

Silver ceremonial trowels

ANTHONY BERNBAUM

Introduction

This article serves as an introduction to the history and design of presentation and ceremonial silver trowels and their use in the various ceremonies involved with the laying of foundation stones and other similar occasions.¹ It examines the emergence of the use of trowels in Great Britain in the eighteenth century and their widespread use during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when rapid urbanisation and the construction of numerous churches and civic buildings lead to a boom in their use. The article will also look at the design of these ceremonial trowels and will highlight in particular some wonderful examples by Arts and Crafts silversmiths and designers. In conclusion it will look at developments in their use after the Second World War and the demise in their popularity.

Silver trowels remain an obscure and esoteric area of the silversmith's and silver collector's repertoire: a very poor cousin compared, say, to the caddy spoon and it is the author's intention that this article should demonstrate that this obscurity is not deserved. Ceremonial trowels represent an old tradition, a window into some great architecture, buildings and social history. The dullest of silver trowels may still carry an often untold and revealing story of civic pride, charitable endeavour, religious zeal, social conscience or economic ambition. On occasion these elements are augmented by innovative silver designs conjuring some wonderful examples of trowels which compare favourably to distinguished pieces of any genre.

Overall this article focuses on British trowels but it strays abroad on occasion to illustrate some exceptional

examples of design. Whilst not explored in any detail in this article foundation stone ceremonies, in which silver trowels were used, have also been part of an international culture both in continental Europe and the Commonwealth.²

The history of foundation stone ceremonies and silver trowels

The idea of celebrating the construction of a new building with ceremonial dates back hundreds of years and crosses many cultures. The foundation stone (or cornerstone) represents the first stone set in a masonry foundation; it is of crucial importance as all other stones will be set in reference to this stone, thereby determining the position of the entire structure. Over time a cornerstone would come to be a ceremonial stone, or replica, set in a prominent location on the outside of a building which often bore an inscription indicating the construction dates of the building and the names of the architect, builder and other significant individuals.

As early as the sixteenth century foundation stone ceremonies were recorded in Britain and Ireland as major civic events. In 1592 Trinity College, Dublin held a foundation stone ceremony lead by the mayor of Dublin.³ In England, the foundation stone of St Paul's Cathedral was laid at a ceremony believed to be held in 1675 (although further foundation or coping stone ceremonies were held in the 1690s). In 1739 Westminster Bridge and in 1760 William Pitt Bridge (now Blackfriars Bridge) both had major foundation stone ceremonies attracting thousands of visitors.⁴

1 Throughout this article the nomenclature of ceremonial trowels refers to trowels used at foundation stone, corner stone, coping stone or topping out ceremonies. The former two are the same ceremony which celebrates the commencement of building works, the latter two celebrate the completion of the roof

structure or finishing of the works. The article does not cover mallets although these do link very closely with the use and history of silver trowels.

2 Two of the earliest references to the use of a ceremonial silver trowel which the author has found are in continental Europe.

The *English Daily* journal of 13 August 1730 reported: "Paris August 19th.

The 13th King [of France] ... went to the new Bridge at Compiègne, which is to be called Pont Royal.

His Majesty put on an Apron fringed with gold and taking up a Silver Trowel out of a Bason of Silver full of mortar, laid

the first stone ...". Pre-dating this is evidence that the Pope used a silver trowel as part of the Jubilee ceremony, possibly as early as the fourteenth century.

3 John Pentland Mahaffy, *An epoch in Irish history: Trinity College Dublin, its foundation and early fortunes 1591-1660*, Dublin, 1903.

4 As reported in contemporary newspapers the Lodge of Antiquities holds a silver mallet, said to have been used by Charles II at the ceremony at St Paul's Cathedral, which Sir Christopher Wren, a freemason, owned until his death when he bequeathed it to his lodge.

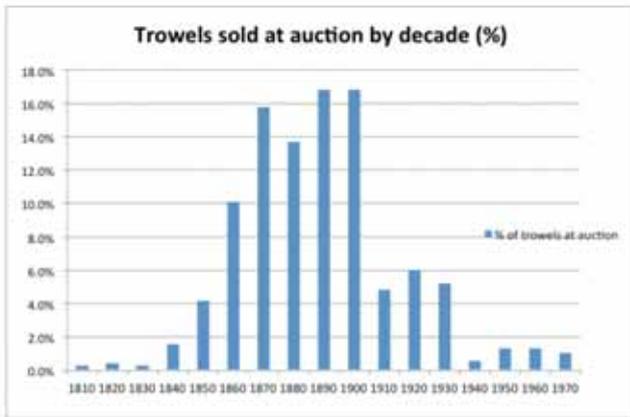


Fig 1 Distribution of trowels by date: data taken from auction records

There is, however, no evidence that any of the ceremonies mentioned above involved a silver trowel. In England references to the use of silver trowels do not appear until the beginning of the eighteenth century and, even then, references to them are infrequent. There seems to be no surviving image of an early or mid eighteenth-century British ceremonial trowel although they were certainly used in this period. On 17 May 1755 *The Evening Post* reported on the foundation stone ceremony for the new Middlesex Hospital which took place on 1 April:

After Divine Service the Right Hon, the Earl of Northumberland, walked from the Church to the Ground appointed for erecting the new Building for the Middlesex Hospital in Marylebone fields, in the following manner, namely, The Beadle of the Hospital with a silver staff; and next to him Two Masons supporting the first stone of the building, followed by Mr Gray, the Builder, bearing a Silver Trowel in his hand ...

At the Place above mentioned a spacious Ring being made, his Lordship, supported by Sir William Beauchamp Proctor and Col Cornwallis, laid the first stone of the Middlesex Hospital, amidst the Acclamations of Thousands of people.

The reference to the "Acclamations of Thousands" is worth noting as it is clear from contemporary sketches and paintings that foundation stone ceremonies were major events, to which formal invitations were issued and were attended by many. Such an image is shown in Fig 6.

The earliest surviving British silver trowels to have been located to date, and for which images are available, date from the 1820s⁵ and one of the very earliest of these is the trowel used to lay the foundation stone of the new premises of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell [Figs 2 and 3].⁶

An analysis of auctions over the period 1886 to 2011, using an aggregator auction website, is shown in the graph in Fig 1. It clearly shows how, based on trowels that appeared at auction, the use of silver trowels in Britain grew rapidly from 1850 to around 1914.⁷

There seem to be two main explanations for the adoption and rapid increase in the popularity of the silver trowel. One is the growth of Freemasonry over the period and the other is the development and growth of the professional architect. Both are considered below.

The role of Freemasonry

The role of the Freemasons is certainly significant in the development and history of the silver trowel.⁸

The ceremonial laying of foundation stones in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the remaining link between Operative and Speculative Masonry.⁹ It was probably because of this connection that Freemasons began to be asked, in the eighteenth century, to assist at the laying of foundation stones and continued to be asked to do so even after the connection with the Operative masons' craft had ceased. It is clear from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century local newspaper reports that local Freemason's lodges played a significant role in many, although not all, foundation stone ceremonies.

