

PART II

Silver tea-urns, ranging in price from £27 to £100 were sold to the aristocracy (e.g. 6th Earl of Craven) and the gentry (e.g. Sir Robert Rich) but rarely to the middle-classes (Boulton's purchase of one in 1776 being an exception).⁷⁹ Even Sheffield-plate tea-urns cost £6.0s.0d. (- if tinned inside)⁸⁰ or £10.10s.0d.⁸¹ if plated on both sides; there was therefore a substantial market for bronzed tea-urns with plated ornaments costing £4.10s.0d.,⁸² one customer, able to afford Sheffield-plate candlesticks only bought a bronzed tea urn.⁸³ (Figure 5). Some tea-urn handles were French-plated.⁸⁴ Silver teapots, in one case charged at £9.19s.10d. were not infrequently purchased by middle-class customers, such as Charles Vere, a London banker or Mrs. Ryland, wife of a local banker,⁸⁵ but Sheffield-plate teapots, cost far less (an agent abroad in 1780 paid £2.12.6d. for one) so that in 1780 two silver teapots were sold against thirty-five in Sheffield-plate. Boulton was

dismissive about making ordinary silver tankards, since they were made cheaply elsewhere. Although he did occasionally make them in silver (expensively on one occasion at £6.17s.8d.) they were produced in far larger quantities in Sheffield-plate at £1.12s.0d: in 1780 Soho sold only one silver tankard but forty-eight in Sheffield-plate.⁸⁶ Wine-labels, which hung from the shoulders of bottles, were bought by 6th Earl of Craven in Sheffield-plate at 2s.0d.,⁸⁷ while the ironmaster John Wilkinson bought them in silver for 4s.0d.⁸⁸

Boulton factored Sheffield-plate spoons from Sheffield but observed in 1783 that few had been made at Soho and resulted in "great trouble and little profit", finding as did others, difficulty in covering the copper edge. Some French-plated spoons were recorded in 1782,⁸⁹ but the technique was time-consuming and lacked durability.⁹⁰ 'Plated' spoons were sold later,⁹¹ but the firm continued to factor at least some of them.⁹² Customers were advised to buy silver spoons since plated ones could not be made of



Figure 5

Boulton, designs
for tea-urns,
BCA.MS
3782/21/2 p.129.

Illustration:
Courtesy of
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“proportional cheapness”,⁹³ and from the mid-1770s Soho made silver spoons in large quantities: 512 were assayed in 1773-4.⁹⁴ An order from Richard Gore, who belonged to the gentry, consisted of a wide range of Sheffield-plate, amounting to £22.15s.6d., but his spoons were silver: one dozen tablespoons costing £6.3s.0d.⁹⁵ The ironmaster John Wilkinson bought six silver teaspoons at 18s.11d. each,⁹⁶ while a trade customer was charged £3.12s.0d. for six dozen plated teaspoons.⁹⁷

Since Sheffield was a major place for knife manufacture Boulton’s customers were often told to apply there direct⁹⁸ or he factored knives⁹⁹ and continued to do so even after manufacture started at Soho.¹⁰⁰ By 1780 Soho made Sheffield-plate handles¹⁰¹ and by the mid-1770’s silver handles though using steel blades obtained from Sheffield.¹⁰² Occasionally silver blades were used.¹⁰³ Sheffield-plate was unsuitable for blades, the copper edge being hard to cover, and like French-plating also lacked durability for such a purpose.¹⁰⁴ Normally Boulton followed the practice in Sheffield of stamping knife handles in two halves (with the

end of the blade inserted into hot pitch placed in the handle after the halves had been soldered) which replaced thicker castings traditionally used in London;¹⁰⁵ however, exceptionally, Boulton offered to make knives with cast handles for the Duke of Holstein- Gottorp.¹⁰⁶ The problems of making the prongs of forks with Sheffield-plate were considerable: silver points were sometimes added.¹⁰⁷ In the early 1770s customers were urged to apply direct to Sheffield for forks with Sheffield-plate handles¹⁰⁸ or Boulton obtained them from that source for his customers.¹⁰⁹ By 1780 Soho produced forks with Sheffield-plate handles and steel prongs,¹¹⁰ and silver forks by 1773,¹¹¹ having previously factored them (and silver-handled knives) from Sheffield.¹¹²

