

## **THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN AND THE JEWISH CONNECTION**

**When the new British monarch King Charles III and his Queen Consort Camilla are crowned at Westminster Abbey on 6 May 2023, the king will have St. Edward's Crown placed upon his head by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This is the senior cleric of the Church of England of which the British sovereign is Supreme Governor. Named after King St. Edward the Confessor (1003-1066), versions of this crown have traditionally been used to crown English (and after the union of England and Scotland in 1707, British) monarchs at their coronations since the 13th century.**

**However, it is not the original St. Edward's Crown because that was either sold off or melted down after the English Parliament abolished the monarchy and executed King Charles I in 1649 following the English Civil War. After the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, a replica was made for King Charles II's coronation a year later.**

**Following the coronation of William III and Mary II as joint monarchs of both England and Scotland in 1689, it was not used to crown any British sovereign until 1911. That was the year of the coronation of King George V and this tradition has continued ever since.**

**However in 1953, at Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, after the actual crowning, she wore the Imperial State Crown to depart the Abbey. In this crown there are a total of 2,868 diamonds, 273 pearls, 17 sapphires, 11 emeralds and 5 rubies.**



*Pictures above: The Cullinan Diamond in rough state and in the Imperial State Crown of the United Kingdom. (Credit Wikipedia)*

At the centre-front of this crown, sits a truly enormous diamond which has a history of high drama and inevitably, given the strong link between Jews and diamonds, a Jewish connection. This gem was cut from the legendary Cullinan Diamond that was discovered at the Premier No.2 mine in Cullinan, South Africa, on 26 January 1905 and was named after Thomas Cullinan, the mine's owner. The discovery made headlines around the world. In April 1905, it was put on sale in London but despite considerable interest, it was still unsold after two years.

In its natural state, the 3,106-carat Cullinan diamond was of exceedingly rare quality and about the size of a human heart. It remains the largest gem-quality (as opposed to industrial quality) rough diamond ever discovered. Many questions arose from the Cullinan's discovery. Who would (or even could) purchase such a gem? Who would cut and polish it?

In fact it was South Africa's Transvaal Colony Government which purchased the unparalleled jewel in 1907 and presented it to King Edward VII of the United Kingdom as a birthday gift. It was to mark five years of peace between the two countries following the end of the Second Boer War.

In those pre-airfreight days and with the eyes of the world upon it, a secure way had to be found to get the stone to London. The colonial government set up a decoy of armed guards and military personnel, intentionally making a grand diversionary show of transporting the diamond to the British capital. Unbelievably though, the enormous diamond was simply placed in a parcel and sent by regular post to the London office of one of the mine's associates!

Upon the Cullinan's arrival in London, King Edward VII turned to Joseph Asscher of the Dutch Asscher Diamond Company for advice on what to do with such an unprecedented treasure. While the king was initially minded to keep it its rough state, Asscher pleaded with him to have this unique diamond cut and polished. He assured the British monarch that he would personally oversee every step of the process putting his own and the firm's reputation on the line.

The king finally acquiesced and informed Joseph Asscher that he could cut and polish the stone and reminded him that that he would be doing the task in the service of the British Crown and the Royal Family's personal jewellery collection. As the United Kingdom was arguably the world's greatest power at the time, a truly awesome responsibility was thus laid upon the master jeweller.

The jewel now needed to make another perilous journey, this time to Amsterdam, then the epicentre of the diamond cutting and polishing industry. As with the earlier voyage from South Africa, the Cullinan's next journey would involve another ruse.

With much deliberate fanfare and maximum publicity, a sealed box ostensibly containing the diamond was placed on a Royal Navy warship which set sail across the North Sea to the Netherlands. Needless to say, the box contained nothing of value whatsoever.

Joseph's brother Abraham Asscher meanwhile, was on a passenger ship heading to Amsterdam. He didn't have any luggage with him, only a heavy coat to keep him warm during the voyage. In one of the deepest pockets of this coat lay nothing less than the largest rough diamond in the history of the world.

Abraham Asscher and the Cullinan arrived safely at Tolstraat 127, Amsterdam, the headquarters and cutting factory of the Asscher Diamond Company. The family immediately invited the press to photograph the priceless uncut marvel but keeping the press happy was the least of its concerns. The company was planning the most complex and awesome diamond-cutting operation in its own history and probably in the history of the world diamond-cutting industry.

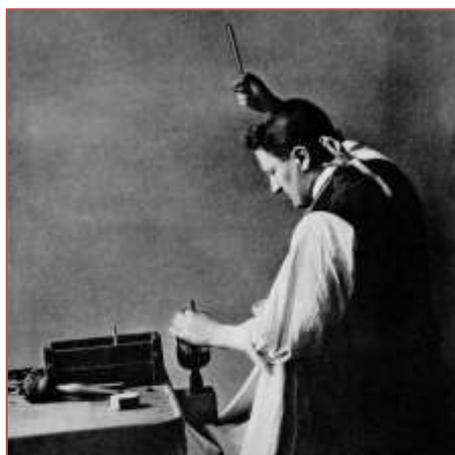
According to Asscher Diamond Company's calculations, the gem could best be split into two pieces. Then, a set of smaller stones could be cut from them but one tiny error could result in the entire precious rock shattering into worthless dust. Joseph Asscher had new tools especially made to minimise this risk after concluding that a diamond of the Cullinan's size demanded customised equipment.

As soon as the tools were ready, Asscher put them to work, spending the entire following month carefully creating an incision just one centimeter deep. On the 10th of February, 1908, he was finally ready to cut the world's biggest rough diamond. Press, notaries and other spectators flooded into Asscher's company premises eager to witness the world's supreme stone-cutter splitting the world's supreme uncut stone (or perhaps to see him fail and the diamond reduced to worthless fragments. What a story that would make!)

