

# IRISH SILVER SPOONS

*The earliest identifiable Irish silver spoons date from about 1630.*

**Douglas Bennett** provides a guide to the variety of designs which developed over succeeding centuries

Spoons must be the oldest of all table utensils. As far back as the neolithic period primitive people were making scoops of bone, horn and clay shaped to hold liquids and to eat from; wooden spoons dating from 3000 BC have been found in Europe and the British Isles; and from the time of the Bronze Age metal spoons have been in common usage and have been manufactured in various shapes and forms to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

Excavations of tombs of the Egyptians prove that they had a variety of spoons made of metal, slate, ivory and wood, while both the Greeks and Romans had spoons that were used for many purposes including eating from table – some of these being silver.<sup>2</sup> The Old Testament description of the furniture in the Ark of the Covenant mentions gold spoons<sup>3</sup> and again when the princes are giving offerings for the dedication of the tabernacle, gold spoons form part of the gift.<sup>4</sup>

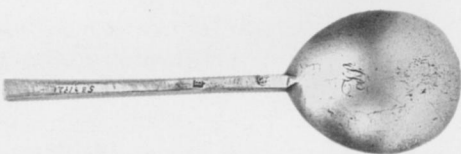
In England it is possible to trace the history and evolution of the silver spoon from the fifteenth century to the present day. In Ireland the earliest identifiable spoons are seventeenth century. At Trinity College Dublin a practice was established whereby certain students on entering college were required to make a presentation of a silver spoon or twelve shillings in lieu of it. The earliest record of this is an entry written by Provost Alvey in 1605-06.<sup>5</sup> No examples of the spoons given to the College in this way have survived: in fact no Irish examples predating the 1630s are extant.

The earliest Irish spoons, dating from the 1630s, have

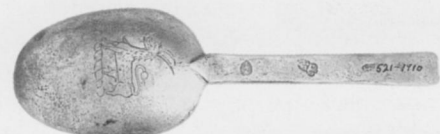
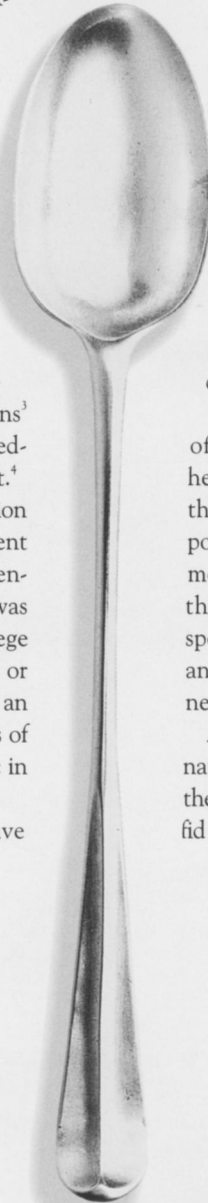
ovoid shape bowls which are termed fig-shaped bowls. The stems are straight and have six or eight sides (Fig. 1). This type of spoon, known as a slip top, was fashionable in mainland Europe and Britain for two centuries before this time. The stem of the spoon was lengthened at the end of the sixteenth century because the introduction of the large ruff collars worn by both sexes rendered the shorter handle impractical when taking liquids. Before the introduction of the ruffle collar, soups, caudles<sup>6</sup> and possets<sup>7</sup> were drunk straight from pots. The new fashion in clothing created an increase in the number of silver spoons used at table and replaced the custom of drinking straight from a porringer.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1640s a new breakthrough in design in the form of the 'puritan' spoon replaced the slip top. It had a heavy, flat, hammered stem or handle and the shape of the bowl was more elliptical than the narrowing, rather pointed, end of the fig-shaped slip top spoon (Fig. 2). This modification was an important step in the evolution of the spoon. The flat hammered handle of the puritan spoon was much easier and firmer to hold in the hand; and with a more practical shape to the bowl, the forerunner of the modern spoon had arrived.<sup>9</sup>

An improvement in the design of the puritan spoon, originating in France in the reign of Louis XIV, reached Ireland in the 1660s. The flat stem widened towards the end with a trifid terminal (Fig. 3). In France these were known as 'pied de



1. SLIP TOP SPOON. Dublin silver of the 1630s. (National Museum of Ireland). This is the earliest known type of Irish spoon. Its design, with fig-shaped bowl and straight stem, was fashionable in Europe from the fifteenth century.



2. PURITAN SPOON. Dublin silver of the 1640s. (National Museum of Ireland). This design, with a flat hammered handle that was easier to hold and a more elliptical bowl, succeeded the slip top design in the 1640s.



