

Alexander Crichton ~ Through the Drinking Glass

Alexander Crichton is a shadowy figure, whose place and date of birth or death has proved impossible to trace. He seems to have had strong Scottish connections, the earliest surviving item from his workshop is a condiment set, retailed by Hamilton Crichton & Co, Goldsmiths of 41 George Street, Edinburgh but made in London 1873/4.¹ The large pair of shields made by Alexander Crichton to the designs of Sir Noel Paton, whom Ruskin called “the genius of Edinburgh” were exhibited in the Edinburgh Exhibition of 1886 by J Crichton & Co., 47 George Street, Edinburgh.² This close relationship, for purposes of sale or exhibition, with the firm of Crichton in Edinburgh would suggest a family connection. Further, it should be borne in mind that the largest collection of Crichton claret jugs belonged to the descendants of the Dukes of Hamilton at Brodick Castle, now a property administered by the National Trust for Scotland, on the Isle of Arran.³

Crichton’s first major work so far located is a pair of parcel gilt shields of 1878 based on the story from Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Nights Dream” bearing many similarities to the two great paintings by Sir Joseph Noel Paton, now in the National Gallery of Scotland, “The Quarrel” and “The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania.” The Shields were, according to a contemporary report⁴ constructed from Paton designs. Patons depiction of fairies is not surprising, for a belief in fairies was very much alive and well at this date in Scotland.⁵ The high standard of casting, embossing and chasing show why Crichton won a prize of twenty five pounds from the Goldsmiths Company at the Society of Arts Exhibition in 1870 for a cup with repousse decoration.⁶

Crichton produced some of the finest whimsical silver in the repertoire of the English silversmith, seemingly inspired by the drawings of Sir John Tenniel for Lewis Carroll’s (Dodgson) “Alice in Wonderland” (1865) and “Alice Through the Looking Glass”(1872). His connection with Sir John Tenniel may have resulted from a friendship between Tenniel and Paton dating as far back as 1845 when they both won prizes in the competition to decorate Westminster Hall for the New Houses of Parliament.⁷ Charles Dodgson, the eccentric Oxford Mathematics Professor commissioned Tenniel to illustrate “Alice in Wonderland” but turned to Paton who had met with success illustrating Kingsleys “Water Babies” (1863) to illustrate “Through the Looking Glass” in 1872, however Paton declined.⁸

The wild imagination of Dodgson stretched Tenniel’s powers of illustration to the limit forcing him to create some of the greatest comic characters of all time. To turn these ideas of romance, fairyland and myth from the pencil and paint brush into three dimensional practical objects was Crichton’s greatest triumph.

The walrus, crocodile,⁹ cockatoo, dodo, fish, squirrels, seals, ducks, budgerigars, owls and a penguin are not the subject matter of a Bogdani painting, but form a series of silver mounted glass claret jugs made by Crichton between 1881 and 1882. Thirty four different subjects have so far been located (see table) and no doubt more will surface with the passage of time. When the bodies are of glass they are plain, etched, carved, coloured or painted and are naturally fragile, possibly resulting in a certain rate of destruction. Purchasers should be aware of head only survivors, the silver feet having been disposed of when new glass bodies were made. In this respect the Registered Designs are relevant.

Crichton registered his mark at Goldsmiths Hall in November 1872 giving his working address in London as 47 Great Russell Street, continually on the move and impossible to trace from the Census he settled at 45 Rathbone Place, Oxford Street, in partnership with Charles John Curry in 1880 trading as Crichton and Curry. They were listed as designers, modellers and silversmiths and like many in the luxury goods business they did not survive the severe recession of the early 1880’s. The partnership was dissolved by October 1884 and Crichton was declared bankrupt in December 1886 with unsecured creditors owed £1,846. He moved to

Sheffield applying for a discharge from bankruptcy in 1899.¹⁰

The Curry of the partnership, Charles John, was listed with his family in the 1871 census at 21 Great Sutton Street as a modeller, aged 23, with his brother William Frederic, aged 21, traveller for silversmiths. Their father John, aged 56 was a silver caster, and the eldest brother Henry William Curry, aged 25 ran the firm as the working head of the family. They employed eight men and four boys and were therefore in a substantial way of business.¹¹ The carpenter of 1886 bears the makers mark H.W. Curry allowing us to presume that with the demise of the partnership, Charles had returned to his family business taking with him some of the Crichton/Curry partnership designs.