In 1776-7 11,831 troy ozs of silver from Soho was passed at the Birmingham Assay Office, the highest in Boulton’s lifetime.¹¹³ A large proportion of that was for five services of plate, all for the aristocracy and gentry.¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Montagu, a member of the gentry with an annual income of £7000 bought a service worth £1114.0s.11d., which she regarded in part as an investment:¹¹⁵ soup tureens, plates, dishes and covers (four of which



Figure 6
Boulton and Fothergill, one of a pair of silver sauce tureens for Mrs. Montagu, 1776-7,
Birmingham Assay Office.

were Sheffield-plate, which could have been about one eighth the cost of covers in silver) sauceboats (Figure 6) as well as smaller items such as ladles and asparagus tongs.¹¹⁶ Boulton met her, designs were discussed with her. The design of the sauceboats was new, though they were probably based on designs by the leading Neo-classical architect James Wyatt whose work promoted the change towards a lighter and more elegant Neo-classicism. Figure 6 was predominantly made with skilful traditional techniques (the base, bowl and cover were all hand-

raised and the festoons of husks were shaped with specially-made punches) though the ribbon-and-reed border was probably die-stamped. Even with these items Boulton was competitive with London makers: he reckoned that their plates would have been heavier (20-22 troy ozs against 16 troy ozs) and his fashioning charge was 1s.2d. against 1s.6d. per troy oz. (Figure 7).¹¹⁷

Though prestigious, these orders were not profitable. This was partly because



Figure 7
Boulton and Fothergill, set of dinner plates for Mrs Montagu, 1776-7,
Partridge Fine Arts

Boulton was operating on an overdraft and interest charges on purchases of bullion were greater than the profit margin, when, as often happened, customers paid late. Boulton reluctantly allowed silver orders to be declined from 1777 and manufacture was dramatically reduced (assay silver slumped to 263ozs in 1782-3) with the aim of increasing Sheffield-plate production.¹¹⁸ External factors also militated in favor of Sheffield Plate;

apart from economic depression following the war with America from 1775,¹¹⁹ platers who after 1773 had been prohibited from placing their marks on pieces, were from 1784, permitted to register marks at the Sheffield Assay Office as long as they were different from their marks on silver; the date, Birmingham Assay Office mark (an anchor) lion passant (sterling silver) and 'maker's' initials on silver were replaced

on Boulton's Sheffield-plate by two suns.¹²⁰ This gave plated wares respectability and the new material gained further advantage from the re-introduction of a duty of 6d. per oz (which had been dropped in 1757) on assay silver.¹²¹

Even by 1780, excluding buttons, 91% of the silver and Sheffield-plate items sold from Soho were in Sheffield-plate.¹²² Later the London agent was required to give priority to Sheffield-plate orders over silver.¹²³ He obtained very large orders from retailers: (who were given discounts for Sheffield-plate but not silver): in 1798 Rundell and Bridge of London purchased £247.15s.0d. of Sheffield-plate, but only £8.0s.9d. of silver. The emphasis was on making Sheffield-plate rival silver: in 1798 Boulton was happy to quote prices for ecclesiastical wares in Sheffield-plate, a material he had not thought appropriate for such purposes in the 1770s. In 1798 the firm offered three types of borders for Sheffield-plate dishes, two of which had silver borders with only one offering a Sheffield-plate border, while all Sheffield-plate trays had silver borders and were double plated.¹²⁴ An extra 14s.0d. was charged

for a pair of thickly-plated candlestick branches, normally costing £3.15s.0d.¹²⁵

Sheffield-plate was increasingly sold as sets. Sheffield-plated ladies' toilette services, including such things as needle cushions, a looking glass and stand was promoted from the early 1780s.¹²⁶ Sets were increasingly bought by the middle classes,¹²⁷ in 1800 a Dr. H. Edgar bought three pairs of candlesticks and a pair of branches, a waiter, an epergne, a tray, a teapot, a toast-rack, two muffineers, three pairs of salts, a cream jug, three pairs of bottle stands, which, with glass dishes for the epergne and salts, came to £37.11s.6d.¹²⁸ Sets were sometimes sold to the aristocracy¹²⁹ and as far away as the West Indies.¹³⁰ Items were routinely ordered from pattern books, which were also used for silver orders, normally through the trade.¹³¹ The range of goods in silver was similar to Sheffield-plate and increasingly the emphasis was, in both, on light wire work for such items as bread baskets, often in conjunction with glass, as in cruet frames,¹³² which often had repetitive fly-pressed bands of decoration (Figure 8). There was little artistic ambition and few special items were made in Boulton's later years.¹³³

