

More light on the Liberty Cymric metalwork venture.

An evaluation of the contribution of Oliver Baker

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Introduction

This article explores one area of early modern silver design. It focuses on the origins of the Liberty & Co Cymric range of silver and the role that one designer, Oliver Baker, played in its development. It seeks to use existing material to put the Cymric range and Oliver Baker's role into a proper context and also draws on previously unpublished material from Baker's sketchbook and his diaries and those of his father which are held at the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive, Stratford-upon-Avon¹. This material highlights the significant role played by Baker in the birth of modern British silver and the Liberty Cymric range. It focuses on the period 1897 to 1899 when Oliver Baker first conceived of a modern silver range and began designing his radical silverware. The article also draws on previously unpublished material from the *Art Journal* of 1901, the Register of Trade Marks held at the National Archives in Kew and the archives of Bernard Cuzner, a contemporary of Baker and himself a leading silversmith during the first half of the twentieth century, which are now held by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

The Cymric range was launched by Liberty & Co early in 1899. There is no known specific date, but the presumed launch date is May 1899 for which an exhibition catalogue exists which lists some eighty, mainly silver, items: this is referred to throughout this article as the May 1899 Cymric exhibition catalogue. Liberty & Co, a London retailer, had already established a global reputation for sourcing and selling the most fashionable and *avant-garde* wares of its day. The Cymric range of silver was seen at the time, as it is today, as highly innovative as well as modern and influential in its design style.

The Cymric range was not a completely new venture in modern silver design (as Liberty themselves claimed at the time) but it came very early in the move towards modern silver design. An extract from the introduction to the May 1899 Cymric exhibition catalogue (p 2) is extracted below:

...For at least a century past no conspicuous development has been noticeable in the production of silver-work.

An art-craft of such antiquity, such dignity, such charm, naturally attracts the sympathetic study and fires the imagination of all whom are concerned with art-production; and follow-

1 The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust includes the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive and contains the local archives for Stratford-upon-Avon which in turn contains the Baker family archives: Ref DR142. The diaries are catalogued under DR142/53-54.

2 Alan Crawford is one of the leading writers and academics on the Arts and Crafts movement. The extract is taken from his book *C R Ashbee*, Yale, 2005, p 343.

3 *The Studio*, November 1898, issue 68, vol XV, pp 104-114.

4 Glenys Wild, Alan Crawford (editor), *By Hammer and Hand: the Arts and Crafts Movement in Birmingham*, Birmingham, 1984, p 110.

5 *The Studio*, November 1896, issue 44, vol IX, pp 126-131.

6 Stephen Pudney, 'Connell's of Cheapside, 'Pioneers of modern artistic silverware', *The Silver Society Journal*, 1999, no 11, p 228. William Hutton & Sons began producing modern silverware early in 1899.

7 Christopher Dresser continued to be closely associated with Liberty at this time and his son, Louis, worked for Liberty. It is thought that Dresser's influence on the Cymric range came indirectly through his influence on Archibald Knox who may have worked in Dresser's own studio during the 1890s.

ing up, as it were, their work of creating new schools of design and colour in connection with fabrics, furniture and other matters, Messrs Liberty & Co Ltd have now made a characteristically original and artistic departure in silver-craft, conceived and produced under their immediate direction, and known as "Cymric" silver work.

Modern silver: the Cymric range in context

By 1899, when the Cymric range was launched, there were only a few modernist silver designers, two of whom are truly outstanding: Christopher Dresser and Charles Ashbee. Alan Crawford sums up this early modern silver work as follows:

... made him [Ashbee] part of the genealogy of the Modern Movement, reaching out on the one hand to the radical work of Christopher Dresser and on the other to the novelty of Art Nouveau..... to the modern eye, both Dresser and Ashbee seem to stand apart from the work of their contemporaries...²

The origins of modern British silver design go back as early as 1870 and lie in the work of Christopher Dresser and the aesthetic period with its accompanying strong Japanese influences.

Dresser, working mainly in conjunction with the silver-smithing companies of: Hukin and Heath, James Dixon and Sons and Elkington & Co, designed radical modern silverwares from about 1870 until about 1890. Much of his work was produced in silver plate, not solid silver. Whilst Dresser's designs appear strikingly modern today, they did not influence the mainstream of silverware manufactured in Britain at the time. He was quite possibly too far ahead of his time to be embraced. He was a commercial designer who seems, for the most part, to have been ignored by artistic designers and craftsman in his day. In 1899 *The Studio* magazine gave a positive retrospective on Dresser's work. A passage that captures this sentiment is extracted below:

In the case of Christopher Dresser we have not the least, but perhaps the greatest, of commercial designers imposing his fantasy and invention upon the ordinary output of British industry, it would argue blindness or prejudice to decline to recognise a very loyal friend of the cause [modern art and design] we have at heart³.

With the exception of Dresser's work very little Modern Movement silver was produced until the middle to late 1890s. During the 1890s a number of guild movements were founded as part of the Arts and Crafts movement

which were inspired by the work of William Morris. Most of these guilds did limited amounts, or no original work, in silver; they typically worked in copper and other cheaper materials or focussed on other crafts such as furniture making⁴. Only two guilds became known for their silver work: Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft and Arthur Dixon's Birmingham Guild of Handicraft.

The Guild of Handicraft, established in 1888, stands out as producing innovative silver from as early as 1889 and the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft also produced Arts and Crafts silver from the middle of the 1890s. The approach of the guilds was the antithesis of that of the commercially orientated Christopher Dresser, and focussed not just on the designs for their output but the processes used to achieve them. The work of the individual craftsman was prioritised and, ironically, by looking back to workmanship of a pre-industrialised age, modern silver designs were inspired by medieval and historical artefacts.

By far the most influential of these silver designers and makers was Charles Ashbee and his Guild of Handicraft. Their output until circa 1900 was very small indeed, perhaps only a few hundred pieces, but it was recognised as representative of a departure from conventional silver of the period. In 1896 *The Studio* published silverwares produced by Ashbee's Guild which had been presented at the 1896 Arts and Crafts Society exhibition and commented as follows:

For Ashbee gains an effect of superb richness in the right way. That is to say he knows when to be silent, when to let the broad sweep of the undecorated surface prepare you for the final ornamentation which heightens the beauty of the object instead of hiding it underneath a superfluous mass of applied decoration.⁵

By the last years of the nineteenth century there was very little Modern Movement silver available in Britain. The better-known modernist silver designers from Denmark and Germany: Georg Jensen and Josef Hoffman respectively, did not commence their work in silver until the early years of the twentieth century.

The Cymric silver range

This brings us to the Liberty Cymric silver range and its launch in 1899. As shown above it was not wholly original and unique as Liberty claimed but it certainly appeared very early in the development of modern Arts and Crafts silver design. As a commercial venture it was the first or second of its kind, after William Hutton and Sons⁶; following Christopher Dresser's much earlier lead⁷.

Liberty deliberately kept the designers of their silverwares anonymous, a fact that has frustrated devotees and academics alike, both in their understanding the origins of the range, and in enabling them to attribute fair credit to their original and innovatory work. The loss of most of Liberty's own archives has further frustrated academic enquiry. Archibald Knox is the designer most closely associated with the Cymric silver range and he undoubtedly produced most of the silver designs for the range after 1900. His distinctive modern Celtic knot designs became the trademark feature of the range and today Knox holds international status as a modernist designer.