Crichton and Curry registered many of their claret jug designs at the Patents Office,¹² an exception being the squirrel of which two examples survive, one from the collection of Her Late Majesty the Queen Mother, the other with a wooden handle was sold in 1975 at Sotheby's Belgravia.¹³

The main retailer of their work was Henry Lewis of 172 New Bond Street, who commenced business as a retail jeweller in 1876 and with various partners continued until bankrupt in 1898, the creditors being a who's who of the London Silver Trade.¹⁴

Exceptions to the norm are a drake jug of 1892 bearing the marks of Frederic Elkington taken from the Crichton moulds and a cockatoo with crest down bearing the over stamped mark of William Leuchars 1881. The difference in makers mark is because Leuchars was a dressing case and novelty dealer with a retail shop in London. He would have purchased the jug, protected by its Patent from Crichton and sold it as his own, after assaying at the Goldsmiths Hall, thereby preventing others going directly to the maker. Leuchars was a leading London retailer of the period. Two drake jugs of 1882 by Alexander Crichton are illustrated, they bear the Patent Registration design number as registered to Crichton in 1881. The head of one is by Crichton and the body by Leuchars.

One of Crichton's final artistic commissions before bankruptcy was for the leading Victorian sculptor Sir Joseph Boehm who designed a magnificent table lighter in the form of a bear at the honeypot as a gift to the Royal Academy in 1883. He chose as his silversmith, none other than Alexander Crichton whose standards of modelling and execution have rarely been exceeded.

¹ Sotheby's Belgravia, 21/7/76 Lot 649

² Watchmaker Jeweller & Silversmith, Trade Journal, September 1886, page 65

³ The Dodo, a family of 4 Walrus and a Fish, all retailed by H. Lewis but marked by Alexander Crichton

⁴ Watchmaker Jeweller & Silversmith, Trade Journal, September 1886, page 65

⁵ Scottish Painters at Home and Abroad 1200-1900, David and Francina Irwin, page 290

⁶ Art Journal, 1870, page 108

⁷ The Directory of British Book Illustrator and Caricaturists 1800 – 1914, Simon Houfe, Paton & Tenniel

⁸ Houfe, page 411

⁹ Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, Chapter II, Pool of Tears

¹⁰ Culme, John, The Directory of Gold & Silversmiths Jewellers & Allied Traders, 1838 – 1914, Crichton page 102

¹¹ 1871 Census RG 10/381, page 83 - 87

¹² Patented Designs held in the Public Records at Kew

Alexander Crichton	22186	24 March 1869	Possibly the 1870 Exhibition Cup
Alexander Crichton	333566	1879, page 715	
Crichton and Curry	370401	22 Sept 1881	
Crichton and Curry	370786	1 Oct 1881	
Crichton and Curry	370787	1 Oct 1881	

Crichton and Curry	367237	22 July 1881
Crichton and Curry	374238	9 Dec 1881`
Crichton and Curry	379943	26 April 1882
Crichton and Curry	379944	26 April 1882
Crichton and Curry	382580	22 June 1882
Crichton and Curry	389387	1882, page 1406
Crichton and Curry	391554	16 Dec 1882
Crichton and Curry	391622	19 Dec 1882

The Designs Act of 1842 gave 3 years protection to the proprietors of ornamental designs made of metal wood or glass. After this any designer could use the model.

¹³ Sotheby's Belgravia, 3/11/1977, Lot 161

¹⁴ Culme J. The Directory of Gold and Silversmiths, page 293, 1838 – 1914 an invaluable source of material for this article.