It seems that the significant role of the Freemasons in foundation stone ceremonies did not extend to guidance within their own doctrine for the use of silver trowels. The trowel is not mentioned as a specific tool in early accounts of Masonic foundation stone laying ceremonies, including that of the ceremony observed at the laying of the foundation stone of the first Freemasons' hall in May 1775. It is also not mentioned at any time in the instructions for the "Ceremony of Laying a Foundation Stone by the M W Grand Master" which appeared in the *Book of Constitutions of the United Grand Lodge of England* which governed such ceremonies until 1922. The book simply referred to the fact that:

...the cement is laid on the lower stone [no mention of a tool] and the upper one is laid down slowly, solemn music playing.

The first official recorded use of a silver trowel as an essential implement used in a Masonic ceremony laying a foundation stone was in fact at a much later date when the foundation stone of the Masonic Million Memorial (the present Freemasons' Hall on Great Queen Street, London) was laid on 14 June 1927.



Fig 2 Trowel, silver-gilt, Dublin, 1814-15, maker's mark of James Le Bas, for Rundell, Bridge & Rundell's new premises
(© V&A Images, Victoria Albert Museum)



Fig 3 Trowel, silver-gilt, Dublin, 1814-15, maker's mark of James Le Bas, reverse of blade
(© V&A Images, Victoria Albert Museum)

The role of architects

The development of professional architecture during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is an important factor in the growth of the popularity of silver trowels.¹⁰ The expansion of the architectural profession dates to the latter part of the eighteenth century when the industrialisation of Britain led to a rapid growth in building construction as well as the development of new materials and processes for construction and the demand for architects grew commensurately.

On 20 September 1791 the Architects Club was established thereby bringing together the leading architects of the day; the club enabled architects to share knowledge and ideas. The Society of Civil Engineers was established twenty years earlier in 1771; it became the Institute of Civil Engineers in 1818. The work of the leading architects of this period, such as John Soane, ultimately led to the establishment in 1834 of the Institute of British Architects, now known as the RIBA. Two highly influential periodicals, *The Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal* and *The Builder* were launched in 1837 and 1840 respectively.

As the practice of architecture was professionalised so it was also commercialised. It would seem from contemporary newspaper sources that architects encouraged foundation ceremonies and acquired trowels inscribed with their names for such ceremonies as a form of self promotion. The naming of the architect on the engraving of a foundation stone trowel, whilst a logical step for posterity, quite probably arose because of the architect's role in originating the ceremony. Seven of the trowels illustrated in this article bear an architect's name. In the records of Omar Ramsden (see note 23), albeit early in the twentieth century, it is recorded that architects ordered trowels from the silversmith directly rather than from a retailer.

In the *Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal*, under the pseudonym 'Candidus's Note Book' the following commentary appears:

Among those whimsical absurdities to which custom reconciles is that of inscribing the name of the architect and the date

5 The earliest surviving silver trowel I have identified is Dutch and was made in 1743 by Arnodus Van Essen of Groningen; this is in the collection of the Groningen Museum.

6 A British trowel of 1810 has been identified which was sold at auction but no images of it exist. It was described as having the engraved inscription: "Bristol March 19th 1810 With this trowel the foundation stone of the Commercial Coffee Rooms was laid by G. Dyer Esq., Chairman and Treasurer" within a wreath and with an ivory handle. An Irish trowel, similarly identified, of Dublin, 1791 by Joseph Jackson, is described as being an Irish George III presentation trowel of elongated form, the blade inscribed "The first stone of/The House of Industry/Laid by the/Rt. Hon. Tho. Connolly/at the request of the Governors/as the first mover of a Bill for /establishing such institutions/in this kingdom/19th September 1791", with a turned wood handle. Just prior to publication of this article one of the earliest English trowels known appeared as lot 265 at Bonham's sale of 27 January 2015. This trowel was used by Lord Thomas Dundas, on behalf of the Prince Regent, to lay the foundation stone of

Regents (now Vauxhall) Bridge on 9 May 1811. The trowel, dated London 1810 has the maker's mark of William Eley I, William Fern and William Chawner II.

7 All British trowels which appeared at auction over the period on the auction site's database, up until June 2011, were assessed; they totalled 781 and both silver and silver plated examples were counted. The date of inscription was used if it differed from that of the hallmark. As far as was possible trowels that appeared more than once at auction were counted once only.

8 This section draws from information kindly provided by the librarians at Freemasons' Hall.

9 The Operative masons were those practising masonry as a craft from whom the Freemasons originated. By the eighteenth century the Masonic movement drew its members from a wide range of professions and hence became known as 'Speculative Masonry'.

10 This section draws heavily from Spiro Kostof, *The Architect, Chapters in the History of the Profession*, Oxford, 1977, ch 7, John Wilton-Ely, *The Rise of the Professional Architect in England*.



Fig 4 John Mead, the Golden Salmon, 32 Ludgate Hill, the new facade of Rundell Bridge & Rundell's premises, watercolour (Guildhall Library, Corporation of London)



Fig 5 Trowel, silver-gilt, London, 1827-28, maker's mark of James William Garland, for the new London Bridge



Fig 6 Laying the foundation stone of new London Bridge on 15 June 1825, watercolour (Guildhall Library © City of London)

11 *The Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal*, 1839, vol 2, p 85.

12 Timothy Schroder, *The Gilbert Collection of Gold and Silver*, Los Angeles, 1988, no 109, pp 412-3.

13 John Culme, *The Directory of Gold & Silversmiths Jewellers & Allied Traders 1838-1914*, Woodbridge, 1987, vol 1, p 398.

of a building, not where they can be seen and convey such information at as single glance, but where they must remain unseen forever, namely on the foundation stone.....It is all very well to bury underground the names of lord mayors or other official worthies and dignitaries who assist at the ceremony of laying of the first stone because it matters not how soon they and everything relating to the childish silver trowel part of the business are forgotten; but that there should ever by any mystery or room for doubt as to who was really the architect of the building ...¹¹

Whilst not direct evidence of the role of architects in promoting foundation stone ceremonies this passage does show how the use of silver trowels must have been reasonably widespread by 1840.

Georgian and Victorian presentation trowels

This section illustrates examples of several of the more notable trowels used for significant buildings of the period; these are set out in chronological order. A distinctive aspect of the genre of silver trowels is their link to so many great buildings and the leading figures who presided over foundation stone ceremonies.

Figs 2 and 3 illustrate the trowel used for the opening of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell's new shop at 32 Ludgate Hill in 1825/6 whilst Fig 4, a watercolour by the architect John Mead, shows the completed building. The inscription on the trowel reads:

The first stone of the New house for Messrs Rundell Bridge & Rundell was laid with this trowel by John Gawler Bridge, 4th August 1825. John Clement Mead Architect.

The trowel is a good size and weight being 15¹/₄ in (38.4 cm) long and weighing over 16 oz (500g). The maker's mark on the trowel is not that of Rundell's but rather that of James Le Bas, the Irish silversmith; the trowel was assayed in Dublin in 1814-15. Timothy Schroder in his catalogue of the Gilbert Collection (which included the trowel) proposed that the reason for this was that there was insufficient time for Rundell Bridge and Rundell to make the trowel for the ceremony.¹² An alternative possibility is that the foundation stone ceremony was organised by the architect John Mead who, therefore, provided the trowel himself, which he purchased and had inscribed elsewhere. The trowel and a copper plate engraved with the facade of the shop were sold by a descendant of the architect so he must have retained it after the ceremony.¹³ The fish engraved on the back must be a reference to the 'Golden Salmon', the name of the shop.