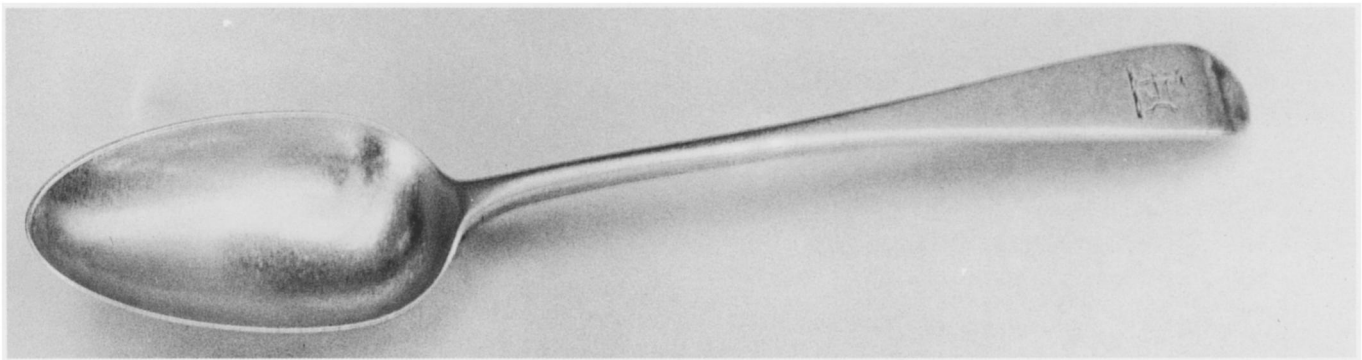
3. TRIFID TERMINAL SPOON. Dublin silver of the 1660s. (National Museum of Ireland). This shape, with a flat handle that widened towards the end to a trifid terminal, originated in France where it was referred to as a 'pied-de-biche' (hind's foot).

5. HANOVERIAN SPOON. Dublin silver, post 1710. This style, with the handle slightly turned up at the end and a ridge down the centre, was introduced about 1710 and after the accession of George I in 1714 became known as 'Hanoverian'.



4. DOG NOSE SPOON. Dublin silver of the 1690s. (National Museum of Ireland). Essentially a variant of the trifid, this form of handle, so called because the lobed end resembled the profile of a dog's head, was introduced about 1690.

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6. OLD ENGLISH SPOON. Dublin silver, post 1745. This design, with the end of the handle turned down, superseded the 'Hanoverian' about 1745 and became known as 'Old English'.

biche' (hind's foot), and very often they had a rat-tail back to the bowl. There is a very rare gold trifold spoon made in Dublin in the collection of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, London. In approximately 1690 a variation on the shape of trifold was introduced, known as the dog nose pattern (Fig. 4). This lobed end resembled the profile of a dog's head and, like the trifold-shaped spoon, it was made until about 1715.<sup>10</sup>

By the eighteenth century spoons were commonplace and as a result it is much easier for the collector to pick up a variety of eighteenth-century spoons in second hand or antique shops, whereas seventeenth-century Irish spoons are rare and become museum pieces. An English design, referred to after the accession of George I in 1714 as the 'Hanoverian' pattern, was known in Ireland from 1710. On Hanoverian spoons, the end of the handle was slightly turned up with a ridge in the centre while the rat-tail on the back of the bowl was eventually replaced with a drop (Fig. 5). A variation on this design came into vogue about 1745 when the end of the handle was turned down and the term 'Hanoverian' appears to have been dropped in favour of 'English' or 'Old English' (Fig. 6).

The rococo period is regarded as an aberration interposed between the plain designs of the first quarter of the eighteenth century and the calm restraint of neo-classical influence after 1770. The rococo period in Irish silver dates from about 1740; it came incontestably from France where Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier had introduced the rocaille style in the early 1720s. A pair of spoons in this style are illustrated with attractive shells on

the back of the bowls (Fig. 7). Asymmetrical designs in ornamentation based on nature become evident at this time on the handles of some flatware as may be seen on the ladle (Fig. 8).

By 1770 a new generation of patrons with fashionable town houses were demanding something different from the highly decorated

styles of the rococo and in its place came the restrained neo-classical influence. The formal charm of this period was most successfully interpreted with the engraver's tool. Engraving is decoration by removing tiny slivers of metal with steel implements whose points are sharpened to suit a specific cut. Feather-edge design was introduced about this time (Fig. 9). This was immediately followed by bright-cut engraving, and an enormous number of these delicately engraved patterns were made in Ireland up to about 1810; the popularity of the design continued to a lesser extent throughout the nineteenth century (Fig. 10).

