

A Toast to the Forks!

By Dorothea Burstyn

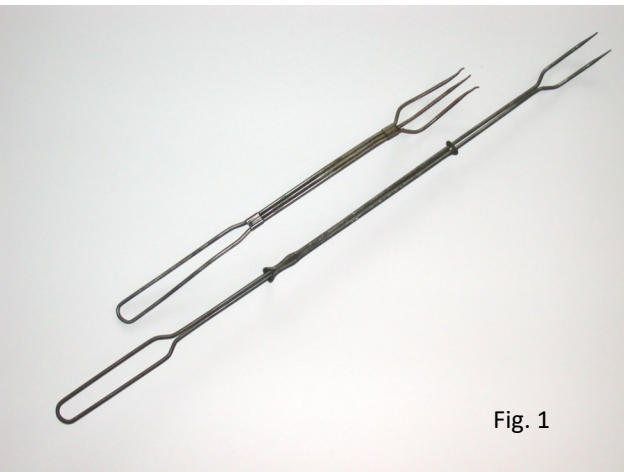


Fig. 1

American kitchen toasting forks, made from wire.

¹A curry comb is an implement used for combing a horse's mane. A Dutch example, dated 1771, is on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum, M.29-1934.

²Charles Oman, "English Silver Toasting forks," *Antique Collector*, vol. 34, February 1963, p. 24.

³Geoffrey Wills, *Silver for Pleasure and Investment: A Guide to 18th Century English Silver* (New York: Arco Publishing, 1969), p. 152.

⁴Robin Butler, *The Albert Collection: 500 years of British and European Silver* (London: Broadway Publishing, 2004), p. 162.

⁵This engraving is shown in Philippa Glanville and Hilary Young, eds., *Elegant Eating: Four Hundred Years of Dining in Style* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2002), p.7 Many thanks to Philippa Glanville for this reference.

From apple corer, egg boiler, larding needle, pastry cutter to curry comb,¹ and from bellows, bird cage, cucumber slicer, skillet to toasting fork, there is probably no item of domestic use that was not at one time or another made from silver. While the majority of toasting forks were of iron, brass or simple wire (Fig. 1), this study concerns itself with the use, styles and history of the silver toasting fork.

It has been suggested that the silver toasting fork was intended to be used in the dining room "to give employment to amateur cooks"² or was handled "by those who preferred to do their own toasting before the dining room or sitting room fire."³ These quotes seem to suggest that the choice of material – silver – was determined by the location in which this implement was to be used. In contrast, modern thought categorizes the silver toasting fork as kitchenware.⁴ The incentive to choose silver for so many medical and kitchenware utensils must be found in the hygienic properties of silver. Besides until the mid-nineteenth century (and possibly even later), people who could afford silver toasting forks had servants who did all the food preparation. This is suggested by an engraving of household servants sharing a dinner, each wearing a badge of his/her office. One wears a little spoon, another one tongs; a woman has keys and the man on the far right of the table, heartily enjoying his meal, wears a toasting gridiron on a wide band around his neck.⁵

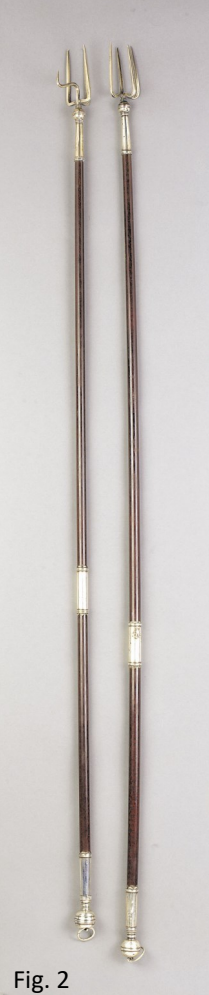


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2, two Charles II silver mounted forks, circa 1670,

Fig. 3 Detail of Charles II silver-mounted toasting forks, prongs and ball finial with suspension loop

Photo Christie's South Kensington, London, September 2001

⁶I am indebted to Dr. Tessa Murdoch for sending copies of the original entries from the registers in the V & A and to Ann Eatwell for spending so much time showing me these toasting forks in the various storage areas – even in the bomb proof cellar - of the museum.

