

meant that after the event all those he looked at were wrapped up with an invoice awaiting his return. Later, presented by Mrs How with a larger parcel and bill than anticipated, he protested that he had only meant to buy one. He was told 'all or nothing' and the parcel was placed in front of him very firmly on a little table in the downstairs anteroom. After a few moments of silent stand-off a returning member of staff was asked to show him out. As he left he called out towards the vanishing figure of Mrs How, who was returning to her eyrie, the little office on the half-landing, that he 'was never coming back'. The riposte that echoed down the historic cage staircase was 'That is my intention.' Perhaps a redundant duelling yard was a particularly suitable address for Mrs How's enterprise.

The author's first encounter with Mrs How was a personal challenge. At the very time that Mrs How was retiring from Albemarle Street, he had decided that as a spoon collector he should seek an audience with her at least once. When he mentioned this to a couple of dealers and collectors, eyebrows were raised and he was wished well in his endeavour. It was not a good start, he thought. He wrote a letter to Mrs How in which he introduced himself as a new spoon collector who wished to increase his collection with a broad spectrum of styles and places of origin. Having written the letter, he asked the Bourdon-Smiths to send it with a covering note to help his cause. Charmian Bourdon-Smith very soon received a phone call from Mrs How enquiring about the character of Mr Constable and asking if he was a serious collector of spoons. The response from Charmian was affirmative, and a little later the suppliant received a letter inviting him to Overnoons. A date and time were agreed, and he was informed that he must bring his entire collection of early spoons, which she would inspect to see if he was worthy of her attention.

On the agreed day they sat chatting for a short period and then he was asked to show her his

spoons. At that point, while he was kneeling down showing them to her, one of the mastiffs entered the room and prepared to protect his mistress from the intruder. One word from her and he returned from whence he came. Mrs How recognised a number of his spoons as old friends, so he passed the test and was subsequently invited to see what she had for sale. Those numbered about thirty spoons. After looking and playing as one does, it was selection time – which was a little like a chess game. At first he enquired if there were any that were not for sale. In response to this two were withdrawn and he was informed that they would be uneconomic for him to buy due to the price. His heart sank as the two stars had got away. They carried on, and he ended up with six spoons before him. At this point Mrs How invited him to help her make the tea and bring through the cake. On completion of a small repast Mrs How gathered up the spoons, looked David in the eye and informed him that she approved of his choice, that there was to be no negotiation and the price stated would be the price he was to pay. To that he replied that if they were too expensive there would be no deal. Mrs How then proceeded to write down the stock numbers and passed the spoons to him without telling him the prices. She told him to take the spoons home and said she would send a pro-forma invoice in due course. If he did not accept the price then he was to return the spoons by registered post, and if he did keep some or all of the spoons he could take up to six months' credit. Needless to say, most of the spoons became his.

About a year later he received a sale catalogue from a provincial auction house with a group of spoons entitled 'The Property of a Lady'. Horror of horrors, there were the two spoons that had got away. Mischievously he telephoned Mrs How and informed her that there were two Apostle Spoons just like hers in an auction. The response was 'I sold them to a wealthy gentleman who must have put them in the sale.'

## The History of the Firm

Born in Edinburgh in 1894 into a family of collectors, George Evelyn Paget How acquired an interest in silver at an early age. In 1911, when on his first voyage as a cadet in the Royal Navy, he found in Gibraltar a George II basting spoon on which he spent 32 shillings 6 pence (£1.62 ½p), leaving him with only 5 shillings (25p) pocket money for the remainder of a three-month cruise. The spoon is still a treasured possession of his family. From then on his collection progressed steadily, being brought together in exactly the same way as that of every collector of modest means.

In the difficult days of 1930, when promotion in the Navy was open to few, Commander How, as he then was, decided to take the bold step of retiring and venturing into business on his own as a dealer in silver. Before he finally left the Navy, while serving at Rosyth Dockyard, he founded his firm of C.N. How. It was based in a small flat with an attached studio for use as a showroom, five storeys up at the top of the *Scotsman* building at 28 North Bridge, Edinburgh. The name featured the initials of his first wife, who was partner and assistant in the original venture.