List of items by Alexander Crichton

Subjects	Year	Makers Mark	Retailer if known	P.O.D.R. or Regn Mark & Design No where found	Location
Animal Claret Jugs					
1 - Fish with handle	1881	A.C.	H. Lewis 172 New Bond St	18 Feb 1882	National Trust for Scotland / Brodick
2 - Fish, handle missing	1881	A.C.		As above	J B Hawkins Antiques
3 - Dodo	1881	A.C.		1 Feb 1882	National Trust for Scotland / Brodick
4 - Cockatoo jug, crest down	1881	W.L. over A.C.		Design no 391622 Page 1871 22 Dec 1882	J B Hawkins Antiques
5 & 6 - Cockatoos, crest up Pepper & salt	1881	A.C.		Design no 374238 Page 1658 9 Dec 1881	J B Hawkins Antiques
7 - Cockatoo, crest down Liqueur bottle	1881	A.C.		Design no 391622 Page 1871 19 Dec 1882	J B Hawkins Antiques
8 - Owl	1881	A.C.		Design no 367237 Page no 233 22 July 1881	Hancocks Jewellers London
9 - Owl	1881	A.C.		22 July 1881	Private Collection
10 - Otter	1882	A.C.	H Lewis 172 New Bond St	7 March 1882	J B Hawkins Antiques
11 - Owl pepperette	1882	A.C.		28 April 1882 similar design no 379943 page no 11488 Mustard Pot	J B Hawkins Antiques
12 - Seal, flipper inwards	1882	A.C.	H Lewis 172 New Bond St	22 Sept 1882	National Trust for Scotland / Brodick
13 - Female Seal	1882	A.C.	H Lewis 172 New Bond St	22 Sept 1881	National Trust for Scotland / Brodick
14 - Male Walrus, tail inwards	1882	A.C.	H Lewis 172 New Bond St	22 Sept 1881 Design no 370401 Page no 841	National Trust for Scotland / Brodick
15 - Female Walrus, tail outwards	1882	A.C.	H Lewis 172 New Bond St	22 Sept 1881	National Trust for Scotland / Brodick

List of items by Alexander Crichton

Subjects	Year	Makers Mark	Retailer if known	P.O.D.R. or Regn Mark & Design No where found	Location
Animal Claret Jugs					
16 - Male Walrus,	1882	A.C.		22 Sept 1881	J B Hawkins Antiques
17 - Male Walrus	1882	A.C.		22 Sept 1881	Private Collection Christies 27/4/83
18 - Squirrel, silver tail handle	1882	A.C.			Her Late Majesty The Queen Mother
19 - Squirrel wooden tail handle	1882	A.C.			Sothebys Belgravia 3 Nov 1977, Lot 161
20 - Duck	1882	A.C.		1 Oct 1882 Design no 370786 Page 986	J B Hawkins Antiques
21 - Drake	1882	A.C.		1 Oct 1881 design no 370787 page 986	J B Hawkins Antiques
21A – Drake	1882	W.L.			J B Hawkins Antiques
22 - Cockatoo crest down	1882	A.C.		22 Dec 1882	J B Hawkins Antiques
23 - Grebe scent bottle	1882	A.C.		26 April 1882	J B Hawkins Antiques
24 & 25 - Pair Budgerigar salts	1882	A.C.		23 June 1882 Design no 382580	J B Hawkins Antiques
26, 27 & 28 - Three Budgerigar scents	1882	A.C.		23 June 1882	J B Hawkins Antiques
29 - Crocodile	1882	A.C.		28 Dec 1882	Private Collection Replaced glass Lost feet
30 - Crocodile	1882	A.C.		28 Dec 1882	J B Hawkins Antiques With original feet
31 - Cockatoo jug, crest up	1882	A.C.		9 th Dec 1881 Design No 374238	J B Hawkins Antiques

List of items by Alexander Crichton

Subjects other than Claret Jugs	Year	Makers Mark	Retailer if known	P.O.D.R. or Regn Mark & Design No where found	Location
32 – Pair of parakeet liqueur bottles	1882	A.C.		16 Dec 1882 Design no 391554	Hudith Bannister Records C J Vander J B Hawkins Antiques
33 – Penguin perfume bottle	1882	A.C.			J B Hawkins Antiques
34 - Frosted Condiment Set	1873/ 74	A.C.		Labelled on box, Hamilton Crichton & Co 41 George St, Edinburgh	Sotheby's Belgravia 2217/76 Lot 649
35 - Pottery Doulton Jug	1876	A.C.		London Hallmarks	Hollis & Hollis
36 - 3 piece tea service	1878	A.C.		Japanese Art Nouveau	S.B. 12/11/70 Lot 281
37 - Parcel gilt pair of Shields	1878	A.C.		Designed by Sir Noel Paton, Exhibited Edinburgh 1886 435 oz	JB Hawkins Antiques
38 - Hand mirror	1879	Design only known		Design no 333566 Page 715	Public Record Office
39 - Canopic vase scent or muffineer	1882	Design only known		Design no 389387 Page 1406	Public Record Office
40 - Pair silver gilt spoons Bottom & Titania	1882	A.C.		Partridge Exhibition	1992
41 - Pair Frog peppers	1882	A.C.			Aspreys Catalogue 1999
42 - Single Frog	1882	A.C.		London Hallmarks	J B Hawkins Antiques
43 - Bear at the Honeypot, table lighter	1883	A.C.		Designed by JE Boehm Esq R.A.	Royal Academy Burlington House Presentations Book
44 – Walrus & Carpenter	1881 1886	WL HWC			Purchased C.J. Vander for Sanders Collection



1. Fish with silver handle
London 1881.

The fish bears the retailers mark H Lewis, 172 New Bond Street on one fin but Alexander Crichton's makers marks with Patented Design Registration on the other.



