

Silver Service

A new book on the designers behind the post-war renaissance in British silver is published next month. Co-author John Andrew considers the politics behind the resurgence, as well as its leading lights



Robert Goodden's condiment set designed for British American Tobacco.

IT IS NOW DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE, but thirty years ago, there was hardly any interest in the secondary market for modern designer British silver, often referred to as 'post war'. Handcrafted, well-designed pieces of good gauge were generally sold at around £5-10 an ounce. Interest began to grow in the 1990s but, even as the millennium approached, the market was still in its infancy. I remember being delighted at securing a pair of Stuart Devlin three-light candelabra, with spherical filigree gilt globes, at a charity auction in one of the Home Counties. When we arrived to retrieve our treasure one of the organisers, looking down her nose said, with utter disdain: "We cannot understand why you bought these when we had so many nice candelabra to choose from." My comment – that I had been looking for a pair for some time – was met with the ultimate look of incredibility.

Growing interest

After the year 2000 there was an increasing interest in the subject and prices began to harden as buyers' confidence grew. Initially Phillips spearheaded the auction houses' development of the market, which was continued by Bonhams when the two companies merged. Other houses also added the genre to their repertoire. The only thing missing was a book on the subject. In 2008 Derek Styles, of the silverware shop Styles Silver, wrote an article on the subject. The Antique Collectors' Club saw a gap in the market and asked if he would like to write the missing volume. In turn Dersk asked me if I was prepared to undertake joint authorship on the project.

Silver revival

The result is the first book to give a full account of what has been called the renaissance in British silver following

World War II. This laid the foundation for the UK to become a centre of excellence for silver design. As far as we know, it is also the first volume written about a generation of silversmiths that is based largely on one-to-one interviews with its fifty leading players. As Gordon Hamme, the founder of British Silver Week, comments in the foreword, this interview approach brings, "the diverse characters to life, making it a joy to read." Furthermore, the book has been designed so a good general outline of the subject can be obtained simply by reading the extended captions for the images. Although the work on post-war British designer silversmiths took more than five years to write, it took even longer to decide on the title. We had to have a cut-off point and decided this would be smiths who *started* working in 1985. Those who were already working at the

end of the war, as well as those who became silversmiths up until 1985, were therefore included. To try to convey this succinctly proved impossible until I came up with the idea of using the parameters of the establishment of the smiths' studios. Alphabetically the smiths covered range from Malcolm Appleby to John Willmin and chronologically from R. E. Stone to Rod Kelly. Their work is covered up until the present, or until they finished working.

Royal appointment

The story of modern designer silver begins far earlier than imagined and with a most unlikely catalyst – George V. His Majesty was tired of handing out traditional trophies at Ascot each year and in 1925 sent his representative to Goldsmiths' Hall with the simple message, "Get silversmiths to design contemporary trophies". Surprisingly the Goldsmith's Company did nothing, so when the representative returned early the following year, there was no news to relay to the palace. A design competition was organised for the Ascot of 1927, but His Majesty rejected the short-listed designs. However, something positive did happen that year. The company began to form a collection of modern British silver and today it is the best one devoted to designer British silver.

Silversmiths were not alone. In the early 1930s, the government thought the entirety of British industry was lacking in the design department. In 1933 the Council for Art and Industry was formed chaired by the seemingly unlikely Frank Pick, a lawyer, who had run London Transport for years. Committees were formed for each sector, including silverware, which was chaired by none other than Mr Pick



A silver chalice made by Gerald Benney.

himself. Among the suggestions made was an exhibition of modern silver. In 1938 around 500 pieces were placed on display at Goldsmiths' Hall. The event attracted an incredible 37,000 visitors. Nevertheless, war clouds were gathering and hostilities began the following year.

War effort

The last thing you would expect to happen during a war is for a government to spearhead a project for improving the nation's design capability in peacetime.



Gerald Benney's cruet set.



A tea service designed by Eric Clements.