One of the most interesting studies in Irish silver is to see how the rural makers outside the city of Dublin did their work. Cork was the second silversmithing city in Ireland, Limerick was the third. The quality of the wares made in both these places was remarkably good. In general the silversmiths who worked in the south of Ireland from the seventeenth century to the famine period knew their business very well.<sup>11</sup> By charter of Charles I in 1631 the mayor of Cork had been empowered to appoint a clerk of assay but after 22 December 1637 the assaying and hall-marking of all silver wares in Ireland was controlled by the Company of Goldsmiths of Dublin. All silverwares, no matter where they are made, must



7. ROCOCO SPOONS. Dublin silver, post 1740. The simple design of these spoons is enhanced by the addition to the back of the bowls of attractive shell motifs, typical of the period.



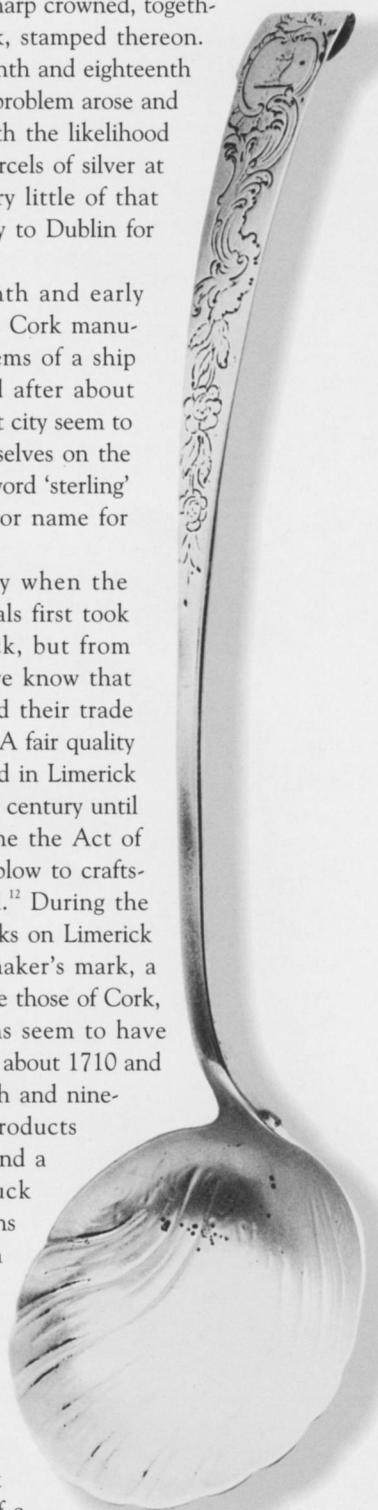
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according to law, be sent to Dublin to be tested and the fineness mark, a harp crowned, together with the maker's mark, stamped thereon. However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a geographical problem arose and the distance, together with the likelihood of highwaymen seizing parcels of silver at gunpoint, resulted in very little of that metal ever finding its way to Dublin for examination.

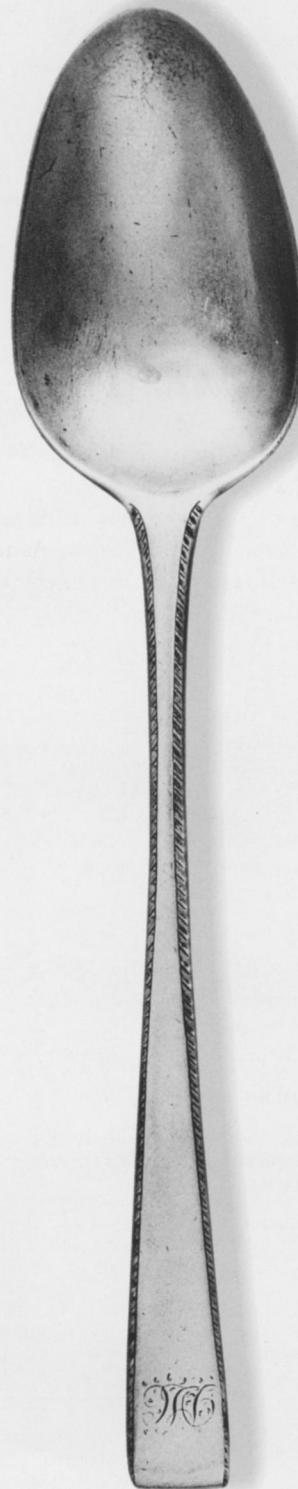
During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Cork manufacturers used the emblems of a ship between two castles and after about 1714 the craftsmen of that city seem to have agreed among themselves on the use of a punch with the word 'sterling' and the maker's initials or name for identification (Fig. 11).