2. Fish, London 1881.



3. The Hamilton / Brodick Dodo 1881.

Closely modelled on the Tenniel drawing with carved glass body.



Tenniel drawing from Alice in Wonderland.

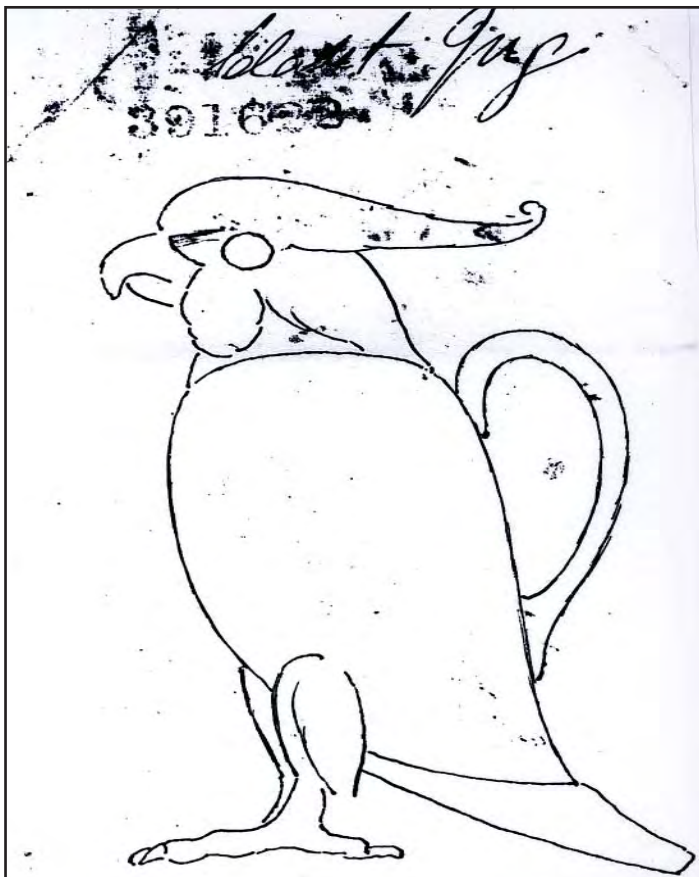
"They all crowded around her once more, while the Dodo solemnly presented the thimble, saying, We beg your acceptance of this elegant thimble: and, when it had finished this short speech, they all cheered."



4. Cockatoo claret jug, crest down, 1881.

One of a pair of claret jugs crest up and crest down, presumably for red and white wine.

"Indeed she (Alice) had quite a long argument with the Lory who at last turned sulky and would only say, I am older than you and must know better."