On 1 April 1931, the date which is always looked upon as that of the commencement of the firm proper, the Commander retired from the Navy and thereafter devoted himself to the business. The opening capital of the firm was so small as to be ludicrous. The stock consisted of Commander and Mrs How's treasured collection and some very fine silver held on sale or return from someone who had decided to part with their collection of silver.

All the work was done by the Hows, and the early books – which the firm still has – are in the Commander's own illegible hand. At first sales were few and it was a wrench to find a purchaser for most of the pieces as that meant parting with an old friend and treasured possession, but the income gave them the wherewithal to buy new things and continue the hunt – which is, after all, the attraction of running an antiques business.

Then came something of a gold rush and Commander How became a bullion dealer, breaking up false teeth for their gold plates, dodging gilt farthings handed over head upwards as half-sovereigns, and working sometimes nearly all night sending off parcels of gold for melt and assay.



*The firm's first showroom at 28 North Bridge, Edinburgh in 1931*

There was so much work to be done that a full-time secretary was taken on and the Commander's brother joined them temporarily to assist him. As a result of very considerable turnover in gold, although the net profit was only 5 per cent, enough money was made to enable the firm to move from its lofty but somewhat inaccessible premises at 28 North Bridge and to open at 7 Charlotte Square in the west end as How of Edinburgh.

In 1932 Commander How published his first article on Scottish tea spoons. This was to set the scene for him and the business; much research was undertaken and many articles published. During the Second World War a set of six notes was produced as a way of keeping in touch with clients – some articles were deliberately controversial, with the aim of generating response and encouraging learning. Various articles were also written for the *Connoisseur*.

Also in 1932 the Commander registered his first mark at the Edinburgh Assay Office as an 'antique silver reproducer' at 7 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh; in the same year he also registered the mark of How of Edinburgh. In Charlotte Square business improved, but the main source of supply of antique silver was the London sale-rooms, and that inevitably meant days and nights of travelling between London and Edinburgh every week. This, together with the fact that there were few big collectors in Edinburgh, made it inevitable that a branch of the firm would be opened in London.



The firm's first London premises, in 1932



The outside showrooms at 15 Stratton Street, the firm's London premises, in 1936

On 1 June 1933 How of Edinburgh Limited opened at 13 Berkeley Square, London. Commander How turned his personal business into a limited liability company in order to bring in more capital to support the opening the London branch and fund the rapid expansion. The firm had part of the ground floor and the basement of one of the most delightful houses then standing on the east side of the square. It was a perfect setting to show the very fine silver in which the business had always dealt. Very soon after the opening of the Berkeley Square premises, Mrs How began to suffer from an illness from which she never recovered. That made it impossible to run the business both in London and Edinburgh, and 7 Charlotte Square was closed down, the Commander never going back there. The Hows later divorced.

The original group behind How of Edinburgh, who were joint owners of the firm with Commander How, were the following relatives and friends of his: Mrs G.E.P. How (Cecily, the Commander's first wife), Mrs Wescott, Mrs H.A. Trotter (the Commander's sister), Mr A.F. Graham Watson and Miss J.P. Benson (who had joined the firm on 23 April 1935). In 1936 the firm was faced with the fact that 13 Berkeley Square was to be pulled down. New premises had to be found. It was decided to take larger premises and to enlarge the staff and stock in an endeavour to obtain 'bread-and-butter' trade in later and less costly pieces. A move to 15 Stratton Street duly took place.