This article does not seek to focus on Knox but rather to assess the period leading up to the launch of the Cymric range, that is: 1897 to 1899. The Baker family archive, mentioned above, contains Baker's 1897 and 1898 diaries and an undated sketchbook from this period which enable us to link Baker directly to previously unattributed designs. The sketchbook appears to be a mixture of sketches of actual antiquities of interest to Baker, and of his designs which used these sketches as a source of inspiration.

The origins of the Cymric silver range

Shirley Bury's key article: *New Light on the Liberty Metal Work Venture* was published in 1977⁸. In 1975 Bury was responsible for organising a major centenary exhibition, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, of Liberty's wares, ranging from fashion to metalwork⁹. She was frustrated by the difficulties of identifying the designers and origins of the Cymric range but was, however, subsequently successful in interviewing the elderly Max Haseler, the son of William Rathbone Haseler, who had run the family business of W H Haseler during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Max Haseler ran the company himself from around 1920 to 1939.

Max Haseler provided a handwritten, seven page account of the Haseler firm and its relationship with Liberty at the time of the establishment of the Cymric silver range¹⁰. The firm was the principal manufacturer of the Cymric silver range and in May 1901 their relationship was cemented by the formation of a joint venture company with Liberty which had the sole purpose of manufacturing Liberty silver and pewter wares.

Max Haseler gave a clear account of his family's recollections of the birth of the Cymric range. In about 1897 his father William Rathbone (W R) Haseler, who much admired the pre-Raphaelite movement and the work of William Morris, approached his brother-in-law Oliver Baker, a well known water colourist and antiquarian, together with a few other Birmingham artists,

and sought to create a new, distinctive and innovative range of silverware. In Max Haseler's own words:

In about 1897 he [William Haseler] conceived the idea of making some jewellery and silverware from designs which were in complete contrast to the heavy and ugly Victorian style which was in vogue at the time. Most of the designs were the work of Mr Gaskin and his pupils and friend Oliver Baker. He [William Haseler] employed several ex pupils to make up the designs.

Shirley Bury's article cast doubt on one aspect of this recollection: the role of Arthur Gaskin, whose work for Liberty seems to have been later than 1899. This may yet be an area for further research but for our purposes it leaves us with Oliver Baker as one, if not the, critical designer for Haseler's modern range at this time.

Max Haseler went on to explain that many silver items were produced in around 1898 but were too distinctive and modern for Haseler's customers. In his words:

... he [WR Haseler] built up quite a collection of these revolutionary designs but unfortunately he could not persuade any of his customers to buy any of it, in fact some of them laughed at it.

As a consequence Haseler took the pieces to London and eventually found a buyer: Liberty & Co. Liberty bought the entire collection and obtained the exclusive rights to sell this range of artistic silver within a five mile radius of Charing Cross, London and so the range was born. The date of this transaction is uncertain but it probably took place during the first half of 1899. John Llewellyn, Managing Director of Liberty at the time was a Welshman and it was he who named the range: Cymric.

Max Haseler's account is in part validated by a nearly contemporaneous article on Oliver Baker and his artist father published in the 1901 edition of *The Artist*¹¹:

The [silver] work was originally undertaken at the request of Messrs Haseler, an enterprising local [Birmingham] firm of jewellers and silversmiths, who were dissatisfied with the inartistic groove into which most of the modern jewellery and silverware had fallen, and were anxious to produce something of higher interest. With this end in view they applied to Oliver Baker, as a personal friend, for assistance. The artist at once consented to see what he could do in an entirely new direction ...

Max Haseler's account is further validated by the Arts and Crafts Society exhibition which took place in the



Fig 1 Casket designed by Oliver Baker, illustrated in *The Studio*, February, 1900.

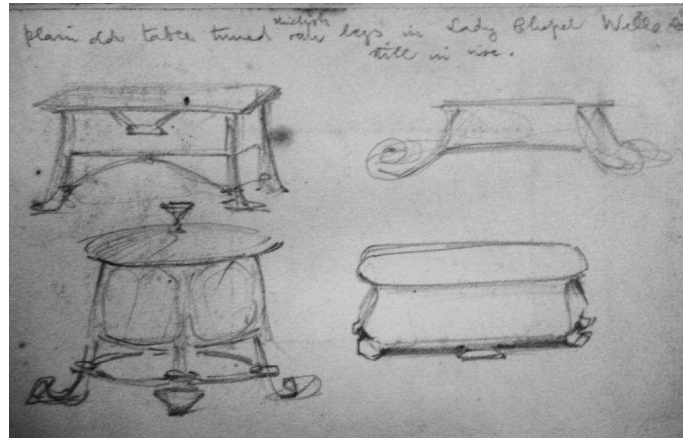


Fig 2 Drawing for the casket in fig 1 (Oliver Baker's sketchbook).

autumn of 1899. The exhibition catalogue is one of the only early and directly contemporary sources that survive which help in making attributions for Liberty's Cymric silver designs. The Arts and Crafts Society catalogue, which was not illustrated, shows that Baker produced designs for nine of the eleven Liberty silver items displayed. The name of Archibald Knox does not appear in the catalogue at all either in connection with Liberty or otherwise. Two other designers who are listed were Bernard Cuzner and A H Jones. Cuzner is known to have worked for Haseler's from 1898-99 and he went on to be one of the most significant designers involved with the Cymric range alongside Knox, Baker and a few others¹².

The Studio, the highly influential magazine, subsequently published an article on Oliver Baker in February 1900 (vol XIX). Fig 1 above shows the image of a silver casket designed by Baker and taken from this article. It may well have been one of the items exhibited at the 1899 Arts and Crafts Society exhibition. Fig 2 is a page from Baker's sketchbook from the family archive; the top drawings in fig 2 are a clear match to the casket.

An assessment of the origins of the Cymric range might conveniently end here save for two pieces of information which contradict the above and suggest that Liberty was itself the driving force for the establishment of the range using other designers and London based silver manufacturers.

The first contradiction is that all the early Cymric pieces dated 1898-99 seem to bear London hallmarks, suggestive of a manufacturer other than Haselers, who were solely Birmingham based.

The second point is that the Cymric range was launched in May 1899 and there is evidence that designers other than Baker were responsible for these designs. A number of silver design sketches exist within the Silver Studio archive at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Middlesex University (MODA), together with a sales register for 1898 which gives details of designs that were sold and to whom.

The Silver Studio was a leading design company which, at the time, supplied Liberty across a range of wares but principally with designs for fabric and wallpapers. It was founded by Arthur Silver in 1880 and was based in Hammersmith, London. After his death in 1896 it was run by two senior employees: Harry Napper and J P Houghton until 1900 when Silver's son Rex came of age and took over the business. Several sketched silver designs from the Silver archive at the MODA have the same names and match descriptions of items from the very first May 1899 Cymric exhibition catalogue (which frustratingly has no illustrations). In the archive these designs have mainly been attributed to Archibald Knox, who was almost certainly designing for the Silver Studio at the time. Oliver Baker's name makes no appearance.

8 Shirley Bury, 'New Light on the Liberty Metal Work Venture', *Decorative Arts Society Journal*, no 1, 1977 and republished in 2001 in *Archibald Knox*, Stephen A Martin (editor), pp 139-146.