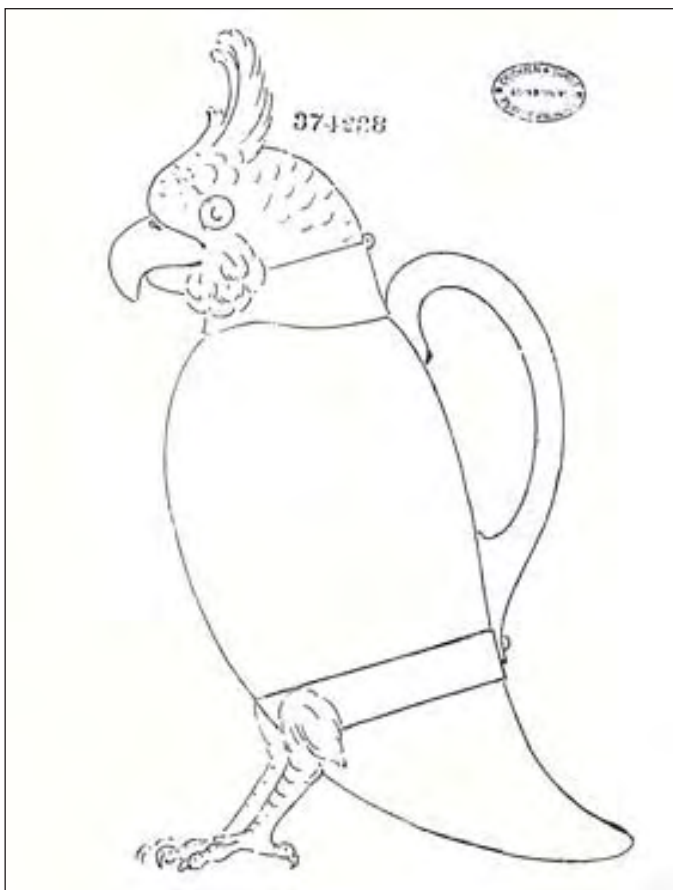


Crichton and Curry, Cockatoo claret jug Patented Design 391622 19 Dec 1882.



5 & 6. Left & right. Cockatoo peppers, crest up 1881

7. Middle. Cockatoo mustard pot 1881. There are over 60 species of Lory including the cockatoo family. Australia was particularly rich at this time and with its native cockatoos and budgerigars an obvious target market for the partnership.



Claret Jug, Patent no. 374238, 9th Dec, 1881

Crichton & Curry registered three cockatoo designs 374238, 9th Dec 1881, 391554 cockatoo liqueur bottle 16 Dec 1882 and 391622 19 Dec 1882 for a cockatoo claret jug which is the same cockatoo but with the crest down. Crichton probably had a design problem with the glass tail/wings and has modified the design to an all silver base.



