

Miniature Georgian Silver Sugar Tongs an article by Graham Hodges

One hears much discussion about miniature or “small” Georgian silver sugar tongs. I do discuss the subject briefly in my book, stating:

“Georgian sugar tongs will generally be between 5 & 6 ins long, the most common length being approximately 5.½ ins long. Bearing in mind that they were all hand made, it is hardly surprising to note that the length is never exact. The longest pair seen are about 6.¼ ins long, made by George Brasier and dated around 1790. There are also some very short pairs, perfect in every respect but only 3 to 4 ins long (I have even seen a pair of Georgian sugar tongs made by Dorothy Langlands of Newcastle that were only just over 2 ins long). There are several theories to explain why tongs were made this size, these include:

- 1. They were made for toy sets of silver-ware;*
- 2. They were made as samples for travelling salesmen to display the maker’s arts;*
- 3. They were made by apprentices and made smaller to use less silver;*
- 4. They were made for people to take on picnics, as part of a “travelling” set of silver-ware;*
- 5. A patron had specifically tasked the maker with a commission for a smaller pair of tongs.*

Any, or all, of these theories could be true, we will probably never know. In any event, short sugar tongs are quite rare, and do look very strange set against standard Georgian tongs. There is no doubt that they are genuine as they are fully hallmarked. It is also clear that they have not been repaired, i.e. a broken piece cut out.”

In fact one does see tongs that are shorter than they should be. Sometimes this is where a piece has clearly been cut out, either at the bowls, or at the centre of the bow, presumably in order to make a repair.

However the real discussion should be about those that do NOT look obviously repaired. There are three main theories to explain these:

1. They are fake, i.e. not Georgian at all, made later perhaps with fake hallmarks;
2. They are actually repaired (and made shorter in the process), but the repair is too good to detect;
3. They are genuine, i.e. made when the hallmark indicates they were made, and made shorter than usual.

I will deal with each of these three theories in turn, as in fact any or all three could actually be true.

Fake tongs

My main objection to this theory is “why bother?” The price of sugar tongs is very low and I find it difficult to imagine anyone going to the trouble of faking a pair of sugar tongs. Having said that we do know of a famous case of fake Georgian silver having been produced, in quantity, and with several different makers marks punched. The fake silver in this case was a variety of objects, including sugar tongs. We therefore cannot rule out forgery.

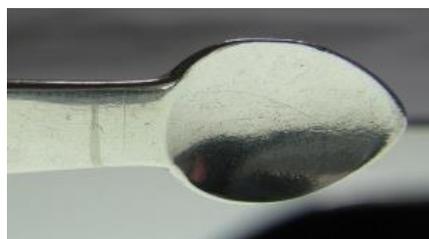
This was discussed in some detail in a paper by Paul V.A. Johnson, titled "The Lyon and Twinam Forgeries" The proceedings of the Silver Society, supplied courtesy of The Goldsmiths' Company Assay Office.

Repaired tongs

I have shown below several examples of repaired tongs. In most cases the repair is obvious, in some (presumably) to cut out a piece of damaged silver and make a whole pair. In several of the examples the "repair" may well not be a repair at all, simply a "join".

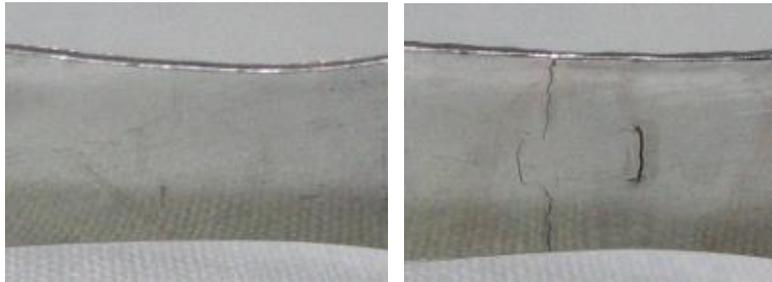
1. Stephen Adams 1791/92

These tongs are 4½ inches long, or 11cms. The bowls have clearly been joined onto the arms at some point. With this pair, we can clearly see that the two bowls have been carefully soldered on to the arms, i.e. added after the arms were made. The tongs bear a clear hallmark and maker's mark suggesting they are genuine. Because of the way the bowls have been added the join appears right at the joint of the bowl on the outside, sloping back by about 4mm on the inside. The bowls also look small for the overall size of the rest of the tongs. The bright cut engraving pattern on the bowls is a pattern often seen with Stephen Adams tongs and therefore in keeping. The question is; were they made like this originally, or were the bowls added later, perhaps as a repair?



