# QUEEN ELIZABETH'S JEWELS

*by Janet Arnold*

A poet's description of Queen Elizabeth I — 'When she came in like starlight, thick with jewels' — conjures up a vision of glittering magnificence. Many of her jewels came from her father's coffers, and had been worn both by him and his six wives, and in turn by her brother and sister. In addition to this, a large number of exquisite personal jewels were presented to her by members of the nobility, courtiers and their wives, and are recorded in the New Year's Gift Rolls, together with the donors' names.

Perhaps the most impressive pieces of jewellery worn by Elizabeth are the collars of state, worn only by the monarch, similar to those depicted in portraits of Henry VIII. The 'Coronation' and the 'Phoenix' portraits, both at the National Portrait Gallery, London, show good examples of these heavy gold chains set with rich gems and pearls, arranged over the shoulders. The collar in the 'Phoenix' portrait is painted with a jeweller's precision by goldsmith and miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard, who may even have designed it. The chain is formed from 'cinques of pearls' with alternating 'lozenged diamond' and 'rock ruby' links, as sixteenth century records would have described them. The gems are mounted in gold settings, enamelled with red, black and white. At the centre front and on each shoulder is an enamelled Tudor rose, red petals encircling the white, with a diamond 'cut in diverse triangles' set in gold at its heart: the word 'facet' appears early in the seventeenth century.

Gem-stones were usually cut in simple shapes, often backed with foil to make them sparkle. In the sixteenth century diamonds were mainly 'pointed', when they stood in the form of a pyramid, or 'tabled' when they showed a flat surface. They might be 'square', 'lozenged', or 'triangle' diamonds, terms which refer to their shape. Rubies might be left uncut, referred to as 'rock rubies' in the inventories, as an alternative to being table cut. The effect of table cutting a diamond was to leave a flat surface, apparently black, which would catch the light and flash brilliantly with movement, rather than the continuous shimmering sparkle given by the cut of modern diamonds. The Queen must indeed have given the effect of starlight when she came into the view of her loyal subjects.

Many of the jewels presented to the Queen as gifts at the New Year, and on Progresses during the summer months, reflect the loyalty of their donors, particularly at the New Year in 1587, with increasing threats of a Spanish invasion. Among the grand total of eighty jewels presented was a 'Jewell of golde having twoe handes, thone holding a sworde thother a Trowell both garnished with soparkes of diamondes and betweence the handes of garnishment of Opalles'. This device, dedicated to John Payton, appears in Geffrey Whitney's book, *A Choice of Emblemes*, printed in 1586. It may have been Payton who gave the jewel to Elizabeth, conveying the message 'That to defend our country dear from harm/ For war or work we either hand should arm'. Another jewel which presented a hidden message to the Queen was a golden lily 'with a butterflye in the same, and a sea crabbe, garnesshed with small ophalls, rubys and diamonds . . . brought into the same chamber by Mrs Skydmore without report made by whom it was given'. The anonymous donor may have intended it as a piece of advice, or as a tactful plea in some suit: the motto 'Make haste slowly' appears with the device of a crab holding a butterfly in Whitney's book, where it is dedicated to 'the very honourable Francis Windham and Edward Flowerdewe most upright judges'.

Much careful thought must have been devoted to the design of jewels intended to please the Queen. In 1571 the Spanish Ambassador told the Duke of Alva's Secretary that the Earl of Leicester had given Elizbeth a jewel in which she was represented as seated on a throne with the Queen of Scots in chains at her feet and France and Spain submerged by waves, 'with Neptune and the rest of them bowing to this Queen'. The Earl of Ormond's gift at the New Year in 1574 was a gold jewel, the front set with rubies, emeralds and diamonds, and the back of blue crystal. It had Elizabeth's name in full: under the crystal were 'certayne verses, every of them beginning with the letters E.L.I.Z.A.B.E.T.H.' Even more flattering was a feather fan presented by Sir Francis Drake in 1587 with a half moon made of mother of pearl in the handle, revealing a miniature of the Queen inside it. The crescent moon was a symbol of the Goddess Diana and Elizabeth frequently appears in this guise in contemporary literature.

François, Duke of Alençon, was one of the Queen's most devoted suitors, and she gave him the affectionate nickname of 'frog'. During the time of his courtship many enchanting little jewels with gold and enamelled frogs were given to her, one by François himself, a little gold flower with frog sitting on it, which opened to reveal his portrait miniature. He expressed his eternal devotion to the Queen at the New Year in 1582 with a golden shackle and padlock, with a motto engraved on the shackle : 'SERVIET ETERNUM DULCIS QUEM TORQUET ELIZA'.