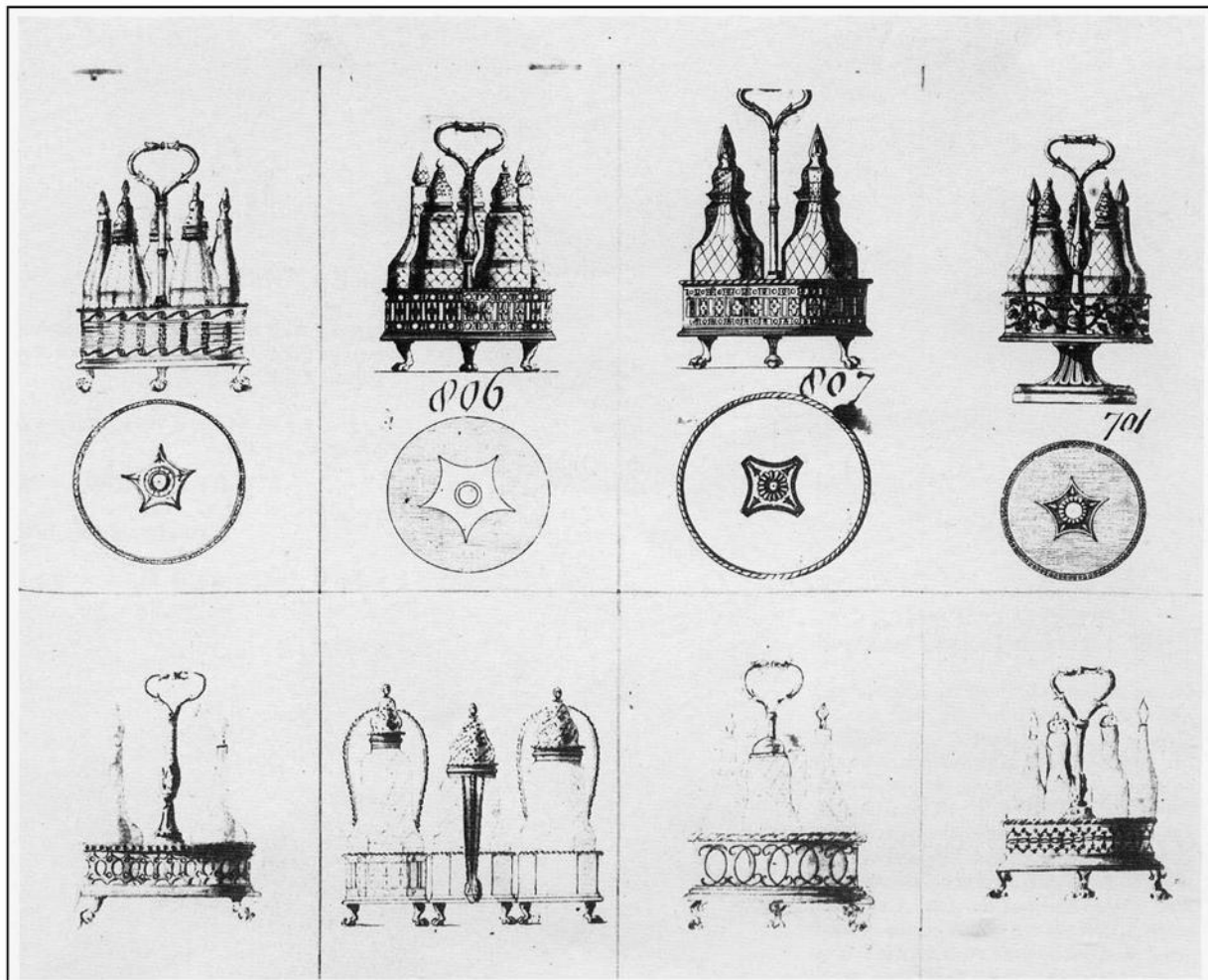


Figure 8
Boulton, designs for cruets,
 BCA. MS 3782/21/2 p.57. Illustration courtesy of Birmingham Libraries and Archives.