The same year saw the firm's first major exhibition of silver stock, which was accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue priced at 2 shillings 6 pence (12½p). Included in the catalogue were illustrations of all the items for sale, apart from an agate casket and a copper-gilt cup and cover. Those two pieces were part of the Airthrey Treasures, which the firm offered for sale in the same year; the Airthrey Treasures featured in the exhibition catalogue although they were sold separately at Sotheby's in 1937, when they were offered as 'Formerly the Property of the late Donald Graham of Airthrey Castle, Bridge of Allan':

#### Comprising

A Superb Renaissance Gold Globe Cup

Probably by Jeronimus Pertei of Nuremberg  
Two very fine Mother-O'-Pearl Silver-Mounted dishes, Netherlands, circa 1600

A Tigerware Jug with Silver Mounts

By Thomas Matew, Barnstaple, circa 1570

A Magnificent Silver-Gilt Chalice, The Hague, 1660

A Large Agate Casket; A Bronze-Gilt Horse;  
and a Copper-Gilt Cup and Cover

Sold at auction by Messrs Sotheby & Co,  
On Thursday, the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, 1937

## The Hows' Publications

A permanent memorial to the partnership of Commander and Mrs How is their three-volume catalogue, entitled *English and Scottish Silver Spoons, Medieval to Late Stuart, and Pre-Elizabethan Hallmarks on English Plate*. This work represented a great stride forward in the presentation of spoons and marks when it was published in the 1950s. Volumes 1 and 2 cover many types of spoon; the third volume is mainly concerned with pre-Elizabethan hallmarks, but it includes an addendum on several spoons that are not in the earlier volumes.

The Commander for many years had collected photographs of silver objects and their marks, and was ably helped in this by Miss Benson. The production of the catalogue was given a good start with the experience the two had gained by producing the 1935 Ellis catalogue on provincial spoons, which included illustrations of many spoons together with their hallmarks.

The How catalogue, which was essentially a hobby, was intended to be published in 1947. That was not to be, and the delay turned out to be beneficial as subsequently a lot more information came to light, notably some link spoons, which increased the scholarly content of the volumes. The Commander was side-tracked in the mid-1940s, when he decided to throw more light on the fascinating subject of Apostle Spoons and their emblems. A couple of large collectors not only granted him access to their spoons but allowed him to take them home for further research. One night he was focusing on the Bernal set of Apostles, which from the time that they were sold in 1859 had been accepted by all authorities as being of the year 1519. He was not concerned at the time about the date or the marks, but was studying the figures of the saints and their emblems. Almost subconsciously, his mind kept coming back to the forms of the spoons, particularly the bowls. All of a sudden a flash of inspiration came to him. He became aware that either the theories about the shape of the bowls, their stems and their changing form were at fault or else they were the key to the first four cycles of hallmarks and therefore to errors in Sir Charles Jackson's works on the subject. After much research the Hows confirmed that they were able to

ascrbe the four cycles of the marks correctly, and with confidence redated the Bernal Apostles to 1539. This meant that they were able to reasccribe a number of other pieces of silver with more certainty.

They realised that their decision always to photograph the marks gave a great deal more accuracy than relying on previously drawn hallmarks. Errors would not creep in through missing off a few whiskers, which could make all the difference to accurate dating. By 1941 they had decided that it was imperative to photograph as many of the items studied by Jackson as possible. The decision was also taken to incorporate in their catalogue detailed descriptions of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century spoons and their changing form. That was because many of their conclusions and alterations of ascriptions were corroborated by minor modifications in the form of the spoons on which the marks appeared. This decision led them to expand their work from covering hallmarks to incorporate the changing forms of spoons, comparing the finial types and creating detailed comparisons of the apostle types.

The Hows recognised that good-quality full-size photography is very time consuming and requires a lot of skill. Their aim was to reproduce the marks at approximately three times normal size, and to duplicate marks in order to compare them and ensure the accuracy of their conclusions. As they had difficulty in obtaining the quality of photographs they wanted, they decided to perfect their own system in order to photograph as many spoons, items of silver and marks as they could. It was not uncommon thereafter for a member of the How firm to turn up with photographic paraphernalia at an auction viewing and proceed to take photographs. On one such occasion they were at Phillips's and Eric Smith, the head of silver, decided that this was not acceptable, ordering them off the premises. As may be imagined, Mrs How was not impressed and demanded to know the reason for his behaviour. Eric would not budge until he had a full apology from Mrs How and an undertaking that she would always ask permission in future before setting up for photography.

