

Assignment 2: Archaeological Database/Dataset

This dataset comprises a detailed catalogue of a collection of silver cutlery. The cutlery is almost entirely of British origin and the objects date from the 18th century through to the end of the 20th century. Before the structure of the dataset is explained, a brief explanation of silver hallmarks is required. The British hallmarking system began in a basic form in the 14th century (Pickford 1994, p. 36), and gradually became more complex with the current standard system, which is still used today, being established in 1544 (Pickford 1994, p. 41). A temporary duty mark was included between 1784 and 1890, which showed that duty had been paid, initially to contribute to the British effort in the American War of Independence (Pickford 1994, p.42). Thus a 'complete' set of hallmarks (as in Figure 1), as seen in the late 18th and most of the 19th century consists of six marks, and the general order of these marks is reflected in the dataset, although the order can vary from piece to piece. Therefore the six marks seen on British silver are the following:

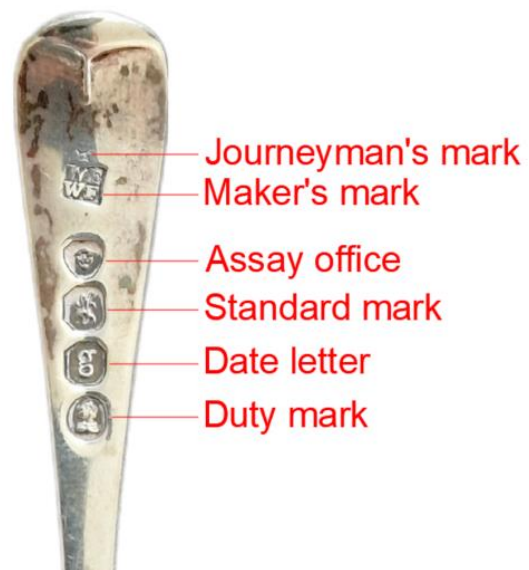


Figure 1 Labelled complete set of hallmarks on CUTL26, an early 19th century salt spoon.

Journeyman's mark: This is a punch which was unique to the craftsman/woman within a workshop.

Maker's mark: This mark identifies the name of the silversmith or company who made the item. It usually takes the form of initials.

Assay office: A symbol is punched onto the object which represents where it was assayed.

Standard mark: A mark is punched onto the object which states the standard of the silver. Most assay offices used a Lion Passant for sterling standard (925 silver parts out of 1000).

Date letter: This letter indicates the year the object was hallmarked. The case, font and shape of the outline need to be consulted along with the office mark and other stamps to identify the date of the item.

Duty mark: This temporary mark indicates the monarch under which the object was assayed, although the busts of George III and IV can be difficult to differentiate and there is some posthumous crossover before marks were changed after a monarch's reign ended.

The fields within the dataset were informed by the hallmarking system above and include other physical attributes and information which varies from item to item. These fields are:

Object number

The object number is a free text field. The items of cutlery were assigned a unique number as each one was catalogued. They are prefixed with CUTL (short for cutlery) to ensure that the identifier is not confused with any other identifier that might be used in archaeology. As there are under 100 items of cutlery in the collection a two digit number was used for each item, starting at CUTL01. Shorter strings of letters could be confused for other meanings such as archaeological cuts, century dates or chemical names.

FISH term

The first categorisation for the objects is the most basic. This drop down list provides terms from object terminology defined by the Forum on Information Standards in Heritage provides three broad terms into which all the objects in this catalogue can be placed: knife, fork (utensil) and spoon. The object hierarchy within the thesaurus is not entirely correct as the term Knife is situated beneath 'food preparation equipment' (2021, p. 31), rather than 'cutlery' as 'fork (utensil)' and 'spoon' are, however the term was used as there is no option for 'knife' beneath 'cutlery'.

Specific type

As the FISH object thesaurus is too broad, the objects have been further divided into types of utensils in this drop down list. The variety of utensil categories includes basic types such as table knife, forks and spoons, dessert knives, forks and spoons, and then more specialised utensils; the names of which were added as the catalogue was made, such as salt spoons (which always have gilded bowls), and grapefruit spoons, which have pointed tips.

Hallmark location

This drop down field allows for the location of the hallmark to be specified (front/back, top/bottom, on the bowl, etc.) The location of the hallmark can be the first piece of diagnostic evidence for an object's date. Until 1781 cutlery was 'bottom struck', at the thinnest part of the item on the underside (Pickford 1995, p. 38). This however resulted in poorly defined hallmarks and unscrupulous 'duty dodgers' could stamp their maker's mark several times and pass it off as hallmarks. CUTL04 is an example of this.

Journeyman's mark

This drop down field records whether the item of cutlery has a journeyman's mark or not. As there are such a wide range of possible marks that no longer have any meaning, the marks are not described in any detail as this does not generally provide diagnostic information. Where there is a need to differentiate marks this can be done in the comments section.

Maker's mark

This free text field allows for the transcription of the maker's mark as far as is possible. As the marks were applied before the cutlery was sent for hallmarking, they are often more worn than the hallmarks.

