

Stylish Stainless Steel

by Andrew Tavroges



1. Super Avon coffee-pot designed by Robert Welch for Old Hall. £120-180

It is 1928 and Mr & Mrs Wiggin are discussing their upcoming silver wedding anniversary. Mrs Wiggin, being ahead of her time, wanted something more practical than silver. Luckily for us her husband ran the family firm of J & J Wiggin, the largest manufacturer of bathroom fittings at the time. The result was a stainless steel toaster, the first domestic product to be made from the metal that had been discovered in 1913 at Brown and Firth research laboratory in Sheffield.

J & J Wiggin had operated from an old Salvation Army hall known locally as 'The Old Hall'. Old Hall Staybrite stainless steel was the result and the first items were sold as Ye Olde Hall, later Olde Hall, and gradually the range increased with the first teapot arriving in 1930.



2. Selection of Old Hall toasters. £10-30 each depending on rarity.

Firth Staybrite and Olde Hall led the way, the latter becoming Old Hall in 1960. Old Hall was taken over by Oneida in 1981 and was closed in 1984. During that time many of the designs were by members of the Wiggin family but Harold Stabler designed at least one tea-set for the firm in the 1930s. Over the years over 70 different toasters were made but remember that most would be made in two sizes and some would be variations on a theme. (See fig.2).



3. Alveston teapot designed by Robert Welch for Old Hall. Part of 4 piece tea set. £250-350.

The most collectable pieces of Old Hall apart from rarities from the early years are those designed by Robert Welch. Robert Welch was made consultant designer in 1955. His most commonly found designs are dishes, toasters and condiment sets. Most are marked 'designed by R. Welch' as well as the company mark. Those items that were difficult and thus more expensive to produce cost a lot when new and are therefore quite rare today. Items illustrated such as the Alveston teapot (see fig.3), the Super Avon coffee pot (fig.1) and the fabulous nut crackers (fig.4) are the main things collectors are looking for along with boxed cutlery.



4. Nutcrackers designed by Robert Welch for Old Hall. £70-100.



5. Boxed cutlery all designed by Robert Welch for Old Hall. £30-50 each set.

Although Old Hall is the main focus for collectors, there are other British firms and designers to look out for. Viners employed the eminent silversmith Gerald Benney whose Studio Cutlery is very stylish and beautifully made. Stuart Devlin designed a small range of objects such as champagne goblets and small vases, also for Viners, whilst the Marquis of Queensberry contributed a good looking tea-set and a few other pieces. The other major producer was Chichester who made some good quality modern designs, but unlike the best Viners and Old Hall, they are yet to be collectable.



6. Condiment sets designed by Pierre Forsell, Gerald Benney and Robert Welch. £25-40 for Gerald Benney set. £15-25 others.

Illustrated also (fig.12) is one of the most beautiful designs ever produced in stainless steel, a fruit bowl by Satinsteel of London. This is a bit of a mystery piece. Satinsteel produced a few other articles such as toasters and small dishes but nothing else I have seen comes close to this great design. These bowls are truly undervalued at £20 - £30, but unless somebody identifies the designer they will probably stay at this level.



7. Angora toaster £15-25. Calderoni butterdish. £20-40.

It is amazing how many good but very small makers there were in the 1960s, firms such as Angora and Thomas Nutbrown turn up occasionally with a truly stylish product. The final British name to mention is the handbeaten products of the Keswick School of Industrial Art. Usually marked KSIA, they produced mainly dishes, along with a few

toastracks. Their basic manufacturing techniques made items such as tea-sets prohibitively expensive. Keswick, like Old Hall, closed in 1984.



8. Tea-kettle circa 1950 designed by Sigurd Persson for AB Silver and Stal. £50-80.

Old Hall pioneered the use of stainless steel in the 1930s for a relatively conservative home market, but it was Scandinavian and Italian manufacturers who developed the modern look after the Second World War. It was the designs of Sigurd Persson for AB Silver and Stal of Sweden and a few others that greatly influenced the young Robert Welch. Britain in the late 1950s and 1960s went modern, but not for long, so one can find some very stylish pieces in car boot fairs, charity shops and markets for relatively low prices. Travel to Denmark, the home of great firms such as Stelton, Georg Jensen and Lundtofte, and all you can usually find secondhand are some well used dishes. Visit any small Danish town and you will find new pieces that in Britain can only be found at a handful of shops such as Harrods. Stainless steel in Denmark is still appreciated as a high class product. It is expensive but the Danes expect a lifetime's use and will get that and more.



