁶

Because of the various complaints, the Chancellor of the Exchequer asked the Board of Inland Revenue to inspect them "with a view to ascertain the course of proceeding adopted at each of these offices in the assaying and marking of gold and silver plate, and whether or not it affords a sufficient security against any frauds or irregularities in the execution of the business, and in accounting for the duties". And the Board directed William Garnett, the Inspector-general of Stamps and Taxes, to inspect them in person. Accompanied by two of the London Wardens he visited Newcastle in 1851 and duly submitted his report, concluding it with the remark that "The assay office at

Newcastle is one of the most miserable description, and is situate in an obscure back court in a low neighbourhood, where it has been for a very long period. The receipts are obviously insufficient to defray the expence of a proper office or an efficient establishment. The assay master seems to be a person of a very inferior condition of life; and though he may be very honest, there is no supervision over his proceedings and consequently no safeguard against irregularities; nor is there any security for the due payments of the stamp duty".⁴⁷

The visit and report were made in 1851, but it was not until 1854 that the Commissioners of Inland Revenue having learnt of further irregularities at Exeter, addressed a report to the Board of the Treasury suggesting the abolition of the provincial assay halls, and not until 1855 that the Member of Parliament James Wilson, at the instigation of the Treasury, introduced a Bill into the House of Commons for their abolition.⁴⁸ When the provinces protested, the Bill was withdrawn, but the following spring the House of Commons ordered a Select Committee to be appointed to make enquiries.⁴⁹

In the interval between Garnett's inspection of the Newcastle Assay Office and his examination by the Select Committee, the old Assay Master Francis Somerville had died. The goldsmiths held a special meeting to appoint his successor and express their regret: "The Company in recording the death of their respected Assay Master, wish to bear testimony to his diligence and faithful dealings of his duties for the long period of 23 years during the whole of which time he was never absent from ill health and was most accurate in the performance of his important trust".⁵⁰ Disillusionment soon came; they were compelled in March to hold another special meeting "having upon examination found that the sum of £38: 12: 8½ was deficient in the account of the late assay master on the quarter ending 25th Decr. 1854 & having received notice from the Board of Inland Revenue that the Goldsmiths Company were held responsible for the amount to the Crown it was resolved that the Stewards of the Company be authorised to take steps to procure the payment of the amount from the estate of the late F. Somerville".⁵¹ The Wardens managed to retrieve £4: 5: 10 from the nephew of the deceased; the remainder, the Company repaid in instalments over the next five years.

This was certainly not the first time that Somerville had helped himself to the duty money, nor was he the first Assay Master to do so. William Garnett in his report had pin-pointed one of the flaws in the system of accountancy, where there was no real check.⁵² That Somerville and at least two of his predecessors took advantage of it can now be proved, as the nineteenth-century Assay Ledgers are ostensibly complete. In them should have been posted all the information from the notes that accompanied each parcel of silver assayed (the date, the maker's name, every item submitted, the weight and the duty payable). On analysis, it appears that for certain manufacturers (significantly non-company members) there are discrepancies between the articles recorded in the Ledgers as having been assayed and actual pieces of silver that have survived. What seems to have happened is that the plate was submitted in the usual way accompanied by the note giving details; it was assayed, marked, the duty paid over to the Assay Master, the silver returned to the manufacturer and the note filed until the end of the quarter. However, every now and then the Assay Master "borrowed" some

of the duty money. At the end of the quarter when he was due to pay the money over to the Inland Revenue, he checked to see how much he actually had and adjusted the accounts accordingly, destroying the necessary number of notes, the remainder being entered in the Ledger to be checked by the Inland Revenue. Because the Assay Office was under the supervision of the Goldsmiths' Company and there was always a possibility that members might examine the books, the notes that Somerville burnt were those belonging to non-company members. When he died unexpectedly, the books fails to balance because he had already used the duty money but had not yet either repaid it or destroyed an appropriate number of notes.

