



Scottish Culture and History



The Quaich

The word Quaich (pronounced qwayCH) is Gaelic for "cup" and is the traditional two handed cup of welcome. It is a shallow drinking cup, usually with two handles and is a uniquely Scottish invention. The Quaich has no apparent connection to any other European drinking vessel. There are some scholars who believe the shape evolved from the use of scallop shells.

Used as a visitor's welcome or farewell cup by proud clan chiefs, worthy merchants or humble crofters, the Quaich has kept its simple but beautiful shape and friendly purpose for more than four hundred years. They were used for whisky or brandy, and in the 19th Century Sir Walter Scott dispensed drams in silver-inlaid Quaichs, but the one he kept for himself was particularly precious to him. In 1745 it had travelled from Edinburgh to Derby with the Scottish Army in Bonnie Prince Charles' canteen. Its bottom was made of glass so that the drinker could keep watch on his companions.

A more romantic Quaich had a double glass bottom in which was kept a lock of hair, so that the owner could drink to his lady love. In 1589 King James VI of Scotland gave Anne of Norway a Quaich as a wedding gift.



A Christening Quaich

The earliest written reference to a Quaich is from 1546 but, by then, they had already been long established in Scottish culture. In a time when people did not drink out of another person's cup, the Quaich was used ceremoniously at weddings to indicate the couple were "quaffing" together and trusted each other enough to drink from the same cup. At christenings, a Quaich was often given to the baby if a boy, or handed around and ceremoniously drunk from to indicate all in the room were trusted friends.

Travellers were known to carry a Quaich with them, hanging it from their belt or saddle and used it to drink from springs, in taverns and inns. The cups were the equivalent of one finger, two fingers, three fingers... along

the way they became a standard measure for whisky, one finger (deep) being the equivalent of a contemporary dram or one eighth of an ounce.

How Were They Made?

The making of these cups was an intricate art by which the Quaich was either turned from the solid or built up with tiny staves. The best Quaichs, considered to be masterpieces, were built up with light and dark wood staves and bound round with withies (strips of willow) or metal bands. The dozen or so staves of alternating woods such as plane-tree and laburnum were coopered together and also 'feathered' into each other; this was a technique in which small slivers of wood were split away from the sides of the staves and slotted into equivalent parings cut in the



A wooden Quaich

opposite direction. A pair of handles, called "lugs", extended horizontally from the rim and these were often covered with silver. The centre of the bowl was usually decorated with a silver coin or an engraved disc or 'print', with coat-of-arms, initials, motto or familiar phrase such as a toast. The disc served the function of masking and sealing the centre of the bowl where the points of the staves met. By the 17th century they were wrought principally of pewter.

The lugs were sometimes covered with silver, providing a place for initials. It was a passion in 17th century Scotland to place ones initials everywhere: on ones silverware, furniture, the lintel, ceiling, and panelling of ones house, and of course on ones Quaich.

The Quaich Moves Up-Market

Quaichs began to be made in metal, whether pewter or silver and gold, in the late seventeenth century. Silver Quaichs for example are first mentioned in the 1660s. When silversmiths began to make Quaichs, they carefully and deliberately engraved radiating lines on the bowl in imitation of the staves of wooden Quaichs and horizontal rings to represent the withy bindings. They also copied the lug handles in every respect.



Gold and Silver Quaich

Quaich making was a highly regarded profession in 17th century Scotland. Quaich makers probably made all sorts of wooden eating and drinking vessels, but took the name of their profession from their best work, much as workers in silver and gold called themselves goldsmiths.

As with all things, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Quaichs became so highly regarded that the upper-crust just had to have them made from precious metals. This posed something of a problem, since wooden Quaichs are solid and quite thick at the bottom — it would be a bit difficult for a fine Scottish lady to sip delicately from a solid silver ale Quaich the weight of a small boulder. The answer was to make the Quaich of sheet-silver, so that the sides were of constant thickness. This allowed metal Quaichs to imitate the outer form of

wooden Quaichs, but made the inner cavity much deeper and more bowl-like.

Modern Quaichs are frequently made of either pewter, silver, or silver and gold and are frequently highly decorated as in the example above and right.

The very fine silver example, at right, with stag head handles has a price in 2005 of \$700.00.



The Quaich in Scottish Culture

The Quaich has a rather unique history and is surrounded by myth and mystique. In ancient time, during the Celtic period, it is believed that the Druids filled the Quaich with blood from the heart of sacrificed humans.

In Kilmuir, there is a wooden Quaich that was formerly used as a baptismal font, thus the Quaich has become a traditional baptismal or christening gift, or even births, to drink the health of a bairn (child) and to share the love and celebration of that new life.

It has a special place in the heart of all who know something of its history and is a prized possession of many people who have an association with Scotland. It will always be remembered in its traditional use as a visitor's welcome or farewell cup.