9 *Liberty's 1875-1975*, exhibition catalogue, London, 1975.

10 Handwritten transcript, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, ref 86KK, box III

(XXIX).

11 *The Artist*, vol 32, pp 145-148.

12 Cuzner produced silver under his own name and registered a mark with the

Birmingham assay office in 1902; from 1910 to 1942 he was head of the metalwork department at the Birmingham School of Art. Cuzner's work can be seen in the Silver Galleries of the Victoria and Albert

Museum (room 67, case 7, shelf 2). In 1935 he published *A Silversmiths Manual*.

The register of sales shows that the Silver Studio was selling silver designs to Liberty as early as October 1898.

This information has lead several writers to suggest that Liberty was the originator of the Cymric range and that Oliver Baker's work and Haseler's manufactures were introduced slightly after the launch of the Cymric wares in May 1899. This article addresses this issue and demonstrates the key role that Baker and William Haseler played.

More Light on the Cymric Liberty Metalwork venture and the role of Oliver Baker

Oliver Baker was a poor diarist; his archive contains no diaries dating from after 1898. These may be missing but in May 1899, as is described below, he made a long entry in his 1898 diary, suggesting he may have stopped keeping a diary at the end of 1898. His handwriting is poor, ironic for an artist and designer, and he wrote very little and infrequently in his diaries. Thankfully though, his 1897 and 1898 diaries survive and the sparseness of his writing is in some ways a blessing: Baker largely wrote about what mattered to him and that, it seems, was his silver work for Haselers.

Max Haseler identified William Haseler as the inspiration for the Cymric range. This may well be true, but as early as November 1897, some eighteen months before the launch of the Cymric range, Baker wrote the following passage in his diary:

What is popularly called the New Movement in Design while greatly influencing for the better [and] exercising a beneficial influence on the architecture, furniture and the decorations of our homes has so far left untouched the work of the silversmith. Perhaps the conditions under which modern silver is produced rendered this almost inevitable but the result in any case has been that while we have in houses [and] churches furniture etc in which the New Movement has given us surroundings not only artistic in the best sense but also conceived in the spirit of old English work. So much so that while actual old English furniture is thoroughly at home in such surroundings, it is not necessary to possess because the work of some of our most advanced firms produce furniture, hangings, or wall decoration which is designed and created to a great extent in the spirit of the work of our ancestors which all agree [admiringly]. As a result of this state of things, the actual silver work which has descended to us from past times becomes more and more valuable and the demand for it greater while the modern silversmith is either employed in mechanically copying the old work to supply that demand or in produc-

ing challenge cups from a few stock patterns in which the leading features alternate between for-bearers cycle parts and the heads of bullocks and sheep [last part of last sentence illegible].

Whatever one's views on the validity of this passage, it reads as a call to arms to create a 'New Movement' silver ware range, made in the spirit of the old wares and craftsman. What is also striking is how close this passage is, albeit a lot less politic, to the introduction to the May 1899 Cymric catalogue, an extract of which is provided above. Whether this is coincidental or not we may never know.

Baker's diaries remain silent on his silver designs until May 1898 but then start to make consistent references to them. The more pertinent comments are extracted below, all from his 1898 diary; illegible words are indicated by xxx's:

May 11th : Talked over the proposal for making designs for plate [at Haseler's warehouse].

May 17th : Went to Haselers with sketches.

May 24th: Went to Haselers at 4.30 and took detailed sketches and three new ideas for vessels. They liked them all. Had another talk about terms and they made another offer. 5% on the sale price and not deduct the price received for the sketches.

May 25th: One W.C. [watercolour] drawing two handled bowl silver and red gold. One pastel drawing, jar with 4 handles. Silver with gold xx unglazed and enamelled purple studded with Connemara... [This may well be the basis of the design in *fig 10* below]

May 26th: Working and designing all day. One W.C. drawing 3 handled pot silver with gold xx and lapis stones. Enamel leaf. One silver bowl with gold xxx. One silver cup W.C. drawing with xx curly handles.

May 28th: Worked all day on candlesticks and the large copper and silver fruit bowl.

June 14th : Went to Haselers and saw some of the work part done. Was rather discouraged at the difficulties and xxxx of artistic designing xxxx. Took 2 sketches of small candlesticks one coloured large one. Showed him small xxx for big cup which he liked.

August 9th: In afternoon went to Haselers. Took in drawing of scone.

October 6th : Designs came back from Haselers. Stayed in all day working them xxx.

October 13th : Posted to Haselers 1 black lead outline elevation of 3 fold candlestick silver on wooden base...1 black lead of same design with four candlestick buckets and base with 3 feet instead of 4. Also two coloured designs for clasps.

October 25th :...posted the W.C. of bowl, 2 black leads of xxx and black lead of casket.

There are also a number of relevant entries from Baker's father's diaries, two of the most interesting entries from 1899 appear below:

20th February: Oliver in afternoon to meet Haselers about designs for silver goods - afterwards to School of Art to work in metals.

3rd March: A young man called Bernard Cussiner [Cuzner] called to see Oliver about a situation at Haseler's to carry out designs in Silver and Gold from Oliver's designs.

The items described above give real insight into the volume, breadth and appearance of Baker's work: early work in modern silver. It shows Baker was working on his designs throughout 1898 and that he was working with Bernard Cuzner. In addition to this information we know that Oliver Baker attended the Birmingham School of Arts in early 1899¹³. There has always been a suspicion that he ceased designing for Haselers during this period but the comments from his father's diary prove otherwise.

Two items have recently come to light that may well be amongst those described above in Baker's diary entry of 28 May 1898 and later in June. These are shown as *fig 3* and *fig 5*. The candlesticks [*fig 3*] bear Haseler's W H H mark and are marked for Birmingham, 1898 which predates the launch of the Cymric range by up to a year and for which the earliest pieces carry the Birmingham or London 1899-1900 date letter¹⁴. Taking account of Max Haseler's recollection, it would seem that these pieces, most certainly the dated candlesticks, formed part of the

collection that Baker designed and Haseler made in 1898 but was unable to sell until it was acquired by Liberty.

The very design of the candlesticks is somehow awkward, as if grappling to combine and create a consistent modern theme. It seems that their form may have been based on a goffering iron; these were used to iron pleats into fabric and their origins lie as far back as ancient Greece with the more modern English version dating from the seventeenth century. An image of a pair of eighteenth-century goffering irons in their stands is shown in *fig 4*.

The candlesticks synthesise an Arts and Crafts base with a central spiral that appears wholly modern, with the upper candle holder having a more continental European Art Nouveau style. The scrolling base and spiral middle section appear in later works by Baker for Liberty but not together on the same piece¹⁵. The junction of the silver spiral to the legs harks back to eighteenth-century baluster wine glasses. The overall effect is handcrafted, giving the totality an Arts and Crafts appearance. Whilst beauty is very much in the eye of the beholder, there is no doubt the design of these candlesticks is Oliver Baker's and that, in some way, they represent the 'missing link'.



Fig 3 Pair of candlesticks, W H Haseler Ltd, Birmingham, 1898-99.



Fig 4 Pair of eighteenth-century goffering irons.