Sheffield-plate had increasingly dominated other substitutes for silver at Soho. The use of platina was confined to buttons. The lack of malleability was a major factor; nevertheless, when Boulton was offered a batch where that was less true, at the end of the century,¹³⁴ there is nothing to suggest that he took advantage of the opportunity. The use of 'white metal' seems to have been limited

to buttons, but it was taken up in a major way by other manufacturers in the nineteenth century, though more as a replacement for pewter than silver.¹³⁵ Boulton made silvered buttons, and occasionally other items with this method; it was cheaper than Sheffield-plate (a pair of salts in an identical pattern cost 14s 0d as against 9s 6d).¹³⁶ But he preferred to use Sheffield-plate for its

greater durability¹³⁷ though he also factored silvered pieces. Around 1770 there was enthusiasm at Soho for tutenague, for candlesticks and other items too;¹³⁸ this was much because of its durability¹³⁹ (since it was not plated) and cost, about the same as Sheffield-plate; however, Boulton preferred the (usually) whiter silver plating of Sheffield-plate (especially as his firm usually used pure silver)¹⁴⁰ He also found that there was little enthusiasm for tutenague in the market place,¹⁴¹ and his supplies varied in quality,¹⁴² so that by the 1780s he was selling tutenague cheaply to clear stocks.¹⁴³ Only from the 1820s when the metal (or a very close equivalent) was made in Europe, to provide cheaper and more consistent supplies did the metal become widely popular.¹⁴⁴ The lack of durability and the tediousness of French-plating led to its decline nationally from the late 1760s because of the growing popularity of Sheffield-plate.¹⁴⁵ It is doubtful whether French-plate ever offered a serious rival to Sheffield-plate at Soho but there were circumstances where it was useful: it could be offered to customers where they wanted it,¹⁴⁶ small parts were sometimes French-plated¹⁴⁷ and the technique was used for

repairing Sheffield-plate where silver flaked off.¹⁴⁸ Though not of Soho manufacture, it is likely that some of Boulton's customers were supplied with buckles finished with close-plate, though this technique was much more generally used in the early nineteenth century where resilience, or the plating of a cutting edge was required, an area of difficulty with Sheffield Plate.¹⁴⁹ Boulton's commitment to Sheffield-plate, despite some early dependence on Sheffield for cutlery, saw Soho produce a wide range of articles so there was little need later for factoring.¹⁵⁰ The success of the material was due to its increasing resemblance to silver in the later part of the century and the greater durability of the silver surfaces and edges which represented an advantage over French-plate. Moreover, although the material could not be cast (if it was to still look like silver) that scarcely mattered since silver castings could be added and since the principal means of manipulation at the Soho Manufactory were hand-raising and the use of dies,¹⁵¹ also employed in shaping silver.

Articles were widely available in other materials at a lower rate than in Shef-

field-plate but Sheffield-plate was far cheaper than silver-plate. The raw material for Sheffield-plate cost 0s 6d to 1s 0d depending on quality, in 1780,¹⁵² and at the same time sterling silver cost 5s 6 1/2d per oz and fine silver 6s 2d¹⁵³ (which was often used for filigree¹⁵⁴) and the finished article cost at least half the price and usually much less. There was no tax on Sheffield-plate; apart from the duty on newly-made silver (which increased from 6d to 1s 0d per troy oz. in 1794¹⁵⁵) there was a tax between 1756 and 1777 for those owning 100 troy ozs or more.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, silver was less valued as a means of investment than it had been, since government stocks and East India Co. shares were becoming increasingly popular.¹⁵⁷ Boulton had found a broad market for small silver items, medium priced pieces of silver sometimes sold to the middle-classes too but expensive purchases of silver were generally confined to the aristocracy and gentry. However, Sheffield-plate became attractive not only to an emulative middle-class but increasingly to the aristocracy also.