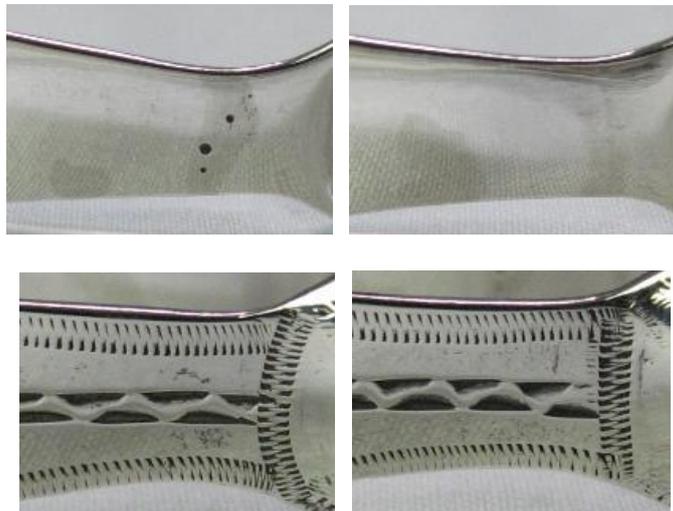
2. William Bateman 1815/16

These tongs are 4.¾ inches long or 11.9cms. They appear to be very well proportioned, i.e. the bowls are aesthetically right and the overall proportions fit well. They are clearly hallmarked, dated between 1st September 1815 and 28th May 1816. About 10mm up from each bowl can be seen a small rectangular inserted piece where the bowls have been joined on to the arms. This is only very faintly visible on the inside and is almost invisible from the outside. There is no break in the feather edge engraving which suggests they were made this way BEFORE being engraved. This strongly suggests they were made this way originally. Given that they are only ½ to ¾ inch shorter than would be normal, it is possible that they were originally made longer, and were “shortened” for some reason. My inclination with these tongs is that they came out of the Bateman workshops appearing as they do now.



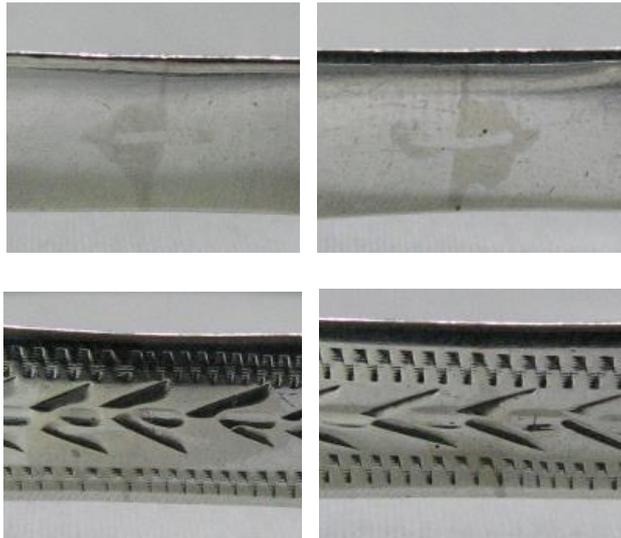
3. George Smith II – c1784

These tongs are just 4 inches long, or 10.2cm. They are properly hallmarked and dated at around 1784. There are very clear joins visible about 4mm up from the bowls. These are solder joints and only really visible from the insides of the arms. The bright cut engraving appears to be whole from the outside. The tongs are about 1.½ inches shorter than one would expect. The difficulty is that of assessing whether the "repair" was made at the time the tongs were made or sometime later. It is very difficult to be sure either way. It is easy to picture these tongs being rather longer and the overall form would look right. At the same time, it is also possible they were made as they are seen. The overall form does not look too far wrong. If pushed I would think it more likely the "repair" was made later and a small piece removed.



