

Property of an Overseas Family

Highly important and historic George III armorial silver entree dish and cover presented to Admiral Lord Nelson by Lloyd's Coffee House after the battle of the Nile by Paul Storr for Rundell & Bridge, London 1800.

rectangular with gadroon edges, the domed cover engraved with a presentation inscription from Lloyds Coffee House on one side and Nelson's coat of arms on the other; with removable finial designed as the *Chelengk* crest of Admiral Lord Nelson. The dish cover additionally engraved inside with the crests of Admiral Lord Nelson. Cover and dish numbered No. 2 (of original set of four). 56.79 troy oz / 1,766.30 grams

Finial height: 75mm / 3"; Overall height: 150mm / 5 7/8"; Dish length: 310mm / 12 1/4"; Dish width: 220mm / 8 5/8"

PROVENANCE:

Admiral Lord Nelson (1758-1805)

Susannah Bolton, his eldest sister.

Thence by direct descent to the present owners.

Nelson's Nile Silver

By Martyn Downer

'I shall take my plate with me: sink or swim it goes with me'.

Admiral Lord Nelson, February 1801

During the night of 1-2 August 1798, off the coast of Egypt, Rear Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson scored one of the most extraordinary and dramatic victories in British naval history. Leading a squadron of fourteen warships in a highly daring manoeuvre, Nelson engaged the French fleet in fading light whilst it lay at anchor, and apparent safety, in the bay of Aboukir near the mouth of the Nile. By morning, eleven enemy warships were captured or destroyed, eliminating the French naval threat in the Mediterranean and lifting the danger to British and allied interests in the east as far as India. It was a sensational event thrusting Nelson and his 'Band of Brothers' of Nile captains into celebrity. They all shared in the rewards of prize money and gold medals but inevitably it was Nelson who was showered with titles and glittering gifts from relieved monarchs and grateful trade interests across Europe. In April 1800, even before Nelson was back in England, the *Naval Chronicle* published a summary chronicling and valuing this extravagant outpouring. It included flamboyant presentation swords from Nelson's fellow officers and the King of the Two Sicilies; diamond set boxes from the Emperor of Russia (value £2500) and King of Sardinia (value £1200) and a diamond and gold mounted walking cane from the Island of Zante. The despotic Sultan of Turkey, being

especially thankful for his country's liberation, was especially generous (even his mother gave Nelson a diamond box). He sent military trophies and decorated the admiral with a *Chelengk* a fine large jewel designed as an aigrette of diamonds and a traditional award for bravery, though one rarely given to foreigners. So struck was Nelson by this gift that he wore it, in traditional Ottoman manner, on his headgear and, following his elevation the peerage as Baron Nelson of the Nile, incorporated the design as a crest in his newly augmented coat of arms. Whilst Nelson remained in Naples following his victory—embroiling himself in a civil war and an affair with the wife of the British ambassador—plans were rapidly advanced in England to rival the generosity of her many colourful allies. It was the merchants in the City of London, so dependent on security of trade in the Mediterranean, who demonstrated their gratitude in the most prodigious manner. The Turkish Company commissioned a silver cup to be presented to Nelson, the Corporation of the City of London arranged a gold and enamel sword, the prestigious Drapers' Company made him a liveryman whilst the directors of the East India Company voted to give Nelson the huge (and sorely needed) sum of £10,000 in recognition of his achievement. Happily, attention was not solely focused on the admiral but also on his comrades. On 2nd October, the very day news of the victory reached London; the *Morning Chronicle* published an announcement from Lloyd's Coffee House launching:

A subscription for the relief of the Widows and Children of the Brave Men who fell in the service of their KING and COUNTRY and for such as have been wounded in the glorious victory obtained by the British Fleet, under command of Rear Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson, Knight of the Bath over the French fleet the First of August in the Mediterranean