Nevertheless, silversmithing did not cease at Soho; the production of assay silver rose to 1174 troy ozs in 1796-7 and

increased further to 10,016 ozs in 1805-6¹⁵⁸ in line with the general increase in demand nationally.¹⁵⁹ In addition to candlesticks, there was demand for the mainly light pieces¹⁶⁰ and novel items (such as wine labels).¹⁶¹ Much was cheaply produced by presses, but such pieces, though of silver, were in Boulton's mind, no more than substitutes for what he had really wanted to produce when in 1771 he confided to Lord Shelburne his ambition to become a 'great silversmith.'¹⁶² Stamped articles were not generally objects of admiration, whether in the world of silversmithing¹⁶³ or elsewhere.¹⁶⁴ Boulton's ambitions to make services of silver-plate and large prestigious items, involving high skills of art and craft, and largely confined to the aristocracy and gentry, was limited to the 1770s and was curtailed because it was not profitable. Yet it was such work which as James Keir wrote shortly after Boulton's death in 1809 '...greatly tended to his celebrity and admiration of his various talents, taste and enterprise.'¹⁶⁵

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is at the Birmingham Assay Office (BAO).

The following abbreviations have also been used

A.J.C = A. J. Cabrit, clerk at Soho

B. & F. = Boulton and Fothergill

J. F. = John Fothergill, Boulton's partner 1762-82

J. H. = John Hodges, a clerk and later a manager at Soho

M. B. = Matthew Boulton

R. C. = Richard Chippindall, London agent .

W.M. = William Matthews, London agent and banker.

J. W. = John Wyatt, clerk at Soho

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94. BAO: MS PR **95.** BCA: MS 3782/1/6 p. 473, 1.11.1780. **96.** BCA: MS 3782/1/6 p. 283, 7.6.1780. **97.** BCA: MS 3782/1/6 p. 575, order for James Phynn, 23.2.1781. **98.** BCA: MS 3782/2/14 p. 167, J.H. to Alex Sharp, 26.12.1783. **99.** BCA: MS 3782/1/9 p. 604, F. Jukes to C&L Procter, 14.10.1772. **100.** BCA: MS 3782/2/15, M.B. to ?, 5.8.1799. **101.** BCA: MS 3782/1/11 p. 564, J.H. to Wakelyn and Taylor, 27.3.1780. **102.** BCA: MS 3782/1/10 p. 791, B.&F. to John and Robert Hinchcliffe, 24.12.1776. **103.** BCA: MS 3782/2/15 p. 236, M.B. Plate Co. to Knowill and Cador, 18.7.1797. **104.** Bradbury, op. cit. (see note 21), pp. 5-7. **105.** Bradbury, op.cit. (see note 21), p. 455. **106.** BCA: MS 3782/1/10 p. 528, B.&F. to J.W., 10.2.1776. **107.** Bradbury, op.cit (see note 21), pp. 335-36. **108.** BCA: MS 3782/1/9 p. 294, B.&F. to John Wace, 3.12.1771. **109.** BCA: MS 3782/1/10 p. 587, B&F to Benjamin Withers, 28.9.1774. **110.** BCA: MS 3782/1/11 p. 564, J.H. to Wakelyn and Taylor, 27.3.1780. **111.** BAO: MS PR.

112. BCA: MS 3782/1/9 p. 604, F. Jukes to C.&C. Procters, 14.10.1772. **113.** BAO: MS PR. **114.** Quickenden, op.cit. (see note 42), p. 56. **115.** Kenneth Quickenden 'Elizabeth Montagu's Service of Plate – Part 1, *Silver Society Journal*, 16 (2004), 131-41 (pp. 134-38). **116.** Kenneth Quickenden 'Elizabeth Montagu's Service of Plate – Part 2, *Silver Society Journal*, 19 (2005), 19-37 (pp28-34). **117.** Quickenden, op.cit (see note 70), pp. 278-84. **118.** Quickenden, op.cit. (as note 70), pp. 287-88. **119.** T.S. Ashton, *Economic Fluctuations in England, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 287-8. **120.** Bradbury, op. cit (as note 21), p. 49.

