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Scottish heart brooches: a re-evaluation of the luckenbooth

Lyndsay McGill FSAScot*

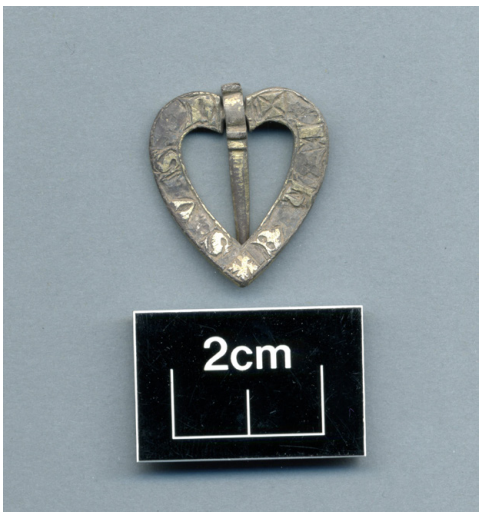
ABSTRACT

This article presents a study of Scottish heart brooches, primarily from the 18th century, using the collections of the National Museums Scotland, Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, the Highland Folk Museum and those reported to the Treasure Trove Unit. By researching over 350 heart brooches it has been possible to gain a fuller understanding of their purpose and meaning, their various styles and their production centres. A re-evaluation of these objects is important because an understanding of them exists that may not be wholly accurate, such as their connection to Edinburgh through the locked booths in the High Street which has given rise to their more commonly known name, 'luckenbooth brooches'. However, the reality from the study is that more were produced in northern Scotland, particularly from the mid-18th into the early 19th centuries. There is also a deeply ingrained romantic notion of them, and while this is certainly true in many cases, other meanings exist such as protection, religion and health. Furthermore, by studying a quantity of brooches from the 13th to early19th centuries, it has also been possible see regional variations between Inverness and Aberdeen and how the heart form changed through time.

In Scotland, heart brooches are enduring items of jewellery. They conjure up romantic notions of the country's past and have existed for hundreds of years. Vast numbers of brooches survive from the late 18th and 19th centuries, many of which can be found today in museum collections, passing through auction houses, and in the homes of individual owners. However, a familiarity and an assumed understanding of these brooches has evolved. Their colloquial name 'luckenbooth brooches' directly connects them to Edinburgh, and their very shape indicates love and romance, and yet a study of over 350 of these brooches paints a more complex picture. This article re-evaluates these existing perceptions by using the National Museums Scotland (NMS) collection (which houses over 300 of these miniature works of art), together with examples from Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, the Highland Folk Museum and the Treasure Trove Unit. By looking at a quantity of objects, it is hoped that a more balanced view can be established and a greater understanding of their purpose and meaning, whether there was an identifiable regional and/or Scottish style, and where the main centres of production were. The Scottish heart brooch has also been considered in a wider context, looking at its place in history from the 13th to 19th centuries and, to a small extent, examining it in the context of comparable objects beyond Scotland.

During the medieval period the symbol of the heart began to proliferate in European material culture. Jewellery was often used to display this motif and heart brooches have been recovered in Scotland dating from potentially as early as the 13th century. These late medieval finds are rare and until now only five are known. Their findspots include Perthshire, the Scottish Borders,

* National Museums Scotland, Department of Scottish History & Archaeology, National Museums Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh, EH1 1JF l.mcgill@nms.ac.uk



Illus 1 Heart brooch from Drumelzier, Scottish Borders, *c* 1250–1450. (Image © Crown Copyright)

Fife and Dumfriesshire. These early examples all display a form of lettering denoting Jesus of Nazareth, and all have vertical pins reaching from the top of the heart to the bottom tip, a style that is distinctly medieval (Prosser forthcoming) (Illus 1).