9. Cylinder Line coffee-pot designed by Arne Jacobsen for Stelton. £80-120.

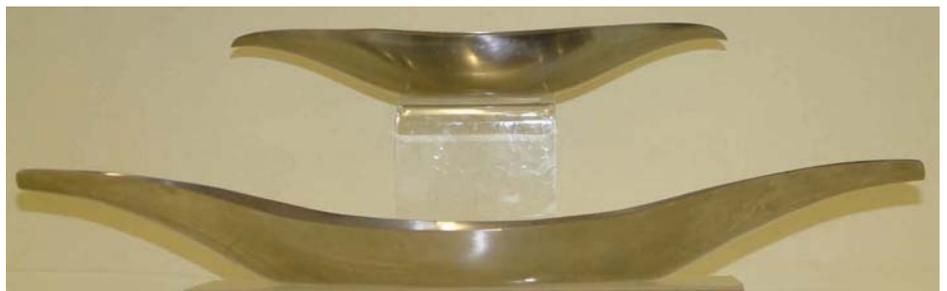
The Rolls Royce of stainless steel today is the Arne Jacobsen 'Cylinder Line' designed in 1964-67 and still produced by Stelton, (See fig.9). Expect to pay around £260 for a new tea-pot and be lucky to find it second hand for around a third to half, or £39 for a new toaster. Or you could be lucky and buy one for 10p at a boot sale as I did a couple of years ago. This puts into perspective the price you may pay for the equally well made Old Hall! The triangular coffee set illustrated in *The Seventies Scene* article a couple of issues ago I found illustrated in a book published in 1963. It was produced by Lundtofte, a good Danish firm that is long gone, and was designed by Lone Sachs, a designer I can find no information about.



10. Carving set designed by Tias Eckhoff. £30-50 with box. 2 salad serving sets by unknown designers. £15-25 per set.

Georg Jensen, famous for their silver and jewellery have been producing stainless steel for well over 50 years, always using good designers such as Arne Jacobsen, Sigvard Bernadotte, Erik Magnusen and Tias Eckhoff. Georg Jensen is such an internationally known and expensive brand that you would be lucky to find any bargains for sale.

Gense is the main Swedish firm to look out for and you will find some of their pieces marked jointly with Viners. This appears to have been a one way relationship, as I have yet to see any Viners designs sold in Sweden by Gense. The major designer for Gense in the 1950s and 1960s was the talented Folke Ahrstrom, who used black nylon panels in many of his designs for handles. Another early Gense designer to look out for is Pierre Forsell whose name will usually be found along with the maker's mark.



12. Smaller dish by WMF. £5-10. Larger bowl Satinsteel of London. £20-30.



11. Campden coffee pot and hot water jug designed by Robert Welch for Old Hall. £60-90 for set with sugar basin.

The last major country to look at is Italy. The main producer, whose vintage stainless steel you will find, is that of the now well known firm of Alessi which grew rapidly in the 1970s by using the best Italian designers. Alessi started as a traditional manufacturer in 1921 making silver plated wares, but discovered the benefits of stainless steel after the Second World War. Like Gense, some of their pieces were retailed by a well known British firm, Walker & Hall, often marked Alfa for Alessi Fratelli. Alessi and a few other Italian firms such as Sabernet and Calderoni tended to produce more curvaceous, sexier designs than the cool Scandinavians or the conservative British. German maker Hugo Pott produced some great designs in the 1950s and 1960s, but I have yet to see any of them in Britain except in contemporary photographs. WMF of Art Nouveau fame also produced some nice designs and these do turn up in the UK now and again.

There are two good reasons for collecting stainless steel. Firstly because you can find some stylish, beautiful, practical and useable pieces at relatively low prices. Secondly because you can create an interesting display. A collection of toastracks can look great, or use larger pieces for their sculptural appeal. Real bargains can be found at car boot fairs, charity shops and markets, but obviously expect to pay far more from specialists who are often dealer/collectors and from twentieth century design dealers.