

# **JAMES DIXON AND SONS**

## **A Brief History of the Company**

The firm of James Dixon and Sons has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was founded by the company's namesake. The firm started in a small way but rose to be one of the major manufacturers in their field. For most of the company's history, manufacturing was on a site known as Cornish Place in Sheffield, England.

### **Dixon and Smith, c.1806-c1823**

The firm was established in 1806 by James Dixon (1776-1852) and Thomas Smith as manufacturers of Britannia metal goods. Originally in Silver Street, to the north of the town centre of Sheffield, the firm aimed to make items for the table from Britannia metal as a cheaper alternative to silver and silver plate. Goods were stamped out using steel dies, but were finished by hand, before the parts were soldered together.

### **Dixon and Son, c1823-c1825**

William Frederick Dixon (1802-1871), the eldest son of James, joined the firm when he was 21 years old and Thomas Smith withdrew. In 1824 they moved to Cornish Place, a large site, which enabled them to expand and develop the workshops, casting shops, offices and warehouses. In 1830, the firm began making silver and plated goods at Cornish Place by acquiring the firm Nicholson, Ashforth and Cutts. This side of the business was run by the newly-appointed manager - Mr William Fawcett, son-in-law of James Dixon. Later, the business of Mr Batty, of Tenter Street in Sheffield was also acquired, adding the manufacture of powder flasks to the firm's output.

### **James Dixon and Sons, 1835-1920**

When the second son, James Willis Dixon (1813-1876), joined the business, the firm's name was changed again to what it is still known as today, James Dixon and Sons (JD&S). James Willis spent much of his time travelling to America, acting as the representative there. In 1836, the firm began to make spoons and forks from nickel silver - an alloy of nickel, copper and zinc. In the 1850s, several new buildings were constructed to accommodate a stamp shop, showrooms, plating shops for the electro-plate processes and more warehouse space. James Dixon, the founder, retired in 1842 leaving three sons, William Frederick, James Willis and Henry Isaac (1820-1912), together with his son-in-law, William Fawcett, to run the business. J D & S exhibited at the Great Exhibition in 1851, being awarded several prizes in different classes for silver and Britannia metal. In the 1870s, the firm opened its first London showroom on Ludgate Hill.

James Willis Dixon Junior (1838-1917) became the leading figure in the family business, continuing to oversee the American trade, having been born in New York. The European trade was in the hands of James Dixon, (1851-1947) the son of Henry Isaac. He was the only member of the family to become Master Cutler, and one of the youngest at 36 years of age. In 1877 when James Dixon (son of Henry Isaac) had taken over the works, he was elected a Member of the Cutlers Company. In 1882 he became a Searcher; progressing in 1885 to Junior Warden; in 1886 Senior Warden and in 1887 he became Master Cutler. At his Cutlers' Feast, his guest of honour was Mr E. Stanhope (Secretary of State for War) as Prince George was unable to come. During James' time as Master Cutler, the Cutlers Hall was extended and the Merchandise Marks Act was published. This Act was considered extremely important at the time and prohibited the sale of unmarked goods, making all companies mark their goods with their name and place of origin. James Dixon was also Guardian of the Sheffield Assay Office from 1915-1920. Lennox Burton Dixon, the son of James Willis Dixon Junior and the great-grandson of James Dixon, the founder, started to work for the company in 1887, and continued there until his death in August 1941.

By the end of the 19th century, some of the original buildings were being replaced. New offices, warehouses and a casting shop, with a crucible stack were built and the boiler house was enlarged. During the First World War presses were installed to produce tin helmets, after the war these presses were used to make gas lamp components.



### **James Dixon and Sons Ltd, 1920 onwards**

After the introduction of stainless steel for cutlery in the 1920s, JD&S who had initially rejected it, began to use the metal for cutlery and holloware. The firm acquired another large silver manufacturer, William Hutton's, in the interwar years. Cutlery and holloware continued to be made in large quantities and gun accessories, with reproduction powder flasks being important product lines. Commemorative pieces, such as 16 Gold Cups for the Grand National, the Blue Riband Trophy in 1935 for the fastest Atlantic crossing by an ocean liner and the 1963 World Golf Cup, were designed in-house by Charles Holliday.