4. William Seaman – 1818/19

This is a shortened pair of standard bright cut tongs. They measure 4.¾ inches or 11.8cms long. The joins where they have been repaired can clearly be seen about ½ inch up from the bottoms of the bowls. The join has been rather cleverly made by inserting a tiny piece of silver lengthways and then soldering the arms to the bowls. It appears that between ½ inch and 1 inch of the arms has been removed. Whether this was done at the time of manufacture or sometime later is debatable. The fact that the bright cut engraving seems un-disturbed suggests it was done at the time of manufacture but we cannot be sure of this.



5. Thomas Lamborn – Sheffield - 1802

This is a shortened pair of tongs. The join can clearly be seen at the centre of the bow, where a piece has been cut out and the bow re-joined. The tongs are 4.¼ inches or 10.8 cms long. This means a good length has been cut out. Given that one of the weakest parts of sugar tongs is the bow, it is hardly surprising that such a repair should be made. These tongs have clearly been repaired some time after they were made.



6. Thomas Wallis II – London 1790/91

This pair of tongs has been shortened through the cutting out of a piece at the bow. They measure 4½ inches or 11.9cms long. The repair can very clearly be seen, not just from the repair line that shows but also because the maker's mark has been partially cut through during the process. Both the maker's mark and hallmarks are right underneath the bow where they should be at the tops of the arms. Notice that the monogram has been engraved some time after the repair was made. They are dated 1790/91.



7. Edward Lees – London 1804

These are a particularly small pair of tongs, just 3½ inches or 9.2 cms long. The arms are narrow, in proportion with their overall size. They are very clearly hallmarked, in the normal place with good clear hallmarks for 1804 (between 29th May and 10th October). They “look” right in every respect. They have clearly been repaired at the bow. My view is that these tongs were actually made this size and have been repaired at some point in their life. This is as opposed to have been shortened at some time.



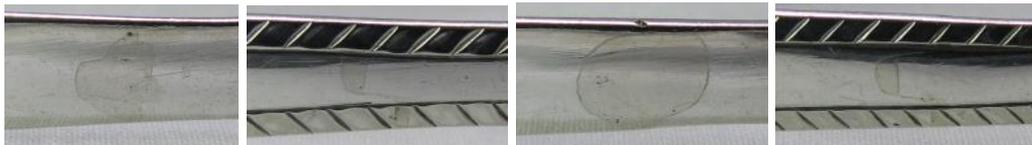
8. Christopher & Thomas Wilkes Barker – London 1803/04

This pair of tongs is just slightly less than 4 inches long, but proportionally the same as larger Georgian tongs. There is often some doubt over whether these types of tongs are made as they appear, or whether they have been cut down. A close look at the join between the arms and bowls clearly shows solder marks where the bowls have been joined to the arms. The question is whether this was done at the time of making or later. My personal view is that they are genuine, not cut down and repaired. This view is taken because of the overall proportions.



9. William Ellerby – 1808/09

These tongs are just 4.½ inches long. One can clearly see the join marks on the sides of both arms. These joins have been very carefully made and it is unclear whether this was done at the time of manufacture or later, as a repair. A close look at the engraving on the sides of the arms shows that they were engraved AFTER they were shortened - curious?? These tongs also have a very elaborately engraved monogram.

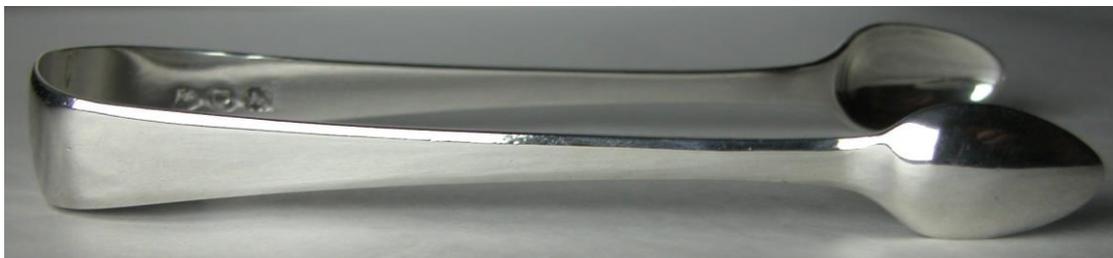


Genuine tongs

We now move on to the tongs that I have labeled as “Genuine”. These tongs are all small, but none have any marks that suggest that they may have been made in several parts or repaired or later made smaller. I suggest that all of these tongs were actually made the sizes that they currently are.