13 In September 1898 Baker, aged 42, enrolled in the Birmingham School of Arts, class 6 "Designs executed in materials for which they are intended" (Glenys Wild, Alan Crawford (editor), *By Hammer and Hand: the Arts and Crafts Movement in Birmingham*, Birmingham,

1984, p 110). From Baker's and his father's diaries it seems that he attended the classes from January through to March 1899 but it may be that he attended from the date of enrolment.

14 There are in fact some Cymric pieces marked London 1898-99. There is a

small salt at the Victorian Albert Museum (room 67, case 20). Such pieces are thought to be those that were exhibited at, or soon after, the May 1899 Cymric exhibition. The salt was named Cybell and catalogued as no 22 in the May exhibition catalogue. The salt has a very small

Liberty mark which was only registered with the London Assay office on 28 April 1899 (it is otherwise identical to the 1894 Liberty mark). As the London date letter ran until 5 May 1899 we can be reasonably sure these very early Liberty Cymric items were assayed in this narrow window just

in time for the May exhibition.

15 The scrolling legs can be seen in *figs 20* and *22* and the sinuous silver twists can be seen in the buckle designs of *figs 24* and *25*.



Fig 5 Bowl, mixed metal, copper and silver, unmarked.



Fig 6 Four-handled vase, W H Haseler Ltd, Birmingham 1899-90.

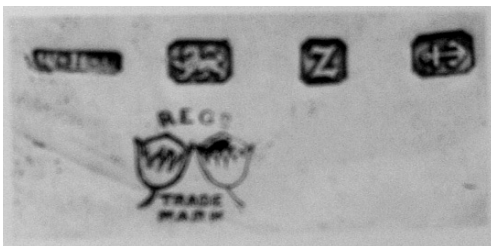


Fig 7 Marks from base of vase (fig 6) showing Haseler's trade mark of two hazelnuts.

They are a clear break from the past: thoroughly modern in their appearance but not yet fully worked through and formed.

The bowl [fig 5], being substantially made of copper is unmarked but the design appears later in plain pewter, as part of the Liberty Tudric pewter range of around 1902, with the model number 01029. The bowl, in plain silver, also appears in the Liberty silver sketchbook, as model number 217¹⁶, making this copper and silver bowl a forerunner of the Cymric range in which the design later appeared. This bowl has Connemara marble inserts set within the stylised silver flowers around the rim. Baker used Connemara on a different piece referenced in his diary only three days before on 25 May.

As an aside, I can find no earlier examples of 'modern' English silver candlesticks or of English mixed metal silver and copper work which makes such a complete departure from Japonisme.

Haseler's new trade mark

On 22 October, 1898 Oliver Baker made the following diary entry:

Did design for marking the silver wares, series of hazel nuts and took it to the mill to post.

This entry puts Baker, or both Haseler and Baker, at the forefront of the concept of a specific and uniquely branded range.

16 The 'Liberty Silver Sketchbook' is held at the Westminster City Archive, London. It is a contemporaneous leather-bound volume containing small

sketches with model numbers of all, or nearly, all of the Cymric range. Frustratingly it contains no design attributions.

I believe this reference to an early Haseler trademark has never been previously assessed. As illustrated above, one piece of silver has been identified that carries this trademark, or at least a derivation of it [figs 6 and 7]. Haseler's trade mark of two hazelnuts was registered by him on 22 March 1899, two months prior to the launch of the

Cymric range [fig 8 and 9]¹⁷. The silver and enamel vase in fig 6 is hall-marked for William Haseler and dated Birmingham 1899-1900. It appears in the Liberty silver sketchbook as model 210 and similar vases marked with the Liberty mark are also known [fig 18]; it can be attributed to Oliver Baker. Quite why Haseler used their mark on this piece and so few others is unclear but, drawing from Max Haseler's account that Liberty was only given exclusive sale rights within a five mile radius of London (until May 1901 when the Cymric joint venture was formed between Liberty and Haselers), it would seem that this was one of a few items that Haseler reserved to sell themselves.

The role of Haselers

It is important at this point to address the early role of Haselers themselves in the manufacture of Cymric wares. Was there a London manufacturer producing Cymric wares before or contemporaneously with Haselers? Was the firm of Haseler, and William Haseler, by inference, more a follower than leader in the conception of the range? This now seems very unlikely. Identical Cymric buckles hall-marked for London and Birmingham 1899 and 1905 respectively have been uncovered. Since the buckles, like most pieces in the Cymric range, were machine made and only hand-finished, the similarity of the two pairs of buckles would suggest that the machinery and craftsmen used must have been the same for both pieces and that the pieces were sent to London in 1899 to be hallmarked¹⁸.

It is highly likely that Liberty wanted their own mark to appear on the designs; this would have been consistent with their marketing approach in branding the Cymric range as their own. The designer and manufacturer were to be kept anonymous. Since Liberty had no mark registered at the Birmingham assay office until 26 September 1899, when they registered the mark 'L & Co in a lozenge' it would have been impossible to achieve this through the Birmingham assay office prior to this date. The only assay office at which Liberty had registered a mark was that in London. They first registered the mark 'Ly & Co' in 1894 when they started selling silver, imported mainly from Japan. Goldsmiths' Hall was by necessity the only assay office for the silver to be sent to.

There is further evidence of an earlier link between Haselers and Liberty of London. When the Liberty mark was registered with the Birmingham assay office in September 1899 one of the three signatories to the registration was William Haseler himself, along with two Liberty directors, suggesting that an established relationship already existed between the two companies¹⁹.

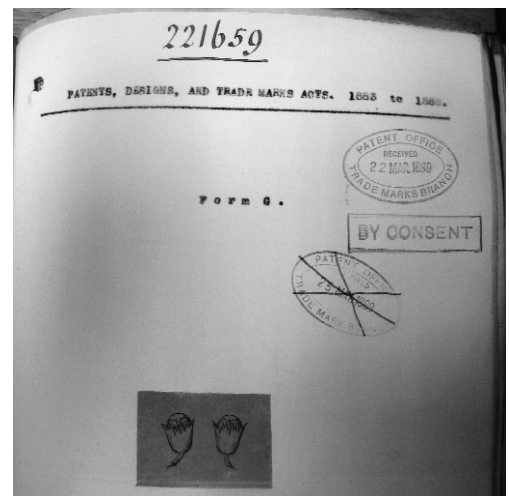


Fig 8 W H Haseler's registration of their trade mark of two hazelnuts.

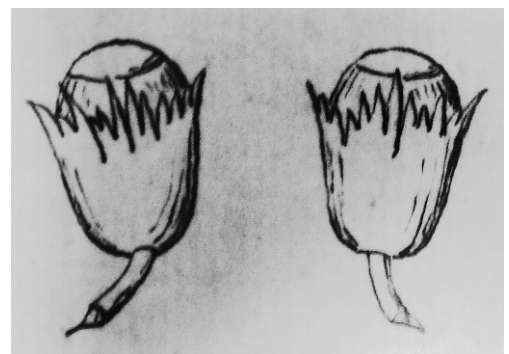


Fig 9 Detail of W H Haseler's registered trade mark of two hazelnuts from fig 8. This trademark is also similar to W H Haseler's later trademark for its Solkets subsidiary, of two overlapping flowers. Solkets made Tudric pewter for Liberty.

