

Lot 1430 “A Sheffield plate oblong table on 4 fluted legs, bearing the Smyth Arms, with embossed border and frame”.

The silver table in the Inner Hall c1929.



Image: Mb6059©Bristol Culture

In the 1947 sale the table was sold to a London dealer for £470 and then bought by the Museum of Sheffield Plate (now Sheffield Museums). The table is still part of their collection but is not on display.



Image: the table in Store at Sheffield. Courtesy of Sheffield Museums Trust



Image: Table top with Smyth coat of arms. Courtesy of Sheffield Museums Trust.

The table is made of Old Sheffield Plate it is the name given to silver plate made from a fusion process in the late 18th and early 19th century, before the invention of electroplating. It involved fusing copper and sterling silver together and rolling out into a sheet. This sheet, one side silver and one side copper could then be made into an item using the same techniques as for sterling silver.

The table, which dates from around 1800, was made for Sir Hugh Smyth (died 1825). The centre of the table bears the coat of arms of the Smyth family.

A recently discovered account, undated and unsigned, and entitled Special Occasions, describes a silver tray, possibly the table top (which was removeable) as follows:

'Christmas [at Ashton Court] was always a memorable occasion. Sometimes after a shoot, when all the beaters came back to Ashton, a whole sheep was cut up and eaten, but at Christmas a deer was cooked whole, put on a silver salver which had handles and stood on six legs (also used as a tea tray) and was wheeled into the hall drenched in brandy and set on fire. A military band was engaged and Mrs Smyth played the organ in the music room; and

there was a great dance for all the guests. On Christmas day or Boxing day there was a servants ball, where caps and aprons were exchanged for jewellery [sic] and evening dress.'

It has been suggested that the table could have used for serving wine as it has casters and it could be moved easily, possibly to a dining table. However Anton Bantock recounts in his book* that the gentlemen would place their button holes on it before they went to dinner.

The 1901 Inventory* of the contents of Ashton Court Mansion details the table in the Vestibule as follows:

"Handsome Sheffield Plated Table bearing the Smyth Arms – silver embossed border and frame. Size 3'6" x 2'2" x 2'6"."

In later years it was always kept in the Inner Hall. Vera Thomas who began work at Ashton Court Mansion as a second housemaid and continued working there 1946 recalled the table in 1989. Anton described Vera's visit in his book*.

"Retracing our steps to the Great Hall we entered the south wing – the Inner Hall ... It was called in Vera's time the 'Tea room' where afternoon tea was laid out every afternoon for visitors, whether any called or not, on the celebrated silver table."

In the same book Anton tells a curious story about the table and other family silver:

"Certain rooms had a sinister reputation. In the oldest part of the house was an attic bedroom in which was a secret cupboard, known only to the owner. When Esme went to live at Ness Castle in 1915 all the valuables were packed up and sent to the bank. A list was prepared and each year the bank checked through to see that no items were missing, then they discovered that the silver table was not there."

A terrible row between the Bank and the Ashton Court estate agent ensued - the agent insisting that the bank had the table and the bank insisting they did not.

Mrs Fround, a servant at Ashton Court, eventually had to disclose her knowledge of the secret cupboard and that Mrs Smyth before she went away had put the table in the cupboard. A carpenter was called to open it up as it was concealed behind oak panels. As soon as the carpenter began to remove the panels he went pale, started shaking and fled the premises. The following day the cupboard was opened and the silver table was discovered inside. What other secrets the cupboard held we will never know.

References

*The Last Smyths of Ashton Court. Part 3, 1900-1946 by Anton Bantock.

*1901 Inventory (Bristol Archives 41648/P 1/71)