1. Thomas Purver & Edward Furnice – 1815

These tongs are very plain and in a fairly standard “Old English” style, typical for the period. They are just 4 inches (103cms) long. They are fully hallmarked, with the un-clipped duty mark showing a date of between 28th May and 13th June 1815. There are no marks anywhere to suggest any repairs.



2. Stephen Adams 1 – 1790/91

This is an absolutely gorgeous little pair of sugar tongs. They are just 4 inches (100cms) long and in pristine condition. They are dated 1790/91. The assay office has clearly had some trouble punching their mark - perhaps they should have punched it sideways! These tongs are a lovely example of miniature tongs, with no marks whatsoever indicating any kind of repair. The proportions are also right for their size.



3. George Smith & William Fearn 1793/94

These miniature tongs are just 3½ inches (92 cms) long. They are perfectly proportioned and clearly hallmarked. They show no signs of any repair. They are dated 1793/94.



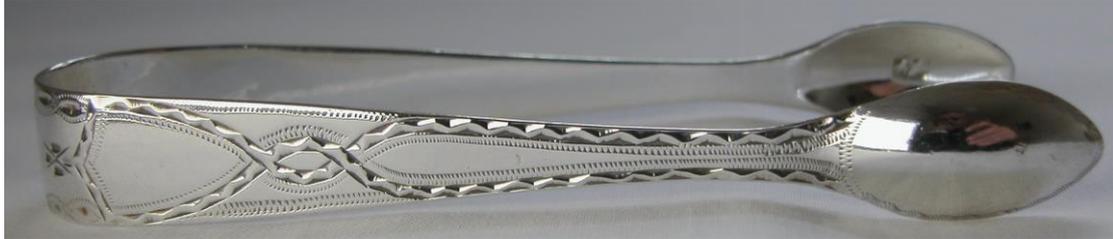
4. Samuel Whitford I

These tongs are just over 4 inches (105 cms) long. They are shaped and have a delicate thread edge. The bowls are circular and engraved although the engraving is worn. As well as being miniature tongs, they are also an example of duty dodging as they are marked with only the maker's mark, marked twice, one on each side of the arm. I have dated them as c1780-84.



5. John Steward

These tongs are 4.¼ inches (110 cms) long. They are marked in the bowls with the script maker's mark for John Steward. Even on very close inspection one can see no sign of a break or repair.



6. Peter, Ann & William Bateman

We now come to two identical pairs of tongs from the Bateman shops. This first pair is by Peter, Ann & William. They are 4 inches (103cms) long and are in correct proportions for their size.



7. Peter & William Bateman

Whilst difficult to see much difference from the picture, this second pair is by Peter & William Bateman.



8. William Eley & William Fearn – 1816/17

These tongs are just over 4 inches (105 cms) long. They are in almost pristine condition and show no signs of any repair. They are dated 1816/17. Interestingly they are bright cut and most of Eley & Fearn's tongs of this time were plain, without bright cut engraving.



9. Charles Hougham

The final pair are by Charles Hougham. They are just 3.¾ inches (93cms) long. They are in superb condition, bright cut engraved and fully hallmarked in the bowls. There is no sign of any repair which would mean that these tongs were made this size. They are dated between 1786 & 1790.



Conclusion

Some of these smaller tongs are definitely repaired tongs. Some are questionable, i.e. whether they were “repaired” at the time of manufacture or later. There are also tongs that show every appearance of having been made as miniatures. My view is therefore that tongs WERE made as miniatures, but we are still no clearer as to why.

All of the above tongs are published on my web-site www.silversugartongs.com