17 The trade mark can be found in Representations of Trade Marks, 221501-222000 (vol 614, form G, no 221659, ref BT/82/656) in the National Archives at Kew. From the image and

the date of registration I have assumed it is that imprinted on the vase of fig 5a, although the records linking the registered trademarks of this period with their registrants have

been destroyed. The bowl, from a private collection, was exhibited in three museums in 2003-4 as part of the *Seawolf* collection, late 19th and 20th century silver, a personal touch, and repro-

duced in an accompanying book of the same title, pp 70-71.

18 Shirley Bury's analysis, *Liberty's 1875-1975*, exhibition catalogue, London.

1975, no D129, p 66.

19 See Shirley Bury's introductory essay on the Cymric range, *Liberty's 1875-1975*, exhibition catalogue, London, 1975, p 14.



Fig 10 Bowl, WH Haseler Ltd, London, 1898-99.

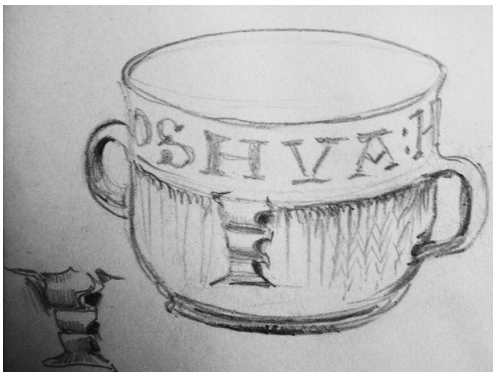


Fig 11 Drawing of a bowl similar to that in fig 10 (Olivier Baker's sketchbook).

One final piece of evidence confirms Haseler's role in manufacturing silver which was then sent for hallmarking in London. This concerns the small silver vessel [fig 10] which is marked for London, 1898-99 but is clearly designed by Baker who only worked for his brother-in-law William Haseler. Set below this vessel is an image taken from Baker's sketchbook [fig 11]. Fig 11 may well be the design for the bowl described in Baker's diary entry of 25 May 1898 as extracted above.

The major contributors to May 1899 Cymric exhibition catalogue

One final issue remains. Who was responsible for the design of the bulk of the wares for that first exhibition catalogue of May 1899 which launched the Cymric range? Was Baker designing simultaneously with Knox and Rex Silver or was Baker's work in fact later than that of Knox and Silver, whose work, Shirley Bury hypothesised, may have formed the basis of that first exhibition, only for Baker's work to be added in the later 1899 Arts and Crafts exhibition and subsequent Cymric ware catalogues.

As has been previously mentioned the catalogue of May 1899 has no images and only summary descriptions of the items. Identification of some pieces can only be made by linking the names given to the items to the named designs in the Silver Studio archive. Items were typically named after people or places drawn from ancient British history or antiquity.

Of the seventy-five or so silver pieces listed in the Cymric exhibition catalogue of May 1899 there are just thirty-three which can be linked with any degree of certainty to sketches in the Silver Studio archive²⁰. Even if, as is currently thought to be the case, these designs are by known Silver Studio designers, Archibald Knox and Rex Silver, it still leaves scope for other designs to be by Baker and others.

Baker's sketchbook opens up an additional line of enquiry which is the possibility that some of the early Silver Studio sketches, attributed to Archibald Knox and Rex Silver, are by Baker. This would point conclusively to his role in this first Cymric exhibition and it would allow some designs to be reattributed to Baker.

A sketch of a group of vases [fig 12] is from the Silver Studio archive and is included with other silver sketches from 1898-99. It is described as "Sheet of trial designs for vases". Most of the vases are also individually drawn and recorded in the archive with names that link them directly to those in the May Cymric exhibition catalogue or to a later illustrated Cymric catalogue of circa 1900. Intriguingly, the style of the sketches in fig 12 matches the rough sketches in Baker's sketchbook [fig 13].

In addition, most of the named Silver Studio designs included in Cymric exhibition catalogue (and for which we have images from the Silver Studio) are copies of objects from antiquity. This idea of copying of historical artefacts (although not of Celtic origin) was an approach that is closely associated with Baker (an antiquarian) and was not a common feature of Knox or Silver's work.

How and why Baker's designs may have ended up with the work of the Silver Studio is unclear. Perhaps when Liberty asked the Silver

20 The attribution of the named Silver Studio designs to the matching pieces named in the *Cymric Catalogue* of May 1899 is my own work undertaken for this article. A print-out showing the matched items is now lodged with the archive.

21 Liberty Cymric model numbers are not strictly chronological. It would seem, in general, that each class of product (candlesticks, vases, bowls etc) was allocated a round starting number (0, 100, 200 etc) and items were then added from that start-

ing point in date order.

22 I am reluctant to claim this piece as entirely conclusive of Baker's early contribution to the Cymric range as I have not seen the marks. The piece was listed as Cymric silver dated 1898 when sold by Bonhams, 16 May 2006, lot 60 and confirmed to me by the buyer who has since sold the piece

