



Altar cross and candlestick holders commissioned for St James Church in Chipping Campden

Heritage and History

Hart's Silversmiths

Words by Michelle Balmer Images by Kirsten Holst

Everything at Hart's Silversmiths smacks of history and heritage. Their past work includes a wedding present for Queen Elizabeth II, a Processional Cross for Gloucester Cathedral and the 1926 Royal Ascot Hunt Cup. All of which were crafted within an old silk mill, in a workshop founded by the revered designer and architect, C. R. Ashbee, as the Guild of Handicraft Ltd in 1902.

Hart's Silversmiths, in the Cotswold village of Chipping Campden, has been built on the hard work of four generations of the Hart family, with the help of a few talented outsiders. One can imagine that Hart's - the only operating workshop from the arts and craft movement - is much the same as when Ashbee left it, apart from a few more museum-like pieces which have multiplied over time and the odd minor practical change that are allowed in such heritage-listed buildings.

Timber workbenches are laden with vices, cutters, and different-sized metal stakes that are used when beating the silver into form. Walls are decked out with rows of hammers and unique tools - most over 100 years old - and clusters of aged invoices hang from the ceiling. A room off the main workshop is a treasure-trove of black and white photographs of old pieces and hundreds of designs, which still provide inspiration today. Above the rhythmic clanging and tinkering of hammers I hear today's news emanating from a modern radio - which ironically rests on an old radio the size of a tea chest - a subtle reminder that I am in fact in the 21st century.

To envision the workshop in a modern setting is like imagining Mother's roast beef minus the Yorkshire puddings. Although each can be appreciated individually, when combined, equate to nostalgic bliss. Three to twenty customers, craft-buffs and tourists from all over the world, drop by each day to watch craftsmen at work in these quaint surroundings - a quick peek at the worn pages of the visitors' book indicates there has been a constant ebb and flow of people since 1903. Yet despite the attention, Hart's is not at all 'touristy'. The silversmiths consider their space 'just a workshop' and are well versed in cutting a chalice while politely answering questions from visitors.

Unfazed by the intrigue surrounding them, the craftsmen soldier on; when a silver jug returns from London's assay office with a freshly hallmarked 'G of H', it is carefully polished; and another craftsman picks up what will become a strawberry bowl with a pair

of tongs and heats it on a rotating hearth to 'anneal', or soften the metal.

When the late George Hart took over the business in 1908 - after the demise of the Guild of Handicraft Ltd - right up until the 1970s the workshop produced mostly ecclesiastical silver. Today, with fewer priests being ordained, the work is mainly for private clients who commission household pieces and gifts for christenings, weddings and anniversaries. Some of the most popular items are elegant glass and silver wine decanters modelled on Ashbee's designs, and jam spoons, which are often encrusted with a synthetic, or occasionally precious, stone. A cheese knife, which features a lump of cheese and rat on the handle, and a matching Stilton spoon, which was first made by George Hart in 1911, still manage to charm anyone who sets eyes on them. "As soon as

I get half a dozen of those made up I need to start again," says David Hart - George's grandson - who at 71 still occupies the bench where he started work at 18, alongside his own father Henry.

Unlike many silversmiths today, Hart's maintain a purist attitude towards their craft and, in doing so, produce some of the world's finest hand-made silverware. Typically, the first process is 'blocking' where a silver sheet is placed on a tree stump with specially carved depressions. The metal is then beaten to mould the object into the desired form and is followed by a round of 'annealing'. "We also use the traditional hand-raising method, rather than



David Hart is 'knocking' a piece of silver into the shape using a tree stump

spinning, which thins the metal," says David. In both the 'blocking' and 'raising' processes different-sized hammers are used and I find it incredible that, with around a hundred hammers to choose from, David doesn't hesitate to reach for the 'right' one for the job. According to David, no one has ever counted the total number of tools but, as we both scan the room, he estimates there must be close to a thousand.

Four silversmiths share this collection of tools. Each craftsman is capable of all tasks that silversmithing requires; from heavy labour to intricate 'hand-chasing', which is the creation of flat or indented surface patterns. Derek Elliot enthusiastically started his apprenticeship in 1982, after David approached a local school looking for a promising new craftsman. Despite becoming a Freeman in 1987, Derek is an avid believer that you can always learn something new. "Officially, the silversmith apprenticeship was five years, but David's Dad Henry always said 'you will never know it all,' - and he was 78 when he packed up," says Derek. Indeed, the day I visit, those words are true for Derek who explains he has taken on a special job of repairing a Danish fork that belongs to the family of one his long-term customers. What begins as a



From left to right behind the work station: William Hart, Julian Hart, David Hart. Front right: Derek Elliot. At their Hart's workshop in Chipping Campden

simple repair on a 'supposedly silver' fork, as were most from Denmark in that period, turns out to be a complex repair of a silver-plated brass utensil. Nevertheless, Derek puts his head down and gets on with the challenging job.