But that is exactly what happened in 1941 when it was realised the country would need hard currency after the war to repay the loans that had financed our part in the hostilities. This meant exporting manufactured goods and, in a competitive market, this meant improving design. In 1944 the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) was established with exactly that in mind.

A month after hostilities ended in 1945, the CoID announced an exhibition to run from September to November the following year to showcase 'the best and only the best that modern British industry can produce'. It covered the full range of consumer goods, including a little silverware, and also explained the importance of design in British industry; it was called Britain Can Make It (BCMI). One of the some 1.4 million visitors was a teenage boy from Sheffield, but more of him later. While the exhibition stimulated interest, it did not of course get designers into industry or into establishments of learning. One of the conduits the government decided to achieve both objectives was the Royal College of Art.

Darwin's evolution

In 1948 the artist Robin Darwin was appointed Rector of the Royal College of Art. He had written the introduction to the BCMI catalogue. In turn he drafted a raft of new blood into the college. This included the architect Robert Goodden, who had designed the 'Sports and Leisure Section' at BCMI. He was appointed professor of what became the School of Silversmithing and Jewellery. Despite the fact Goodden didn't turn out to be an inspirational teacher, the school was a great success from the very beginning. One of his earliest successes was Eric Clements who



Stuart Devlin's candelabra seen at Chatsworth.

became an educator, industrial and silver designer. However, the golden trio was David Mellor (the teenage boy from Sheffield at BCMI), Gerald Benney and Robert Welch, who joined in three successive years from 1950. They were an impressive triumvirate. All three were educators at stages in their careers; all were silversmiths, but not necessarily for all of their careers and all were also industrial designers. More to the point, all three founded businesses that today are continued by a son.

New generation

There is no doubting that the young Graham Hughes, appointed exhibition secretary at the Goldsmiths' Company in 1951, worked endlessly in promoting modern silver. He persuaded businesses in the City to commission the new generation of silversmiths and he



Robert Welch's striking designs.

also staged a dozen exhibitions per year bringing modern silver to the public's attention. However, I felt that a link was missing to bring the renaissance to fruition. Despite searching for the blue touch paper nothing materialised until I asked Stuart Devlin, probably the best-known and arguably the most creative of the silversmiths to emerge from the 1950s, what he considered was the trigger. He responded, "Gerald [Benney] brought a richness to silver, a contribution to the idiom." The problem for us was the fact Gerald had died some years earlier.

Benney v Scandinavia

A few months later, however, his widow Janet suggested I look at a letter she had found. First she told me a story of how Gerald had been devastated when an American lady told him, in the late 1950s, that his silver "was not modern British, but modern Scandinavian." While the letter was insightful, it was not groundbreaking. However, other papers, which included many cuttings, seemed more interesting. It was not long before I found a page from a longer interview with Gerald. The article was not dated and there was no indication of the publication.

In it Gerald said that he "with four or five" other smiths was "trying to design silver which is immediately recognisable as English." This was a real eureka moment. What had been puzzling me for some years then all fell into place. Stuart Devlin had given up silver for sculpture in the early 1960s. However, when he saw that Gerald had broken the Bauhaus/Scandinavian idiom, he realised his true vocation and returned to it.

Devlin's influence

Like Benney, Devlin did not like the Scandinavian influence on British silver – he found it alien to his nature, while Gerald found it sterile. He also realised that the personal items he made for his wife and friends were far more romantic than his public work. So, while retaining the simple forms of his objects, he started to enrich them to create an air of romanticism. He added gilding, textured surfaces and filigree work. He drew on his skills of working with molten metals that he had learnt as a sculptor. The result was work the likes of which had not been seen before in the world of silversmithing. In 1968, the newspaper columnist Godfrey Winn described Stuart's workshop as "an Aladdin's cave" and his creations, "the work of a magician". Undoubtedly Devlin's creativity was the catalyst that gave the renaissance its momentum.

Designer British Silver From Studios Established 1930-1985 by John Andrew and Derek Styles is published by the Antique Collector's Club, priced £75. For an exclusive subscribers' pre publication offer see page 41.



'Pride' tea service designed by David Mellor in 1958.