To safeguard themselves against another such occurrence, the Company required the new Assay Master to take out an insurance policy for one hundred pounds as a guarantee that the duty money would always be forthcoming at the right moment.⁵³ Meanwhile, as the Company was still repaying Somerville's debt at the time of the Parliamentary Enquiry, it was a potential embarrassment since there was the possibility that the whole unsavoury affair might be revealed in the course of the proceedings and conclusions drawn that might lead to a recommendation for the abolition of the Assay Office.

What had emerged by the end of Garnett's cross-examination by the Select Committee was that, though there might be the opportunity, there was no reason to suspect that any irregularities had actually taken place. A week later Christian John Reid, one of the Newcastle Wardens, who had spent the intervening days assembling evidence, was also cross-examined. Helped by the sympathetic questioning of Liddell (the Newcastle Member of Parliament who had been well briefed beforehand), Reid was able to draw attention to Garnett's mistakes and misconceptions, avoid reference to the Somerville incident altogether and, taking advantage of ambiguity in the questioning, he made it understood to the Committee that certain practices, such as the hundred pound guarantee, were of long standing when in fact they had only been introduced since Somerville's death.

Garnett had described the Assay Office as "in a very obscure part of the town, in a little back room, very dirty", and the Assay Master who "worked for an engineer" as of "no great respectability in appearance". Under Liddell's interrogation, Reid explained that "The accommodation ... is quite equal to the requirements of the town ... It is within 50 yards of the main street ... in a most convenient locality for the trade"; and the Inspector had, he said, "mistook the assayer for the stamper ... the assayer was a retired silversmith; he retired upon taking the office of assayer, and he had also property, which enabled him to live without being dependent either upon assaying or any other business". Reid conveniently forgot that only a year earlier he had signed a petition that referred to Somerville as dying "in very indigent circumstances"; he was also careful not to point out that while Garnett's remarks on the late Assay Master were invalid because they applied to the Stamper, they might be applicable to the present Assay Master, who was the former Stamper.

According to Garnett, "only those who are members of the trade can take a part in the management of the hall"; this was denied by Reid, for since all the members voted in the election of Wardens and Assay Master, it was "in the hands of the whole

company and they all take an active part in it". He also contradicted the Inspector's statement that assays only took place occasionally and were unsupervised because "the wardens were never present. It would be almost a waste of time for those gentlemen to be there all day when there is scarcely any work to be done". Reid had never known the office to be open and no work presented; it was open regularly twice a week "from nine till one, or longer if necessary", and the Wardens were "constantly present. I do not mean that they are there the whole time, but the practise is for one of them to attend early in the day, and the other afterwards".

Garnett's statements that the "punches were under the sole control of the Assay Master during the day", "the scales not kept clean", "no diet whatever was preserved" and no substandard plate ever broken up, were likewise denied by Reid. "The rule has been", he said, "for the keys (of the diet box and stamps) never to go down till the stamper was ready to stamp the plate which had been assayed; that was always done between 12 and 1", the Stamper collected them from the Warden's house, returning them afterwards if the Warden did not happen to be present. The Office possessed "two sets of scales which are constantly kept in accurate order", being examined regularly and sent to a reputable London firm for adjustment, as the receipts would show. Although the Mint had never sent for it, the diet was always kept; and with regard to substandard plate, Reid could produce a list "for the last 20 years of the work broken down, and I have brought some letters from the manufacturers complaining of the work being broken down, and threatening proceedings against us for breaking the work down".

