

The Olle Centrepiece

A unique piece of craftsmanship commemorating Bury St Edmunds' role in Magna Carta, which is rarely seen on public display, is to be part of the Bury St Edmunds Magna Carta 800 celebrations and displayed in the Cathedral during May 2014.

The Olle Centrepiece is a 25 inch circular charger – or centrepiece plate – depicting the heraldic Arms of St Edmundsbury and surrounded by the 25 shields of the Barons who met in Bury in 1214 plus that of King John and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

It is known as the Olle Centrepiece after Robert Arthur Cecil Olle who died in 1975, having twice been Mayor of Bury St Edmunds, who left a bequest for the piece to be made and used at civic functions.



This takes the form of a twenty five inch circular and heavy hand hammered shallow bowl or 'Charger', raised from a single thirty inch diameter silver sheet. It is turned down two inches and slightly curved vertically at its edge. This parallels the great twenty four inch circular 'charger of the Roman Treasure found at Mildenhall, ten miles from Bury, and the twenty seven inch diameter Anastasias dish from the Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo, south-east of Bury; both now in the British Museum.

Bury St. Edmunds, 'the hub of East Anglia' is depicted at its centre by a wheel symbolism in the form of a boss of fine gold and fine silver with transparent enamels modelling the Arms of St. Edmundsbury granted on 15th May, 1976. In its heraldic treatment the medieval seal format is used with the small shield tipped at about forty five degrees and the large helm and crest with the supporters and motto encircling it. In 1214, twenty five Barons with the Archbishop of Canterbury met in the semi-circular apse of the great Abbey Church to swear on the high altar to force King John to accept Magna Carta.

The Disk, Wheel and Hub symbols are of the greatest antiquity. They were used in the great rose windows of medieval cathedrals. The wheel is the dual equilibrium of contrary forces, contraction and expansion, good and evil. The disc is immobile, the wheel turns round its hub; hence the portrayal of the Sun as the hub of the universe which rotates around it with the sectors of the rim representing the passage of time - Bury's antiquity; it past, present and future. The wheel of Law, Truth and Life is one of the eight emblems of good luck in Chinese Buddhism. The wheel represents the communion of saints, the reunion of the faithful in the immovable, invisible mystic centre; God - the Archbishop making the Barons swear on the high altar of the Abbey.

The Boss is encircled by twenty seven shields of arms, of thirteenth century shape, blazoned in transparent enamels on fine gold and silver. That of King John (1) (gules, three lions passant, Gardant in pale or) - red with the three lions of England - will be seen directly opposite the hallmarks and "the January 1975" recording Mr. Olle's bequest. It is slightly larger than the rest. To the heraldic left of King John's shield of arms (right as the viewer sees it) is (2) that of Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury - (per pale azure and gules, a bend or) - half blue, half red crossed with a sloping strip of gold - whilst to the heraldic right of the King (left as viewed) (27) the shield of Arms of Robert Fitzwalter, Marshal of the baronial forces. The shields of the twenty five barons are also shown.

The transparent enamels on fine gold echo the techniques and particular colours of the unique British Museum Royal Gold Cup made about 1380 for the Duke de Berri ("probably the most valuable piece of Goldsmith work in Britain"). Nearer Bury, King John's cup at Kings Lynn, is the earliest surviving piece of English Medieval secular plate and traditionally the only piece recovered from King John's treasure lost in the Wash.

It is interesting to note that the twenty seven letters of the Borough Motto "Sacrarium Regis; Cunabula Regis" parallel the twenty seven shields of Arms so that each letter of the Motto radiates from the point of a shield - King John pointing to the 'S' of 'Regis' with thirteen letters to his left and thirteen letters to his right, the motto starting from the bottom left under No. 15-(the red with a horizontal gold lion of William de Lanvellei) - and, reading clockwise, ending at No. 14 - (the green with horizontal band and fleurs-de-lys of William de Hardell). On the vertical turndown - six feet six inches in circumference - one hundred and forty one letters of fine gold record the bequest "The gift of Robert Arthur Cecil Olle, twice Mayor of Bury St. Edmunds, Alderman Honorary Freeman of the Borough, Alderman West Suffolk County Council 1975."

Robert Arthur Cecil Olle was born on 15th May, 1890 and died at his residence, Fornham Priory, Mildenhall Road, Bury St. Edmunds, on 3rd January, 1975. He was a member of the Bury St. Edmunds Borough Council from November, 1929. In 1943, he was elected an Alderman of the Borough. He was Mayor of the Borough in 1937 and in 1953. His membership of the Council extended over 40 years, until 1970, when he did not seek re-election as an Alderman. He was elected a member of the West Suffolk County Council in 1931 and elected a County Alderman in 1952. On 30th May, 1968, the Honorary Freedom of the Borough was conferred upon him. By his Will, Mr. Olle left to the Council of the Borough of Bury St. Edmunds or the Authority which at the date of his death had succeeded the Borough Council, a sum of money for the purchase of a silver or silver and gold centrepiece for use at civic and other functions. It was a condition of his Will that the centrepiece should be designed and made by a Silversmith of national repute and it was to represent the meeting of the Barons at the high altar in the present Abbey Gardens to enforce the granting of Magna Carta.

The Borough Council sought the views of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in London and it was decided to invite a design from Mr. Louis Osman, B.A. (Arch.), F.R.I.B.A. His Work had included the design of The Treasury for the Goldsmiths Company in Lincoln Cathedral. He also designed and provided a new housing and reset the Lincoln Cathedral copy of Magna Carta. He was commissioned to design and make the crown which was first used at the Investiture of H.R.H. Prince Charles as Prince of Wales in 1969.