Fig 5 shows the silver-gilt trowel used for laying the foundation stone of the new London Bridge. The hallmarks are for James William Garland, London, 1827-28 and the reverse is engraved with the arms of the City of London and the inscription reads:

With This Trowel the first Stone on The City Side of the New London Bridge was laid in the foundation of the abutment by The Right Honourable MATHHIAS PRIME LUCAS Lord Mayor on the 12th day of March 1828.



Fig 7 Trowel, London, 1837-38, maker's mark of Robert Garrard II, for the Fitzwilliam Museum
 (© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

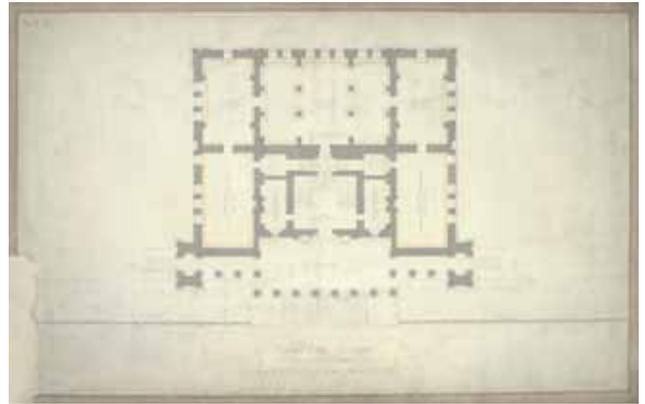


Fig 8 Architect's plans of the Fitzwilliam Museum as engraved on the blade of the trowel in Fig 7
 (© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

The ceremony was reported in the *Morning Chronicle* of 13 March 1828:

Mr Jones, The Chairman of the Bridge committee, then handed to his Lordship [the Lord Mayor] a silver trowel, used in the ceremony of laying the first stones of the other piers.....The stone having been lowered, his Lordship used the trowel in a workmanlike manner.

The reference to the trowel being used to lay the first stones of the other piers may refer to a ceremony that took place on the south side of the bridge in 1825 for which a different silver-gilt trowel was used which was made by Green, Ward and Green. A contemporary engraving exists of the 1825 southside ceremony [Fig 6].

The silver trowel used for the laying the foundation stone of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge [Fig 7] on 2 November 1837 was made by Robert Garrard II and is marked for London 1837-38. Unlike so many trowels of the Victorian period, its quality shines through. The engraving on the blade depicts the ground floor plan of the museum; the actual architect's plan is shown as Fig 8. The trowel is now held by the Fitzwilliam Museum. The *Bury and Norwich Post* of 8 November 1837 commented:

A considerable portion of the site had been enclosed and fitted up with stages, one of which was appropriated to the ladies, another to members of the Senate, a third to the undergraduates and a fourth to Gentlemen not members of the University. When all had taken their respective stations the spectacle was very imposing- the splendour of the scene not being a little enhanced by the numerous attendance of the young noblemen in their rich costume. ... The architect, Mr Basevi, now placed a silver trowel in the hands of the Vice Chanecllor who took some mor-

tar and spread it on the under stone ... The Vice Chancellor addressed the meeting in nearly the following words "Gentlemen of the University at a time when our university is so actively exerting itself to keep pace the spirit of improvement which pervades the whole country we cannot but hail with satisfaction and delight the auspicious commencement of this noble work"

The Writer's Museum in Edinburgh now holds the trowel used for the foundation stone of the monument to Sir Walter Scott [Fig 9]. The inscription on the trowel reads:

To Commemorate the Laying of the Foundation Stone of the Monument at Edinburgh in honour of the Immortal Scott. This trowel to be used at the ceremonial was presented to the Right Honourable Sir James Forrest of Comiston Bart., Lord Provost of Edinburgh, Most Worshipful Grand Mason over all Scotland. The Right Worshipful Master, Office Bearers and Brethren of the Grand Masters Mother Lodge, The Ancient Lodge of Edinburgh No. 92. Aug 15th 1840.



Fig 9 Trowel, silver and wood, for the Scott Monument, Edinburgh
 (© Edinburgh Museums & Galleries, Writer's Museum)



Fig 11 Silver trowel used for the Victoria Bridge, Montreal, Canada, wood engraving



Fig 10 Trowel, silver, London, 1843-44, maker's mark of William Eaton, for the clock tower, Houses of Parliament, London
(© Parliamentary archives)

The *Morning Chronicle* of 14 August 1840 reported:

... and in the name of the ancient lodge over which they presided, presented his Lordship with an elegant silver trowel.....The ceremony of laying the foundation stone then commenced with usual masonic rite, the Grand Master using the silver trowel above mentioned.

The trowel used to lay the foundation stone of the clock tower of the new Houses of Parliament, now called the Elizabeth Tower, but better known as Big Ben, was made by William Eaton, London, 1843-44 [Fig 10]. The inscription reads:

The first stone of the clock tower of the Houses of Parliament was laid by Emily second daughter of Henry Kelsall Esqr of Rochdale, 28th September, 1845. Charles Barry architect. Thomas Grissell, Samuel Morton Peto builders.

There are no references in the parliamentary archives or local newspapers to a foundation stone ceremony for Big Ben so it seems quite possible that it was a private affair between the architect and builders and the lack of ceremony may reflect the lengthy delays to the overall project. Emily Kelsall, who laid the foundation stone, was the wife of the builder Samuel Morton Peto.

Ironically the *Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal*, in a commentary written under the pseudonym 'Candidus's notebook', as referred to above, made the following, and as it turned out wholly inaccurate, comment:

The only symptom I have yet discovered of the so much talked of "March of Intellect" is that there has been no "laying the first stone" of the New Houses of Parliament-none of the fussy tom foolery, with the "silver trowel" and all the rest of it, which generally takes place upon such important occasions. The sensible example thus set, will I trust, be adhered to in future; for I suspect the silly ceremony hitherto la vogue, has frequently dipped rather deeply into the building funds...¹⁴



Fig 12 Trowel, silver and granite, London, 1879, maker's mark of Robert Garrard & Sons, for Eddystone Lighthouse
(© Trinity House, London)

14 1841, vol 3, p 272.

15 *Home to Canada Royal Tours, 1786-2010*, Dundurn, 2010.

As might be expected there are many silver trowels of this period with royal connections: far too many to illustrate in this article but Fig 11 shows an engraving of a Canadian silver trowel with a beaver handle and decorated with maple leaves which was used by Edward, Prince of Wales, for laying the last stone of the Victoria Bridge in Montreal in 1860.

Arthur Bousfield and Garry Toffoli, drawing on contemporary accounts, wrote:

Montreal Canada's largest city of the time with 90,000 people had been in a frenzy of preparation...Houses were white-washed, trees planted, fountains created Torrential rain delayed Edward's entry until 1.30pm August 25th...Under a crimson canopy fringed with gold lace and furnished with handsome carpets, the prince saw the six ton last stone of Victoria Bridge lowered in to place. He tapped it few times with a silver trowel....¹⁵

Whilst the *New York Herald*, as reported in *The London Illustrated News* of 15 September 1860, described the same ceremony in the following terms:

The Prince and suite having ascended the platform, the builder of the bridge handed him a silver trowel the handle of which represented a Canadian beaver and which was connected with the blade by the Princes feather.

