

## LONDON'S ROLE IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PORCELAIN

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15 October 2007

At the present day the majority of the population, if asked, would probably associate the English porcelain or china industry with its traditional home in Staffordshire and the city of Stoke-on-Trent, where the famous firms of Minton, Spode and Wedgwood and many others were based. Elsewhere they would almost certainly have heard of the great factories of Royal Crown Derby and Royal Worcester, but they are unlikely to have heard of the factories at Bow, Isleworth, Limehouse and Vauxhall, although some might be aware that china was once made in Chelsea. Yet it is in London that the English porcelain industry has its roots.

Staffordshire had many natural advantages for the manufacture of ceramic wares. Clay and coal to fire the ovens was available locally and there was a long tradition of making earthenware vessels for domestic and dairy use. In the Wedgwood manuscripts there is a list of some forty-seven potworks in Burslem and its environs in the early 18th century. These were generally small concerns and it is reckoned that no more than about five hundred persons were employed in the Staffordshire industry at that time. By 1785, however, it is reckoned that the number of employees had risen to fifteen thousand.

London did not enjoy the natural resources of Staffordshire, being at some distance from ample supplies of clay and coal, but it had several advantages of its own. It was by far the largest city in England and the centre of fashionable society; it had many craftsmen in the jewellery and metalworking trades whose skills could be applied to new materials; it offered direct access to a substantial wholesale network and a large number of retail outlets; and it was the most important port for international trade. Moreover, it did have a long established pottery industry of its own, well known for the production of the tin-glazed earthenwares generally known as English delftware. These had been made in the Aldgate area of the City in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, but were later more closely associated with Southwark, Lambeth and Vauxhall. When William Griffith of the Hereford House Pottery on Lambeth High Street died in 1761 he was described as 'the most considerable potter in England'. Wares from the South Bank potteries were exported to the American colonies and its artisans assisted with the establishment of the delftware potteries in Brislington near Bristol and at Glasgow and Liverpool.

The subject of today's paper, however, is porcelain and it is now time to move on to that. The secrets of porcelain manufacture had been known to the Chinese for centuries and a few pieces found their way to Europe from the 14th century onwards, being so highly prized that they were often presented in silver-gilt mounts. With the establishment of the great European trading companies in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, trade with the East rapidly expanded and large cargoes of Chinese porcelain began to be imported in Dutch ships. Although there was a decline in the trade in the 1640s, the result of the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644, the Dutch were able to turn to Japan, where they had exclusive trading privileges, and trade with China gradually recovered. The qualities of these Asian wares attracted the attention of Europe's rulers

and it was not long before they were vying with each other in forming collections of the better pieces. In England Queen Mary II was a notable collector, although at least one historian was unimpressed - 'a vast collection of hideous images and of vases on which houses, trees, bridges and mandarins were depicted in outrageous defiance of all the laws of perspective'. Nevertheless Chinese and Japanese design exercised an enormous influence on English pottery and porcelain to which the continuing popularity of the famous 'Willow Pattern' and Royal Crown Derby's Imari designs bears witness.

Another crucial development was the development of tea drinking. Tea was introduced into England in the second half of the 17th century and rapidly became popular. By 1687 the East India Company was confident enough to place an order for twenty thousand pounds and by 1750 it was shipping over two and a half million pounds a year, imports of tea rising to a staggering twenty million pounds by 1800. It was a logical extension of this trade to import vessels which could be used for tea drinking, an additional advantage being that the heavier porcelain also served to stabilise the light tea cargoes on the Company's ships. By 1720 it has been estimated that some two million pieces of porcelain were being imported into England each year. Over 350,000 pieces of porcelain were ordered from a Canton merchant in 1772 and these included eighty-seven thousand small cups and saucers. The East India Company's trade was centred on London and the City in particular. Goods were landed at the Company's wharf at London Bridge, stored in warehouses in the eastern half of the City and sold from East India House in Leadenhall Street. There sales took place by auction in large lots and the porcelain was bought by a powerful group of merchants generally known as the London chinamen. This centralisation, quite different from the traditional ways of selling pottery by hawkers or in street markets and fairs, was to have a lasting effect on the marketing of porcelain in England. It meant that, when the new English factories were established in the late 1740s and 1750s, they frequently sold their wares at auction in London and they also took account of the timing of the Company's sales there in arranging their own calendars. A sale of Worcester porcelain in 1754 comprised forty thousand pieces and, in a notice of a further sale in 1755, the proprietors advised country traders that they made 'London their only mart for sale'.