Assay office

This field provides a drop down list of the assay offices in Britain, as well as options for foreign illegible or absent marks. This field is one of the most important pieces of information to record as it is used to date the item in conjunction with the date letter.

Purity mark

This field provides an option to record whether the spoon has a purity mark or not. Most silver that has been assayed at an office has a purity mark, usually a sterling mark denoting a 92.5% silver purity. The mark is usually a lion passant, except for a few exceptions such as Edinburgh which had a thistle and Glasgow which had a lion rampant. The absence of a sterling mark (if British) indicates that the item of cutlery was never sent to be assayed and was made by a provincial (usually Scottish, due to relaxed laws) craftsman/woman (Pickford 1994, p. 264 and p. 530). Items CUTL04 and CUTL43 are examples of this.

Date letter

This field allows for the selection of the date letter stamped, or to record the absence of one. This field is one of the most important pieces of information to record as it is used to date the item in conjunction with the assay office mark.

Date letter style

This field records the font style and the case of the letter which is essential for determining the date of the object. The letters are usually serified, gothic or cursive, and alternate between being in uppercase and lowercase with each cycle.

Letter outline

This field records the broad style of the outline around the letter which helps with determining which letter is stamped on the item of cutlery. There are a great number of different styles of outline with minor differences which cannot be described in a drop down selection, however a free text entry may cause confusing and convoluted descriptions of these shapes and so the field has been sorted into five broad categories.

Duty mark

The duty mark is the last of the marks in a complete set of hallmarks. This mark is included in the dataset as, when present, it provides a way to quickly determine the approximate age of the object. The options are provided as a drop down list.

Date

This free text field records the date of the cutlery as determined by the information in the previous columns and cross-referenced with tables in Jackson's hallmarks (Pickford 1994). In most cases a specific date can be determined, however where this wasn't possible a date range has been provided as determined by the hallmarks and pattern.

FISH period

This field categorises the objects into periods as defined by the Forum on Information Standards in Heritage [FISH] (2023). The options provided in the drop down list exclude two periods from FISH that cover the date range of the utensils; First World War 1914 to 1918, Second World War 1939 to 1945. This is because the war periods had little to no impact on the morphology and hallmarking of cutlery.

The following fields within the dataset record the physical attributes of the objects.

Weight (g)

This free text field records the weight of the item in grammes to two decimal places, the most accurate measurement available to the author at the time of creating this dataset.

Length (cm)

This free text field record the length of the cutlery in centimetres to one decimal place, the most accurate measurement available to the author at the time of creating this dataset.

Monogrammed/Inscribed

This quantitative field records whether or not the item has been inscribed with the owner's monogram or initials. This can help with quickly identifying the piece of cutlery and when of interest can be further elaborated on in the comments section.

Pattern

There are several shapes and basic designs that cutlery can take and these are called patterns. This drop down field allows for the pattern to be recorded.

Decoration

This free text field allows for the recording of any additional decoration to the utensil beyond the pattern. This is usually engraving but can also be enamel or decorative terminals. Due to the complexity of some decorations and the simplicity of others it was considered too prescriptive to use a drop down list of options for this field.

Comments

This free text field allows for any additional data to be recorded that wasn't recorded by the previous fields.

The order of the data fields within the dataset are not set out at random. The identifying number of the object is the first in the list as this is the first point of identification for items in the collection. The Fish terminology is the next field as it is the broadest description and classifies the items into the main three types of object; knife, fork (utensil) and spoon. The type of object is then better and more specifically described and identified in the 'specific type' column. The following columns then detail the hallmarks and are set out in the same order the marks are often seen in (such as in Figure 1). The date, as determined by the preceding marks – as well as the patterns in the following columns, when the hallmarks do not provide a date, due to wear or being incomplete – are cross referenced with tables in Pickford (1994), and stated as accurately as possible. The items are then grouped into broader periods as defined by FISH. These periods can help the user to quickly identify when an item dates from. The weight and length are recorded in the following columns, which are important identifying information. The position of any monograms or inscriptions, the pattern and decoration are recorded. These three categories are grouped together as they record the physical shape and style of the object. Finally any other comments are given in the final column to detail any information not already detailed in the previous data categories.

There are several other fields of data that could have been included in this dataset but were not for ease of use and simplicity or where data fields were unnecessary. For example the ClfA Archaeological Materials Word List (2023) suggests a set of categories that should be used when recording finds, however the suggested categories are extremely general, such as 'Material Class' (stone, metal etc), and the most specific field is 'Material Type (sub-class)', which breaks items down only as far as the metal used. As all of the items in this dataset fall under Material ID 6.6 (Metal, Artefact, Silver), it was not deemed necessary to specify this in the dataset. Another data field that could have been included was the name of the maker as denoted by the maker's mark. However this was not included because of uncertainties and difficulties with identifying maker's marks as they were often damaged during the hallmarking process. Additionally there can be several makers with the same initials, or their marks are not recorded. If this field was included many of the entries in the catalogue would be left blank or uncertain, and so this field was omitted.

Bibliography

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