8. Owl 1881

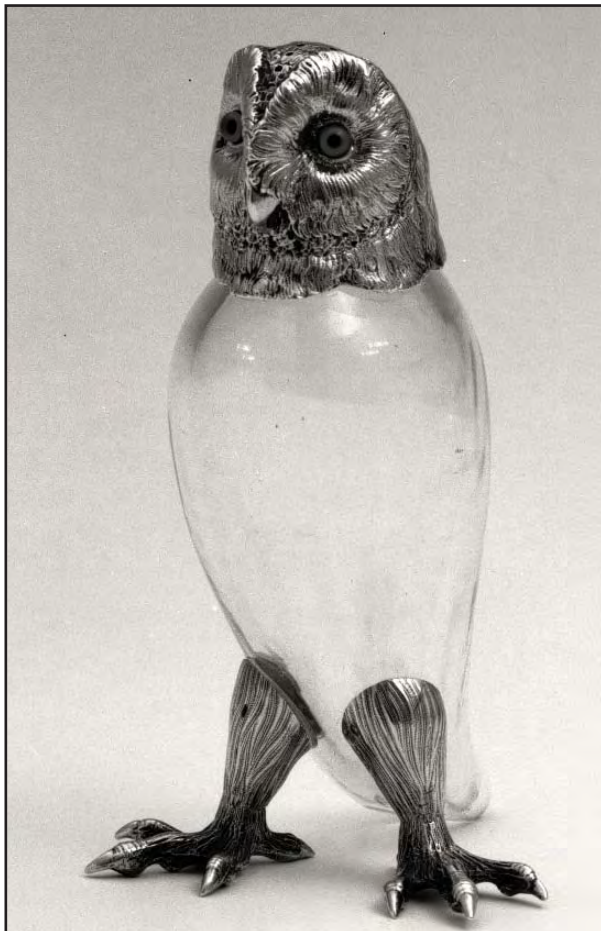


Patent no. 367237,
Design Registered 22 July 1881

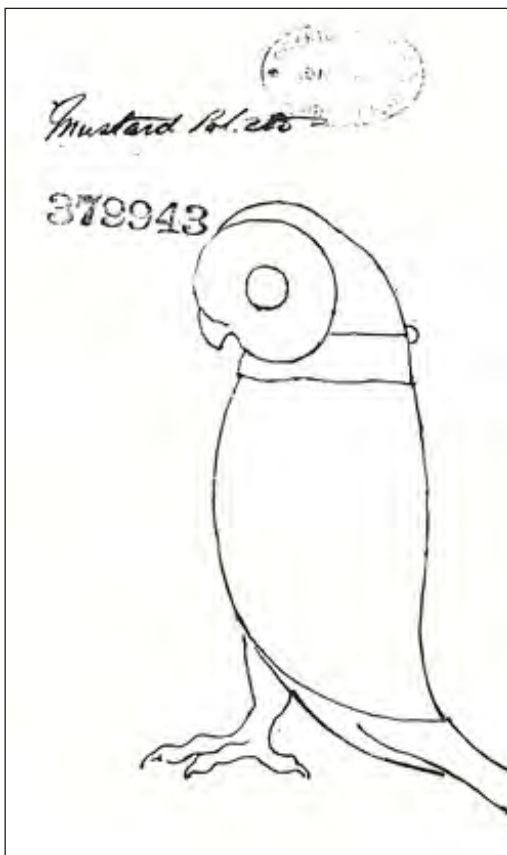


10. Otter 1882

This otter has a superb frosted glass body to simulate the animals coat. I have owned another example with a solid raised silver body.



11. An Owl pepper by Alexander Crichton, London 1882 based on the mustard pot patent no 379943.



Crichton and Curry Owl mustard pot. Registered Design No 379943, 26 April 1882.



12. Female Seal, flippers inwards 1882.

There are two female seals at Brodick, they are smaller in size to the single Bull Seal.



13. Large male Seal 1882.

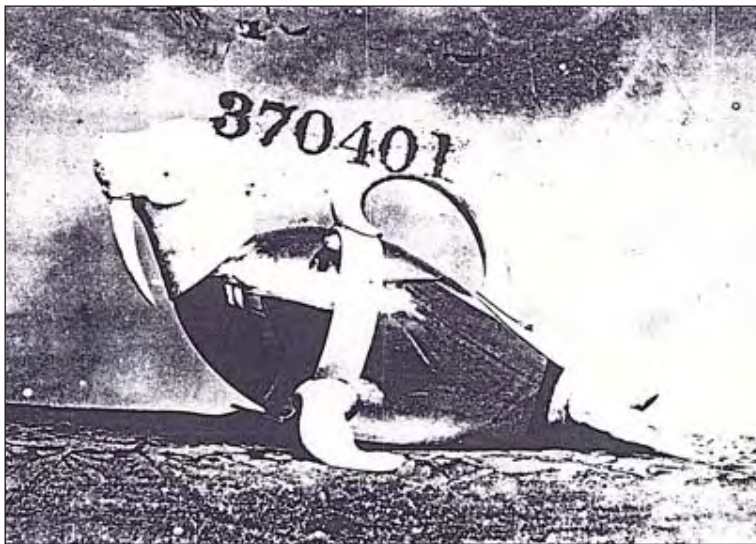


A family gathering of Seals and a male Walrus. Hamilton National Trust Collection, Brodick.



17. Walrus, male with flat tail, 1881

This walrus is hallmarked by William Leuchars but was almost certainly made by Alexander Crichton. It should be noted the Leuchars had the design patent since 18 Oct 1872 by 1882 they must have come to an agreement over the use of this design.



This is the Crichton and Curry Design Patent 370, 401, page 841 of 22 Sept 1881 for the Brodick male Walrus, No 18.



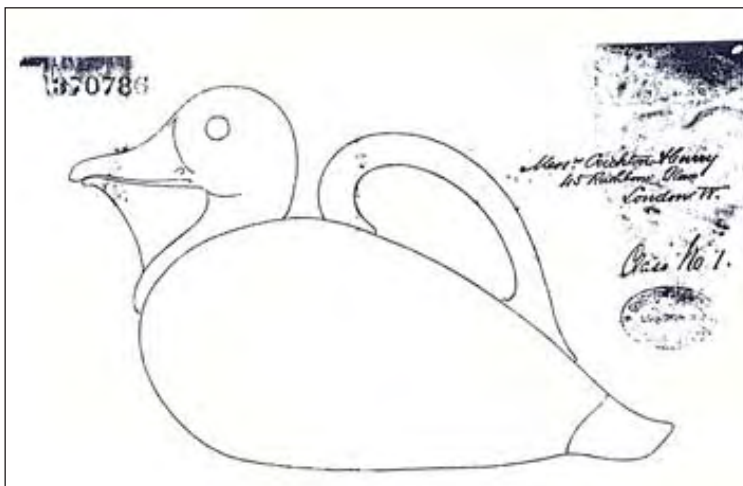
18. Squirrel 1882, silver tail handle.