The natural development of the royal and aristocratic interest in porcelain and the rising tide of imports was a desire to manufacture porcelain in Europe itself and the breakthrough was finally made about 1709 at Meissen, near Dresden in Saxony, under the auspices of its ruler, Augustus the Strong. Although the secret formula was jealously guarded, the defection of workmen led to the knowledge of it escaping and, within a decade or so, factories were established at Vienna and Venice. Oriental and Meissen porcelain is made to what is known as a hard-paste formula, but experiments elsewhere resulted in the discovery of an alternative body, known as soft-paste or artificial porcelain and it is with this that most of the early English factories were concerned.

As early as 1671 John Dwight of Fulham claimed to have discovered 'the mystery [of making] transparent earthenware, commonly known as porcelaine or china', and was granted a patent. Excavations on the pottery site in the 1970s did yield some small deposits of experimental porcelain but there is no surviving evidence that Dwight ever made it on a commercial scale and he was informing a committee of the House of

Lords only a few years later that English potters could make any sort of ware except china 'to which we do not pretend'. Incidentally Robert Hooke, one of the City Surveyors and a leading light in the Royal Society, is recorded as having visited the Fulham pottery on 16 May 1674 and continued to take a strong interest in Dwight's products. The Society itself is known to have had samples of the raw materials used in Chinese manufacture and in 1743 Thomas Briand attended a meeting and exhibited some specimens of a fine white ware which he claimed to be preferable to that of Dresden, the contemporary name for Meissen porcelain. Only a little time later a William Steers of Hoxton filed a patent to make a transparent earthenware in imitation of china but it was not pursued and Steers is recorded as having moved by 1746 to Staffordshire where he is associated with an early porcelain venture on the site of the Pomona Inn at Newcastle-under-Lyme.

We have now reached the period when the history of English porcelain really begins. There is some competition among ceramic historians to declare the factory of their research as the earliest, but I do not propose to enter this debate this afternoon and I shall mention the early London factories in alphabetical order, which conveniently places the two most important, Bow and Chelsea, at the top of the list. I propose to omit any particular mention, beyond this, of a factory in Kentish Town c.1755-56 about which little is known, and another possible one at Greenwich c. 1747 of which nothing is known.

The Bow Factory has a particular interest for us at the Guildhall as one of the original proprietors was an Alderman of the City. His name was George Arnold and he was a linen draper in Cheapside and a liveryman of the Haberdashers' Company. Having previously been a Common Councilman for Cheap Ward, he became Alderman of the same ward in 1740. His partners in the new venture were Edward Heylyn, a freeman of the Saddlers' Company of which his father had been Master, an Irish artist named Thomas Frye who was making a career as a portrait painter, and John Weatherby and John Crowther who had a wholesale china and pottery business near the Tower of London. It is thought that Arnold is most likely to have been the financial backer of the new venture, although he may not have been acting alone as a letter of 14 December 1744 mentions 'a patent granted for the making of China ware in which some Aldermen are concerned'.

Few records survive of the early English factories and Bow is no exception. It is known that Heylyn and Arnold acquired property in Bow in 1744 and this has recently been identified as a substantial house with a stable and large garden near St. Mary's church. As the purchase was made at about the same time that Heylyn and Frye petitioned for their first patent there must be a possibility that the premises were to be used, inter alia, for porcelain manufacture. Although Heylyn and Frye referred only to 'a certain Material' in their application, they were obliged under the terms of their grant to provide further details and this they did in the spring of 1745. The formula included Cherokee clay or 'uneka' ('uneker') from the Carolinas and it is known that Arnold had a ship the *Hannah* which regularly sailed to America, where he also had a cousin. Bow china made to the 1744 patent formula has never been positively identified, but it has recently been suggested that a mysterious class of porcelain known as 'A' marked wares might provide the missing link, the letter 'A' marked on the pieces possibly representing the surname Arnold. Although it is known that the Bow factory was referred to as Alderman Arnold and Company in the parish

records of West Ham in 1749-50 and the chemical composition of the porcelain fits neatly with the Bow patent, there is as yet no conclusive evidence that this china was made at Bow. A major difficulty is that the polychrome decoration bears no resemblance to the earliest known blue and white Bow porcelains. Another theory is that the 'A' marked wares were made in Scotland by Alexander Lind and that the letter 'A' represents the Duke of Argyll!