In addition to the finds, there are further historical references. After the death of James III in 1488, it is recorded that he left several heart brooches, including one of gold, together with a gold and enamelled heart (Lightbown 1992: 186). In 1503, shortly after the marriage of James III's son, James IV, to Margaret Tudor, the king requested that the goldsmith Johne [sic] Currour produce gifts for his new queen consisting of 'thre litill ringis of gold, [and] ane hert of gold …' (Balfour Paul 1900: 217). Hearts were also included within an act of parliament recorded by the Edinburgh Incorporation of Goldsmiths in 1569 to prohibit certain brass objects from being gilded, the 'Act contra latoun wark be gilt'. The types of wares that were banned consisted of rings, buttons, hearts and any other sorts of work that may be hurtful or deceitful to the king, the penalty being a fine of 40 shillings (Munro & Fothringham 2006: 223). This act implies that certain goldsmiths were producing wares of non-precious metal and trying to pass them off as gold by gilding them. That hearts should be specifically mentioned in the act implies that they must have been a popular form of personal adornment.

The overwhelming majority of heart brooches that survive date from *c* 1700 onwards and their widespread popularity across the country is suggested by the evidence of finds recorded by the Treasure Trove Unit. This reveals that from the last ten years, heart brooches have been recovered from the ground all over Scotland, including the Highlands, Moray, Aberdeenshire, Angus, Perthshire, Stirling, Fife, Falkirk, the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway. However, thanks to their popular name, luckenbooth brooch, they are largely associated with Edinburgh. The name comes from the locked booths that hugged the north side of St Giles Kirk in the Old Town. Believed to have been established around 1440, these shop booths formed the goldsmithing and jewellery quarter until 1817, when they were torn down to widen the High Street.[1] Traditionally it has been said that the goldsmiths who inhabited these luckenbooths sold heart brooches and thus the name derives from the shop. Despite this, confirmed Edinburgh-made examples are surprisingly rare (as will be explained) and the name in relation to heart brooches is not known to have existed prior to the late 19th century (Finlay 1991: 164; Dalgleish 2006: 123). Indeed, the term may have been created by late Victorian antiquarians and collectors as part of their growing nomenclature surrounding historical objects. There is also the possibility that the sellers of such items concocted the name as a powerful marketing tool, employing heritage as part of their sales pitch. Further research into the term will be necessary to establish its exact origin and development.

The inscriptions found on heart brooches sometimes suggest an understanding of how they were used. The 18th- and 19th-century Scottish types, for the most part, highlight the romantic nature of this jewellery. Many are inscribed with loving messages: 'my heart you have and yours I crave', 'I fancie non but the alon', 'let love abid till divid', 'Before my eye [symbol of

an eye] no star to the'. These types of messages support the idea that heart brooches were traditionally betrothal gifts, which is also encouraged by the abbreviated biblical inscription sometimes found, 'Ruth I Chap Ver 16 17', which refers to the marriage phrase, 'till death do us part':

> And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:
>
> Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me (Ruth 1: 16–17).[2]

In addition, by far the most common form of engraving on Scottish heart brooches is the twin sets of initials. This is a feature frequently found on material culture in Scotland (such as door lintels, the handles of quaichs and furniture), and often signifies a marriage connection. Furthermore, by the early 19th century, makers were interlacing two single hearts together to create an example of conjoined love (Illus 2). Several also have the word 'vertue' engraved, which according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, can mean '1. moral excellence', '3. chastity, esp. of a woman' and '6. an angelic being of the seventh order of the celestial hierarchy' (Thompson 1998: 565). Was the wearer therefore moral and chaste, or perhaps an angel in the eye of the giver?

Nevertheless, other messages also exist. Two examples in the National Collection imply that these types of brooches may also have been given to friends; their inscriptions read: 'A friends gift' and 'friendship'. This reminds us that not all love is connected to romance and that the gift giving of brooches had a wider appeal. The very act of giving creates a bond between the giver and the recipient, thereby heightening the importance of the object (Yan 2020).