This design does not seem to have been registered. Two examples have so far been located, this one in the Royal Collection and another, plate 20 with a wooden handle. Both have superb carved coloured glass bodies.



20. Duck 1882

The duck and the drake presumably for red and white wine had their designs registered at the same time and when found as a pair as with the Cockatoos, Walrus and Seals they must be considered as the ultimate in English silver mounted claret jugs.



Crichton and Curry original Patented Design Registration No. 370786, 1-Oct-1881

It is interesting to compare this Patented Design with that as executed. The partners have removed the strengthener below the beak, thereby improving the concept.



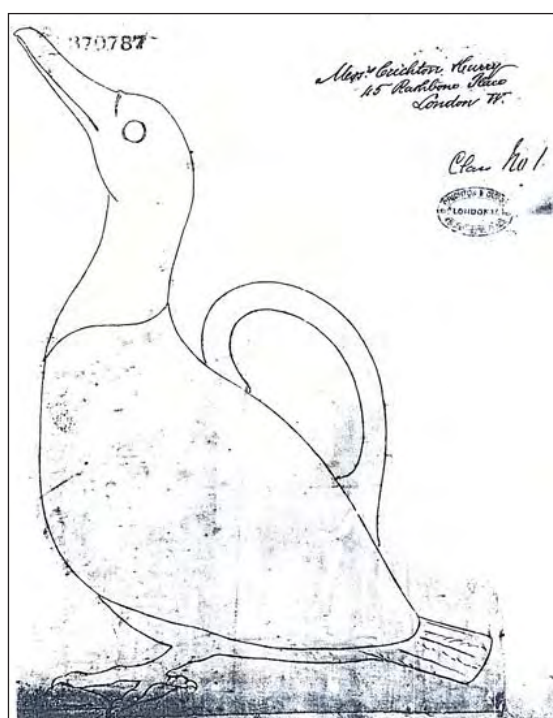
21A

21

These jugs were made by Alexander Crichton in London in 1882 and bear his Patent Registration Marks number 370787 as registered by Alexander Crichton in 1881.

The monogrammed jug (LHS) bears the retailers mark of William Leuchars to the body but Crichton to the head and the jug with a cut glass body (RHS) with wings bears the makers mark of Alexander Crichton.

The difference in makers mark is because Leuchars was a dressing case and novelty dealer with a retail shop in London. He would have purchased the jug, protected by its Patent from Crichton and sold it as his own, after assaying at the Goldsmiths Hall, this protected his source preventing others going directly to the maker.



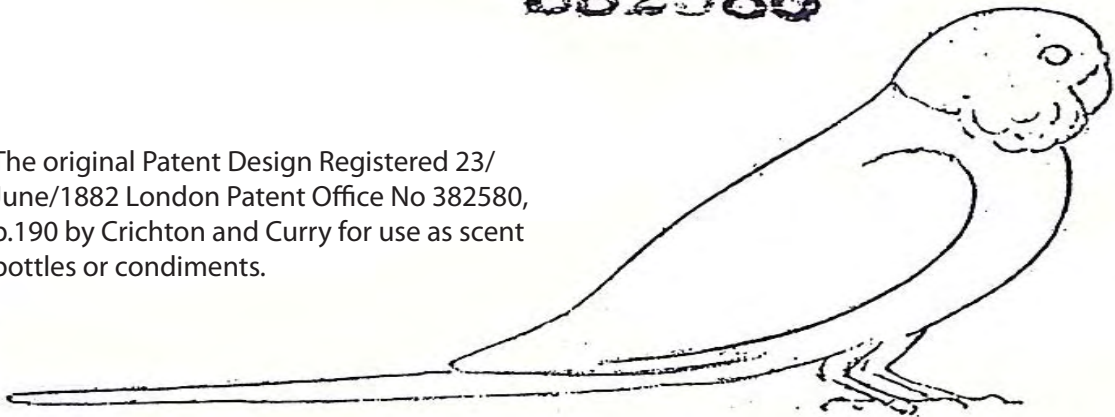
23. Crichton and Curry original Patented Design Registration No: 370787, 1-Oct- 1881.



24 & 25 Salt & pepper containers with detachable heads. All five are silver mounted on original carved glass bodies. Alexander Crichton 1882.

382580

The original Patent Design Registered 23/
June/1882 London Patent Office No 382580,
p.190 by Crichton and Curry for use as scent
bottles or condiments.