Bow did not persist with its early porcelain formula, perhaps because of the difficulty in obtaining supplies from America, and secured a new patent in 1749 which specified the use of a 'Virgin Earth' or bone ash. This was a vital breakthrough for English manufacture and was soon adopted by many other factories. It ultimately led to the formula we know today as English bone china, considered by many to be the best ceramic body for everyday use because of its strength, translucency and whiteness. By this time Bow was already an important producer. A newspaper advertisement in August 1748 informed the public that a 'GREAT variety of Useful and ornamental CHINA' was available for sale at a toyshop in Cornhill near the Royal Exchange and on 7 February 1753 Bow opened its own warehouse in the same area, diagonally opposite the Mansion House. A purpose built factory called 'New Canton', was established on the Stratford Road on the Essex side of Bow Bridge by the summer of 1749, when the first insurance policy was taken out. The building may have had a similar appearance to the East India Company's warehouse at Canton, but the new name is also a clue to the factory's aim to imitate Chinese imports. Bow was one of the largest factories of its day, perhaps employing three hundred workers, including ninety painters, by about 1760. In the years 1753-55, the value of china sold averaged more than £10,000 per annum. The warehouse manager, John Bowcock, travelled widely, acting as auctioneer at a Norwich sale in 1755 and arranging sales in Dublin in 1758. China was exported to America and it is probable that a short-lived porcelain factory at Philadelphia was staffed by workmen from Bow. Manufacturing at 'New Canton' probably ceased in 1774, about ten years after the death of Thomas Frye who was described in a contemporary obituary as 'the Inventor and first Manufacturer of PORCELAIN in England'. In a recently published and what, I think, will prove in other respects to be a rather controversial book [Bow Porcelain 1730-1747 (Oxford, Resurgat, 2007)], Pat Daniels argues that Bow was making hard paste porcelain in small quantities between 1742/3 and 1746 but then changed to another formula. Redevelopment of the factory site has led to a further opportunity for archaeological investigation and a large number of finds are in the process of being cleaned and evaluated by Museum of London staff and volunteers, but the earliest precisely dated pieces known at present are the inkpots inscribed 'MADE AT NEW CANTON 1750'.

It is now time to pass on to the most famous early English factory, Chelsea. The factory's 'undertaker', as he described himself, was Nicholas Sprimont (1716-1771) who was born into a family of silversmiths in present day Belgium. He is recorded in England in 1742 and registered his mark at Goldsmiths' Hall in January 1743. Some silver pieces with his mark survive for the period 1743-47 and stands which he made for sauceboats, now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, are very similar in design to porcelain stands subsequently made at Chelsea. Sprimont had premises in Compton Street, Soho, which he retained until 1748 but, by September 1744, he was already a sub-tenant of a house in Church Lane East, Chelsea. It is assumed porcelain making must already have begun as the *Daily Advertiser* of 5 March 1745 reported 'We hear that the China made at Chelsea is arrived to such Perfection, as to equal if not surpass

the finest old Japan...'. The earliest surviving dated pieces, known as 'goat and bee' jugs, were made in the same year and bear both the incised triangle mark and the words 'Chelsea' and '1745' incised on the base.

The factory became very successful and probably late in 1749 it moved to Lawrence Street. Chelsea had its own factory showroom at least as early as 1747, but later it had a West End showroom in the Mall and later still another adjacent to the White Bear in Piccadilly. The business also used auctions to sell its wares, establishing regular annual sales in 1754, but much was resold in London china shops or through auctions of dealers' stocks. Unusually for an English porcelain business it enjoyed some practical aristocratic support. Sir Edward Fawkener, Secretary to the Duke of Cumberland, made substantial payments to Sprimont in the period 1746- 48 and he was also instrumental in securing from Sir Charles HanburyWilliams, the British envoy to the Saxon Court, some Meissen porcelain for Chelsea to copy. In a letter of thanks to the ambassador in August 1751 Fawkener was able to report that 'many imitations are made'. There are numerous surviving examples of the factory's copies of Meissen figures and in some respects they surpass the originals and often command a higher price. It is sometimes forgotten that the original purpose of such wares was as 'ornaments for a desert' on tables, rather than display in cabinets or on mantelpieces. Chelsea specialised in the production of dessert wares, figures and vases for the wealthy and was also well-known for its 'toys' which included elaborate scent bottles and very small seals in the form of tiny figures and animals. There is no time today to consider the various phases of production, but it was probably Sprimont's failing health in the 1760s that led to the factory's decline. Eventually, in 1770, the lease was acquired by William Duesbury who had once had a decorating business in London in the early 1750s and had formed a partnership in 1756 with a banker, John Heath, and a china maker, Andrew Planché, to make porcelain in Derby. Production on a reduced scale continued at Chelsea until about 1783, when the factory buildings and fixtures were finally sold.