Even the remote Eddystone Lighthouse was deemed worthy of a foundation stone ceremony after a new lighthouse had been commissioned to be built in 1877; the ceremony took place on the foundations of the lighthouse, surrounded by the sea. The original silver trowel by Robert Garrard and Sons of 1879-80 [Fig 12] is beautifully engraved with the four Eddystone lighthouses [Fig 13]: Winstanley's (1698 to 1703), Rudyerd's (1708 to 1755), Smeaton's (1759 to 1882) and the current Douglass Tower (1882 to the present day); the handle is made from rock taken from Eddystone itself. The event was shown on the front cover of *The Illustrated London News* of 30 August 1879 [Fig 14]. The accompanying article commented:

This tool is a unique memento of the event, its handle being a Turk's head knot and rope's-end of polished gneiss taken from the core of the Eddystone south rock and the silver blade is appropriately inscribed and engraved. On one side is the coat of arms of the Trinity House; underneath are the delineation of the four towers which have been built on the rock; and toward the point is a scene representing the site of the new building. Round the edge is inscribed the motto "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it". On the other side of the trowel is the Royal coat of arms surmounting a commemorative inscription. The trowel is inclosed in a box composed of polished oak taken from the present lighthouse, the lid bearing a plate with the following inscription: - "This box is made from a portion of the original internal fittings of Smeaton's lighthouse on the Eddystone, 1757. 1879." A white glass bottle containing a parchment inscribed with the date

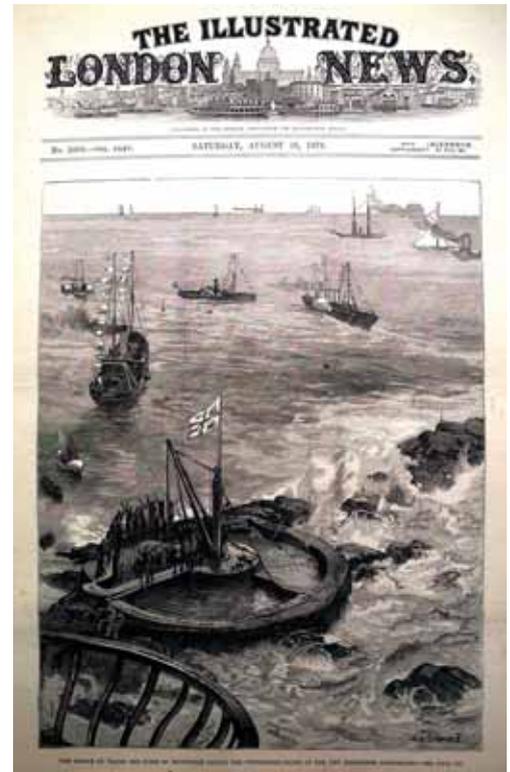


Fig 13 William Heysham, the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Edinburgh laying the foundation stone of the new Eddystone lighthouse, engraving, 1879 from *The Illustrated London News*



Fig 14 Trowel, used for the Eddystone Lighthouse, engraving from *The Illustrated London News*



Fig 15 Trowel, silver and wood, London 1902 maker's mark of Mappin and Webb, for Kew Bridge
 (© Museum of London)



Fig 16 Detail of Kew Bridge trowel
 (© Museum of London)



Fig 17 Detail of finial of Kew Bridge trowel
 (© Museum of London)

and the circumstances of the ceremony, and the names of the Master, Deputy Master, and engineer was deposited in the cavity under the stone. In the mean time the engineer in charge, Mr. Thomas Edmond, had prepared the cement setting for the block. This the two Princes further tempered, each having a silver trowel for that purpose, and Mr. Douglass assisting in the operation. The block was slowly lowered by hand-power, and the Duke of Edinburgh, after trying it with his trowel, said, "I declare this stone well and truly laid." The words were a signal for a round of cheers from those on the rock and those on board the steam-boats within sight, some of the more distant ships joining.

Finally, selecting a trowel from the very beginning of the twentieth century Fig 15 shows the trowel used for the coping stone of Kew Bridge in 1902. The wooden handles of the trowel and mallet are made from timbers from the first Kew Bridge which dated from 1759. Both pieces are marked for Mappin and Webb, London 1902-3 and Fig 16 is a detail of the trowel blade, including an engraving of the new bridge whilst Fig 17 shows the Tudor rose of the finial of the handle, a motif popularised by Arts and Crafts silversmiths such as Ramsden and Carr. The inscription on the blade pronounces that the coping stone was laid by Edward VII on 20 May 1903.

The Illustrated London News

The trowels described above represent some of the very best silver trowels of the period that still survive. Such was the enthusiasm and significance of foundation stone ceremonies and their associated trowels that *The Illustrated London News* published a number of images of trowels, including that for the Eddystone Lighthouse as described above. Two that were illustrated are shown as Figs 18 and 19 although the whereabouts of the actual trowels is unknown but both are sufficiently innovative in their design to provide an appropriate link to the following section on the design of trowels.

Fig 18 shows the trowel used for the opening of Birkenhead Docks in 1844 and is taken from *The Illustrated London News* of 26 October 1844. The handle and engraving were beautifully executed by the local firm of Joseph Mayer. It is less surprising, than it may initially seem, that a little known provincial silversmith should produce such an innovative trowel. Joseph Mayer (1803-86) was a passionate collector, well travelled and with a wide interest in antiquities, medieval art and porcelain. He established his own jewellery and silver firm in 1844 so this trowel was quite probably a significant and early commission for him. He went so far as to establish his own museum in Liverpool in 1852; his collection now forms part of the Walker Art Gallery.¹⁶

The second trowel [Fig 19] dates from 1849 and was used by Prince Albert to lay the foundation stone of the Middlesex Paupers Lunatic Asylum. It appeared together with a detailed description in *The Illustrated London News* of 12 May 1849, as set out below. It was made by Garrard's and designed, according to the article, by Benjamin Rotch, a senior Middlesex magistrate who chaired the committee overseeing the new asylum's construction. The highly naturalistic

16 This is a summary of information provided by Liverpool Museums website.



Fig 18 Silver trowel by Joseph Mayer of Liverpool, for Birkenhead Docks, engraving from The Illustrated London News

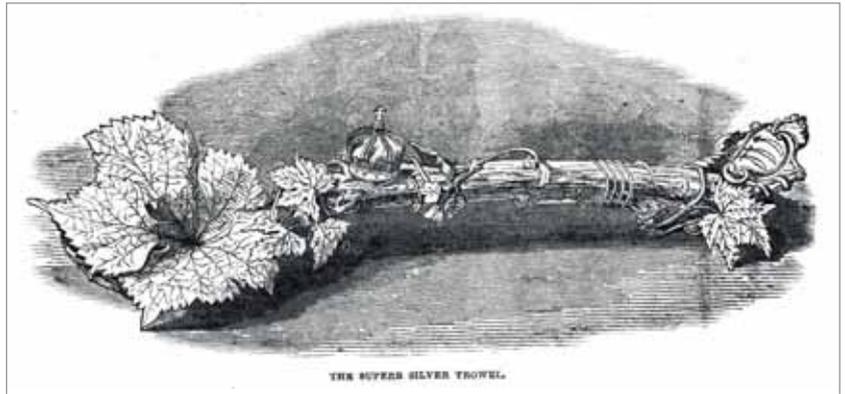


Fig 19 Silver trowel by Garrard & Sons, London, for Middlesex Paupers Asylum, engraving from The Illustrated London News