Another category of inscriptions suggests that some brooches also held religious significance. Several have the phrase 'fear god' or 'fear god III [ill?] heart' engraved on them. The symbol of the heart has been used in religious material culture since the medieval period and

Illus 2 Double heart brooch by Alexander Stewart *c* 1796–1841, 76 × 53mm. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

can be witnessed in the extant medieval Scottish brooches (Illus 1). The words 'Jesus of Nazareth' inscribed on these examples are repeatedly found on personal adornment in Scotland. Devotion to the Holy Name was used like a talisman because it was believed to prevent the wearer from 'sudden death' (Scarisbrick 2004: 58). Although the veneration of the heart is often associated with the Catholic faith, after the Reformation the heart was still used occasionally as a symbol in Protestant churches. Some parish kirks across Scotland adopted the heart for the shape of their communion tokens, as seen in Rerrick Parish Church in Kirkcudbright (Illus 3). Others incorporated it into their communion token designs, such as the parish of Mochrum, which displayed a heart transfixed by two swords. The meaning behind the heart was 'to convey the idea of Christ's love for sinners, or the dedication of the communicant's heart to God' while the 'transfixed heart probably refers to Christ's sufferings' (Burns 1892: 467–8).

Although the original intent of many of these brooches is apparent from their inscriptions, it is not uncommon for the meaning, or the purpose,

Illus 3 Heart-shaped communion token for the parish of Rerrick, 1731, 20 × 18mm. (Photograph by Ewen Weatherspoon, © Inverness Museum and Art Gallery)

Illus 4 Heart sewn into children's clothes, early 19th century, 18 × 16mm. (Photograph by Ewen Weatherspoon, © Inverness Museum and Art Gallery)

of an object to change over time. When such items have been gifted to museums they are occasionally accompanied by a family story. These oral histories, captured in museum registers, are sometimes associated with the protection against witches afforded by the pinning of a heart brooch to the underside of a child's petticoat. Indeed, heart brooches were sometimes referred to as witches' brooches, and silver has been said to have 'mystical properties' and could be 'used as a charm against the evil eye and witchcraft' (Dalgleish & Fothringham 2008: 13). This practice can be seen in an example from Inverness Museum and Art Gallery in which a small gold heart was 'sewn into children's clothes as protection against evil powers' (Illus 4).[3] Another, gifted to the National Museum in 1893, was worn on the breast of the chemise by the grandmother of the donor, to prevent the witches from taking away her milk.[4]

It therefore appears that in some cases the original function of the brooch changed into something possessing charm-like qualities. As mentioned above, it was not unusual for certain types of brooches to be used as talismans and, as Hugh Cheape (2008: 106) observes, 'Brooches with inscriptions invoking Christ, the Virgin Mary and other intercessors were worn to protect against illness and perceived danger of "witchcraft".' In Inverness during 1903 there was an exhibition titled 'Highland and Jacobite Exhibition' with an accompanying catalogue of the same name. One of the entries lists a 'Gold Witch Brooch, worn by Allan Macdonald of Kingsburgh, Skye, in the year he was imprisoned at Fort Augustus for sheltering Prince Charles for one night at Kingsburgh', believed to be 200 years old at the time.[5] The use of the term 'witch brooch' highlights the protective function of this heart brooch. This is the only reference the author has found relating to an adult male wearing one from the early modern period.

The heart shape in general is found among the vast variety of historical Scottish amulets that survive. There are numerous examples of heart charms, many of which are made from lead (Illus 5). Cheape (2008: 116–17) writes that a heart amulet was believed contemporarily to offer protection to 'the vital and central organ against the ever-present threat of disease or injury' and that there are 'a number of references to the use of lead hearts for curing perceived heart ailments or fevers'. Therefore, given the long-rooted tradition of brooches and heart charms being used for protective purposes in Scotland, it is understandable that some later heart-shaped brooches acquired amulet-like properties.