In its early life Chelsea had a mysterious rival once referred to as the 'Girl in a Swing' Factory and so called because of a particular class of figure. There was evidence of a former relationship between the two concerns, but it took some fairly recent research in French archives to uncover the fact that the proprietor of the rival business, Charles Gouyn, had been responsible for the original establishment of the Chelsea factory. He had a retail jewellery business in Bennet Street in the St. James's district of the West End and it was already known that Chelsea porcelain had been sold at a shop nearby as early as April 1746. Charles Gouyn's factory or the St. James's Factory, as it is now generally known, produced porcelain figures and 'toys' and a limited number of useful wares, such as teacups, which are now extremely rare.

There were several other London factories, knowledge of which has rapidly advanced within the last twenty years or so. A traditional source claims that the Isleworth factory was commenced by Joseph Shore of Worcester in 1757. Recent excavations uncovered a shard inscribed with a date which might be read as November 1754 (or possibly 1756) and it is thought the factory was experimenting with porcelain production until about 1766. It was in this year that Shore entered a partnership to make porcelain with his son and a son-in-law, Benjamin Quarman, who had been apprenticed to a Bristol delftware potter and had lived in Worcester. The factory

concentrated on utilitarian wares such as moulded teawares and sauceboats and production of porcelain ceased about 1790.

Joseph Wilson and Company's Limehouse factory first paid land tax on 15 March 1745. In September and October 1746 newspaper advertisements provide evidence that it was actively recruiting 'Pot Painters' for its works near Duke-shore and, in the following year, it was proudly announcing to the public 'The new-invented Limehouse Ware.. .consisting of great Variety of Sauce-Boats, Tea-Pots and other useful and Ornamental Vessels...' Unfortunately the factory was very short-lived and its remaining stock was sold off in May and June 1748.

The most significant of the lesser factories was Vauxhall. At the beginning of this paper, I have already alluded to the South Bank as an important area of ceramic production. In 1743 an earthenware potter named John Sanders established a factory in Glasshouse Street and a soapstone licence was taken out by him and Nicholas Crisp in 1751. Crisp was a freeman of the Haberdashers' Company, but traded in the City as a jeweller with a shop in St. Paul's Churchyard. The Glasshouse Street premises were expanded in the same year and it seems likely that porcelain production must have commenced about this time, although it appears it was not until May 1753 that 'a strong and useful Manufacture of Porcelaine ware made there of English Materials' was advertised. Crisp's financial difficulties elsewhere led to difficulties for the business in the next decade and a 1764 sale of the factory's stock mentions 'curious Figures, all Sorts of ornamental Toys, Knife-handles, and variety of all Kinds of useful Sorts, etc.'. With this and other information it now seems strange that Vauxhall porcelain went unrecognised as such for many years. A group of figures was classified as Longton Hall, an early Staffordshire factory, and many other wares were grouped together and provisionally attributed to the Liverpool factory of William Ball. Archaeological excavation, however, has finally established a Vauxhall provenance and we now know that it produced a very wide range of goods, including vases, figures, mortars, flowerpots, candlesticks and over twenty different sauceboat designs. Crisp later attempted to re-establish his factory at Bovey Tracey in Devon but it appears that very little porcelain was made there. The venture did, however, have some lasting significance as William Cookworthy, proprietor of the Plymouth factory, employed three workmen from Bovey Tracey in December 1767 and it is likely that they had originally worked at Vauxhall.