23 A number of Lethaby textile designs were exhibited by Liberty at the 1893 Arts and Crafts Society exhibition

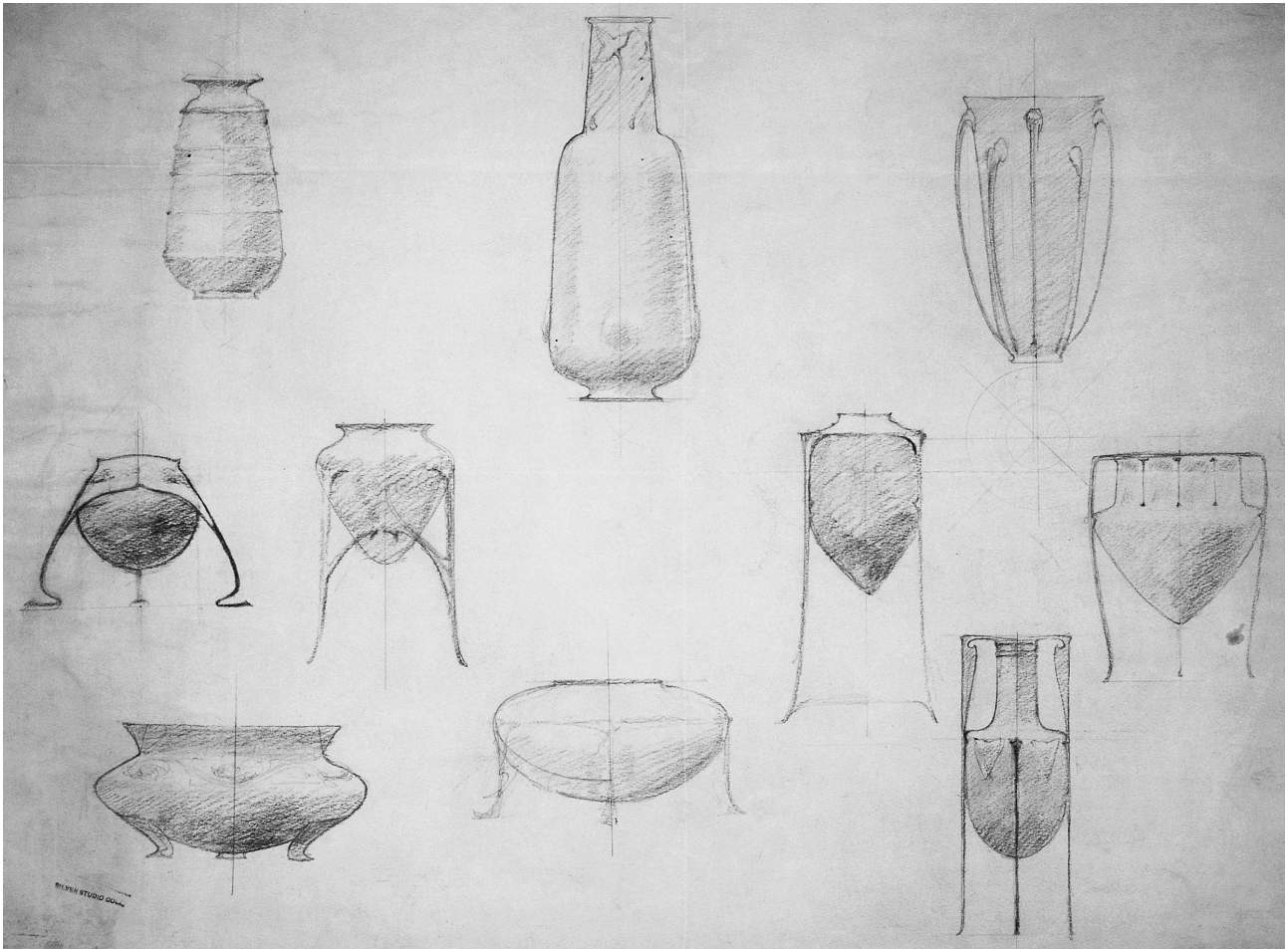


Fig 12 "Sheet of trial designs for vases" from the Silver Studio archive (SD 1635).

Studio to do designs for its new Cymric range they wanted some form of comparative basis of style, hence leading to Baker or Haseler sending them the earlier sketches. Ultimately the analysis of these Silver Studio designs remains an area of further research but two other pieces of information also point to Baker's role in the launch of the Cymric range.

The first is the small four handled bowl shown as *fig 10*. It is stamped 'Cymric' together with the Liberty model number 552²¹. The London date letter for 1898-99 means it must have been hallmarked (and hence designed and produced) before 5 May 1899²².

The second point is that there is one final diary reference to be considered. In Baker's 1898 diary he wrote at the front a record of his conversation with W R Lethaby. Excitingly for our purposes this is dated 6 May 1899 (see below). W R Lethaby was an architect, a founder of the Art Workers Guild and a leading member of the Arts and Crafts design movement; he was also a designer for Liberty's during the early 1890s²³. It is hard to draw any conclusion other than that Baker is recording a conversation that he had with Lethaby, after the latter had visited the Liberty Cymric exhibition in the same month. We know from Baker's father's diaries that Oliver Baker was in London at this time.

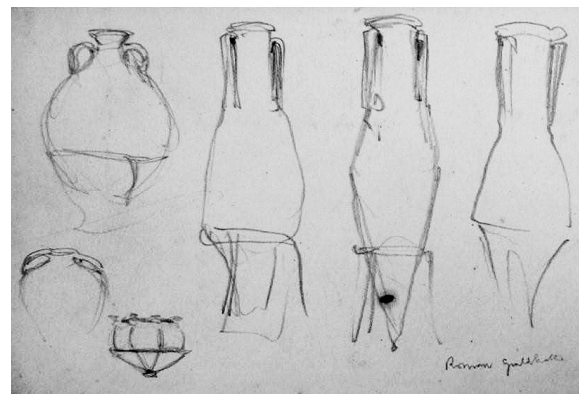


Fig 13 Drawings of vases similar to those in fig 12. (Oliver Baker's sketchbook).



Fig 14 Drawing of a cup.
(Oliver Baker's diary).

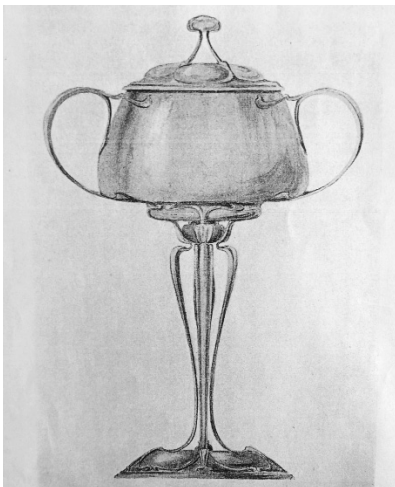


Fig 15 Image of a cup similar to the
drawing in fig 14.
(Cymric ware catalogue, 1900).

24 From his diary it is clear that Baker designed only a very few candlesticks, which Max Haseler recalled were amongst the pieces sold to Liberty, and it is quite possible that the pair of candlesticks referred to are the pair shown in fig 3. The reference to the steel rolled copper bowl may also be that in fig 5.

25 National Archives Kew, copy3/71, key register vol 37, p 256, ref 17552.

26 In September 1904 *The Studio* published a photograph of this design which was described as a "cachepot" and attributed to Eleanor Fortescue Brickdale who went on to become famous as an artist, part of the pre-Raphaelite sisterhood, and as an illustrator. It is possible the decoration and choice of inscription are hers as there is evidence she adapted other Baker works (A Tilbrook, *The Designs of Archibald Knox for Liberty & Co*, 1976, p 44).

WR Lethaby liked the best little candlesticks from the knop downwards but thought the upper much too artistic and fussy. The salt cellars would have been good if they had been five times the size. They and the buckles were too much like bizarre knick knacks. Too amorphous. Too Studiosque. He objected to the steel rolled copper surface in the bowl²⁴.

There are, however, no candlesticks listed in the Cymric exhibition catalogue of May 1899 which casts some doubt on this attribution although there may as yet be an explanation. During the nineteenth century Stationers' Hall was the copyright depository for Great Britain; this is to be distinguished from the Patent or Trade Mark Office and, like today, it was used to protect copyright on manuscripts and images, as distinct from designs that could be patented. Liberty used Stationers' Hall extensively to copyright its commercial catalogues. An examination of the Stationers' Hall archives for 1899 identifies only one possible entry for the May catalogue but this was entered on 26 July 1899. The entry simply states "Cymric Silver-work": the exact title of the May exhibition catalogue. The entry also gives the first date of publication as 24 July²⁵. This raises the possibility that the May 1899 exhibition catalogue may not actually have been published contemporaneously with the start of the exhibition itself but was launched subsequently as a commercial catalogue.

Baker's further contributions to the Cymric range.

There is a further important Liberty Cymric catalogue which does have illustrations and, therefore, allows identification of other early works of Baker's that were produced for the Cymric range. The catalogue is undated but many of the designs included in it are also in the May 1899 catalogue; it is thought to date from the middle of 1899 to early 1900. Some of Baker's finest designs are shown in this article alongside the images and prices from this catalogue, and where possible, drawings from his sketchbook. A striking feature is just how expensive the larger Cymric pieces were.

