

I had planned to start this year's articles with Engagement Rings and with the news of the Engagement of Prince William to Kate Middleton on the 16th November what could be more topical. But before we look at the Royals I would like to briefly consider the origins of the engagement or betrothal ring?

It was a Roman tradition to give the betrothed a ring, a symbol of the circle of life and eternity. In Pliny's time (23 -79AD) the ring was made of iron, but I'm not sure what most modern day prospective fiancée's would make of that as their forbears had to wait until around the 2nd Century A.D. for their rings to be fashioned out of gold.

It was not until the 15th century that the symbolism of a ring was strengthened further by the inclusion of the Diamond, the emblem of conjugal fidelity, and it seems that the first recorded incidence of a diamond engagement ring was that given to Mary of Burgundy by the Archduke Maximilian of Hamburg in 1477. Uniquely able to resist both fire and steel, the diamond epitomises unyielding and

invincible strength, so what better symbolism of a life long partnership.

But initially the diamonds used were in their natural crystalline structure and nothing like the sophisticated cut and polished stones we are familiar with today. However the late medieval goldsmiths used their imagination and romantic vision to incorporate subjects such as rosettes, fleur-de-lys, and letters of the alphabet to enhance their designs. Sometimes Posies (meaning little poems) were inscribed on the hoops of the rings and so hidden inside. This same idea was used by the Greeks as early as 400BC in a betrothal ring inscribed and bears a single word 'Honey'.

By the 16th century the gimmel ring, a wedding ring made of two hoops that slid together when shut, became popular. The symbolic allusion was further emphasised by an inscription on the hoop taken from the marriage service. Later on in the 1600's, the gimmel merged with another romantic symbol, the two clasped hands of the fede (meaning Italian for faith) and these fedes sometimes held a rose cut diamond heart.

The quiet sparkle of the 17th century diamond ring, with clusters of small stones rimmed in gold and enamel, had a gentle beauty that gave way a century later to the desire for more sparkle. To meet this trend settings were cut down to reveal more of the stones, which in the case of the diamonds were enhanced by setting them in silver. Furthermore coloured stones such as rubies or emeralds had coloured metal foils set behind them to accentuate their colour.

The industrial revolution made money for many of the middle classes with jewellery playing an



important role as a status symbol. Diamonds became increasingly sought after, but in 1870 supply met demand with the great discovery of the diamond mines on the African continent. Now that diamonds had become accessible to a far wider public, a bride could expect two rings: a gem-set engagement ring and the actual wedding ring, which in Victorian times was no more than a slim gold band. Solitaires, half hoops, double or single clusters, fan, panel, navette and cross-over were all available, but the brilliant cut diamond with its 58 facets was the most popular.

But in my opinion one of the most significant developments was in 1886 when Tiffany introduced the six prong solitaire diamond engagement ring. Tiffany, the famous New York jewellers, invented a dramatic open setting with a plain metal band where the stone is suspended by 6 tiny platinum claws. For the first time this setting allowed the fullest play of light onto the exposed stone. Unlike the old style settings, which covered all but the face of the stone where the flaws could pass undetected, this revolutionary Tiffany mount passed the emphasis from the setting to the stone itself. The modern engagement ring had arrived.

There still remains a strong emphasis on the diamond single stone as the traditional engagement ring, but we continue to be asked for coloured stones such as tanzanite, ruby, peridot and of course sapphire. Some couples who come to us enjoy choosing their stones and having their ring designed especially for them, or even remodelling a family piece with a special emotional attachment.



Prince Philip for example gave Elizabeth II an engagement ring made out of diamonds from his mother's tiara.

This leads me back to the ring that Prince William has recently given Kate Middleton and as we have all heard was romantically carried around in his rucksack until the right opportunity arose. This ring Prince Charles gave to the late Princess Diana and unusually for the royal family was selected from a choice of eight ready made rings brought to Windsor Castle.

The design with a central sapphire surrounded by 14 diamonds is not only stunningly attractive but has proved to stand the test of time. We at AA Thornton have over the years sold many similar rings with subtle variations. Some rings are surrounded by 10 or 12 diamonds, whilst others have a yellow or white gold or a platinum shank. Even today, prices can start from just under £1,000 which is along way short of the £28,500 price tag said to have been attached to Princess Diana's.

Whilst undoubtedly engagement rings with Sapphires or other gemstones are quite stunning, the recent royal engagement has created a lot of publicity. However the elegant single stone diamond ring is hard to beat and will over time, I think, continue to be the most popular of all.



Sally Thornton, AA Thornton,
1/7 High Street, Kettering
Tel: 01536 513014
www.aathorntonjeweller.com