Not only did the purposes of heart-shaped brooches vary, they also came in a variety of styles which were subject to change over time. Of the six mid to late 18th-century examples known to have been made in Aberdeen in the national

Illus 5 Lead heart charm from Silverknowes, Edinburgh, 55 × 44mm. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

collection, five have a distinctive plain slender heart shape and three of those are topped with a crown. The crown is always flared and decorated with engraved hatching. Looking at the makers' marks, these show the hand of three silversmiths, Coline Allan, James Gordon and James Erskine (Illus 6, 7 & 8).

When comparing the existing 18th-century Aberdeen examples from the national collection with those from Inverness being produced during the same period, it is possible to see two distinct forms. The Invernesian examples possess a far livelier decorative scheme and features include: small projections at the shoulders of the heart and near the base; the tip of the heart is finished with a three-leafed or lobed decoration; and the makers often (but not always) used a chevron bar to decorate the lower portion of the heart. In addition, three varieties of crowns are found: a 'flared' crown (similar to those found on the

ILLUS 6 Heart brooch by Coline Allan *c* 1748–74, 38 × 25mm. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

ILLUS 7 Heart brooch by James Gordon *c* 1766–1810, 30 × 20mm. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

ILLUS 8 Heart brooch by James Erskine *c* 1792–1824, 20 × 11mm. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

ILLUS 9 'Flared' crown; the heart also displays projections, three-leafed decoration at the tip and a chevron bar, by Charles Jamieson, *c* 1792, 40 × 24mm. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

Illus 10 'Spectacle' crown by Thomas Borthwick, *c* 1772–83, 92 × 50mm. (Photograph by Ewen Weatherspoon, © Inverness Museum and Art Gallery)

Illus 11 'Bird head' crown by Charles Jamieson, *c* 1798, 47 × 30mm. (Photograph by Ewen Weatherspoon, © Inverness Museum and Art Gallery)

Aberdeen examples), a 'spectacle' crown and a 'bird head' crown (Illus 9, 10 & 11).

The distinctive projections at the shoulders and base of the heart may have been influenced by the religious iconography of the wounded heart. As mentioned above, the Mochrum communion token displays a heart transfixed by two swords, and the double piercing of a heart, whether by arrows or swords, may have acted as inspiration for the Inverness goldsmiths. The projections may therefore be an abstract nod to an ecclesiastical design (Laurenson 2017: 101).

The identification of stylistic groupings within Scotland is possible due to the maker's mark that the goldsmith punches on the brooch (usually on the reverse) to say that he or his workshop produced it. However, it should be noted that the vast majority of brooches are not punched with a maker's mark, and in some cases it has not been possible to identify the goldsmith's mark – indeed, only one-sixth of NMS's brooches are marked. Nevertheless, by looking at the National Collection it is possible to see that the majority of marked brooches that can be positively identified to a particular maker come from the Inverness area (23) followed next by Aberdeen (11). This weighting of manufacture to the north of the country suggests that there is a stronger case for a significant northern Scottish production base than previously understood. By looking at the collection as a whole and employing typology based on the known examples,

it could also be argued that the Inverness heart brooch style is the most prolific, and although not completely uniform in style, they do possess certain characteristics that eventually become a dominant or preferred style throughout Scotland by the mid-19th century.

That said, there are some makers' marks that suggest that nine brooches could have been made in Edinburgh. A few within this small group have Edinburgh hallmarks that tell us that they that were made during the 1830s, but unfortunately it has not been possible to identify the makers' marks. It should also be reiterated at this point that the locked booths from which these brooches take their name no longer existed during the 1830s, having been demolished by the early 19th century. Therefore, it is inaccurate to call an Edinburgh-made heart brooch a luckenbooth after 1817. Furthermore, care should be taken when using hallmarks to look for a place of production. A brooch having been hallmarked in Edinburgh does not necessarily mean that it was produced there. The hallmarking laws of the country, which were enforced by the Incorporation of Goldsmiths of the City of Edinburgh, stipulated that all silver and gold wares across Scotland were to be sent to the capital for assaying (quality checking) or to the Glasgow Assay Office, which operated from 1820 to 1964 (two brooches have Glasgow hallmarks). Needless to say, this was a huge inconvenience to provincial silversmiths and many did not comply, although some did, especially after 1836 when the laws were tightened.

