



Three single vine leaves MADEIRA PORT SHERRY 1830-1845. Next to them PORT H GIN and CLARET 1780-1800 BRANDY probably 1780-1840. Victorian MADEIRA label 1850-60 BUCELLUS 1780-1810 PORT 1750-1770 SHRUB probably between 1780 and 1840. All London.

## Silver Decanter Labels

by Zita Thornton



Regency cast silver shell for the Greek wine MENA. Benjamin Smith II 1807 London.



Victorian BURDEOS label with squirrel, about 1850, London.



Two Regency labels with the popular grapes and vine leaves motifs. LISBON by Wardell & Kempson, Birmingham 1819 SAUTERNE W. K. Reid London 1826.



Early labels 1750-1756, London. CYPRUS and PAJARETTE by John Harvey. SEIGES Margaret Binley. QUINTA DE PORTA Sandylands Drinkwater. Others unknown.

Decanter labels, or bottle tickets as they were originally called, were an English invention of the 1730s. They were hung around the necks of clear glass decanters which were becoming increasingly fashionable on high class dining tables.

Some labels were created specifically for a single family or for royalty, and bear an armorial crest. Although they were made in a variety of materials including enamels, Sheffield plate, mother of pearl, porcelain and tortoiseshell, the majority were made in silver and it is these that are most widely available and collected today.

More than 500 silversmiths have been recorded as including decanter labels amongst their wares. Some silversmiths, such as Sandylands Drinkwater and Margaret Binley made them their speciality. Others included them amongst their general range of silver items. They have been recorded at all the English assay centres, provincial, as well as London, supplying the up and coming middle classes and gentry homes in the region. The fashion spread to Scotland and Ireland, who produced their own distinctive designs. The British took them overseas to India, China and the rest of Europe, whilst North American, South African and Australian silversmiths copied the English designs themselves.

The first silver labels from about 1735 to 1770 reflected the contemporary Rococo taste. With scrolled edges they included festoons and cherubs gathering grapes or holding wine bottles. However, there were also plainer rectangular or crescent shaped examples with chasing which included vine leaves, a recurring theme for decanter labels. During the neo-classical era until the end of the eighteenth century, demand for decanter labels was at its highest. Silversmiths gave them more attention and importance, introducing new elegant designs, with the emphasis on a decorative border around simple rectangular, oval or crescent shapes. The new process of die stamping produced finer detail more easily and economically.

Regency labels in the first part of the nineteenth century reflected the sumptuous ornate taste of the Prince Regent. Made by important silversmiths such as Paul Storr and Benjamin Smith, as well as others who followed their fashion, there was a return to the earlier methods of casting and hand raising. From the 1820s a single vine leaf became popular and was used for spirits as well as wine, in matching sets.

Victorian labels followed the elaborate and eclectic fashions of the time and initial letters were used too. However, the introduction of labelled, single bottles of wine around 1860, lessened the necessity for labels which hung around decanters. They were still used in dining rooms where the wine had been decanted into cut glass decanters as a sign of fashion and elegance, but demand lessened and most labels from this time show the contents of spirit and fortified wines instead.

Silver labels continued to be made in the twentieth century and can be found in art nouveau and art deco styles. More recent commemorative labels can be found as special commissions, for instance from British Airways in 1986, given to passengers on Concorde and one for the Queen's Jubilee in 1977 engraved VERMOUTH.

The names inscribed on the decanter labels are of interest in themselves and shed light on the drinking habits of the times. For instance, it shows how wine was imported from South Africa and Europe in the eighteenth century, including Mena, which was a Greek wine and Terra Forte from the slopes of Mount Etna. However, labels were also made for home produced country wines such as cowslip and elder. Some wines are hard to identify as they no longer exist under that name. Common tipples were port, sherry, claret and Madeira, although there were many different spellings of the latter including Medira and Medeiry.

Slang names for spirits also feature on decanter labels, such as Thistle Juice for whisky and Cream of the Valley for gin. Around 3,000 different names have been found on decanter labels including the well known and the obscure.