Some of the jewels presented to the Queen incorporated the badges of their donors, presumably as a permanent reminder of their allegiance. The Earl of Leicester, for

example, often used the bear and ragged staff, sometimes just the former, in the design of his gifts. At the New Year in 1574 he presented her with a white feather fan set in a gold handle with a white bear on each side of it, and 'a lyon ramping with a white mozeled beare at his foote'. The lion rampant represented Elizabeth, the lion of England, with Leicester, the muzzled bear, subdued at her command. Leicester also used the ragged staff (an untrimmed branch of a tree) together with true love's knots, for fourteen gold buttons and 36 smaller gold buttons decorating a black velvet cap, which he gave to the Queen on New Year's Day 1580.

At first sight Elizabethan jewels may appear to be simple naturalistic representations of flowers, insects, and animals, such a frogs, bears and snakes, but as we have seen, a frog might represent the Duke of Alençon, and a bear, the Earl of Leicester. A snake was variously used to symbolise lurking danger or treachery (Aesop and Virgil), reasoned judgement (Geffrey Whitney) and wisdom (Cesare Ripa), while 'to feed uppon snakes' is to renew youth and vigour (Thomas Dekker). One golden jewel of an arrow through a snake, set with diamonds and rubies, was given to the Queen by the Countess of Oxford in 1583. In this particular case Whitney's book shows the emblem with the motto:
'Aboute the arrow swifte, ECHENIS slowe doth folde:
Which bids us in our actions haste, no more than reason woulde'.

Among her jewels Elizabeth had many in the shape of birds, such as swans, cranes, peacocks, owls and parrots; the pelican and the pheonix were the most popular choice. Owls were the birds of the Goddess Athena and symbolise wisdom, while the pelican in her piety, wounding her breast to feed her young, is an early symbol of redemption through Christ's blood. In Whitney's book the latter is accompanied by the motto 'Quod in te est, prome. Ad eundum' and these verses.
'The Pellican, for to revive her younge,
Doth peirce her brest, and geve them of her blood:
Then searche your breste, and as you have with tonge,
With penne procede to doe our countrie good:
Your zeale is great, your learning is profound
Then help our wantes, with that you doe abounde'.

The phoenix was one of the Queen's favourite emblems. It appears in *The Heroicall Devises of M. Claudius Paradin*, printed in 1591, with the moto 'But always one Phoenix in the world at once'. Another motto, 'Semper Eadem' ('Always the same') set in rubies, was used in a gold armlet, the gift of Lord Howard, the Lord Admiral, in 1586. In the centre of it was a golden pheonix set with opals and sparks of rubies. The Drake jewel is one of the most beautiful of those surviving from the sixteenth century. It dates from 1588, and contains a miniature of Elizabeth by Nicholas Hilliard, facing a painting of a phoenix on the inside of the lid.

The crown jewels, as well as many of the sovereign's personal jewels, were kept in the Secret Jewel Houses in the Tower of London and at the Palace of Westminster. However a selection had to be ready for the Queen at a moment's notice, wherever the Court might be, at Richmond, Windsor, Hampton Court, Greenwich, Nonsuch, Westminster, or on a Progress, and small coffers of jewels were in the care of various ladies-in-waiting. Katherine Howard, Countess of Nottingham and Mrs Mary Ratcliffe were in charge of a number of jewels at the time when a full inventory of the contents of the Wardrobe of Robes was prepared in 1600. Special coffers were made to hold the jewels. John Grene, the Queen's coffer maker, put extra fittings into one coffer in 1565; 'for makinge diverse particions within a Jewell coffer to put in Prowches, cheynes and girdells in diverse tylles and lyning them with sarcenet'. A silk lined wooden chest, with separate small boxes would have prevented the chains from twisting and tangling with the girdles, thus scratching the delicate enamelled surfaces, or breaking fragile links. It would also have enabled the Queen's servants to see at a glance if anything was missing. Jewels were sometimes lost when the Queen was wearing them and the date and place of loss were always carefully entered in a day book, with the words 'lost from her majesties back'. This brings a fascinating picture to mind, of Elizabeth shedding jewels on her Progresses like some exquisite perambulating Christmas tree.

Janet Arnold, *'Lost from Her Majesties Back'* The Costume Society 1980. Janet Arnold 'Sweet England's Jewels' in *Princely Magnificence: Court Jewels of the Renaissance, 1500-1630*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1981. Janet Arnold, *'Queen Elizabeth's Wardobe Unlock'd*, W. S. Maney and Son Ltd., Leeds 1988.