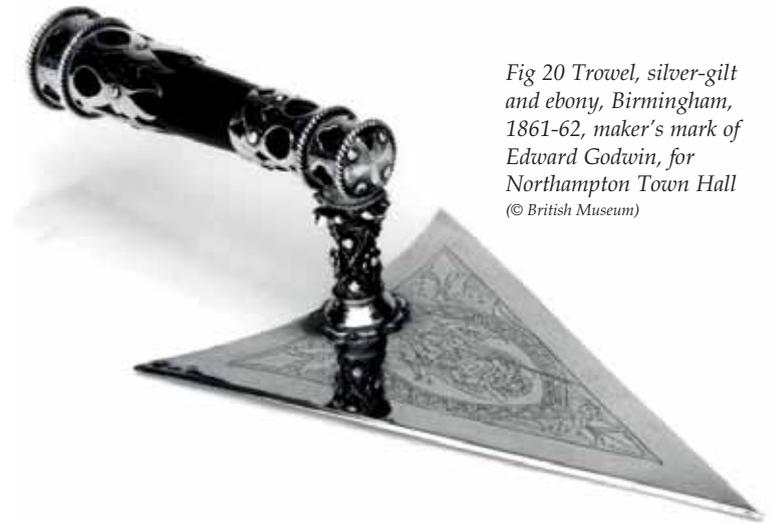


Fig 20 Trowel, silver-gilt and ebony, Birmingham, 1861-62, maker's mark of Edward Godwin, for Northampton Town Hall
(© British Museum)

design of the trowel, which does not look particularly practical, predates the comparable pieces made by William Smith of Liverpool in the late 1870s.

Design in silver trowels

Most trowels made and used in the Victorian period were not of the calibre of those shown above and the relatively standard design and manufacture of trowels of this period is perhaps one reason why so little has been written about them. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and during the Edwardian period, up until the Second World War, much greater innovation in the design of trowels can be seen which was led by the most distinguished designers and silversmiths of the day. There are wonderful examples of trowels by Omar Ramsden and Alywn Carr, Alexander Fisher, Nelson and Edith Dawson, Henry Wilson, and Edward Spencer which this section illustrates; setting out the designs in chronological order.

The first trowel illustrated dates from 1861-62 [Fig 20] and is by Edward William Godwin, an architect who is best known for his modernist aesthetic furniture design. It was used for the foundation stone ceremony of his first major commission, Northampton Town Hall [Fig 21].



Fig 21 Northampton Town Hall, designed by Edward Godwin



Fig 22 Trowel, silver and gold, maker's mark of William Kerr, for the Great Hall of Sydney Town Hall
(© Powerhouse Museum, Sydney)

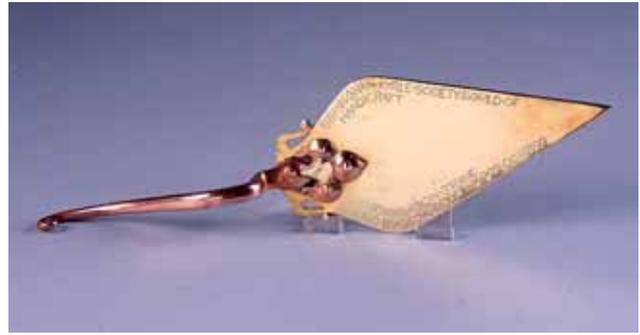


Fig 23 Trowel, copper, by the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft for Kyrle's Hall, Birmingham



Fig 24 Kyrle's Hall, Sheep Street, Birmingham designed by Henry Bidlake

Godwin won a competition for the design in April 1861 and the building was officially opened on 17 May 1864. The drawing for this trowel is preserved among his designs for the town hall at the Victoria and Albert Museum.¹⁷

The British Museum describes the trowel, which was made in Birmingham by an unknown maker, as follows:

Silver gilt with ebony handle, the blade engraved with St Michael and the dragon within a mondorla, set within a triangle, the spandrels of which are decorated with Gothic leaves; the handle mounts are pierced with quatrefoils and stylised leaf-forms; the shaft joining handle to blade is encrusted with rosettes and twisted wirework; on the end of the handle an engraved monogram within a shield; the reverse of the blade is engraved with a sexfoil containing an inscription (rubbed).

The *Northampton Mercury* of Saturday 26 October 1861 described the foundation stone ceremony in profuse detail over two pages, including the trowel and its inscription:

The Town Clerk then presented to the Mayor, on behalf of the Corporation, a handsome silver trowel, with which the stone was laid, having on the lower face the following inscription, and the upper being engraved with a very artistically designed figure of St Michael and the Dragon, within a Vesica Piscis:- "This trowel was presented by the Corporation to Pickering Phipps Esq, Mayor of Northampton, on the occasion of laying the foundation stone of the New town Hall, October 22nd 1861."

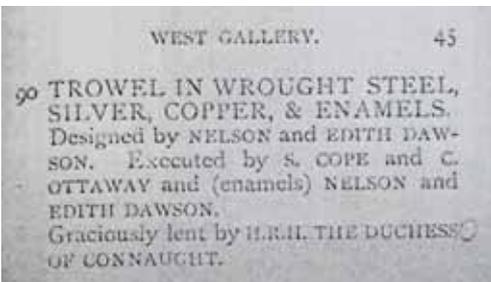


Fig 25 Entry from the Arts and Crafts Society exhibition catalogue of 1896, referring to the trowel by Nelson and Edith Dawson

The next trowel [Fig 22] is not English but rather an Australian design from 1883, albeit by a silversmith born in Northern Ireland. It is remarkable for its design and seems to have been influenced by the aesthetic fashion that was gripping much of Europe (although comparatively few silversmiths) at this time. It was used in laying the foundation stone of the Great Hall of Sydney Town Hall on 13 November 1883 and was made in the workshop of William Kerr (1838-96), a leading watchmaker, jeweller and silversmith in Sydney in the late nineteenth century. Kerr was born in Northern Ireland and came to Australia on board the 'New York Packet' with his family

17 Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, E.598-1963; gift of Edward Godwin, son of the artist.

18 T Ducrow is recorded as one of the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft's earliest members and his metalwork was shown at the 1895 Arts and Crafts Society Exhibition.

in 1841. He obtained many important commissions for presentation pieces, such as this trowel, often from Sydney City Council. He used Australian motifs, mostly plants and animals, in his distinctive, finely worked pieces.

The Powerhouse Museum Sydney notes that:

The striking design and execution as well as the original condition of the trowel, which is applied with Australian flowers crafted in gold, make it an outstanding item of Australian metalwork of the period. It is the only example of its kind known to have been made and survived.