⁷Nine out of eleven toasting forks in the collection are from Dr. Louis Clarke. He donated regularly to the V & A from 1911 on, mainly metalwork objects, but also textiles, woodwork and ceramics. The toasting forks came to the museum as the bequest of Dr. Clarke in 1961 (E-mail from James Sutton, V & A Museum Archives, 2 November 2005.)

⁸Lots 243 and 244 in *Selected Silver and Plate*, Christie's, South Kensington, 25 September 2001.

⁹*Jackson's Silver & Gold Marks of England, Scotland & Ireland*, third ed., Ian Pickford, ed. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1989), p. 131.

¹⁰V & A, M.21-1961.

Apart from the few examples of toasting forks in my own collection, which triggered my interest in the first place, I wanted to make a survey of existing toasting forks. Looking through auction house catalogues brought a few results, but a search through the published catalogues of American museums proved futile. The biggest collection of toasting forks (eleven pieces) is in the Victoria and Albert (V & A) Museum, London. If one wanted to enter into any meaningful discussion of style and its evolution, a visit seemed imperative.⁶ Most of the V & A collection, which spans from 1669 to 1889, was assembled with an eye for quality and the unusual by Dr. Louis Clarke, a member of the Society of Antiquarians and curator of the Fitzwilliam Museum.⁷

The earliest example in the V & A, dated 1669, as well as a Charles II silver-mounted toasting fork⁸ feature elongated two-pronged forks with a backward hook, devised so that slices of bread and cheese or meat could be toasted together. Another Charles II fork has four prongs, more suitable for toasting teacakes or apples. Both of these Charles II examples are marked with DL, a trefoil above and a mullet below, the mark of a maker who might have specialized in these implements, as he is also recorded in Jackson, revised, to have made a "long toasting fork," 1672-73.⁹ Both examples have tapered handles with central silver ferrules, the terminals furnished with reeded ball finials and suspension rings. Similar examples were offered at Christie's South Kensington. (Fig. 2 and 3).

Another toasting fork, dating to about 1680¹⁰ and marked with the maker's mark of F.G over a star in a shaped shield, features the same arrangement of tapered handle, central ferrule and ball shaped



Fig. 4. George III silver toaster, Exeter 1796, Photo Sotheby's, New York, October 26, 2005, Late Charles L. Poor collection

Fig. 5. George III toasting fork, Thomas & James Phipps, London 1817, Photo Waddington's, Toronto, Nov. 7th, 2024

Fig. 6. George III toasting fork, London 1796, Photo Waddington's, Toronto, Nov. 7th, 2024

terminal with suspension ring, but is equipped with a C-shaped, two-pronged fork with a pivoted stirrup-shaped toast-holder. This fork combines the toasting fork and a related utensil, the toaster. The toaster has an arrangement of tapered back hooks forming a basket-shaped device or rack in which a sandwich can be inserted (Fig. 4). A charming example is in the V & A, dating to ca. 1690 and marked with the maker's mark of Ro crowned. The toast holder consists of two hooks, the ends of which are formed as eagles' heads.¹¹

The toaster with variations of basket and hook arrangements is an enduring style. Examples found in 1709¹² and two examples made in Exeter, 1813 and 1816¹³ are on record. Another more sophisticated specimen was made by Thomas Whipham, London, 1749, the wirework basket being attached to a short shaft via a hinge.¹⁴ T. Phipps and E. Robinson of London made a variety of toasting forks and toasters.¹⁵ (Fig. 5) The piece de resistance is an example dating to 1797: ingenious, yet simple, the triple-hooked toast holder and a three-pronged fork are both hinged to a tapering socket, the two hinges being arranged in a way to allow either the toast holder or the fork to be used. (Fig. 6) If the basket is used, the fork can be folded parallel to the handle, a space in the hinge of the basket holding it in place.¹⁶

From the 1790s on ingenuity was the name of the game. A successful silversmith, Sir Edward Thomason, reminisces in his *Memoirs During Half a Century* about his inventions: "In 1809 I invented the sliding toasting fork, some with one, two, or three slides, within a handsome japanned handle, common now in all the shops. I also invented one that by the action of drawing the slide, the same movement raised a shield from off the prongs, and upon shutting up

¹¹V & A, M.22-1961.