It is impossible to say when the working of precious metals first took place in county Limerick, but from archeological evidence we know that goldsmiths certainly plied their trade there from about 700BC. A fair quality of silver was manufactured in Limerick from the mid-seventeenth century until about 1820 by which time the Act of Union had dealt a hard blow to craftsmen generally in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> During the seventeenth century, marks on Limerick silver consisted of the maker's mark, a castle gate and a star. Like those of Cork, the Limerick silversmiths seem to have adopted the sterling mark about 1710 and for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries their products bear the word 'sterling' and a maker's mark often struck twice (Fig. 12). The designs of the provincial spoon makers followed closely the patterns executed by the Dublin makers, sometimes with interesting variations. During the period of bright-cut engraving, many Limerick spoons bore the motif of a fleur-de-lys or of Prince of Wales feathers, these not being in general use elsewhere (Fig. 13).

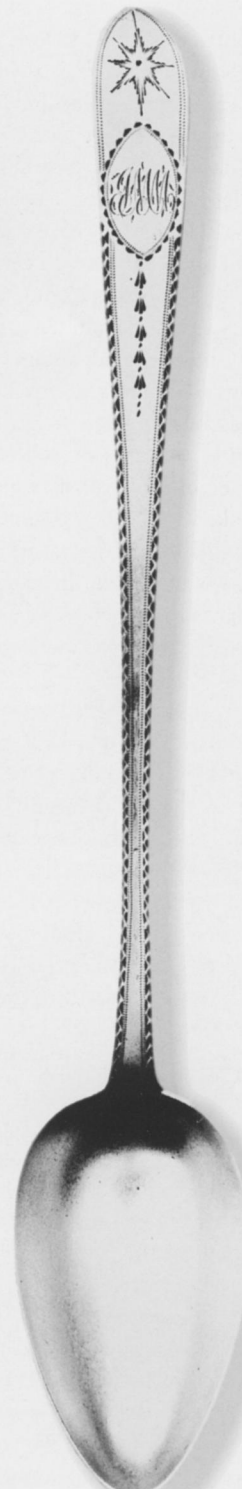
The most common of all the



8. LADLE with flat-chased asymmetrical decoration. Dublin silver, post 1740. This type of ornamentation, derived from nature, became popular in the rococo period.



9. FEATHER EDGE SPOON. Dublin silver, c.1770. Engraved design on silver became the norm in the second half of the eighteenth-century and the feather-edge design, where the edges of the handle were engraved was introduced about 1770.



10. BRIGHT-CUT SPOON. Dublin silver, c.1770 Bright-cut patterns, of which this example is typical, were particularly popular in Ireland in the neo-classical period of the late eighteenth century.

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designs in the nineteenth century must be the fiddle pattern spoon (Fig. 14). This shape arrived in Ireland about 1800 and continued to be made by hand in Dublin until about forty years ago. In the British Museum there are very early Christian spoons made of silver with handles resembling fiddle pattern and early in the eighteenth century the French developed the *forme violon*. This was in the true shape of a fiddle or violin as the name infers; it came into fashion after the dog nose lost its popularity. Variations of this are found throughout Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century but the stilted form that we know as 'fiddle pattern' came from England in the late eighteenth century and arrived in Ireland at the turn of the century.

One of the advantages of assembling a collection of spoons is that there are so many types and variations readily available at reasonable prices. It must be realised that this article is only a guide to dates. It takes time for new designs and shapes to emerge and very often patterns overlap for a few years. Spoon makers did not suddenly decide one day to stop making Old English pattern and only concentrate on the Rococo. As the whims of fashion dictated change so did the spoon maker slowly adapt to the demands from the public for something different.

DOUGLAS BENNETT'S books include *Irish Georgian Silver* (1972), *Collecting Irish Silver* (1984) and *The Silver Collection: Trinity College Dublin* (1988).

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the director of the National Museum of Ireland for granting permission to reproduce spoons Figs 1-4 and to Mrs L Wyse Jackson for permission to quote from her late husband, Robert Wyse Jackson's book *Irish Silver*. My thanks also go to the Board of Trinity College Dublin for allowing me to quote from records in their Manuscripts Department.