Fig 14 is a sketch from Baker's sketchbook with an image of a cup [fig 15] in the later illustrated Cymric catalogue of circa 1900. The cost of this item was listed at £24. Figs 16 and 17, from the same two sources respectively, show a cup or vase²⁶ which cost £45. Figs 18 and 19 are images of a surviving version of a silver bowl marked for Liberty & Co, Birmingham 1901 and its image from the Cymric catalogue of 1900; the colours of the enamel are reversed. This was priced at £25 in the 1900 catalogue or £19 10s if it was ordered without the enamelling. The hammered surface of the bowl is accentuated as part of the design, an innovation of the period. Figs 20 and 22 show two of the finest examples of Baker's work, together with their images from the 1900 Cymric catalogue [figs 21 and 23]. Fig 20 shows an 1899 Birmingham hallmarked bowl marked for Liberty & Co on four scrolling copper feet with a rim set with semi-precious stones. Two buckles designed by Oliver Baker are shown [figs 24 and 25]; they were illustrated in the 1900 catalogue and in *The Studio* article on Baker of February 1900.

Finally, a rare Cymric rose bowl of 1903-4 (model 2028), attributed to Oliver Baker, is shown as fig 26. Although the feet on the bowl are in



Fig 16 Sketch of a three-handled vase or cup.
(Oliver Baker's sketchbook).



Fig 17 Image of a presentation or challenge cup similar to the drawing in fig 16.
(Cymric ware catalogue, 1900).



Fig 18 Bowl, Liberty & Co, Birmingham, 1901-2.

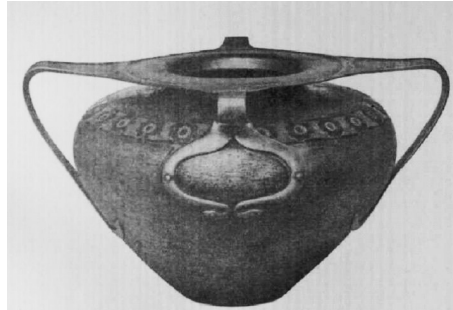


Fig 19 Image of bowl in fig 18.
(Cymric ware catalogue, 1900).



Fig 20 Cymric bowl on copper feet set with stones, Birmingham, 1899-1900.



Fig 21 Image of bowl in fig 20.
(Cymric ware catalogue, 1900).



Fig 22 Liberty Cymric bowl with four feet and Connemara marble stone set rim, Birmingham 1903-4.



Fig 23 Image of bowl in fig 22.
(Cymric ware catalogue, 1900).



Fig 24 Silver and hardstone buckle, Liberty & Co, Birmingham, 1900-1.

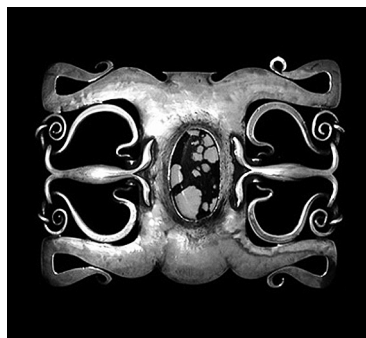


Fig 25 Silver and hardstone buckle, W H Haseler Ltd, Birmingham, 1905-6.



Fig 26 Silver and enamel rose bowl, Liberty & Co, Birmingham, 1903-4.

Baker's style, the bowl is atypical for the Cymric range being based from on Arthurian revivalist taste which was prevalent in other areas of the Arts and Crafts movement. The bowl carries the Shakespearian inscription: "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet"²⁷.

Insights from Bernard Cuzner

As already mentioned Bernard Cuzner was a young silversmith and contemporary of Baker who worked at Haselers during 1898 and 1899; he also provided silver designs for the Cymric range. Notes for a speech he wrote and gave in May 1951, towards the end of his life, are contained within his archive at the Birmingham Museum. The speech, entitled "Modern Silverwork", gives his personal account of the origins, design and industry of silver manufacture from around 1890 to the then present day. It provides an essentially contemporaneous perspective of someone who had been at the heart of modern silver work and design throughout that period. His notes include the following passage describing his view of the birth of modern silver in the 1890s:

H Wilson, JP Cooper out of Sedding's office began to work in metal with their own hands. Ashbee's Mile End Class, AS Dixon, AJG, G of H, Nelson Dawson, Alex Fisher enamel. Attempts to revive guilds didn't get very far. [Unintelligible sentence]. Uncommercially with varying degrees of success artistically and financially. Art Nouveau prevalent around 1900 confused many. They could or did not realise the difference. The O.B + W.H.H venture. Gallant and worthy of a better fate. Rejected Lethaby's criticism. L&Co, their I of M designer, mixture of Art Nouveau and Celtic interlacings, forced and extravagant ...

In a subsequent section titled "Art and Industry" which may be from a different speech, Cuzner wrote:

The Haseler experiment, founded on an Art Nouveau reef.

These extracts from Cuzner's notes provide a wealth of important confirmatory information. The first part of the main passage identifies, as is widely accepted, the role of the craft guilds in creating a new style of silver design: the Arts and Crafts style. The reference to "Sedding's office" must be to John Dando Sedding (1838-91), an architect and leader of the early Arts and Crafts movement who trained many of the next generation of Arts and Crafts architects and designers. Henry Wilson was his assistant and became a leading Arts and Crafts jeweller and silversmith as was John Paul Cooper who was head of metalwork at the Birmingham School of Art from 1904-7, a position shortly thereafter filled by Cuzner himself. The refer-

ences to "Ashbee's Mile End class" and "G of H" concern Charles Ashbee and his Guild of Handicraft which operated from Essex House in Mile End, East London until moving to Chipping Campden in 1902. "A S Dixon" was Arthur Stansfield Dixon, an architect, who from the mid 1890's was the chief designer and head of metalwork for the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft. "A J G" was Arthur J Gaskin, another leading Birmingham artist and designer, who was head of the Vittoria Street School for Jewellers in Birmingham from 1902-24. Nelson Dawson founded the Artificers Guild in 1901 and worked with his wife Edith to create Arts and Crafts jewellery and silver. Alexander Fisher was a leading enamellist of the period.

Most of these designers contributed jewellery or silver work to the 1893 and/or 1896 Arts Craft Society exhibitions ie prior to the work of Baker and Haseler that appeared in the 1899 Cymric exhibition and prior to the launch of the Cymric range. Examples of silver or jewellery work by all of these designers are in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, with images on the museum's website.

Critically, the second section of Cuzner's notes confirms Oliver Baker (O B) and William Haseler (W H H) as responsible for creating a distinctive style or range of silver; one that preceded, and was subsumed by, the more commercial Liberty venture with its Art Nouveau and Celtic style. The passage also provides a direct link to Oliver Baker's diary entry of May 1899 referring to Lethaby's criticism of Baker's work. Finally there is Cuzner's disapproval of Liberty and Archibald Knox (I of M being the Isle of Man). Whilst this view would not be shared by many today it does give some insight into the divisions between the Arts and Crafts movement and silversmiths on the one hand and the more Art Nouveau style and commercialism of Liberty on the other: influences of both of which can be seen in the Cymric range.

Oliver Baker

So just who was Oliver Baker? He was born in 1856, a fourth son, into an artistic middle class Birmingham family. Baker's father was Samuel Henry Baker who was a renowned water colourist and member of the Royal Academy. Of the four brothers, two died at a relatively young age, leaving Oliver and his brother, Harry. Harry, a talented artist himself, chose to pioneer photography as an artistic media and went on to hold many exhibitions in Birmingham and London. It was Harry who married William Haseler's sister.