¹²*Old Cambridge Plate*, An Illustrated Catalogue of the Loan Collection of Plate, Exhibited in the Fitzwilliam Museum, May 1895, Cambridge, Deighton Bell & Co and Macmillan & Bowes for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, 1896, page 63.

¹³Toaster, Exeter, 1816, no maker's mark; previously illustrated on the website of Argentum-The Leopard's Head, San Francisco (www.argentum.com) September 2005

¹⁴Pictured in Eric Lassen, *Knives, Forks, Spoons* (Copenhagen: Host & Son, 1960), entry no. 64.

¹⁵For example, a three-pronged toasting fork with a wooden handle, 1798, V & A, M.28-1961; and toaster with turned wooden handle and suspended rack-shaped toast holder, 1817, Lot 2, Important English and Continental Silver, Sotheby's, New York, 21 October 1997, offered at Waddington's, Toronto November 7th, 2024, Lot 56, previously in the W.B.G. Humphries collection

¹⁶Waddington's Toronto, November 7th, 2024, previously in the W.B.G. Humphries collection, Lot 51, another example dating to 1797 at the V & A, M.27-1961



Fig. 7

Fig. 7. Toasting fork by E. Thomason, Photo Birmingham Assay Office.

Fig. 8. Telescopic toasting fork, London 1804, maker TID, with shagreen handle.



Fig. 8

Fig. 9. Telescopic toasting fork from the Weeks Museum, London 1809, maker George Collins. Photo "The Finial", Daniel Bexfield Antiques.

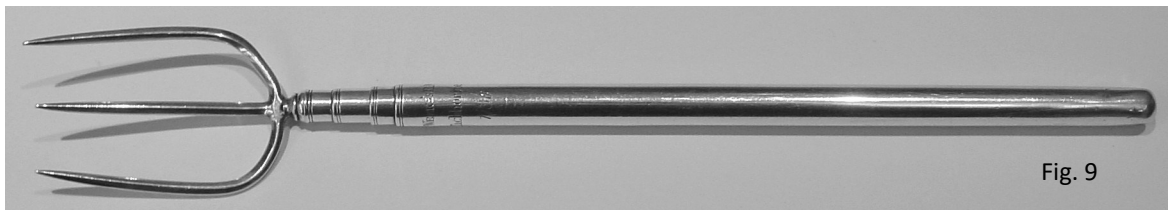


Fig. 9

again of the slides this action moved the shield over the prongs. I also invented a third kind, which was that the three prongs collapsed together, which, on the shutting up of the slides of the fork, drew the same into the mouth of a snake, the head of a silver snake being attached to one end of the outer slide or handle. The above were made in silver, gilt, plated, and brass; and large quantities were sold even by me; but, as I did not protect this invention by patent, thousands were made and sold by other manufacturers."¹⁷ An example of his wonderful toasting fork with collapsible prongs, made of various metals with a black japanned handle and a gold-plated snake head, is in the collection of the Birmingham Assay Office. (Fig. 7)

Patented or not, the sliding – or better telescopic - toasting fork was made much earlier than 1809 by other makers, as there is an example marked with maker's mark TID, dating to London, 1804, in my collection (Fig. 8) and yet another one, made by the same maker, 1807, in the Albert collection.¹⁸ A slender four-part extending toasting fork is hallmarked for London 1809 and made by George Collins (Fig. 9). It is inscribed around the outer collar with *B[ough]^t at Weeks's*

¹⁷Many thanks to Phyllis Benedikz, librarian/curator of the Birmingham Assay Office, for sending a photo of the toasting fork and photocopies of Sir Edward Thomason's *Memoirs During Half a Century*, Vol.1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans), 1814.

¹⁸Robin Butler, page 162; another telescopic toasting fork with lacquered grip, engraved with initials *EE* under a marquess's coronet, hallmarked London, 1805, is in the V & A, M.29-1961; yet another one, made by Joseph Willmore, Birmingham, 1809, sold at Important English and Continental Silver, Sotheby's, New York, 21 October 1997, Lot 2.