Commander and Mrs How were not prepared to compromise the quality of the publication and style of their catalogue, and therefore after some consideration they decided that they would bear the full cost themselves and publish it privately. Their ambition was that their great work would be so comprehensive that it would not be necessary for anyone to attempt another large work of reference on the same subject; however, they were very concerned about how many collectors would pay to have the catalogue.

It would be very difficult to achieve what the Hows did today. That is because the availability of the spoons would be a great problem as they are now spread far and wide. One of the great advantages that they had was that they were considered among the top dealers in spoons, which gave them access to many of them – and that included items held in national collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, to which they made reference in their work. Since then there has not been a book comparable to theirs. Tim Kent has written several books on spoons and their makers, all of which should be in any serious collector's library, and in particular has given collectors the ability to ascribe many of their spoons, whereas the Hows' approach concentrated on forms and styles and on correcting the London leopard's heads and date ranges.

The first of the three volumes was printed in 1952 and the second in 1953; the final volume appeared after the Commander's death in 1957. There were fifty copies printed on mould-made paper and bound in leather, with a further five hundred copies printed on good-quality paper and bound in dark blue

card with dust jackets. Once these copies had been sold Mrs How would have sets bound to order. During 2002 the place in Scotland where the unbound copies were being stored closed down, and the author was asked to store them on behalf of Mrs How. It came to light that approximately eighty copies of volume II were missing, and on enquiring he was informed by Mrs How that there had been a warehouse fire in which the missing ones had been destroyed. It is therefore now possible to bind only a further seventy copies. Sets become available at auction from time to time; they are a must for any serious spoon collector and any scholar who requires extremely good reproductions of pre-Elizabethan marks for study.

The Hows wrote numerous articles for *Apollo* and the *Connoisseur*. Their other publications are their six notes on antique silver, the first three appearing in the summers of 1941, 1942 and 1943, and the remaining three dated 1944–5, 1946–7 and 1948–9. Their other works, apart from the Ellis and How catalogues, are the following:

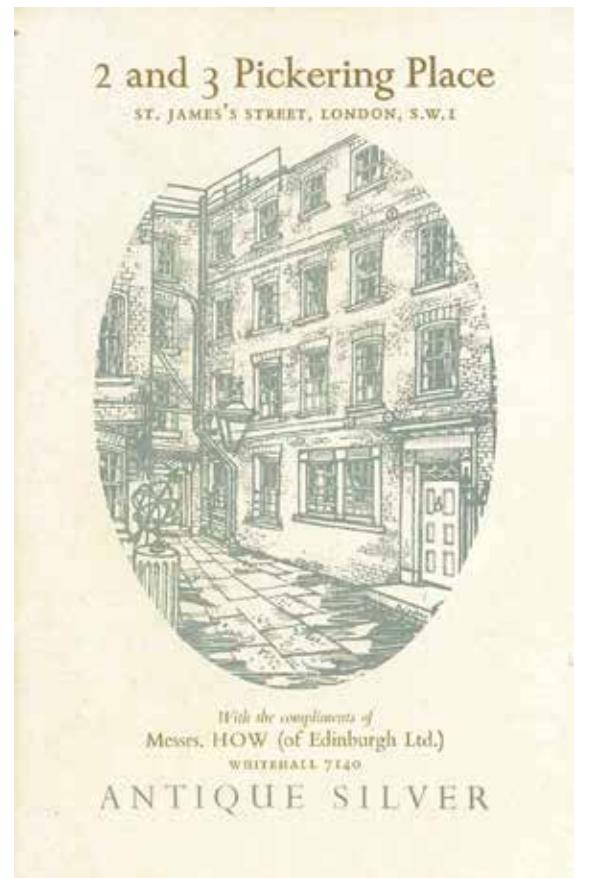
- *How of Edinburgh Ltd*, three editions, in 1936, 1937 and 1992, catalogues of the firm's stock
- A Coconut Cup, made by Thomas Lindsay of Dundee circa 1600
- The Eddystone Lighthouse Salt, made by Rowe of Plymouth circa 1698
- Restoration and the Law, a reprint of articles which appeared in various periodicals 1949–50
- With Intent to Deceive
- The Hall-Mark Tomorrow? (A suggestion)
- Scottish Standing Mazers.