Significantly, however, the national collection's earliest marked brooch was made by a goldsmith apprenticed in Edinburgh, James Brown. After his apprenticeship he appears to have worked as a journeyman (employed in a workshop but without rights to his own mark) until 1724, when he relocated to Perth and started marking his own wares.[6] It is therefore likely that this brooch dates to Brown's time in Perth, *c* 1725. It is engraved on the reverse with the phrase 'Fear God and love Tvertto' and the initials 'K G' (Illus 12).

Illus 12 Heart brooch by James Brown *c* 1725, 33 × 21mm: (a) obverse; (b) reverse. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

The style of this brooch resonates with the mid to late 18th-century Aberdeen examples and it may be that early 18th-century Scottish heart brooches conformed to a plain heart shape, sometimes capped with a crown, a legacy of which continued in Aberdeen. The earliest datable Inverness brooches were made by Thomas Borthwick, who was working *c* 1772–83. However, more datable examples are needed before any firm conclusions can be made on the style of Scottish heart brooches prior to the middle part of the 18th century.

Trained goldsmiths were not the only producers of heart brooches; there were those also made by Travelling people. In the Highland Folk Museum's collection there is a heart brooch converted from the 'bowl of a spoon by tinkers for the G. [great] Grandmother from whom it was bought'[7] (Illus 13). Dating to the 19th century, it came from Applecross and follows the general outline of a standard heart brooch topped with a crown but decorated with crude dots, lines and chevrons. A heart brooch made from the bowl of a spoon is a little unusual compared to how the majority are usually produced, but in a sense the principle is the same; brooches tend to be cut from sheet metal or cast in moulds and hand finished.

Interestingly, moulds for the production of heart brooches have been recovered from the ground. A potential reason for some of these stray finds may be to do with the Travelling communities within Scotland. The name 'tinker' was originally a term that highlighted the work produced by itinerant metalworkers, those primarily specialising in tin or white metal, although the name has since assumed negative connotations (Neat 1996: viii). In 1895 the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland purchased for its collections a stone mould 'for casting small heart-shaped brooches, from Kirkcowan'.[8] Then in 1927 the Reverend R S G Anderson donated to the Society a stone mould 'bearing a matrix for casting a Luckenbooth Brooch on one side and

Illus 13 Brooch from the Highland Folk Museum, 65 × 42mm. (Image © Highland Folk Museum)

Illus 14 Mould for a luckenbooth brooch and button, of stone, from Whithorn, Wigtownshire. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

a Button on the other, found at Isle of Whithorn, Wigtownshire' (Illus 14).[9] Although discovered more than 30 years apart, the findspots are remarkably close, being approximately only 16 miles from each other.

Another mould of a different form was handed into the Treasure Trove Unit in 2016, having been recovered from the grounds of the Kirk of Monzievaird in Crieff (Illus 15). This crude lead mould shows a matrix of a heart-shaped brooch surmounted with a crown and, remarkably, a small section of a (presumably failed) lead casting was found with it (Campbell 2016).

It is possible that these types of finds attest to the itinerant nature of working smiths, given that all three were found in locations where there are no recorded goldsmiths. The moulds may either have been lost by mishap or deliberately discarded after having served their purpose.

During the 19th century there is evidence to show that heart brooches grew in size as the century progressed, with double interlaced hearts becoming popular. The conjoined hearts may be the reason the romantic name 'Queen Mary brooches', referencing Mary Queen of Scots, was also used to describe them, as the overall form gives the impression of an 'M' surmounted by a crown (Marshall & Dalgleish 1991: 41) (Illus 16). This coincides at time when there was a renewed interest in the Renaissance period and the beguiling Queen. Many of these larger brooches appear to retain some of the distinctive 18th-century Inverness features, regardless of where they were made.