Oliver Baker himself studied art under his father and at Birmingham School of Art. He was elected a full member of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (1884) and Royal Cambrian Academy (1908). He was an antiquarian

and ran a gallery in Stratford-upon-Avon for much of his life. His artwork was exhibited from 1875 at the Royal Academy, the Royal Society of British Artists, the New Watercolour Society, the New Gallery and elsewhere, although he was never an especially successful artist commercially. He took up etching in 1880 but worked mainly in watercolours from 1887.

As can be seen from his diaries, in the period around 1898-99, when Baker was already over 40 years old, he spent much of his time designing silver. In Max Haseler's account of the origins of the Cymric range he in part attributed the origins of Liberty's Tudric pewter range to Baker who was said to have provided Arthur Lazenby, owner of Liberty's, with examples of Elizabethan pewter. Based on surviving Liberty silver and pewter work of the period it would seem that Baker continued to design for Liberty's up to circa 1906, perhaps later. A range of ceramic and silver black jacks (a medieval leather drinking vessel) was introduced in a Liberty catalogue of 1906 and it is probably safe to assume these were designed by Baker²⁸. The range was not repeated in subsequent Liberty catalogues and the pieces are, I believe, unknown in the antique trade suggesting that very few were sold, perhaps marking the end of Baker's time as a silver designer. Baker's publications included the illustrated *Ludlow Town and Neighbourhood*, *The Moated Houses of Warwickshire* and *Black Jacks And Leather Bottells* which was published in 1921. He became an active member of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments and was also a member of the Shakespeare Club. He went on to work with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust advising them on the restoration of Mary Arden's House at Wilmcote which can still be seen and visited today. He was also a founder of the Stratford Guild in 1912.

Baker died, aged 84, in 1939 and on his death was accorded a sizeable obituary in *The Times* of 14 April 1939. The obituary makes no mention of Baker's metalwork designs or of his work for Liberty but it does emphasise the point that Baker was at heart an antiquarian with a deep knowledge of medieval and historic artefacts, as extracted below.

By the death of Mr Oliver Baker, the artist and antiquarian and author.....Warwickshire loses a fine medievalist and a charming personality. In a sense the artist and the author were subordinate to the antiquarian, for though his watercolours are held in high regard, though his "Ludlow Town and Neighbourhood" is still a standard work after 50 years and though his "Black Jacks and Leather Bottells" is an authority never likely to be challenged, these impressive achievements grew out of his lifelong passion for old buildings, old furniture and old documents.

It is hard to uncover Oliver Baker's true character. He was married with one child but his diaries and archive offer little insight into his personality. Through my research I have gained a sense, but no more than that, of a quiet studious man who lived in the shadow of his father. From his father's diaries there is a sense of disapproval of his son's silverwork and certainly there are more favourable references to Oliver's brother Harry. The lack of references to Oliver's silverwork in his father's diaries, make me think that Oliver hid the extent of his work from his father. His father makes no reference to Lethaby having seen Baker's work although this was, quite clearly, a seminal moment for his son. Similarly there is no mention of Oliver's role in the 1899 Arts and Crafts Society exhibition, yet his father wrote consistently of Harry's photographic exhibitions, including one which took place at exactly this time.

Conclusion

I hope this paper has shown that Oliver Baker was at the absolute heart of the development of modern silver and the Cymric range.

It has also established that Baker's designs were developed and produced as early as 1898, bearing the Haseler mark. They exist with Liberty marks in conjunction with both London and Birmingham hallmarks as early as 1899. Through his diary it is possible to establish that Baker was a conscious innovator in the development of his modern silver designs. Through the 1899 Arts and Crafts Society and 1900 Cymric catalogues we know Baker was a, or the, leading designer contributing to the Cymric range at that time and I hope to have plausibly established, though not proven, that he may well have had the same role in that first Liberty Cymric exhibition of May 1899.

Overall I hope that this article has extended the existing knowledge of the birth of the Cymric silver range. Taking Shirley Bury's work, the key interview with Max Haseler and the new material from the Baker archive and Bernard Cuzner's notes into account, it is now possible to be quite confident, although not certain, of the following timeline.

27 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, scene II. Baker was a Shakespeare enthusiast. He gave his only child Geoffrey, the middle name of

Arden: presumably after Mary Arden, Shakespeare's mother.

28 Liberty catalogue, 1906 in the National Art Library, London.

Late in 1897 Oliver Baker, quite probably stimulated by his brother-in-law, William Rathbone Haseler, determined to create a 'New Movement' artistic silver range.

Throughout 1898 designs were produced by Baker, and quite probably other Birmingham artists, for Haselers who in turn manufactured them.

Liberty asked the Silver Studio, with whom they already had a strong connection, to execute silver designs. This may have been a decision inspired by, or independent of, Haseler's works. From October 1898 the Silver Studio produced some of its own designs.

Baker, with Haseler's, chose to give their silver range a distinctive trademark of hazelnuts; the mark was designed circa October 1898 and registered in March 1899.

The items produced by Haseler's were shown to, and bought by, Liberty's circa 1899 and the decision taken to make the unique Cymric range.

Haseler's did the bulk, if not all the manufacturing but initially items were sent to the London Assay Office for hallmarking in time for the May 1899 exhibition.

In May 1899 the Cymric range was launched, and Oliver Baker's designs were, almost certainly, a significant part of the exhibition.

Items from, or similar to, the May range of Cymric wares were shown at the November 1899 Arts and Crafts Society exhibition. Baker's work was sufficiently distinctive to be written up and several images of his works reproduced in *The Studio* in February in 1900.

The Cymric range was given further impetus with the launch of an illustrated catalogue of circa 1900 which contained a large number of Baker's works.

Haseler's and Liberty's cemented their relationship by forming a joint venture in May 1901.

This article has focussed principally on identifying the origins of the Cymric range and establishing Oliver Baker more clearly as one of, if not the, key originator

together with William Haseler. It has, hopefully, also shown that some of Baker's work has distinct modern qualities and beauty and deserves wider acclaim. Baker was a true innovator and credit must go to him to as one of the key participants who laid the foundations of modern silver design and for the Cymric range, from which Knox and other designers subsequently flourished.

Acknowledgments

Having discovered Baker's archive diaries and sketchbook, and on about my fifth draft of this work, I found *By Hammer and Hand, The Arts and Crafts Movement in Birmingham* (1984), edited by Alan Crawford. The book contains an excellent article on metalwork by Glenys Wild and Alan Crawford which includes some of the extracts from Baker's diaries used in this current article and draws some of the same conclusions. The article directed me to new sources (such as *The Artist* article of 1901) and gave me the confidence to push on with my own research.

I would also like to thank the following: the staff at the Birmingham Assay Office and Goldsmiths' Hall who have assiduously answered my many e-mails and helped me to understand, in particular, the precise dating of silver in 1899 and the workings of the assay offices. Jan Van den Bosch for his enthusiasm and knowledge and for providing some of the images contained in this article. The staff and curators at the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive, the National Art Library, the National Archives, MODA, Birmingham Museum and the Westminster City Archive who were all so helpful in my research and have granted permission for a number of images and/or text to be reproduced in this article. A number of private collectors have generously given permission for images of pieces in their possession to be reproduced.

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