Turning back to British trowels, the first Arts and Crafts trowel identified is by the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft for its own new premises in 1892 [Fig 23]. The trowel is not made in silver but copper and brass, in keeping with the Guild spirit of using affordable every-day materials. Its inscription reads in two parts:

Birmingham Kyrle Society and Guild of Handicraft. Foundation Stone laid by George Dixon MP 22nd October 1892.

George Dixon was a Birmingham MP and father of Arthur Stansfield Dixon, chief designer for the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft, one of the earliest Arts and Crafts guilds to focus on metal working. Like other guilds of this period its ethos was directly linked to the work of William Morris. Founded in 1875, and named after the seventeenth-century philanthropist John Kyrle, the Kyrle Society was a society “for the diffusion of beauty”, one of its principal activities being to plant trees and flowers in urban areas but also to provide a forum for the poor and lower classes to learn artistic skills and better themselves more generally.

The trowel was used for the Guild’s first purpose-built premises, Kyrle’s Hall, Sheep Street, Birmingham. This classic Arts and Crafts building was designed by the architect William Henry Bidlake and completed in 1893 [Fig 24]. The *Birmingham Daily Post* of 24 October 1892 commented extensively on the ceremony:

Mr Dixon having laid the stone (using for the purpose a trowel made in bronze by a member of the Guild of Handicraft, Mr Ducrow)¹⁸ addressed the gathering...

They [the Kyrle Society] also tried to develop the beauty of character. Those who endeavoured to take advantage of opportunities of this kind not only increased their enjoyment but did something to raise themselves to a higher position in the



Fig 26 Trowel, silver, steel, enamel and copper, by Nelson and Edith Dawson, used for Aldershot Hospital, illustration from the Arts and Crafts Society exhibition catalogue of 1896

scale of humanity. Those who used the building would recognise that the ladies and gentlemen who worked for the Kyrle society did so at considerable personal sacrifice but the sacrifice after all merely nominal for the effort to contribute towards the elevation and enjoyment of others was one of the greatest pleasures of life.

Nelson and Edith Dawson were pioneers of Arts and Crafts jewellery and silver. They were amongst the first designers to exhibit their metalwork at the Arts and Crafts Society exhibition, commencing in 1896, and were famous for the quality of their distinctive enamelling. Amongst the items included in the 1896 exhibition was a steel, copper and silver trowel as described in an extract from the exhibition catalogue [Fig 25] while Fig 26 shows a photograph of the actual trowel with a heart-shaped blade, enamelled handle and central enamel plaque surrounded by the royal coat of arms. The inscription reads:

With me, her Royal Highness The Duchess Connaught of Strathearn laid the foundation stone of the Aldershot Hospital July 28th, 1896



Fig 27 Trowel, silver and enamel by Nelson Dawson trowel, for the South Kensington Museum
 (© V&A Images, Victoria Albert Museum)

The Arts and Crafts Society exhibition was highly significant at this time and it is probable that this trowel influenced many of the trowels subsequently illustrated in this section. The heart-shaped blade of the trowel can be seen repeated in the trowels shown below by Henry Wilson, Alexander Fisher and Edward Spencer. The example by Edward Spencer [Fig 39], dated 1911, was for a foundation stone ceremony of an extension to the very same Aldershot Hospital.

In 1899 Nelson Dawson made a trowel for the South Kensington (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) Museum's foundation stone ceremony of 1900 which was to be Queen Victoria's last public appearance; Fig 27 shows this trowel in its original box. It is Victorian and ornate in its design, no doubt reflecting the purpose it served, although an Arts and Crafts influence can be seen in the use of enamel and in the silver design around the bottom of the blade. The *Builder* of 20 May 1899 commented that the trowel "was not the usual "shop" production".¹⁹

The actual foundation stone is shown as Fig 28 and a contemporary sketch of the ceremony in Fig 29.

The next design for a silver trowel may not actually be placed in correct chronological order since we do not know its date, just its designer. Charles Ashbee illustrated it in his book *Modern English Design* published in 1909 [Fig 30] which includes designs by him dating from 1889 to 1909. The trowel is described as a:

Presentation Trowel, set with three chrysoprases or three amethysts and fitted with a turned ivory handle. The socket of the handle is beaten into nine leaves where it is applied to the blade.

Ashbee was perhaps the greatest and earliest innovator in Arts and Crafts silver, starting his metalwork in 1889 from premises in east London.



Fig 28 Foundation stone of the South Kensington Museum

Figs 31 and 32 show two similar trowels by Henry Wilson, both of which are dated 1902; Fig 33 is the reverse of the first trowel. Wilson was another of the pioneering architects of the Arts and Crafts movement and highly influential. The inscription of the first trowel [Fig 31] reads:

Presented to the Countess Beauchamps to commemorate the laying of the foundation stone of the Wyche Church Malvern October 2nd 1902.



Fig 29 The Queen's visit to South Kensington: Her Majesty laying the foundation stone of the Victoria and Albert Museum, newspaper image

19 Further information is available on the Victoria and Albert Museum's website, see Nicholas Smith, *What lies beneath: Foundation stones and time capsules and Queen Victoria's*

Trowel, under the section 'Tales from the Archive'.

20 This trowel can be viewed at the Royal Free Hospital Archives Centre, Hampstead on request.

It has been 'rediscovered' during the research for this article.

21 April 1904, vol 31, issue 133, p 228.

That of the second trowel [Fig 32] reads:

Presented to Hon James Hozier. M. P. by the Architect and the Contractors on the occasion on his laying the memorial stone of Lesmahagow Church Hall Oct. 4th 1902.

Alexander Fisher is considered the leading enamellist of the period who re-established the tradition of designing silver which incorporated enamel. In 1902 he designed a trowel [Figs 34 and 35] for the foundation stone ceremony of the New Hampstead Hospital, now the Royal Free Hospital.²⁰ This stunning trowel was illustrated in *The Studio*²¹, the leading art and design journal of its day, which described it as follows:

The little silver trowel given for the laying of the foundation stone of a hospital and reproduced here by kind permission of HRH Princess Christian, is replete with thought. On the enamel on one side is Hygeia, holding a smoking cap, symbolic of the healing power of drugs. Upon the handle a snake in champlevé enamel is imprisoned within the silver bars.

