

Triumph and tradition

For 200 years The Gold Cup has been the tangible standard of victory in Ascot's oldest race but, asks Nick Blackmore, how is it made?

WHEN, ON THURSDAY 21st June 2007, The Gold Cup is raised in victory, a long road of meticulous preparation and lasting commitment will be rewarded with a nine-carat-gold symbol of achievement. This will be true not only for the owner who is presented with the cup, but also for those people behind its creation: jewellers Mappin & Webb.

For the owner in question, the Gold Cup will be the prize of victory, while for Mappin & Webb, seeing the cup awarded will be triumph enough. To create a Gold Cup worthy of Royal Ascot is a challenge that has been offered for two centuries: the conditions for the first Gold Cup in 1807 outline how 'a Gold Cup of 100 guineas value' will be offered as a prize.

2007 marks the second year that Mappin & Webb have produced the Gold Cup (as well as four other trophies) for Royal Ascot. Tradition is a major part of Mappin & Webb's make-up, just as it is part of Ascot's. Senior Manager Victor Barley has been with the company for 49 years, and was integral in Mappin & Webb winning the tender for the Royal Ascot Gold Cup last year.

The company's successful tender reveals just how much Ascot values invention as well as heritage: all tendering companies were asked to produce the traditional Gold Cup designs of the past, as well as some new and innovative designs of their own. During a brainstorm session, Victor and expert designer and silversmith of 40 years Colin Hellier came up with a radical yet entirely fitting concept: designing the cup according to the structure of the →

All photography: David Burton

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distinctive new Ascot stand. “We looked at the flowing design of the cantilever roofs, the archways and also what we call the ‘bars’ going across,” Victor remembers. “I thought we could develop that into some embellishment on the cup,” confirms Colin. A modern Ascot design for a modern Ascot cup ultimately won Mappin & Webb the contract.

The 2006 trophies were such a success that they have been reproduced this year, but the process of creating The Gold Cup is not a simple one. When asked what the most challenging part of the project is, Colin replies: “The whole thing – each step is a real test of craftsmanship.”

Initially, Colin produces a working drawing in pencil of all the sections that will be manufactured. The fabrication process begins with the crown being modelled in wax. A mould is produced and this is cast in gold and soldered around the centre boss. Next the gold is spun over a lathe and formed over a metal boss to the required shape.

Gold can be bought in sheet and wire form,

Top and above right: Some of the tools used for chasing The Gold Cup

Above left: One section of the finished, polished cup

but for The Gold Cup, a disc made of a specific gold alloy is used. “Ordinary working gold” is unsuitable because it would be too hard; the special alloy is a soft gold that is easy to form over the boss. At some point scrapings of this gold must be sent to the London Assay Office at Goldsmiths’ Hall for sampling. If the gold meets the required standard then the cup receives its hallmark. Any blemishes from the sampling are polished away at a later stage.

Then the process of chasing begins; moulding and cutting out the actual style of the cup and embellishing it. The cup is hammered very delicately with minute tools, a process that dates back 2,000–3,000 years. Victor points out that this is a crucial and complex process: “You have to be so careful – if you make a mistake on one cup you can’t just bin it and start all over again, it’s a gold cup!”

The next step is to solder the crowns around the centre boss before the hand engraving is formed around the base. Finally, the mahogany plinth is made to fit on the base, completing the assembly. →



When completed, The Gold Cup measures approximately 26cm in diameter at its widest point and 22.5cm in height. It is one of the few trophies made from nine-carat gold and, because of the amount of gold in the cup, it is comparatively heavy. In fact, it is the only trophy at Royal Ascot that is solid gold, representing the degree to which the trophy represents the pinnacle of achievement at the event.

While Mappin & Webb have yet to find out whether identical designs will be used next year, for now there will be respite enough to focus on just who wins this year's cup. "I certainly will be watching," confirms Colin, "when Her Majesty The Queen presents it, it's a fantastic honour to be involved." Her Majesty, like everyone else who covets or creates the cup, must surely see victory in its burnished surface. ■