



insider
NEWS

Michael Rosewarne began working at Fletcher Robinson in 1957. The company's stock-in-trade is bespoke, handmade silver cutlery



SPECIALIST PROFILE

Fletcher Robinson

A hand-forged piece of cutlery is subtly but noticeably different from its modern, machine-cut alternative – beyond its decorative qualities, its balance and weight generally make it more comfortable to use. Today only one firm of silversmiths remains in Britain making sterling-silver cutlery in the traditional way.

With an unbroken succession of apprenticeships and masters, Fletcher Robinson in Sheffield can trace its lineage back to 1550, to a silversmith named Nicholas Bartholomew. Manufacturing techniques, passed down through the years, are still used today in the production of patterns which originated as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Each piece is made from a silver ingot which has been measured and cut to size. Then, using a hand-held, gas-and-air torch, the silver 'slit' is heated to soften the metal and allow the forger to hammer it into the rough shape of the proposed fork or spoon. In the case of a spoon, around half the silver goes into making the bowl, the metal of which is slightly thicker on the edge where it attracts most wear, 'so that after 100 years of use it will still be as good as new.'

Once the basic shape and pattern is achieved, the piece is 'hand-filed'. This can

mean filing the top of the bowl of a spoon or bending the tines of a fork. Such tasks demand the highest degree of skill and years of practice because each implement must match exactly – not least so that they will fit, each one curving round the next, for storage.

Each piece is buffed with an abrasive mixture of stone dust and oil. (Originally, sand from the River Trent was used, but these days that has been replaced with powdered pumice.) Next, felt polishers create the desired finish; for forks, each tine is individually buffed down to the base using fine, stiffened polishers. Finally, each piece is fastidiously and skilfully 'finished' by hand.

Much of the cutlery ends up in family collections, especially as the company can make pieces to match existing sets. A recent commission was to make a bespoke set for a disabled customer. The firm employs 11 silversmiths and, until recently, had only one retail outlet, James Robinson of New York, which, in 2002, took over the company in order to guarantee its supply as well as preserving this piece of English heritage. In Britain, Fletcher Robinson cutlery can now be obtained through Thomas Goode, S J Phillips and Bentley & Skinner.

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