A book produced by the *Wine Label Circle* draws on the interest and expertise of its members to explore the history and development of wine labels and looks at the great collections. It gives details of styles, makers and places of production spanning the period from 1730-to the present day.

*Wine Labels: A Worldwide History*. Edited by John Salter. Published by Antique Collector's Club, £85, hardback.

The *Wine Label Circle* has been meeting regularly for fifty years to swap information, share recent finds, view collections and learn more about the subject of decanter labels. There are two meetings a year, one in London and the other elsewhere. Past meetings have included trips to Oxford to view the collection of decanter labels at the Ashmolean Museum and to Newcastle to see local labels there. Membership costs £20 which includes the circle's journal. Details from George Gillham 63 Russell Court, Woburn Place, London WC1H 0LW.



Regency cast labels: COTE ROTI and HERMITAGE Benjamin Smith 1807, BURGUNDY Charles Rawlings c1820, HOCK Philip Rundel 1820.



Silver labels for SHERRY and MADEIRA with crest William, Michael and Stanley Barnard 1897 and SHERRY electroplate example with crest c1830.



Labels. London 1750 PORT and CLARET John Harvey, SAUTERNE Lewis Hamon.

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A collection of labels for Punch. Top left: Sandylands Drinkwater 1750. Top right: Henry Chawner 1791. Centre: Typical Rococo label by Sandylands Drinkwater with cherubs collecting grapes 1750 above an unrecorded example probably of the same date. Bottom left: Joseph Willmore Birmingham 1830. Bottom centre: Thomas Phipps & Edward Robinson 1799. Bottom left: Joseph Willmore Birmingham 1820. The initial 'P' at the bottom shows Mr Punch and Toby dog, but as this is one of a series which includes 'M' and an 'S' it was probably not for punch but for Port. Charles Rawlings and William Summers 1846.

## Market Information

The best place to find decanter labels is at auctions and through dealers who trade at the larger fairs. They include the following, regularly to be found at the Olympia fairs:

- Hannah Antiques Tel: 01844 351935
- J H Bourdon-Smith Ltd. Tel: 020 7839 4714.
- Steppes Hill Farm Antiques. Tel: 01795 842205.
- Mary Cooke Antiques Ltd. Tel: 020 8876 5777.
- The Spring fair at Olympia is 2nd-7th March 2004.
- Bonhams regularly have a good range of decanter labels in their silver and vertu sales. They include valuable rarities and those from well known makers as well as mixed lots of more common labels. The next sale takes place at Knightsbridge on 11th March and 15th April 2004
- On the Internet Hayward and Stott Ltd trade at [www.scottishsilver.com](http://www.scottishsilver.com)
- The most valuable silver decanter labels are armorial examples. An unusual shape or name, or those from well known makers are very desirable. The least valuable are English Victorian initials and the single vine leaf, which were made in greater quantities.

## Recent prices

From Hayward and Stott Ltd:

- Pair labels inscribed GIN and SHERRY, London 1904. £195
- Two Birmingham labels 1923/30 for sloe gin and orange. £115
- George III Port label 1810. £95
- London sherry label, 1794. £110
- Victorian Scottish silver initial 'S' 1845 by Alexander Wigful. £245
- Pair Edinburgh square labels with initial 'P' and 'M' 1815. £375
- Simple rectangular madeira wine label on ring 1839. £175

At Bonhams including buyers premium:

- Pair of George III Irish labels for whiskey and Port, Dublin 1785 by Benjamin Taitt. £1,076
- Rare and unusual set of 3 wine labels in sunflower form incised MOUNTAIN, PORT, CLARET by Richard Morton & Co Sheffield 1786. £1,173
- Pair of George III labels inscribed SHERRY and WHITE. £180
- Pair spirit labels, embossed cherub heads and fruiting vines, 'Brandy' 'Whiskey', an early Victorian wine label with gadrooned shell and acanthus edge, London 1837 and a pair of oval salts. £65
- Sandylands Drinkwater plain escutcheon sherry label 1745 est. value £120-£140