Since the outbreak of war with France in 1793, the merchants and underwriters at Lloyd's Coffee House in the City of London had subscribed to a series of ad hoc funds to support the wounded and dependents of those officers killed in action at sea and, on occasion, to reward individuals for outstanding bravery or leadership with an award in silver. Naturally City self-interest in granting awards to promote the protection of British merchant shipping ensured the success of the funds. Nevertheless, in an era of official disinterest in such matters, the funds were the first organised and sustained attempt to provide for families devastated by war and to reward officers by merit not status. In 1803 the various subscription funds coalesced into the Patriotic Fund—which continues to this day—under the founding directorship of Sir John Julius Angerstein, a City luminary, former chairman of Lloyd's and a leading philanthropist of his age. The haphazard nature of the grants were formalised into a graded system of annuities whilst officers meriting individual reward were offered the choice of a specially designed Patriotic Fund sword, silver vase or money to like value.

Angerstein was very well qualified for the task having chaired the funds created after the battles of Cape St. Vincent in 1797 then, a year later, of the Nile. The greater strategic importance of the Nelson's victory in Egypt is well illustrated by the disparity in subscription: £2,615 for St Vincent compared to £38,436 eventually raised for the Nile. His first task after the Nile had been to enquire of Nelson as to casualties then to relay news that the fund committee had voted £500 (approximately £40,000 in today's terms) to be awarded to the admiral, himself wounded at the action, specifically for the purchase of silver. Possibly on account of Nelson's continued absence in the Mediterranean, his uncertainty as to what to order or delay in the grant from Lloyd's, it was not until November 1800, and the admiral's return to London, that Rundell & Bridge, the celebrated royal goldsmiths on Ludgate Hill, submitted an '*Estimate for a Service of Dishes for The Right Hon^{ble} Lord Nelson*'.

The estimate details eight oval dishes (or plates), four circular dishes (or plates), four circular casserole dishes with covers and *Chelengk* crests, and four oblong 'double' dishes also with covers and crests, otherwise known as entrée dishes. An accompanying diagram and description of how the dishes could be arranged at table—in the hand of Alexander Davison, Nelson's friend and agent, who

was charged with organising the silver—not only offers insight into the evolution of the order but also fascinating detail into the dining habits of the day. Davison, like Nelson, was a self-made man and the anxiety of both men to imitate the lifestyle of the aristocracy is clearly apparent. The worldlier Davison's annotated instructions on how to use the dishes reads like an exercise in social manners. So he carefully explains how some dishes are recycled between courses whilst others remain on table. The *'new pattern double oblong Dishes'* with removable crests serve both purposes as they *'come on in the first course with covers, which covers take off & are used as Dishes in the second course'*. On 20 November 1800 Rundell & Bridge estimated the cost of the service just over budget at £550. Four days later they submitted a more detailed statement, in the form of a pro-forma invoice, for £627.0.2s. As Nelson was in London at this time—he had visited the City on 6 November, when he likely met Angerstein, and had taken his seat in the House of Lords as Baron Nelson of the Nile on the 20th—there had presumably been a meeting to discuss the service. The increase in price is accounted for by the expense of two additional oval plates, arranging a 'strong iron bound Wainscot Chest' for storing the service (now in collection of the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth) and engraving very lengthy presentation inscriptions on the covers of the eight double dishes. The wording, which was presumably proposed by Angerstein, encapsulates the sentiment of the gift:

Lloyd's 1800. Presented by the Committee, for managing a Subscription made for the Wounded and Relatives of the Killed at the Battle of the Nile, To Vice Admiral Lord Nelson and Duke of Bronti (sic), K.B., &c, &c, &c, who was there wounded, As a testimony of the sense they entertain of his Brilliant Services on the first of August, 1798, when a British Fleet under his Command obtained a most decisive victory over a Superior French Force. J. J. Angerstein, Chairman

The *'4 neat double oblong double dishes to divide & serve for eight'* cost £120.18s.7d. As *'Modelling & chasing crests for buttons to d^o to screw off'* cost a further £10.10s 0d; the total price for the four entrée dishes was £131 8s 7d, or the equivalent of about £10,000 today. Despite the significant over spend, Davison has neatly annotated the bill *'paid for by Lloyd's Coffee House'*.