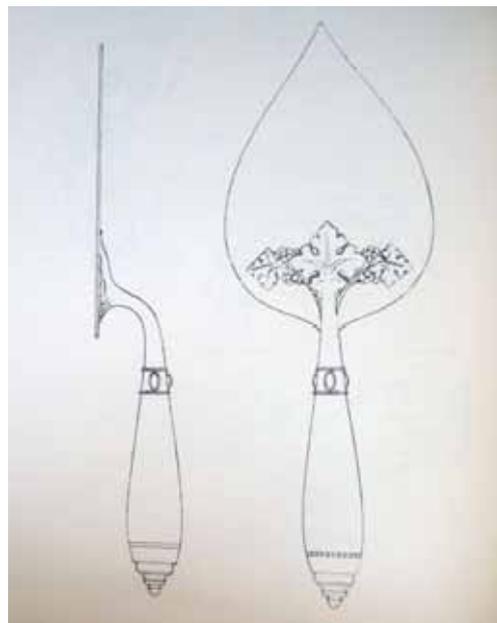


Fig 30 Sketch of a trowel, Charles Ashsbee, from *Modern English Design*, 1909



Fig 31 Trowel, silver and copper, by Henry Wilson, for Wyche Church, Malvern
(© Van den Bosch)



Fig 32 Trowel, silver and copper [Fig 31] reverse showing inscription
(© Van den Bosch)



Fig 33 Trowel, silver, by Henry Wilson, for Lesmahagow Town Hall
(© Van den Bosch)



Fig 34 Trowel, silver and enamel, by Alexander Fisher, for New Hampstead Hospital
(© Royal Free Hampstead Archives Centre)



Fig 35 Detail of Fig 34
(© Royal Free Hampstead Archives Centre)



Fig 36 Trowel, silver and steel, by Omar Ramsden and Alwyn Carr, for their premises in Fulham
 (© Daniel Bexfield, London)

A silver handled trowel with a steel blade which is not marked but is by Omar Ramsden and Alwyn Carr [Fig 36] was almost certainly used by Ramsden and Carr themselves at the opening of their new workshop at 3a Seymour Place, Fulham Road, London which they named St Dunstan's Studio. The architect for the project was C H B Quinnell and it was built by William Willett.

In 1905 Liberty & Co put their sponsor's mark on a trowel [Fig 37] which was almost certainly made by their partner firm William Hair Haseler Ltd; the trowel is marked for Birmingham 1905. The handle is cast with a stylised honesty pods with a band set with four turquoise stones. The designer is not known but it is very typical of David Veasey who, after Archibald Knox, was one of Liberty's leading designers of the period. It is thought to be the only presentation trowel made in the Cymric range. The inscription reads:

Presented to Edward Williams Esq Vice-Chairman of the Birkenhead School Board from 1893-1903 and of the Birkenhead Education Committee from 1903 to 1905, on the occasion of the laying of the [xxx] stone of the Mersey Park School, by his colleagues as a token of the regard and their appreciation of his services to education July 3rd 1906.



Fig 37 Trowel, silver, Birmingham, 1905-6, maker's mark of Liberty & Co, for Mersey Park School, Liverpool

An outstanding and highly innovative silver trowel, dating from circa 1906, was used in the foundation stone ceremony for Niagara Power Station [Fig 38]. The Art Nouveau influence is self evident, with the handle representing Niagara Falls and, within that, a stylised figure representing the spirit of the falls. It was presented to Sir Henry Pellatt by E J Lennox to commemorate the laying of the corner stone of the Power House Company in Niagara Falls, Ontario on 8 May 1906. Unfortunately the hallmarks are rubbed and the maker of the trowel cannot be identified.²² The blade is engraved with an image of the power house above the text:

Presented to Lt. Col. Sir Henry M. Pellatt, President of the Electrical Development Company of Ontario Limited/by E.J. Lennox, architect for the/Power House Company of Niagara Falls/on the occasion of the /laying of the corner stone/May 8th, 1906.



Fig 38 Trowel, silver, for the Niagara Power Station, Canada
 (© Casa Lomo, Toronto)

Fig 39 shows a trowel by Edward Spencer made for the Artificers' Guild, together with a watercolour of a nearly identical trowel from their archive held at Goldsmiths Hall [Fig 40]. The Artificers' Guild had been set up by Nelson and Edith Dawson in 1902 and although their association with the guild soon came to an end, the guild itself continued from 1909 to 1938 under its lead designer Edward Spencer. The trowel is unmarked; the blade and finial are silver and it has a steel shaft. The handle is made from ebony and abalone with touches of gilding to parts of the handle and gold pins hold the finial in place which is itself topped by an amethyst. The monogram E R within the green enamel circle is for Edward VII. Its inscription reads:

The Aldershot Hospital, July 1911, King Edward VII ward

It was illustrated in the local *Aldershot News*. It was used at the foundation stone ceremony for a new wing of the local cottage



Fig 39 Trowel, silver, steel, enamel, gold, abalone and ebony, by Edward Spencer, for Aldershot Hospital



Fig 40 Edward Spencer, design for a trowel, watercolour
(© The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths)



Fig 41 Edward Spencer, design for a trowel, watercolour
(© The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths)

hospital which involved a large ceremony attended by local dignitaries. The newspaper noted that:

On behalf of the architect, Mr T Davison who was unable to be present, Mr Underwood then presented Mrs Newcombe with a silver trowel of exquisite design with which to lay the stone.

A review of the archives at Goldsmiths' Hall suggests that Edward Spencer and the Artificers' Guild made at least twenty-five trowels during the period 1902 to 1939. Two of his more elaborate designs are shown as Figs 41 and 42.²³ Fig 43 illustrates a charming note written on the back of one of the trowel designs that no doubt reflects the need to make the trowels to a specific deadline dictated by the date of the foundation stone ceremony:

Notice. Trowels are urgent to date of finish

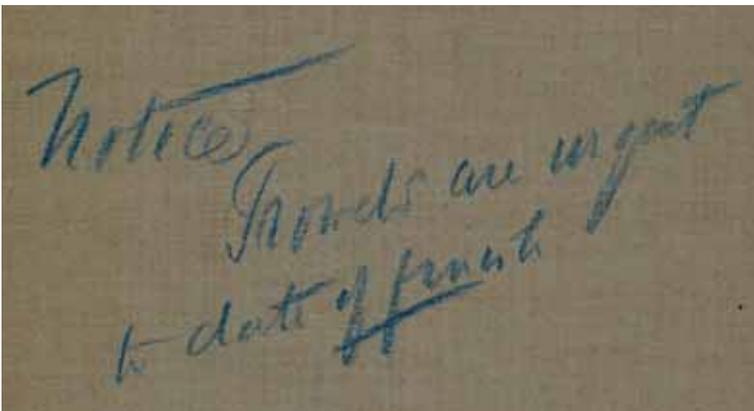


Fig 43 Text from reverse of Fig 42
(© The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths)



Fig 42 Edward Spencer, design for a trowel, watercolour
(© The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths)

22 This trowel is held at Casa Loma, Toronto, Canada.

23 Figs 44, 45 and 46, are from the Edward Spencer archive at Goldsmiths' Hall.



Fig 44 Trowel, silver, London 1922-3, maker's mark of Omar Ramsden
(© The Antique Silver Company)

Omar Ramsden also produced a number of high quality trowels one of which is illustrated as Fig 44 and trowels to this design appear from time to time on the market. Ramsden's note book [Fig 45] makes reference to the architect Montford Piggot ordering two batches of trowels, one of three and one of five, in 1922 and 1925 respectively.²⁴ Ramsden's code reveals that the total cost of each trowel in 1922 was £2 1s, with a price to the client of £4. By 1925 the cost had risen to £2 5s and the price to the client was £5 5s 2d.

The onset of the Second World War marked a clear end to this period of innovation in design. Edward Spencer's Artificers' Guild closed in 1942, four years after his death, as did the workshop of Omar Ramsden, in 1939 following his death (though it was later continued by Leslie Durbin).

