



A Monumental & Highly Important Pair of Sideboard Dishes

George III

London, 1813

Maker's mark of Paul Storr of Storr & Co.

For Rundell, Bridge & Rundell, After a design by Thomas Stothard,

Diameter: 77.5 cm, 35 in.

Weight: 22,518 g, 724 oz. 10 dwt.

The centre of each dish cast in bold relief with a group of Bacchus and Ariadne. They in turn with cherubs flying about their shoulders, drawn forward in an ornamental chariot by four centaurs who are wielding a thyrsus or playing a double-pie, a lyre and a tambourine, further decorated with an applied ribbon-tied laurel wreath below the massive vine and trellis border. The border strewn with cymbals and other antique musical instruments. The reverse of each dish engraved with a coat-of-arms, supporters and motto below a duke's coronet, one stamped: 'Rundell Bridge & Rundell Aurifices Regis et Principis Walliae Regentis Britannias', in their original case with the brass plate engraved 'The Duke of Northumberland'

This is the only pair from the series of 'Bacchus and Ariadne' sideboard dishes created by the workshop of Paul Storr for the royal goldsmiths Rundell, Bridge & Rundell. It is also the earliest, made in 1813 and purchased by William Pole-Tyney-Long-Wellesley, 4th Earl of Mornington (1788-1857), nephew of the Duke of Wellington. A single example of 1814 was purchased by the Prince Regent, future King George IV, and is now in the Royal Collection.¹ A fourth example was made in 1817, bearing the arms of the 2nd Earl of Ailesbury, and was part of the Audrey Love Collection.²

The royal goldsmiths Rundell, Bridge & Rundell are synonymous with the Imperial style in silver and silver-gilt which reflected the new pride and prosperity of Britain during the Napoleonic wars. Although in large part influenced by the French emperor's predilection for dazzling display, and for gold, this new

sculptural fashion in precious metal was nonetheless entirely British. Drawing on classical motifs from Greek and Roman architecture, the style celebrated massiveness, which had been advocated as the 'principal characteristic of good Plate' by the architect and designer Charles Heathcote Tatham (1772-1842) in 1806. Rundell's, as the largest and most successful supplier of plate, diamonds, pearls and jewellery of the period, drove the fashion for monumental silverware. Joseph Nightingale said 'The shop of Messrs. Rundell, Bridge and Rundell, Jewellers, &c. exceeds, perhaps, all others in the British Empire, if not the whole world, for the value of its contents.'³

The sculptural qualities of silver and silver-gilt were exploited, not only on the table but also for sumptuous displays of buffet plate. The firm had realized early on that in order to undertake such ambitious work, and to keep its designs exclusive, it needed to have its own workshops and design studios. Their ensuing success meant that, unprecedented for the time, they were able to produce works of art on a speculative basis, and, led by the Prince Regent, the aristocracy, clamoured to buy them from Rundell's premises on Ludgate Hill. It was a startling reversal of the traditional roles of patron and supplier, and it places Rundell's among the most innovative businesses of the 19th Century.

Key to its success in the manufacture of the best in silver and silver-gilt, Rundell's employed a number of talented artists to supply designs and oversee production. First among these was the sculptor William Theed (1764-1817) who was instrumental in setting up the firm's first silver factory. Thereafter the sculptor John Flaxman (1755-1826) whose most important work for Rundell's was the remarkable silver-gilt Shield of Achilles of 1821. Flaxman's friend the English painter, illustrator and engraver Thomas Stothard (1755-1834), was another important member in the firm's creative circle. A prolific and inventive artist, Stothard provided on a freelance basis many drawings and sketches for Rundell's, comprising entire schemes as well as decorative details.

Stothard's design for this pair of sideboard dishes (see illustration) was thought to have been his own composition based on his biographer's words: he 'chose for his subject Bacchus and Ariadne, drawn in a chariot by Satyrs. This was imagined and delineated with true classic taste and feeling'.⁴ This design was in fact inspired by an antique Roman cameo discovered in the Via Aurelia in 1661, published shortly after,⁵ and now in the Louvre having been seized by Napoleon in 1798 (see illustration). The success of Stothard's design led him to be commissioned to design the Wellington Shield, presented to the 1st Duke of Wellington by the Merchants and Bankers of the City of London in 1822 and still in the Wellington collection (Apsley House).