R[oyal Mechanical] Museum, Tichbourne St^t, 1138.¹⁹ Curiously a parasol with a telescopic handle and an inscription identical to the one on the toasting fork (except for the number 1013) surfaced in the estate of a prominent English dealer. It turns out the handles on both, the toasting fork and parasol, are identical in length and were made by the same maker, but the parasol handle was assayed in 1802. As Mr. Weeks started his commercial life as an umbrella manufacturer, the question arises whether both items started out as parasols or toasting forks.²⁰

Telescopic toasting forks, supposedly invented for traveling, are relatively short and measure closed from 9 to 12 inches. They may have sterling, Sheffield plate or japanned handles. Most toasting forks are equipped with wooden handles. Ebony or hard fruitwoods are most chosen, measuring 36 to 39 ½ inches; black buckhorn is seen on Anglo-Indian toasting forks²¹ (Fig. 10). Scottish hallmarked toasting forks, currently offered at eBay, also are equipped with black buckhorn handles. I came across two all silver toasting forks, both having handles very similar to Warwick cruet stands. One is in the V & A (M.1674-1944) and is thought to be a fake or a concoction of parts put together from various sources. In any case, due to silver being an excellent conductor, an all-silver toasting fork without heat-spacers seems a very impractical instrument.



Fig. 10

¹⁹Anthony Dove, "A Souvenir Purchased From a Georgian Museum," *The Finial*, October/November 2003, p. 9. Many thanks to Mr. Dove for showing me this interesting item.

²⁰A. Dove "Toasting fork from the Weeks Museum", *The Finial*, December 2002/January/February 2003, p. 21.

²¹For a pair of toasting forks by Jonas Gregory, Madras, ca. 1830, see Wynyard R. T. Wilkinson, *The Makers of Indian Colonial Silver: A Register of European Goldsmiths, Silversmiths, Jewellers, Watchmakers and Clockmakers in India and Their Marks, 1760-1860* (London: W. R. T. Wilkinson, 1987), p. 80.



Fig. 11 and 11 a.
Extendible toasting fork made as special order by Gorham 1889. Detail of Gorham toasting fork.



Fig. 11 a



Given the great variety of types, styles and patterns of American flatware, it is surprising that not more American silver toasting forks surfaced in the survey. I found but one example, made by Gorham in 1889 (Fig. 11 and Fig. 11 a). The costing record²² calls it “1357 Toast Fork” and indicates that it was a special order made 4 December 1889 for the Providence, Rhode Island, retail jeweler Tilden & Thurber. The three-pronged fork is attached via a swivel to an extension rod that slides in and out of the wooden handle and is controlled by a silver screw on top of the socket. It measures 22 inches closed and can be extended to a length of 36 inches. The handle is fruitwood with a lovely acorn finial. The central ferrule is divided into two parts by a beaded band, the lower section being engraved with *M.P.B.H. Nov. 16th, 1889*. That the inscription features four initials (presumably his and hers), plus the fact that the fork is engraved with a date earlier than it was actually produced, makes one suspect that it was given as a wedding present.²³ The other American toasting fork was seen on eBay, also made by the Gorham company. (Fig.12)

Fig. 12

²²Samuel J. Hough report EIN 65-1216727: the fork consists of 3 ounces 8 pennyweights troy of sterling silver, valued at \$4.08. The making of the fork took about twelve hours with an additional hour each for chasing and finishing. The net factory price was \$16.50. The estimated price given to Tilden & Thurber had been \$18.00.

²³Traditionally one can give wedding presents up to one year after the wedding date. Tilden & Thurber has no records going back that far, and unfortunately the *Providence Journal* is not available on micro-film for interlibrary loans. Until further research can be done, the fact that it was a wedding present is pure speculation on my part.