Post war developments in silver trowels

The practice of using silver trowels at foundation stone ceremonies continues to this day and was widespread throughout the 1950s and well into the 1960s although it has dwindled since then.²⁵

Most designs for silver trowels during this period were, however, stylistically quite limited and a traditional style prevailed.²⁶ Of the great post war silversmiths Leslie Durbin made several trowels and Robert Welch just one. There is no evidence that Brian Asquith, Christopher Lawrence, Gerald Benney or Stuart Devlin made any ceremonial trowels. Leslie Durbin continued Omar Ramsden's practice and made several beautiful silver trowels including Fig 46, a small parcel-gilt trowel dated 1947. The inscription on which reads

PRESENTED TO H.R.H. THE DUCHESS OF KENT C.I., G.C.V.O., G.B.E., 19TH MAY 1948.

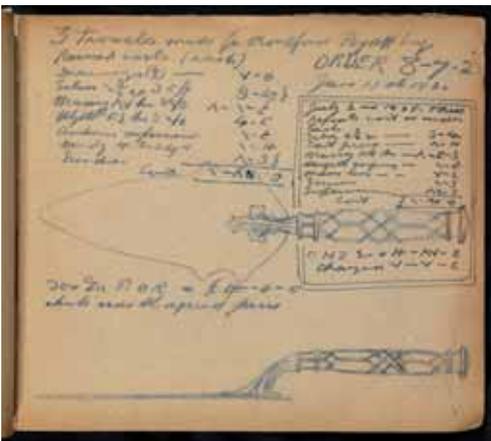


Fig 45 Omar Ramsden, sketch for a trowel
(© The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths)



Fig 46 Trowel, silver, London, 1947-48, maker's mark of Leslie Durbin, for Ramsgate Hospital

The blade is applied with the arms of Ramsgate and was used at the foundation stone ceremony of the new wing of Ramsgate Hospital which also served as the Ramsgate Peace Memorial. A sketch of the trowel also appears in the Omar Ramsden note book [Fig 47] in which Leslie Durbin remarked:

This [trowel] gave me quite a lot of trouble owing to the winding of the silver plate on the handle and the gilding of the Arms of Ramsgate on the blade. It worked quite well but actually cost in time much more than our price which was given by the Corporations.

This article concludes with Robert Welch's trowel [Fig 48] designed for the foundation stone ceremony of Churchill College, Cambridge in 1961. It is clearly innovative and modern in its design; not just a rarity for its time, but a rarity today as well. On the day of the ceremony Sir Winston Churchill was unwell which ironically resulted in Lord Tedder, Chancellor of Cambridge University, undertaking the ceremony, towards whom Churchill had a well recorded animosity. An exchange of letters held in the college archive between Churchill and Lord Tedder follows:

Lord Tedder to Churchill²⁷:

I have taken the liberty of arranging to send the silver trowel, which was used for the laying ceremony, on to you as soon as it has been suitably inscribed.

Churchill replied²⁸:

I should be very glad to have the trowel but, as you laid the Stone, I think that it would be appropriate for you to retain it yourself.

Robert Welch, in his biography²⁹, relays the following anecdote which sheds further light on the fate of the trowel:

I also recall the episode of a silver trowel that Richard Sheppard [first Master of Churchill College, Cambridge] was to present to Sir Winston Churchill at the topping off ceremony³⁰. I wondered whether to design a traditional trowel, a beautiful form if ever there was one, or to take artistic license. Unfortunately I chose the latter course of development.

Later I was invited to a Fellows dinner where Richard Sheppard sought me out. He was a heavily built man who supported himself on a walking stick. He came close to me and placed his stick firmly on the centre of my shoe, pinning me to the spot; before I could utter a gasp of pain, he gave me a lecture on the beauty of a real trowel and how designers should not take liberties with such splendid objects. The point was fully taken. The trowel cannot have been held against me as I received several commissions from the College afterwards.

This anecdote provides the perfect epitaph for this article for, from this period onwards, there seems to be virtually no further develop-



Fig 47 Leslie Durbin, sketch for a trowel
(© The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths)

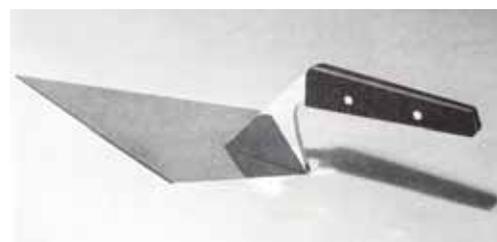


Fig 48 Robert Welch, trowel for Churchill College, Cambridge

24 Figs 48 and 49 are from Omar Ramsden's workshop notebooks in the archive at Goldsmiths' Hall, book R, p 191 and book S p 53 respectively.

25 The foundation stone of the National Theatre on the South Bank was laid with great fanfare in 1951 by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and captured in detail by Pathé news; the ceremony and trowel can be seen at: www.british-pathé.com/video/queen-lays-foundation-stone-at-national-theatre/query/national+theatre. The actual trowel has not been located but it was designed by Leslie Durbin. The Post Office Tower in 1964 had a well attended topping out ceremony involving a silver trowel.

26 Modern innovations can still be seen in part from the designs for fish, cake

and pastry slices collected by Professor B Seymour Rabinovitch, see Benton Seymour Rabinovitch and Helen Clifford *Contemporary Silver, Commissioning, Designing, Collecting*, London, 2000 and Benton Seymour Rabinovitch, *Contemporary Silver Part II, Recent Commissions*, Seattle, 2005.

27 16 October 1961, Churchill archive reference CHUR 2/571A/30.

28 20 October 1961, Churchill archive reference CHUR 2/571A/31.

29 Robert Welch, *Hand and Machine*, Chipping Camden, 1985.

30 Churchill College had no topping out ceremony and this is certainly a reference to the 1961 foundation stone ceremony.

ments in silver trowel design and their use has dwindled significantly. Today very few major British buildings have foundation stone laying ceremonies or, if they do, use silver trowels, although the practice does continue internationally.³¹ Speaking with modern day architects it would seem that commercial pressures favour limited publicity and ceremony for the commencement of works at major buildings. Topping out or opening ceremonies remain prevalent but usually without the symbolism of a silver trowel.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Jan and Carole Van den Bosch for their knowledge and enthusiasm on Arts and Crafts silver and also for permission to reproduce certain images in this article; to David Beasley and Eleni Bide at the library at Goldsmiths' Hall and to the Feemasons' Hall library. I am also grateful to a number of other librarians and archivists including those at the National Art Library, the Churchill College archive, the Royal Collection,

Royal Free Hospital archive and the Museum of London. Thanks finally go to George Styles who was very helpful, most notably in finding the reference on Robert Welch's trowel for Churchill College

Anthony Bernbaum works in finance and has a longstanding interest in British Arts and Crafts design, principally focussing on the silver and social history of that period. He is particularly fascinated by the origins of modern design and modern silver design in particular. He has found that silver trowels provide a perfect combination of all his interests but has so far resisted becoming a trowel collector. He has a BA in Economics from Cambridge University and an MBA from INSEAD.

31 The Heron Tower in the City of London did hold a topping out ceremony involving the gift of silver trowels to the

participants. By contrast the Shard has held both a topping out and opening ceremony without using a silver trowel.