Rundell & Bridge gave the work to the workshops of Paul Storr in Air Street Soho, an up and coming silversmith who also made the Turkish Company cup. Despite Nelson's entreaties, it took six months to finish the service with Davison patiently explaining in January 1801 that *'Rundle (sic) and Bridge are exerting themselves to finish your plate, but it requires time, and being confined to a few hands to work upon it'*. As the service was of a plain form with conventional gadroon pattern borders, it must have been modelling, casting, chasing and engraving the unusual *Chelengk* crests for the eight dish covers which took the time. It can be assumed that Nelson showed Rundells his *Chelengk*—about which there had been a great deal of wild speculation in London—though Storr's version differs significantly from known images of it. Nevertheless, as the *Chelengk* was stolen and lost from the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich in 1951, the model in silver gives a tantalising feel of this now almost mythical jewel

On 22 April 1801, Davison finally reported the service finished and being fitted to its travelling case ready for sending out to Nelson at sea in the Baltic. Embroiled in the bitter separation from his wife following discovery of his affair with Emma, Lady Hamilton, no doubt Nelson wished to keep the silver close at hand rather than risk losing it in possible proceedings. *'I shall take my plate with me'* he had told Davison in February, *'sink or swim it goes with me'*. Ironically, by the time Nelson took possession of his Nile service, he had earned a second grant of £500 for silver from Lloyd's Coffee House, having conquered the Danish fleet at the battle of Copenhagen on 2 April. Unlike its bespoke predecessor, however, items for the Copenhagen service were bought from the stocks of a variety of London silversmiths possibly to achieve better value for money and also because Nelson, now enjoying his dishes, needed general items such as plates, sauce tureens and salts to, as he instructed Davison, *'make a complete set'*.

After Nelson's death at Trafalgar his, by then, very extensive collections of silver (including some 150 pieces by Rundells) were shared out haphazardly between his estranged wife, his brother

and two sisters, and his mistress Emma, Lady Hamilton. Over the years since, most items have been offered for sale at least once and scattered into private and public collections around the world. But it is the original Nile service, extending to only twenty two pieces by the leading silversmith of his age and Nelson's first significant award, which retains the utmost scarcity and most appeal for collectors. For example, in the spate of auctions held to coincide with the bicentenary of Trafalgar in 2005, Bonhams in London sold two oval and two circular plates from the Nile service for £195,600. However, it is the eight principal dishes with their *Chelengk* (or aigrette) crests which are the very greatest trophies. Their histories after the death of Nelson suggest that they were shared between Nelson's sisters and his mistress. In 1814, as she faced financial ruin, Emma Hamilton signed a deed of sale for '*four casseroles covers and aigrettes*'. Three of these subsequently appeared for sale at Christies in 1895 at the dispersal of the magnificent collection of inherited Nelson relics and artefacts belonging to Viscount Bridport, the grandson of Nelson's brother William, Earl Nelson. They were bought by Lady Llangattock who gifted them to the newly established Nelson Museum, Monmouth on her death in 1923. Of the four '*new pattern double oblong Dishes*': three were purchased for the Nelson Collection at Lloyd's of London in 1910 from the collection of Nelson's sister Catherine Matcham. The fourth, and present example, descended in the family of Nelson's other sister Susannah Bolton and was last exhibited at the Royal Naval Exhibition at Chelsea in 1891. So its re-appearance is a moment of significant interest and excitement for collectors, scholars and enthusiasts of Nelson.

Further reading:

Warren R.Dawson (ed.) *The Nelson Collection at Lloyd's*, 1932

Martyn Downer, *Nelson's Purse: The Extraordinary Story of Lord Nelson's Lost Treasure*, 2004

Leslie Southwick, 'The Nelson Collection at Lloyd's of London', *Trafalgar Chronicle*, 1996. pp. 71-86

Silver studies: the journal of the Silver Society, No. 19, 2005.