William Pole-Wellesley, 4th Earl of Mornington (1788-1857) and nephew of the 1st Duke of Wellington, was considered as a 'most unworthy representative of

the honour of the elder branch of the House of Wellesley.' A notorious scoundrel, gambler and fortune-seeker, he won the hand of Catherine Tylney-Long, the richest woman in England outside of royalty, with an income of £80,000 a year. After their marriage in 1812, he absorbed the bride's estate and became William Pole-Tylney-Long-Wellesley. They moved to Wanstead House where he organised extravagant festivities, notably stag hunts or after-midnight dinners with guests he brought back from the opera in London.⁶

In 1814, Long-Wellesley held a grande fete to celebrate the Duke of Wellington's victory over Napoleon. It is most likely that he purchased the present pair of monumental dishes for this specific occasion. Among the guests were the Prince Regent himself who would have admired the dishes and probably decided to acquire his own version at the time. This was purchased the following year from Rundell, Bridge & Rundell and joined the Royal Buffet.⁷ A drawing of 1844⁸ and then a photograph from the early 20th century⁹ show the sideboard dish in the centre at the top of buffet in St George's Hall, Windsor Castle.

To secure a debt of £250,000, Long-Wellesley mortgaged Wanstead House and contents to his creditors; but in 1822, he had to flee to Europe while the trustees of the settlement auctioned off the house's contents in an auction lasting 32 days.¹⁰ During that auction Rundell, Bridge & Rundell acquired some silver items such as an important nautilus cup on behalf of the Prince Regent, now in the Royal Collection.¹¹ The goldsmiths also bought the present pair of sideboard dishes, probably on behalf of Hugh Percy (1785-1847), 3rd Duke of Northumberland,¹² whose arms were then engraved on the reverse. The Duke had previously purchased from the goldsmiths in July 1822 one of the splendid shields of Achilles designed and modelled by John Flaxman.

Unlike the first owner of these sideboard dishes, the Duke was a much admired and respected man. He was sent to France in May 1825 as the extraordinary ambassador at the coronation of Charles X where he defrayed the expenses out of his private purse and was 'everywhere received with marked attention'.¹³ In 1829, he was appointed Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland and subsequently created Knight of the Garter. As a private individual, the Duke was also 'deservedly respected. His immense income was employed munificently [...] His charities

were as princely as they were unostentatious; and instances without number might be cited in which his acts of kindness were performed with a delicacy and grace which much enhanced their value.'¹⁴

He also played a part in the development of football at a time when it was a controversial game by

providing a field for the annual Alnwick Shrove Tuesday match and presenting the ball – a ritual that continues to this day.

The dishes stayed in the Percy family until they were sold at auction in 1984, together with the Shield of Achilles.¹⁵

Footnotes

1 RCIN 51654.

2 Sold Christie's New York, 19 October 2004, lot 239.

3 Joseph Nightingale, London and Middlesex, London, 1815, vol. III, p. 631.

4 Anna Eliza Bray, *Life of Thomas Stothard, R.A.: with Personal Reminiscences*, London, 1851.

5 It was engraved by F. Buonarotti in 1698 and included in Bernard de Montfaucon's *L'Antiquité expliquée* of 1719.

6 <http://wansteadhouse.com/customers/content/wansteadhouse/timeline.aspx>.

7 The royal dish, with date letter 1814, was purchased in 1815 from Rundell, Bridge & Rundell for £497 7s. 7d., to which was added 18s. for engraving the Royal Arms and £188 for the gilding.

8 <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/egallery/object.asp?pagesize=20&detail=scrapbook&object=51654&row=4608&scrapbook=14028>.

9 <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/egallery/object.asp?pagesize=20&detail=scrapbook&object=51654&row=4608&scrapbook=14029>

10 Long-Wellesley died in lodgings in Thayer Street, Manchester Square, London, from a stroke 'so sudden that the deceased had one egg; which he was partaking from, in his hand when he was seized with the fatal attack.' *The Morning Chronicle*, London, Saturday 4 July 1857, p. 5d.

11 Number RCIN 50603. John Flaxman believed to be by Cellini but the maker was then identified as Nikolaus Schmidt. The cup, lot 331 in the Wanstead House sale, was purchased on 18 June 1822 by Rundell, Bridge & Rundell (£120); by whom sold to George IV, 1823 (250 gns; RA GEO/26060).

12 Rundell, Bridge and Rundell rendered account of the purchase as follows: on Rundell's account dated 21st, 22nd and 29th June, their cost was £252 7s. for one and £255 3s. for the other, calculated at 14s. per ounce. The same document indicates their origin by specifying immediately afterwards charges of £6 17s. and 7s. 6d. respectively to 'Paid Expenses to Wanstead 3 days, attending Sale and Carriage of Plate home,' and 'Paid Cartage and assistance.'

13 He received a diamond-hilted sword from the French King.

14 The Newcastle Courant, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Friday 12 February 1847, p. 4c.

15 See Sotheby's London, 3 May 1984, lot 124.

Literature:

The Glory of the Goldsmith: Magnificent Gold and Silver from the Al-Tajir Collection, London, 1989, fig. 141, pp. 182-183.