121. Forbes, op.cit. (as note 26), p. 228. **122.** Quickenden, op.cit (as note 32), p. 90. **123.** BCA: MS 3782/2/15, pp. 450-1, J.H. to R.C., 20.11.1800. **124.** Kenneth Quickenden 'Richard Chippindall and the Boultons', *Silver Studies. Journal of the Silver Society*, 22, 2007, p. 51-65, (p.54). **125.** BCA: MS3782/1/6 p. 331, Order for James Johnstone, 11.7.1780. **126.** BCA: MS 3782/1/11 p. 641, B&F to Baumgartner and Hoffstetter, 12.10.1780. **127.** BCA: MS 3782/1/6 p. 437, Order by John Floud, 23.9.1780. The Sheffield Plate came to £46 3s 6d. **128.** BCA: MS 3782/2/15 p. 422, M.B. Co. to Dr H. Edgar, n.d.7.1800. **129.** BCA: MS 3782/2/14 B&F to Lord Lucan, 14.5.1783, Sheffield Plate valued at £17 12s 0d. **130.** BCA: M.S 3782/2/15 M.B. to Robert Jones, 25.9.1799. **131.** BCA: MS 3782/2/15 p. 449, J.H. to R.C., 8.11.1800. **132.** BAO: MS, PR., 1793-4. **133.** Quickenden, op.cit. (as note 124), pp. 55-56. **134.** BCA: MS 3782/12/59/95, R.C. to M.B., 2.7.1798. **135.** Bradbury, op.cit. (as note 21), p. 494. **136.** BCA: MS 3782/1/6 p. 113, Order for Oatridge and Marindin, 21.1.1780. **137.** BCA: MS 3782/1/11 p. 612, J.H. to Mason and Lobrot, 1.7.1780. **138.** E.g. dish crosses (BCA: MS 3782/1/9, J.W. to Woolley and Heming, 27.6.1771). **139.** BCA: MS. 3782/2/14 pp. 126-27, J.H. to Benjamin Henfrey, 7.7.1783. **140.** BCA: MS 3782/1/9 p. 685, B.&F. to J.B. Rogler, 28.12.1772. **141.** BCA; MS 3782/1/9 p.403, B&F to William Willson, 19.3.1772. **142.** Pinn, op.cit. (as note 35), p. 55. **143.** BCA: MS 3782/2/14, pp 126-7, J.H. to Benjamin Henfrey, 7.7.1783. **144.** The metal was called German silver. It had a higher copper content, higher nickel content but a lower zinc content than tutenague. Pinn, op.cit. (as note 35), pp. 60-71. **145.** The decline in sales at the London retailer Parker and Wakelin was marked from the late 1760's. One customer returned candlesticks bought in 1766 for re-silvering only five months after the initial purchase. Clifford op.cit. (as note 19), p. 93. **146.** A customer wanted dish covers copied that had French-plated brass knobs, which M.B. offered to do. BCA MS3782/2/13 p. 137. **147.** BCA: MS 3782/2/13 p. 137. **148.**

Bradbury, op.cit. (as note 21), p. 97. **149.** Bradbury, op.cit (as note 21), pp. 5-7. **150.** E.g. Some Sheffield -plate candlesticks were factored from Winter, Parsons and Hall because Soho was rushed. (BCA: MS 3782/1/11 p 180, 28.2.1778). **151.** Bradbury, op.cit. (as note 21), pp. 103-112. **152.** BCA: MS . 3782/2/13 p. 137. **153.** BCA: MS 3782/1/4 p463, 14.9.1780. **154.** Quickenden, op.cit. (as note 7), p.350. **155.** Forbes, op.cit. (as note 26), p. 233. **156.** Clifford, op.cit. (as note 19), p. 93. **157.** Clifford, op.cit, (as note 19), p. 8. **158.** BAO: MS PR **159.** In London approximately 900,000 troy ozs were marked in 1796 increasing to approximately 1,400,000 troy ozs in 1810. (Forbes, op.cit. (as note 26), p. 320. The comparable figures for the Sheffield Assay office were 35,434 troy ozs and 46,585 troy ozs. (Information supplied by a former Assay Master D.G. Johnson). **160.** Clifford, op.cit. (as note 19), p. 181. **161.** Clifford, op.cit. (as note 19), p. 8. **162.** BAO: MS 3782/1/9 p.2, M.B. to Lord Shelburne, 7.1.1771. **163.** Goldsmiths Co., London, Court Book 17, 1767-1777, p. 232, 6.5.1773. London's silversmiths contemptuously referred to silver 'stamped with dies.' **164.** Berg, op.cit. (as note 2), p. 99. In 1778 Josiah Wedgwood wrote to Thomas Bentley '...people will not compare things which they conceive to be made out of moulds, or perhaps stamp'd at a blow like the Birmingham articles, with carving and natural stones..' **165.** Quickenden, op.cit (as note 70), p. 288.

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