David's son William Hart, aged 40, joined the workshop in 1990, taking the place of his ailing grandfather Henry. "With granddad unable to work they needed someone and, seeing as though I didn't have a job, it seemed like fate," says William. Although William admits to me, as he shows me a pair of bookends that he's working on, that he hadn't actually been jobless for long, "I had just completed my college studies in computer science on a Friday and started at Hart's on the following Monday."

The fourth silversmith is William's cousin Julian, who started his silversmith apprenticeship in 1994 after a stint studying motor-vehicle engineering. Julian's partner Caroline Richardson is a jeweller and also has a workspace adjoining the silversmith workshop.

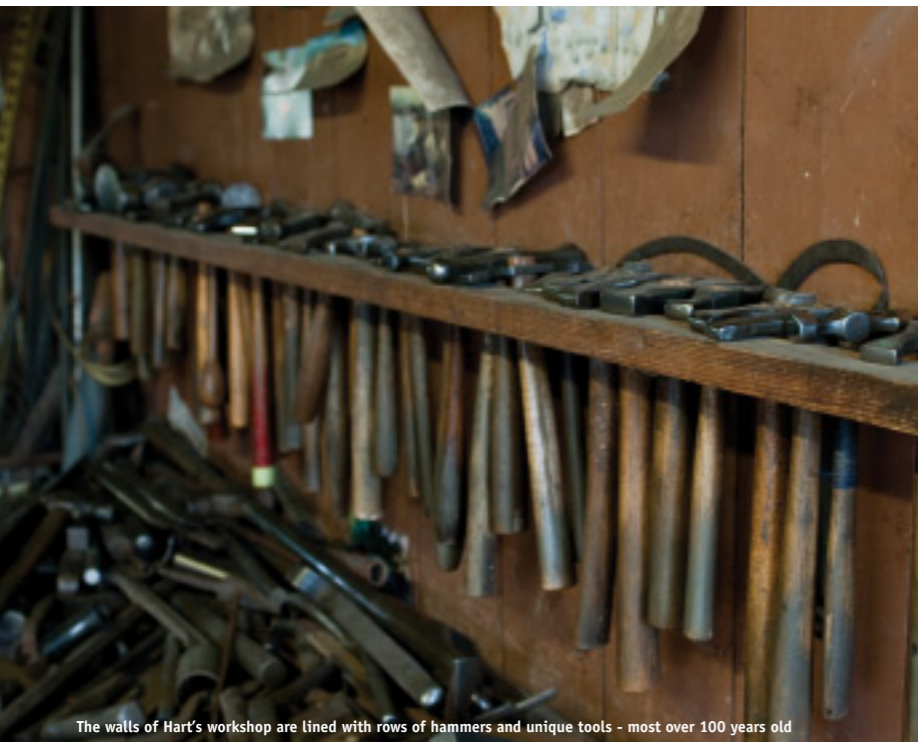
Although they all share the cost of the rent and sundry expenses, each person runs their own business with their own clients allowing them to see pieces right through from start to finish. Apart from a few napkin holders, teapots and spoons, which were made to display in the workshop, all of their work is commissioned. "We never get time to make anything speculatively. A lot of people think we're creating things and then selling it but we're not. We're making to customer orders all the time," says David.

The make-to-order model has clearly worked for Hart's, "...the only form of advertising has been word of mouth," says David. Even despite the infiltration of production silver from the East, demand for

Hart's fine silverware remains steady. Perhaps this can be attributed to maintaining the 'worldwide reputation that the workshop has held since the turn of the century', or perhaps it was the determination of the Hart fellows who have always adored Chipping Campden and the simple country life.

Whatever the reason, in 2008 Hart's celebrated a centenary of family ownership with an exhibition of around 400 pieces, which were loaned from private collections. A book titled The Harts of Chipping Campden, written by author and now friend, Richard Russell, was also released during exhibition week. "I felt quite chuffed to have reached the 100-year milestone," says David smiling. "Grandad never had a lot of confidence that Dad and I could keep the place going - who knows what he's thinking up there now."

Hart Gold & Silversmiths
The Guild of Handicraft
Sheep Street, Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire
T: 01386 841100
www.hartsilversmiths.co.uk
Visitors are welcome



The walls of Hart's workshop are lined with rows of hammers and unique tools - most over 100 years old



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