The 1962 Buyers Guide of Cutlery and Silverware lists James Dixon and Sons Ltd. principal products as being cutlery, silverware, electroplated goods, canteens, spirit flasks and stainless steel flatware. However, times began to change and the family involvement ended in 1976 with the death of Milo Dixon.

The next few years saw changes in ownership, with stability finally arriving in 1994 when the company was acquired by the Solpro Group, owned by Mr. Paul Tear. As a past Master Cutler, Mr. Tear had a determination to keep the traditional skills and quality of James Dixon and Sons alive to ensure its continuance into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today the company is run by his daughter Jackie.

She comments "Today the silverware produced by James Dixon and Sons is manufactured by a small number of very skilled craftsmen and women, a couple of whom were the last generation to apprentice with the original company. Today exceptionally skilled craftsmen are helping teach the next generation to ensure the quantity of items produced today are items the forefathers of the industry would be proud of."

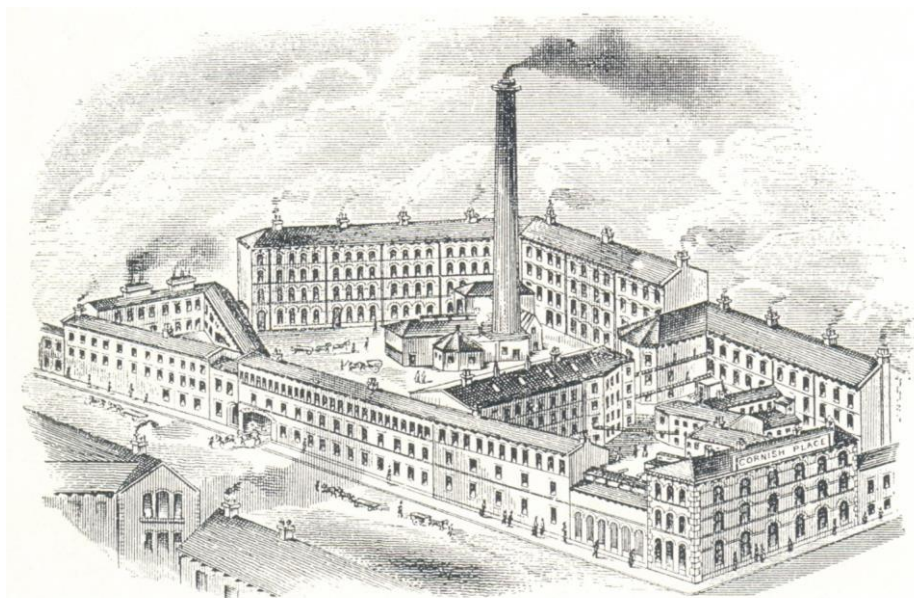
Much of the silverware produced is bespoke and commissioned by private clients but the company still produces quality giftware for the discerning customer, offering a very personal service to ensure the client can feel secure they will be valued and the silverware will be of the best quality.

“James Dixon and Sons looks to offer customer service and quality to the highest level” Jackie continues “ While I was looking in the archives I came across a quote from the great James Dixon himself which sums up exactly what I feel and the company stives to do, it is an honor to ensure his mantra is kept today”

James Dixon wrote

*“When I commenced in business in 1806, it was with this determination that nothing should go out of my hands,bearing my name, which could disgrace that name”.*

### The History of Cornish Place



## Cornish Place

Cornish Place was one of a few remaining large integrated factory sites in Sheffield and saw production there until the mid 1990's. Small-scale workshops were common in Sheffield's traditional trades of cutlery and silver manufacture, many specialising in one or two processes only. With the advent of steam power in Sheffield in the 1780s, the necessary capital investment meant that larger buildings appeared in the town centre, most being tenement factories, where workshops and power were rented out to individuals and small firms. However, in the 1820s, integrated works belonging to one firm began to appear, the first being Sheaf Works near the canal basin. Globe Works on Infirmary Road; Joseph Rodgers on Norfolk Street (now demolished), the Washington Works of George Wostenholm (now demolished) and James Dixon's Cornish Place are examples of early factories belonging to one firm, where most of their manufacturing processes took place.