Another of Garnett's charges had been that "no regular form of ticket was provided, describing the work and the weight", instead "a memorandum in writing is brought with the name (sometimes only the initials) of the worker". Reid maintained that the practice in Newcastle was "as the Act prescribes", it was never the case that there were only initials attached though he did admit that documents of that type might be submitted with private assays of rough silver. Sure of the replies and their effect on the Committee, Liddell pursued his questioning with the reflection: "Then it is possible, is it not, that the inspector may have mistaken the identity of those documents, as he appears to have mistaken the identity of the stamper and the assayer?", to which Reid responded, "I wrote to the person who was warden, after hearing the inspector's evidence, and he informs me that assays of his own were lying there at the time, that the inspector had pointed them out, and said that they were not according to law, but he told him at the time that they were only private assays for his own guidance in mixing the silver". Liddell then pressed the point to a conclusion with a leading question that scarcely required any answer: "So that Mr. Garnett had not much excuse for making the mistake that he appears to have made, with regard to those initials?"

Through Liddell's skilful questioning, all that was adverse in Garnett's testimony was discredited, and questions by the rest of the select Committee on the conduct of the Assay Office and other aspects of the silver trade did not reveal anything detrimental. The Newcastle Assay Office survived the enquiry.

Business continued as usual until 1866, when the Company Minute Book notes that "owing to the retirement from business of Mr. Thos. (sic!) Walton, the business of the

Company has been considerably curtailed".⁵⁴ Since 1821 John Walton had been the principal manufacturer of plate in the area, responsible for producing half the total assay, so his retirement reduced the trade of the Office by half. This was the beginning of the end. Manufacture of plate in Newcastle steadily declined until the annual output was less than 200 ounces.

One of the factors contributing to that decline may have been rivalry from London. From early times, London silver had the reputation of being superior to anything made in the provinces, but until the nineteenth century there had always been the problem of transport; with safer, quicker and cheaper transport provided by the railways, many provincial goldsmiths while continuing to produce small articles such as spoons and forks, found it more convenient with larger ones to retail those of London manufacture rather than to make their own. The business of the Assay Office thus declined until the Company decided there was too little work to warrant the upkeep of the place. At the annual meeting in May 1884 the Wardens' proposal that the Government stamps should be returned to the Inland Revenue was carried unanimously. The stamps were duly surrendered and the local dies effaced, the *Newcastle Courant* sadly noting the extinction of "a time-honoured institution".⁵⁵ Although through the centuries the London goldsmiths had tried to control the manufacture of silver in the north and to close the Assay Office, when the end actually came, it was through a decision made by the Newcastle goldsmiths themselves.

NOTES

¹ T. Madox, *The History and Antiquities of the Exchequer* (London 1711), p. 604. *Memor. 33 Henry III Rot. Ia.*

² *Ms. Hargrave Brit. Mus. Cod. membran.: 313f 95b*, published in *Chronica Johannis de Oxenides* (ed. Sir Henry Ellis, London 1859), pp. 315-25.

³ Public Record Office: C67/29 m.1.

⁴ 28 Edward I Stat. 3 C.20 (1300).

⁵ 2 Henry VI C.14 (1423).

⁶ *AA*³, vol. VII (1911), F. W. Dendy, "The Struggle between the Merchant and Craft Guilds of Newcastle in 1515", p. 95.

⁷ *Extracts from Acts of Parliament for Preventing Frauds in Gold and Silver Wares and preserving the Standards appointed for Wrought Plate; and also from Charters granted to the Company of Goldsmiths of the City of London* (1773).

⁸ Goldsmiths' Company of London: *Wardens Accounts and Court Minutes*, 23 Sep. 1635 "the proceedings of Mr Wardein Taylor & Mr Wardein Chapman in their Search in the Country this summer in the North and easterne parts amongst the Goldsmithes there".

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 Sep. 1635.

¹⁰ W.B. *A New Touch-stone for Gold and Silver Wares* (London 1679), pp. 108-9.

¹¹ 18 Elizabeth I C.15 (1576).

¹² Associated Company: *Minute Book* 18 Mar. 1695/6.

¹³ 8 William III C.8 (1696).

¹⁴ *Supra* note 8, 22 Feb. 1698/9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 Oct. 1699.

¹⁶ Goldsmiths' Company of Newcastle upon Tyne: *Minute Book*, 16 Nov. 1721.

¹⁷ *Supra* note 8, 24 Feb. 1700/1.