A second exhibition was held by How of Edinburgh in 1937 and a fully illustrated catalogue was again produced.

No one could have foreseen in 1936 the difficult times that were to come. The firm opened in palatial premises with extra staff at 15 Stratton Street, but the times grew steadily worse. With the outbreak of war in 1939, the very survival of the firm was in danger. The large overheads of the luxurious premises ate into capital, and finally the solution was to cut the very big losses in the struggle for existence. In 1940 Stratton Street was closed, and the Commander rejoined the Royal Navy. Miss Benson,

one secretary and the ever-faithful Nellie – the cleaner, messenger, packer and general factotum – kept the business going, having temporarily moved to the shop of a firm of decorators in Sloane Street. Shortly afterwards Commander How, whose health did not permit him to serve at sea, returned to the firm to rebuild and resuscitate How of Edinburgh Ltd.

During the blitz much of the small stock of silver was kept in the country for safety. After that gradually things improved until trade became very good. Commander How and Miss Benson were married in 1946. In spite of serious illness on the part of the



and the United States. How of Edinburgh built up an extraordinary reputation, which increased after Mrs How took over completely after the illness and then the death of the Commander. By 1950 it was evident that he would never again take a fully active part in the running of the firm. He resigned the managing directorship in favour of his wife, retaining the chairmanship of the company. He spent three or four nights in the middle of each week in London, carrying on with research and writing. He and his wife were usually at home for visitors after the shop was officially closed at 5.45 p.m.

In 1953 Percy Bourdon-Smith decided to pay the Hows a visit to enquire if they would be prepared to take on his son John. John was offered a six-month trial. When he first reported for work he was directed to stay downstairs with the dogs to annotate corrections to a large pile of copies of the Ellis catalogue. Several days later he was dispatched to Esher to draw the marks that were struck on a small seventeenth-century German trencher salt cellar which had just come on the market – the Hows did not want to draw attention to this discovery, which they had made ahead of other dealers. John returned to the firm with his drawing, but unfortunately he had drawn the object and not the marks. The How management announced that he could serve out his six months but would never become a long-term employee or director. He swallowed his pride and left their employment soon afterwards.

John Bourdon-Smith started riding around the countryside on his motorbike, buying and selling silver. While in St Andrews he discovered a 15oz Scottish square salver of 1732, which he duly took to Mrs How, selling it to her for £60 after having paid £40 himself. John handed the salver to Mrs How in the lower showroom. She took it upstairs, pondered over it for a bit, and then descended to the ground floor where he was anxiously waiting and said, 'John, that is a lovely bit of silver you have got there, but it is a crazy price for an unmarked bit of Scottish silver.' When John pointed out that it was marked on the feet she ran upstairs as fast as she could to get her cheque book.

It is true to say that the Hows as a working pair handled or had a hand in helping the transfer of ownership of some of the earliest pieces of good Scottish silver. Among them are the gold ampulla, part of the Scottish regalia made for the anointing of Charles I in 1633; the Tulloch standing mazer (drinking vessel) by James Gray of Cannongate, dated 1557, which is the earliest of standing Scottish mazers and – according to How – 'the most beautiful of them all'; and the Fergusson mazer dated 1576, made by Adam Craig with Deacon James Mosman.