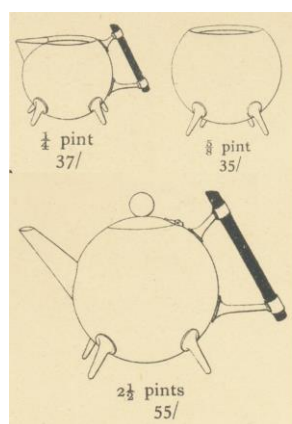
Most of these early large factories or 'Works' as they are generally called in Sheffield, were for cutlery or steel manufacture. Cornish Place was the first of the large silver and silver-plate factory sites. During the 19th century several other large silver manufacturers developed and also built large factories, including those belonging to Mappin and Webb and Walker and Hall, today, these have been demolished. In fact, very few of the large 19th century factories survive in Sheffield with

the decline in trade in the 1950s and 1960s triggered more destruction than the bombing of the city during World War II.

Cornish Place stands above the River Don to the north of the city centre. The town of Sheffield began to expand from its mediaeval core at the end of the 18th century and the flat land in the Don Valley area was valuable for the large works being contemplated. Roads were being improved, the canal to Tinsley was completed in 1819 and the coming of the railway in 1838 did much to encourage the boom in manufacturing in Sheffield in the 19th century. Cornish Place lies fairly near the canal basin and Victoria Station (now demolished), which had replaced the first station at Bridgehouses. It was surrounded by other works, both large and small, and some of the worst housing in Sheffield. Pleasant street names like 'Green Lane' and 'Bower Spring' were crammed with poor quality back-to-back housing, some of which were owned by the Dixon family. Nearby was the Sheffield Workhouse at Kelham, which later transferred to Fir Vale.

## What did James Dixon and Sons Make

Much of the manufactured wares of JD & S were designed by people who worked there, many not having the title of 'designer' and not having had formal artistic training. The firm did have two noted designers. Christopher Dresser became a designer for the firm and his work in the late 19th century influences designs up to the present day. Perhaps one of the first 'modern' industrial designers, he combined a concern for the techniques of mass production and the function of the articles. His exact length of tenure with the company is not known however catalogues from the 1880-1890 has numerous examples of his work.



On the right are illustrations of a Christopher Dresser designed Tea Set from an old catalogue dated 1879, above the same Tea Set still manufactured 2006

During the mid-20th century, Charles Holliday designed many trophies and commissioned pieces. Starting at Dixons in 1927, he was a designer for more than fifty years. In the 1970s, he began re-using some of the Victorian dies, from the thousands stored at the factory.

### Charles Holliday and the Goodwin Design Competition

The Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire has an acclaimed collection of Sheffield hallmarked silver, with at least one item for every year since 1773, when the Sheffield Assay Office was established. In the late 1940s, Stuart Goodwin, later Sir Stuart, initiated an annual competition to encourage designs in modern silver and to continue the Company's collection of 'year pieces'. For almost three decades from the 1950s, Charles Holliday was rarely out of the list of winners. The Company and Sir

Stuart would decide on the item and designs were submitted, from which a winner and runner-up were chosen. The winner, and often the runner-up, were then given sufficient funds to produce the piece as well as a cash prize, initially 20 guineas (£21) and 5 guineas (£5.25).