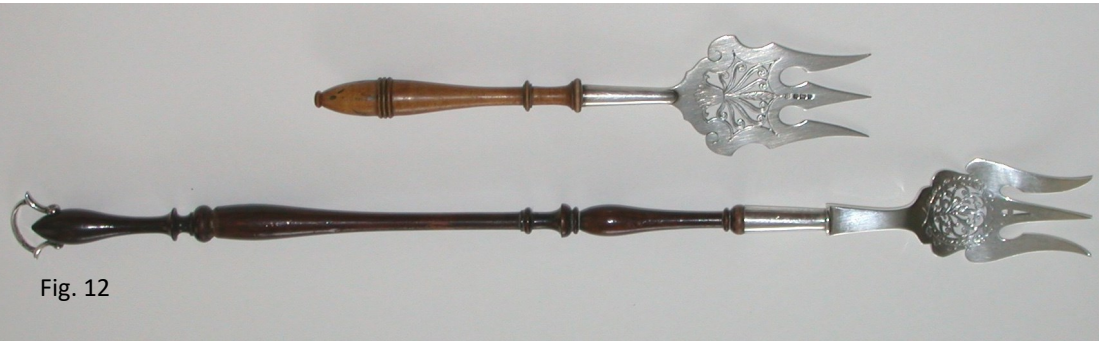


Fig. 12

Fig. 12. Toasting fork and bread fork by T. Bradbury & Sons, Sheffield 1918 and 1894



Fig. 13

Fig. 13. Two toast forks, Sheffield 1898, London 1897

As described earlier, two- and four-pronged forks were made, but the most enduring form over the centuries by far is the three-pronged type. (Fig. 12) And when a new serving implement for toast was introduced in the 1880s, it was the three-pronged style that prevailed (Fig. 13). It is interesting to note that James Dixon & Sons made an electroplated nickel silver bread and toasting fork combined, the short bread or toast fork is equipped with a separate extension rod.²⁴

I conclude with a brief parade of people who possessed silver toasting forks. Some toasting forks are known only from old records. Henry VIII's toasting fork was sent to be melted down in 1557; its replacement is described in a 1574 inventory.²⁵ Toasting forks were also regularly used in noble English households: the Railton family of Norfolk possessed one dated 1561, and Thomas, Lord Wharton, had a toasting fork listed in the inventory made at his death in 1568.²⁶ Sir George Farmor of Eastoneston bequeathed one to his wife in his will in 1611.²⁷ The list of expenses of John, Lord Hervey, mentions the repair of a silver toasting fork in July 1711.²⁸ Captain William Tyng, one of the wealthiest merchants of Boston, had a "silver toasting forke" in 1653, and John

²⁴*Trade Catalogue*, James Dixon & Sons, Cornish Place, Sheffield, 1895, p. 30: "Bread and Toasting Fork, combined, in case, 17/0." I am grateful to Ann Eatwell for this reference.

²⁵Charles Oman, page 25.

²⁶Michael Clayton, *The Collector's Dictionary of the Silver and Gold of Great Britain and North America*, second ed. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1985), p.431. The Railton fork is illustrated in figure 668, p. 430.