Given the enormity of what was at stake, the pressure on Joseph Asscher must have been colossal as the moment finally arrived to strike the splitting knife which was wedged into the meticulously selected incision on the Cullinan's surface.

Using a hammer, he struck the knife with a resolute and mighty blow. Instantly a breaking sound pierced the air but alas it was not the diamond that divided but the knife in Joseph Asscher's hand! The world's largest uncut diamond remained intact thus confirming the precious stone's reputation as the hardest material on the planet.

Joseph Asscher fell backwards from the force of the blow as was witnessed by the gathered spectators. A legend grew from that moment, telling of how the Cullinan's strength had overwhelmed even the greatest diamond cutter of his day and rendered him unconscious. This was denied implicitly by the company and family but legends create their own momentum.



*Picture: Joseph Asscher striking the fateful blow  
(Credit Royal Asscher website)*

Four days after the failed attempt, Joseph Asscher was back at his workbench with new tools. Armed with larger knives and heavier blades but this time no ladies or gentlemen of the Press (just a single public notary was in attendance) the second attempt at the diamond got underway. With the new knife firmly slotted in the groove, Joseph struck a deft blow and the remarkable stone obediently split into two pieces.

From that first division, Asscher successfully realised the plan to create the nine large stones that would become part of the British Crown Jewels. Ninety-six smaller stones were retained by the Asscher's as their fee for cutting the Cullinan Diamond.

He had utilised a cut which the company had patented in 1902. This is still called the '*Asscher Cut*' and allows more light to enter the stone giving it extra brilliance. Finally the precious stone was able to be returned to the delighted king.

In 1910, the central diamond, weighing 530 carats, was placed in the royal sceptre of the crown jewels and named '*The Great Star of Africa*.' This one diamond alone was valued then at £2.5 million (about £52 million at today's value). The second largest diamond was named '*The Second Star of Africa*' and was set in the centre of the Imperial State Crown. Shortly afterwards, Asscher received a knighthood from Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands.



***Picture: The Asscher Diamond Company headquarters in Amsterdam in 1907  
(Credit Royal Asscher website)***

The Asscher Company was founded in 1854 when Joseph Isaac Asscher, who was well-known in the diamond industry, established the I.J. Asscher Diamond Company. The initials stood for his son, Isaac Joseph, who followed his father into the diamond industry and passed down his expertise to his five sons (later the initials were dropped from the company's name). The family became the 20th century's most exceptional diamond experts and had European royalty, top politicians and the rich and famous among its clientele.

During World War II, the Nazis entered the Asscher Diamond Company's Amsterdam headquarters and seized all its diamonds. The family was deported to the concentration camps along with nearly all of the company's 500 master polishers. Most of the Asscher family and almost all of the polishers perished in the death camps.

During the war the patent on the original Asscher cut expired. With no one to renew the patent, other companies started to utilise the Asscher-Cut, leading to market confusion about the origin of many Asscher-Cut diamonds. Some companies chose to call their Asscher-Cut diamonds square-emerald cuts instead.

Many of these diamonds were cut for maximum yield and did not necessarily follow Joseph Asscher's original proportion calculations for the Asscher-Cut, which specified parameters for the diamond's crown height, table size and facet alignment.

Only ten members of the family Asscher family and fifteen of the polishers had survived the Holocaust. The diamond industry in Amsterdam was virtually wiped out during the war, including the Asscher Diamond Company. Antwerp in Belgium subsequently emerged as a major diamond polishing centre.

In 1946 two surviving members of the family, Joop and Louis Asscher, were invited to utilise their expertise to start a new company in New York. However, they chose to remain in their home city of Amsterdam and began to rebuild the Asscher Diamond Company from the ground up. During the 1950s and 1960s the company began exploring new markets and opened offices in Tokyo and New York.

The Asscher Diamond Company became the Royal Asscher Diamond Company in 1980 when it was bestowed with the Dutch Royal Predicate from Queen Juliana of the Netherlands in recognition of the company's stature both in the Netherlands and around the world. In 2011 Queen Beatrix perpetuated the Royal Prefix for another 25 years.

The Asscher Company secured international design patents on all its cuts, so that they cannot be legally imitated. The name Royal Asscher is also trademarked and the company owns exclusive rights to the name. To further guarantee authenticity each diamond is laser inscribed with the Royal Asscher logo and an identification number belonging to a single diamond only. The number is logged with the Royal Asscher Diamond Company in Amsterdam and a Royal Asscher certificate accompanies the diamond.

Today, the Royal Asscher Diamond Company is a fancy cut specialist. Consumer understanding of diamonds has increased with the advent of the Internet, online sellers and social media. Today's consumer is willing to buy online and buyers are looking for something individual and rare.

This created a growing interest in generic fancy shape diamonds. Non-round shapes used to be much harder for customers to find and purchase. Rounds were always popular and fancy shapes typically harder to source in beautiful variants. That's because there is no universal cut grading system existing for fancy shapes, whereas round diamond shapes have the ideal category (as best in cut class).

Seeking to create a new level of perfection in this class, Royal Asscher as known pioneers of shape undertook research and development. The firm introduced four cuts which it states are the shapes ultimate expressions of beauty, each cut has 16 more facets when compared to their generic counterparts.

Today, the company is headed by the sixth generation of the family, Mike Asscher and Lita Asscher, both of whom are diamond experts. The company continues to flourish with a clientele drawn from across the whole spectrum of society and all continents.

***Footnote: Following the death of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022, there have been strident calls from within South Africa for the return of 'The Great Star of Africa' in the Royal Sceptre to be returned to that country. This is unlikely to be acceded to.***



***Picture: 'The Great Star of Africa' diamond set in the Royal Sceptre.  
(Credit Wikipedia)***