26, 27 & 28. Three scent bottles



30. Crocodile 1882

"How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale!

How cheerfully he seems to grin
How neatly spreads his claws
And welcomes little fishes in
With gently smiling jaws!"

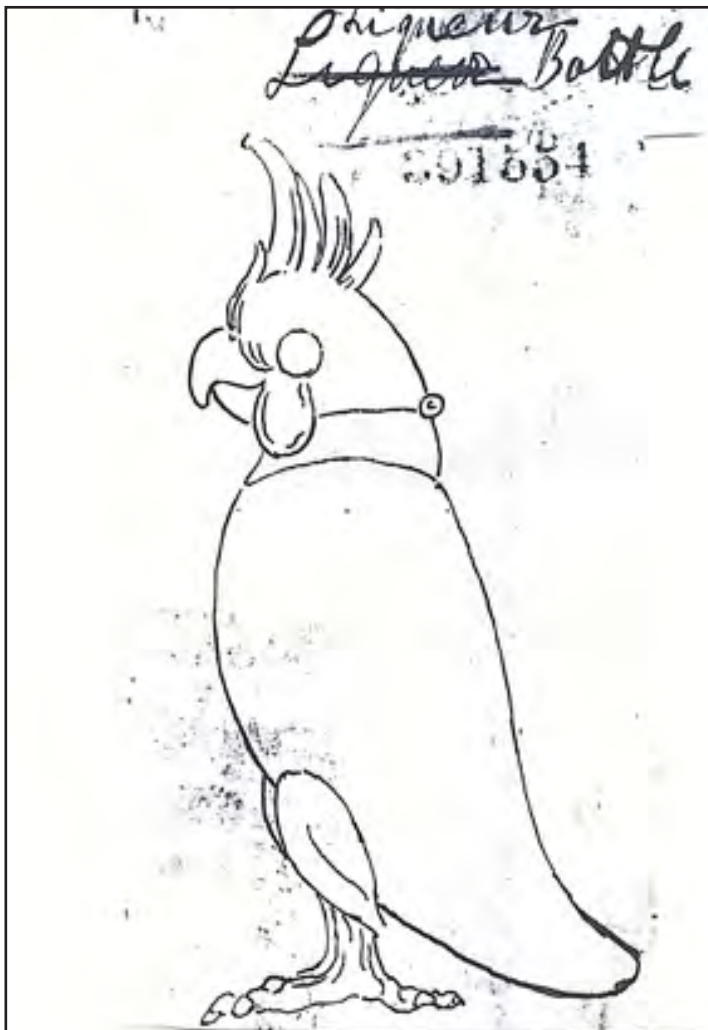


31. Cockatoo Jug 1882

A superb painted and enameled glass body. A similar jug would appear to be illustrated in the Burdett - Coutts photographic inventory of her silver bound in full red morocco formerly in the collection of J B Hawkins Antiques and the model is the companion to Plate 4, crest down.



32. Pair of liqueur bottles, Alexander Crichton 1882.



Crichton and Curry Registered Design 391554, 16 Dec 1882.



33. A silver gilt perfume bottle with carved glass body in the form of a Penguin by Alexander Crichton, London 1882.



A composite group of claret jugs. Part of a collection of 26 Crichton jugs formed by J B Hawkins Antiques and sold at the Olympia Antique Dealers Fair, London 1999.



37. One of a pair of parcel gilt shields made in London by Alexander Crichton in 1878 to a design by Sir Noel Paton and exhibited in Edinburgh in 1886.



42. Single frog pepper, 1882
"I speaks English, doesn't I?" the frog went on "Or are you deaf?"

"The Walrus and the Carpenter were walking close at hand"



44. Walrus 1881 by Crichton & Carpenter 1886 maker H.W. Curry, London silversmith and brother of Charles John Curry, Crichtons former partner.

This pair provide both clues and a problem. The late Judith Bannister, whose photographic silver index I purchased, has this illustration annotated as "With registration on walrus 22 Sept 1878" This may suggest that Leuchars was the instigator of the concept of using the Tenniel drawings for inspiration, an idea later taken up by Crichton and Curry.



A scent flask by H.W. Curry, London 1885, 3 1/2" high.

With the bankruptcy and departure of Crichton from the partnership Curry as evidenced by this scent flask may have continued within his family business. The modelling and execution are not up to the standard of the previous partners joint workshop.