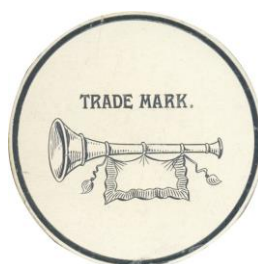
The following were the 15 competition pieces which Charles Holliday designed and almost all were made up:

1948	Three handled loving cup - winner.
1952	Fruit stand - winner
1953	Cup - runner-up
1958	Loving cup - winner
1959	Table centre costing no more than £100 - runner-up
1960	Floral display container - runner-up
1964	Dessert dish on a pedestal - runner-up
1965	Piece of table silver - runner-up
1966	Rosewater dish - winner
1967	Three piece condiment set - runner-up
1968	Goblet for the Master Cutler - winner
1969	Goblet for the Junior Warden -winner
1974	Goblet to celebrate 350 anniversary of the Cutlers' Company -winner
1975	Dish with trial strike of the new Assay Office mark - winner
1978	Single taper candlestick – winner

The Cutlers' Company silver collection includes almost fifty pieces made by James Dixon and Sons (or hallmarked with James Dixon's mark), by far the most of all the Sheffield silversmiths. Charles Holliday's success in the design competitions was a big contribution.

### Trade marks

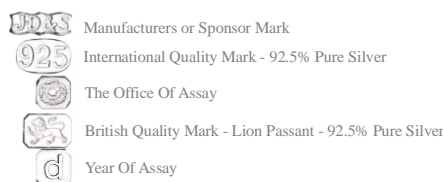
Dixon and Smith, established in 1806 in Silver Street, Sheffield made Britannia ware, identifying their goods with the mark 'DIXON & SMITH'. They moved to Cornish Place in 1824 and shortly afterwards became known as Dixon and Son, with a corresponding change in their mark. In the mid-1830s, the firm changed its name yet again, to James Dixon and Sons and in 1878 James Dixon registered the 'trumpet' trade mark.



The published register of trade marks in 1953 listed 15 trade marks for James Dixon and Sons Ltd. some being used for specific items, eg. a bird with an envelope in its beak, with the word 'DESPATCH' beneath which was used on sportsmen's equipment, cartridge fillers and powder flasks.



Other trademarks used names and marks of firms taken over by Dixon, such as the crossed arrows of Wm Hutton and CRESWICK & CO.



The ‘trumpet and banner’ trademark of James Dixon and Sons is still used today on silver plated ware and non precious metal. Sterling Silver is sent to the Sheffield Assay Office, independently tested and struck with the mark JD & S in a shield as it has been for the last 200 years.

## Cutlery, Flatware and Holloware

Dixon and Smith set out to make Britannia ware for the table - teapots, bowls, dishes and so forth – known as hollowware items. The elaboration during the Victorian era of table settings and ornamentation about the home led to a massive increase in objects made by silverware companies. The ability to provide candlesticks, trays and teapots for a variety of purses was an advantage. Dixons could make items by hand, by stamping out parts and with hand decoration, in silver, in plated metal and in Britannia metal.

In the later part of the the 19th century, cutlery and flatware (forks and spoons) had been added to the firms production. The trade catalogues show the expansions in lines being made and the changes in taste of their customers. By the end of the 19th century all the range of implements for eating, serving and displaying food had been developed. Specialised knives and forks for particular kinds of food - asparagus, crab, fruit, dessert - as well as ‘ordinary’ table knives, were being made. Cruets, holders for sauce bottles, toast racks, egg cups were required for the best tables, as well as all the serving dishes and platters which were thought necessary in the best households and catering establishments, and the aspiring middle classes enthusiastically bought them. Most things were decorated with chased, engraved or pierced designs. Cutlery might have costly handles of pearl or ivory. The 1920s and 1930s catalogues include personal items such as dressing table sets of mirror and brushes, cigarette cases and hip flasks. Many of the over-elaborate designs had gone, but the array of cutlery felt necessary was still being produced - such as asparagus eating tongs, pearl caviar knives and mango forks. The catalogues also had pages devoted to the items required by the catering trade - tea-pots, hot water jugs, trays and waiters in a range of sizes.

The range of goods produced over the 200 years is a mirror of public tastes, as well as documenting the change in people’s eating habits. The domestic market for finger bowls, pickle frames, egg boilers, muffin dishes and sardine boxes is now relatively small, however, equally elaborate and intricate banqueting suites, for foreign clients remains an important part of the companies manufacturing today.

Current Managing Director Jackie Tear explains how in the past James Dixon and Sons supplied the Downton Abbey’s of their time . “Today we still do but our market is now worldwide”

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