During the same period another type of heart brooch developed, a very small one, measuring on average 20mm, with a twist at the tip (Illus 17). These were frequently set with stones or paste but also came in plain gold and silver. Another 19th-century change was that the internal pin used to fasten the brooch, which had been held in place by the tension of the material, was now converted to a steel spring pin and catch. This sharper and thinner device was developed to reflect the change in clothing and an overall tightening of the weave in garments (Marshall & Dalgleish 1991: 41).

Heart brooches have become synonymous with Scotland, but they are not unique to this country. Examples are found all over Europe and beyond, and there have been suggestions of

Illus 15 Mould and brooch section found in Monzievaird, Crieff. (Image © Crown Copyright)

Illus 16 Double heart brooch by M Rettie & Sons, Aberdeen, *c* 1827–90, 67 × 50mm. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

ILLUS 17 Small 'twist' heart by Charles Jamieson, *c* 1793, 26 × 20mm. (Photograph by Ewen Weatherspoon, © Inverness Museum and Art Gallery)

ILLUS 18 Brooch by Johan Fredrik Busch, Norway, 1866, 44 × 23mm. (Image © National Museums Scotland)

Scandinavian influences on Scottish types. The 'bird head' crown found on the early Inverness brooches, although highly stylised, may have been inspired by the birds occasionally found on the crowns of Norwegian examples (Dalgleish 2006: 124). Furthermore, the symbol of the crowned heart is commonly found throughout the Continent. In the national collection there is one such brooch, which was produced by Johan Fredrik Busch in Bergen, Norway, dated 1866 (Illus 18). It displays a heart set with four red stones and wire-work decoration in the crown.

In summary, the heart in Scotland has been a popular symbol for centuries and the fact that so many heart brooches survive from the 18th century onwards testifies to their precious nature. They appear to have been passed down through families and treated with reverence, and when gifted to museums it was often to preserve family history. The inscriptions on them, and the oral histories surrounding them, highlight their connection to love, religion, health and protection. They also appear to have been worn by all sections of society at various points throughout history, including kings and queens, men, women and children. This is further emphasised by the different materials they are made from, ranging from gold to less expensive silver, and even more accessible non-precious metals. The Edinburgh goldsmiths' booths on the High Street have become entwined in the history of these brooches, and yet a study of over 350 brooches indicates that the north of Scotland may have been more prolific in the manufacture of these personal items during the second half of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Indeed, no Edinburgh-made brooch has been securely dated prior to 1830 in the study, and the locked booths had ceased to exist by 1817. Furthermore, the term 'luckenbooth brooch' was not known before the late 19th century. From the second half of the 1800s into the 20th century, the humble heart brooch attracted a plethora of new designs and decorations and is a subject for another paper.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this enduring jewellery continues in its production by contemporary makers. Taking inspiration from the past, makers create new versions of old forms, sometimes

working in different mediums like Perspex, and applying current technologies such as laser cutting. While new ones are made, the old brooches continue to circulate through the hands of jewellery enthusiasts and those appreciative of their historic nature, and it seems that at least for the near future, the legacy of the Scottish heart brooch continues.

NOTES

1 Canmore: National Record of the Historic Environment: 'Edinburgh, High Street, Luckenbooths'. https://canmore.org.uk/site/52535/edinburgh-high-street-luckenbooths. Accessed 19 February 2020.
2 The Holy Bible, Ruth 1: 16–17.
3 Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, Object Accession Catalogue.
4 National Museums Scotland, Accession Register 1893.
5 *Highland and Jacobite Exhibition*, Inverness, 1903, p 31. Catalogue in private collection.
6 The Incorporation of Goldsmiths of Edinburgh archive: 'James Brown'. https://incorporationofgoldsmiths.org. Accessed 17 November 2021.
7 Highland Folk Museum, Newtonmore, Object Accession Catalogue 1935–54.
8 *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 1895: 5, 'Purchases for the Museum and Library'. https://doi.org/10.9750/PSAS.030.1.9
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