

My earliest recollection of silver as a young child at home is my christening mug, napkin ring and spoon. The napkin ring was used regularly; however the christening mug and spoon remained firmly out of reach.

When I was a little older, and perhaps inspired by the mystery surrounding these items, I found on the shelves at home a book on hallmarks and set about trying to learn more about the little stamps on the back of them and in turn discover how and when they were made. I learned that of these small silver items, one was hallmarked and dated with the year of my christening, whilst another had my name engraved on the handle.

For many years now they have been safely stored in a drawer in my own home, along with other special items connected to the memories of my childhood. The tradition continues and on the christening of my twins they were both given sets of engraved napkin rings, which are also kept safely in the drawer with my own.

The practise of giving gifts when a child is christened is not just a 20th or 21st century tradition. Christening gifts have been recorded as far back as the Christmas story itself, where gifts were given by the Magi who offered gold, frankincense and myrrh.

In Italy, during the 15th century, apostle spoons were considered by the wealthy Venetians and Tuscans to be the ideal baptism present, with the handle of the spoon often bearing the figure of the child's patron saint. It is from this custom that a privileged child is said to be born with a silver spoon in its mouth, as only a wealthy family could afford to commission such a gift.



Victorian Silver Spoon & Pusher

Elaborate rattles in silver incorporating a whistle and bells and a coral or ivory teething stick for the baby to chew on, date back to the early 1700's and were also given as Christening gifts. The teething sticks were not only durable, but also originally believed to ward off evil spirits. Like the Silver Apostle spoons, it is thought by some that this is the source of the expression "Whistles & Bells", as indeed they had all the extras an 18th century mother could want for her child. I have in a box somewhere a Victorian example which is sadly in need of repair and at some stage will be a project for me to undertake. Meanwhile however, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have some excellent examples, some of which you can see if you look at their website.



Royal Selangor pewter teddy christening mug
£45.00



Silver baby bangle with diamond set cross
£59.95



Silver christening baby tankard
£295



Royal Selangor pewter first tooth pot
£35.00



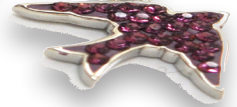
Silver Queens Jubilee hallmarked bookmark with tassel £55



Maman Bebe silver & gold plate swallow necklaces £126.00



Maman Bebe stone set swallow necklaces £196.00



If we move to the slightly more down to earth, in both Great Britain and also the United States, during the late 18th century mugs and their handles were made from cylinders of sheet metal. By the early 19th century small, often lavishly decorated, examples were popularly given as christening presents. These designs became more elaborate, with those of baluster shape on a spreading foot perhaps being the most popular.

In the Victorian era the range of gifts given at a child's christening expanded rapidly. The most popular of these remained a christening cup or silver tankard, although in reality this was an adaptation of an earlier tradition dating back to the drinking vessels of Northern Europe. Fitted christening bowl and spoon sets were frequently engraved depicting familiar nursery rhymes, such as Mother Goose, whilst silver egg cups, spoons, napkin rings and cutlery all appear in greater numbers. These novelty nursery items were produced in large numbers, both in silver and silver gilt, and from time to time we do come across them.

As with many 'traditions' the Victorians still have a strong influence on the range of gifts we give to a child at their christening. Cups and Tankards are still popular, not only in silver but also in pewter. Royal Selangor, the world famous pewterers, have ranges which includes a lovely mug with a teddy. Childs expanding bangles are always popular and I particularly like the ones with a small cross. A new concept that I am quite struck by is from a young designer who has produced her Maman Bebe range. These consist of inter locking items such as a Swallow or a star, one of which is worn by the mother whilst the other by the child.

This year is of course the Queens diamond jubilee and as such British silver companies have produced small silver and silver plated gifts such as bookmarks,

napkin rings and picture frames to commemorate this unique occasion. Each item has the Sovereign's head and this year's date letter and will only be produced for a limited time. Although not originally intended, they are quickly becoming popular as christening gifts.

I can't finish off without mentioning the little model shoes in pewter. I think they are so cute.



So if you have a christening this year there has never been a wider choice of gifts from the traditional to the contemporary designs.

**Sally Thornton,
AA Thornton,
1/7 High Street,
Kettering
Tel: 01536 513014
www.aathorntonjeweller.com**