²⁷Film 92052 PCC 34 CAPELL, Heartland/Fields/1759 vol.3.87 -Internet

²⁸Geoffrey Wills, p. 152

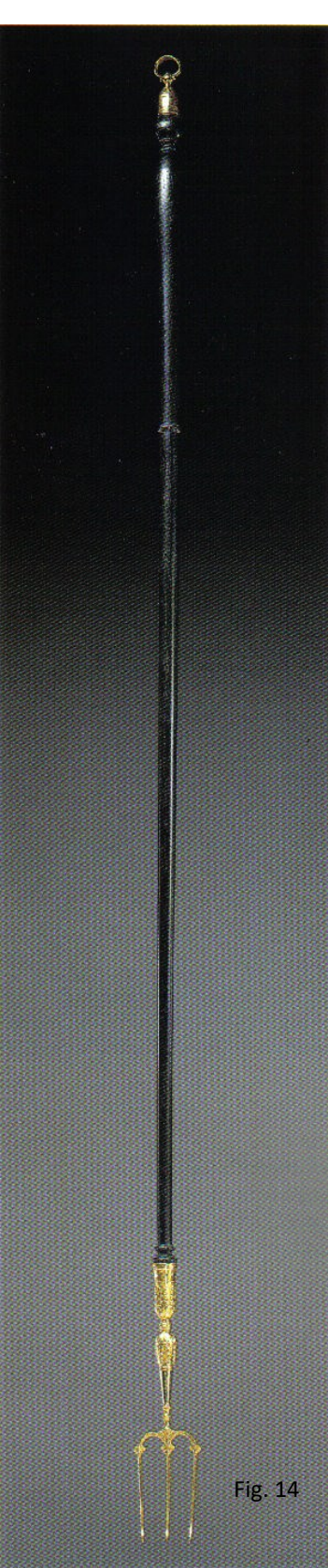


Fig. 14



Fig. 14a

Fig. 14 and 14a. William Beckford's gold toasting fork, London 1793 and detail,

Photo Sotheby's New York, April 1998

Freake, a rich Bostonian attorney and merchant, had a cheese toaster in 1675 – the fact, that their inventories include such specialized implements as toasting fork and toaster and even forks shows not only their affluence but also their progressive taste in silver.²⁹ The Geneva inventory of the possessions of Mr. James Smithson, Esq., whose personal effects, library and mineralogical cabinet formed the nucleus of the Smithsonian Institution, lists a silver toasting fork. However, it is not known if this fork ever made it to America, but even if it did, all Smithson's effects, save his library, were destroyed in a fire in January 1865.³⁰

A toasting fork was part of the equipment affluent students took to university; Lloyd Evans received one as a present from his mother in 1669,³¹ and John Courtenay donated his toaster, made 1706, to his alma mater.³¹ Given that dinner was served as late as 1 pm in the mid 1700s and even moved to 3 pm later on,³³ a cheese toast or a roasted apple might have been welcome treats before a late meal.

As mentioned before, telescopic toasting forks were popular on travels. Recounting her early travels to the continent, Lady Caroline Capel called her toasting fork "an inestimable treasure which made many a bit of sour, coarse bread go down, that would otherwise have stuck in the throat."³⁴ The legendary collector, tastemaker and bon vivant William Beckford owned three toasting forks that he took with him on his various

travels.³⁵ The epitome of sheer luxury and elegance is his unique gold toasting fork. Bought shortly before his journey to Portugal, it is dated 1793, measures 38 3/4 inches in length and features exquisite floral chasing on the baluster stem and three fluted prongs (Fig. 14 and Fig. 14 a). The elongated ebony handle is capped in gold and furnished with a gold ring. Of impeccable provenance and engraved with the Beckford crest, this piece was sold at Sotheby's in April 1998 for the remarkable sum of \$134,500.³⁶

²⁹Probate inventories of Captain Tyng and John Freake in Albert S. Roe and Robert F. Trent, "Robert Sanderson and the Founding of the Boston Silversmiths' Trade," *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), pp. 481-482. Many thanks to Deborah Dependahl Waters for this information.

³⁰E-mail September 13, 2005, from Ellen Alers, Assistant Archivist, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

³¹Unmarked toasting fork in the V & A Museum collection, M.62-1954, engraved on the ball-cap with EVANUS LLOYD EX DONO MATRIS (Evan Lloyd's gift from his mother)

³²Toaster, 1706, inscribed on the rack: *EX DONO JOHANNIS COURTENAY FFILIJ (sic)/NATU MAXIMI JOHANNIS COURTENAY DE WEST MOLAND(sic) IN COMITATU DEVON/ARMIGERI* (donated from John Courtenay, son of the great John Courtenay of West Morland in Devon/Armigeri), in the Queen's (College)collection (Old Cambridge Plate, p. 63).

³³Helen M. Clifford, *A Treasured Inheritance: 600 years of Oxford College Silver* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2004), p. 87.

³⁴*The Chapel Letters 1814-1817*, Cape, 1956; quoted in G. Bernard Hughes, *Small Antique Silverware* (New York: Bramhall House, 1957), p. 111. ³⁵William Beckford, *1760-1844: An Eye for the Magnificent* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Derek E. Ostergard (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press for The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, 2001), page 315.

³⁶Lot 46, *Important English and Continental Silver and Gold*, Sotheby's, New York, 22 April 1998.