In English silver the Hows handled the sale of the Dolben Cup, now confirmed as having been made by Robert Smythier in London in 1678. This magnificent silver cup and cover is by far the largest known example of the form and was the gift of the

City of London to Mr Justice Dolben. It bears a Latin inscription which translates as 'To William Dolben Knight formally Recorder of the City now elected to the Bench of judges from the Corporation of London on account of benefits rendered and rejoicing at the honour [conferred on him] 1678'. On one side are the arms of the City of London and on the other the arms of the Dolben family. When the cup was originally presented it was filled with sovereigns.

The company registered its London marks in 1954. After the death of the Commander, the mark 'IH' in a lozenge was registered in 1958 for Jane How, trading as How of Edinburgh. The same marks were registered at the Edinburgh Assay Office in the following year.

The firm continued to be innovative. Mrs How mounted the first overseas exhibition of museum-quality objects belonging to a dealer at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto in 1958. Her stand at the Grosvenor House Antiques Fair was eagerly scrutinised by many who never ventured into the premises in Pickering Place. However, working on the stand became something of a hazard for Mrs How as potential purchasers who were not especially favoured would try to time a visit to Pickering Place to coincide with one of her absences.

When the lease came to an end in the late 1980s the property reverted to Berry Bros & Rudd Ltd. The firm made its final move, to 28 Albemarle Street, London. In 1992 at Albemarle Street, fifty-six years after the firm's first exhibition, Mrs How put on the third, again with a fully illustrated catalogue – a feat of which she was particularly proud. The doors finally closed in the late 1990s, but Mrs How maintained a residence in London, at 1a Arlington House, Arlington Street, sw1. The spoons that remained in Mrs How's stock, which the author viewed during a visit to Mrs How in 1999, were sold at Woolley and Wallis on 2 May 2001 (Lots 68–95). This sale, seventy years after the firm was founded, was probably the official end of How of Edinburgh.

After Mrs How's death on 25 June 2004, her executors sold the remaining How of Edinburgh stock, a total of 400 lots, at the Salisbury salerooms of Woolley and Wallis on Tuesday 30 October 2007. The quality of the stock varied enormously, particularly where spoons were concerned. However it must be recognised that the Hows would have retained many of those spoons in connection with their quest for learning and as reference items for their research.

## The Catalogue

In the following entries all the items in the Benson Collection are individually numbered, and the Ashmolean loan number is supplied for each. Photographs of each spoon are included. Each is shown from a number of angles so that all details are presented to the reader.

The first part of each entry comprises information about spoon type, measurements (length in centimetres and inches, and weight in grams and troy ounces), maker and marks, date and period of manufacture, place of manufacture, and finally a reference to the How catalogues.

The details given for each item begin with a description of the spoon, supplied by the author. Sometimes the description is followed by further information also provided by the author. In most entries there are comments made by How, all of which appear under the specific subheading 'How's comments'. For some spoons there is extra information, particularly relating to comparisons across the collection, links with spoons outside the collection, and bibliographical references. Those are given in abbreviated form; full details of the works cited are included in the bibliography.

Terms that are italicized are references to the glossary at the end of the book, where an explanation is supplied. Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to How, *English and Scottish Silver Spoons*.

*Spoons no longer in the Benson collection that are illustrated in How*

As with many collections, spoons are added and deleted as a collection matures; the Benson collection was no different. The following spoons are no longer part of the collection:

- Volume I, p.84: Slip Top
- Volume I, p.114: Maidenhead
- Volume I, p. 164: Diamond Point
- Volume I, p.214: Pre 1478 London Seal Top
- Volume I, p.356: Gothic Acorn Knop
- Volume I, p. 358: Bronze-Gilt Spur
- Volume II, pp.62–65: The Thomas Apostle Spoons,  
St James the Greater and St Peter
- Volume II, p.196: Head and Neck Finial