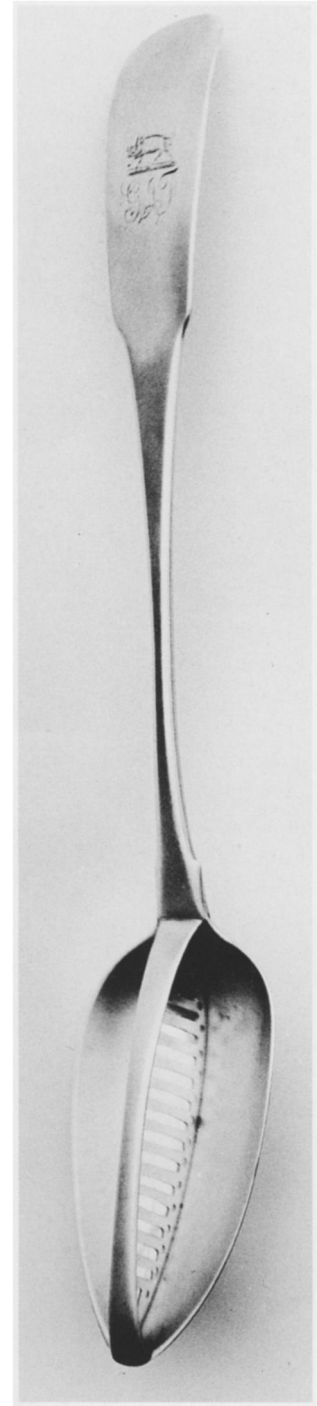
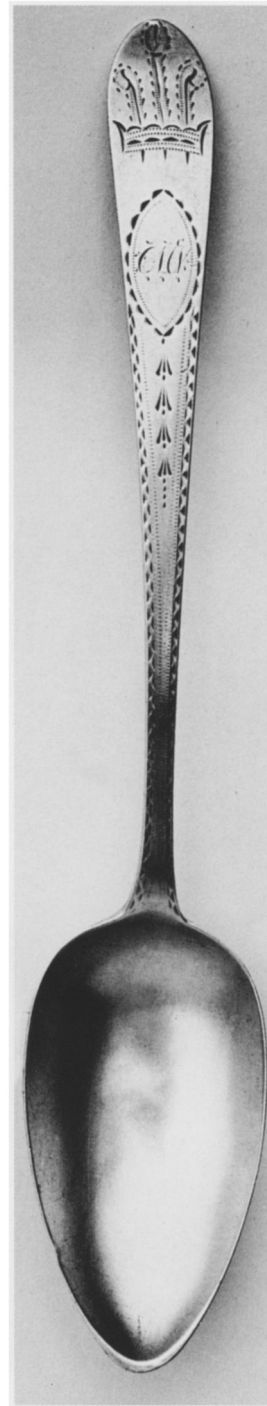


11. (Above left) CORK SILVER MARK. The maker is John Toleken. After 1714 Cork silversmiths used the word 'sterling' together with a punch of their own name or initials.

12. (Above right) LIMERICK SILVER MARK. The maker is Maurice Fitzgerald. Limerick silversmiths also used the sterling stamp and the maker's mark, often struck twice.

13. (Right) LIMERICK SPOON. Post 1770. The bright-cut pattern was popular with Limerick silversmiths who often incorporated in the design a fleur-de-lys or Prince of Wales feathers motif that was not generally used elsewhere.

14. (Far right) FIDDLE-PATTERN STRAINER SPOON. Dublin silver, 1800. The fiddle pattern became the most common of all nineteenth century designs. In this spoon the divider in the bowl was used to strain gravy.



1. Society of Antiquaries. *Archaeologia*, Vol LIII, 1892.

2. *Ibid*.

3. *Exodus*, 25 v 29, 'and thou shalt make the dishes thereof, and spoons thereof and covers thereof, and bowls thereof to cover withal; of pure gold shalt thou make them.'

4. *Numbers* 7, v. 84 and 86. 'This was the dedication of the altar, in the day when it was anointed, by the princes of Israel: twelve chargers of silver, twelve silver bowls, twelve

spoons of gold: The golden spoons were twelve, full of incense weighting ten shekels apiece.' Gold spoons are also mentioned in *1 Kings* 7, v 50 and in *2 Chronicles* 24, v 14.

5. Manuscripts Department Trinity College Dublin '1605 paid for a dozen silver spoons 4L-05'. A 1609 entry includes 'silver spoons a dozen and a half'.

6. Caudle was a warm drink of wine and eggs for an invalid or a woman in childbed.

7. Posset was a pick me up of hot milk curdled

with ale or wine flavoured with spices and sugar.

8. Victor Houart, *Antique Spoons*, Souvenir Press 1982.

9. Douglas Bennett, *Collecting Irish Silver*, Souvenir Press 1984.

10. *Ibid*.

11. Robert Wyse Jackson, *Irish Silver*, Cork, 1972.

12. Douglas Bennett and Rosemary folliott, *Irish Ancestor*, No. 2. 1978.