With so much porcelain being imported and later produced in 18th century London, it is not surprising that the London china trade flourished. In 1762 the important dealer, Charles Vere of Fleet Street, produced a trade card advertising that he sold tea and tea tables, chocolate, snuff, fans and drinking glasses as well as china, and in 1766 he insured his stock for the very large sum of £4,000. Chinamen listed in London directories rise from eighteen in 1753 to fifty-two in 1774. The majority were in the City and in 1785 a number of them formed the China Club, a trade association which appeared to operate an auction ring to control wholesale prices. It was effective enough to force the Derby works to back down over its spring sales to the nobility, William Duesbury the younger assuring its members in 1785 that they were happy to sell their wares 'thro' the medium of Gentlemen of the China Trade than thro' any other mode whatsoever'. It was not long, however, before the Club incurred the wrath of the powerful East India Company and forty-seven china dealers, not all members, were defendants in a lawsuit in 1788. Although the final outcome of the case is not

entirely clear, the Club appears to have disbanded about this time and the East India Company established regulations to try and prevent improper practices. The chinamen, however, continued to be influential through the next century. When Wedgwood was planning to give up its showroom in 1827 it was reported that it was 'most desirable to do only with the first and most respectable...the leading houses are very shy till they find out who you do with'. When the Corporation commissioned porcelain in the 19th century it often dealt with these businesses. Most have long since disappeared, but the splendid shop of Thomas Goode in South Audley Street in Mayfair is a surviving example.

It has already been noted that both Bow and Chelsea had showrooms where their wares could be displayed and other manufacturers followed suit. Worcester had its own warehouse in Aldersgate Street by 1756 and the Suffolk factory of Lowestoft had a warehouse in Aldermanbury in 1763. William Duesbury at first sold Chelsea and Derby porcelain at auction in London and by 1770 was dealing with at least five London chinamen. Eventually he leased the Castle Tavern in Covent Garden and then extended his premises by leasing the Bedford Head Tavern next door. The most prestigious factories continued to have their own London showrooms well into the 19th century. They were places where the finest wares could be displayed and commissions could be placed. The showroom manager could also keep the factory informed of the latest demands and fashion trends. In 1786, for instance, Joseph Lygo wrote to William Duesbury in Derby requesting good colour patterns as the other manufacturers were only doing blue and gold and white and gold.

Before finally ending this survey, I should mention briefly the existence of various important decorating establishments in London. The most famous early business was that of James Giles who had premises at Berwick Street, Soho. He is known to have purchased between forty and fifty thousand pieces of Worcester porcelain for decoration in the years 1771-1774 and the workshop's distinctive designs can also be found on Liverpool, Derby and Chinese porcelain and also on glass. The firm of Taylor & Abbot of Fleet Street, who employed their own decorators, claimed in 1785 that they could produce a service of any pattern within a few days of an order being placed. They also specialised in painting arms and crests on porcelain and could match broken pieces. Earlier in the century armorial wares might have been ordered via the London coffee houses from China, but delivery could take two years or more. The quality of London decoration was well known and it has been pointed out that, when the male Derby painters were protesting about the employment of women, one of their arguments was that they had not been trained in London. Edward Withers, who went to Derby in 1789, had previously been employed by the London chinaman, Richard Horwood. Some of the most beautiful porcelain of the early 19th century, made at the Welsh factory of Nantgarw, was painted in London at various decorating establishments. Gradually, however, the leading factories preferred to employ their own decorators and a firm such as Rockingham in Yorkshire was able to secure elaborate royal and aristocratic commissions in the late 1820s and early 1830s using its own painters, who often moved from one factory to another as business declined or expanded.

I hope I have done enough in this paper to demonstrate the importance of London in the history of English porcelain and I will end today's survey by quoting words from

a ballad which probably derive from an incident recorded in a London china shop in 1773:

On Holborn Hill the first of May  
The Truth I do declare Sir,  
A furious Bull did run away  
Which made the folks to stare Sir.  
This Bull was stout, this Bull was strong.  
He ran and made no stop, Sir,  
Till horns and all he rush'd headlong  
Into a China Shop Sir!...  
The cups and platters there he dish'd  
And knock'd the Mugs about, Sir!  
The china-men they swore and fish'd  
But could not get him out, Sir.  
And such a clatter made he then,  
And such a great uproar, Sir,  
With Sheriffs, Mayor and Aldermen, Was never heard before, Sir!...

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