¹⁸ 12/13 William III C.4 (1700/1).

¹⁹ Newcastle upon Tyne *Common Council Minutes*, 19 Jan. 1701/2.

²⁰ *Journal of the House of Commons*, 9 Feb. 1701/2.

²¹ 1 Anne Stat. 1 C.9 3-5 (1701).

²² 6 George I C.11 (1719), 12 George II C.26 (1738), 31 George II C.32 (1757/8), 32 George II C.24 (1758/9).

²³ A. Heal, *The London Goldsmiths 1200-1800* (Cambridge 1935), p. 205; J. C. Hodgson *History of Northumberland*, vol. VII (Newcastle 1904), pp. 441-2.

²⁴ *Poll Books*, 1774, 1777. After the latter election he was examined by an investigating Committee as to his relations with an agent of one of the candidates and his knowledge of any bribery that may have occurred during the campaign (*Newcastle Journal*, 4 Jun. 1777).

²⁵ Goldsmiths' Company of London: *Mark Book*, 3 Mar. 1780.

²⁶ Thomas Bewick *Memoir* (ed. A. Dobson, London 1887), pp. 86–7, 108, 128.

²⁷ Goldsmiths' Company of Newcastle upon Tyne: *Miscellaneous Papers*, Letter 3 May 1784.

²⁸ *AA*², vol. XVI (1894), J. R. Boyle "The Goldsmiths of Newcastle", p. 408.

²⁹ *Supra* note 20, 1–2 and 25 Feb. 1773.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 Feb., 8 Mar. and 6–7 May 1773.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 26 Feb. 1773.

³² *Case of the Wardens and Assistants of the Company or Mystery of Goldsmiths of the City of London* (1773), and *supra* note 7.

³³ Goldsmiths' Company of Newcastle upon Tyne: *Assay Ledgers*.

³⁴ *Supra* note 28, p. 407.

³⁵ *Supra* note 16, 3 May 1773.

³⁶ *Newcastle Magazine*, vol. 1 (1820/1), p. 318.

³⁷ Thomas Bewick *Memoir* (ed. J. Bewick, Newcastle 1862), pp. 126–7.

³⁸ 24 *George III C.53* (1784).

³⁹ 37 *George III C.90* (1797).

⁴⁰ *Newcastle Courant*, 11 Sep. 1802.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7 Aug. 1813.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17 Apr. 1824.

⁴³ *Supra* note 20, 12 Mar. 1844.

⁴⁴ *Supra* note 28, Letter from George Terris to the Wardens and Assayer of the Newcastle

Goldsmiths' Company, 20 Mar. 1844.

⁴⁵ 7/8 *Victoria C.22* (1844).

⁴⁶ Published with the *Memorial from the Manufacturers of Silver Spoons and Forks in London, dated the 6th day of November 1849 calling attention to the Mismanagement of the Country Halls* and other minutes and papers relating to the provincial Assay Offices (London 1855).

⁴⁷ *Report of Messrs. Garrard & P. N. Johnson & of Mr. Wm. Garnett of an Inspection of the Country Assay Offices* (Ms. 1851 Goldsmiths' Hall London; printed London 1855).

⁴⁸ *Supra* note 20, 6 Jun. 1855.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 Feb. 1856.

⁵⁰ *Supra* note 16, 13 Dec. 1854.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6 Mar. 1855.

⁵² In his examination by the Committee, he commented: "The Committee will observe that there is no check there; the notes are filed in the office, and kept till the end of the quarter; then the assayer makes an entry of them, but the notes may be abstracted, or taken to light the fire, and there is no security when there is no regular system of account ... it is impossible for the distributor of Stamps to know that all the notes are produced to him, or that all the work assayed is entered in the accounts" (*Report of the Committee on Silver and Goldwares together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index* (London 1856)).

⁵³ *Supra* note 16, 3 Aug. 1855.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3 May 1867.

⁵⁵ 20 Jun. 1884.

