THE PORCELAIN MANUFACTURERS OF DERBY, ENGLAND

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Today I would like to attempt to give you the genealogy of Royal Crown Derby porcelain. Whether or not it is a direct descendant of the old Derby porcelain, I will leave to you to decide. Even the experts disagree so you'll be in good company whatever your decision

The old Derby Porcelain Works was typical of most 18th century British porcelain factories. Whereas such famous factories as Meissen in Germany and Sevres in France were supported by royal or aristocratic patronage, English companies were private enterprises with none of the financial security such patronage would have afforded. The English companies' survival depended on commercial success in a highly competitive market. A failed kiln firing or an expensive mistake in mixing and drying clay could actually push a company over the brink into bankruptcy.

Derby was typical, except that despite changes of ownership, and at least one lapse of quality during a severe financial crisis, it was one of only two 18th century porcelain factories that survived for a hundred years, and produced porcelain of outstanding quality. Other factories went under, often within a year or two of their beginnings.

There seems to be general agreement that the Derby porcelain factory was founded on Nottingham Road in Derby, England around 1748 or 1750 by Andre Planche. Planche was a French Hugenot who had trained as a goldsmith and served his apprenticeship in London. He came to Derby and experimented with ingredients which he hoped would produce a material similar to that being successfully developed at Meissen in Germany.

The first known partnership at Derby was drawn up, but not signed, in 1756 between Planche, John Heath who supplied the financial backing,

and William Duesbury. Duesbury had been a porcelain enameler and decorator in London, and he seems to have brought considerable business acumen to the partnership. It is believed that Planche soon returned to his goldsmithing, and Duesbury came to occupy the leading role in the factory's affairs, a position he held until he died. Duesbury acquired the Chelsea factory in 1770, and the Bow factory in 1775 or 1776. John Heath went bankrupt in 1779. Thus Duesbury, by the time of his death in 1786, was sole owner of Derby, Chelsea and Bow, and each acquisition had increased Derby's range and quality of products. Because of Duesbury's pioneering skill, Derby pieces became style leaders.

Originally Derby made a creamy, soft-paste porcelain and was unique among early English factories because for its first six years, it concentrated on porcelain figures, vases and ornamental items only. In 1756, about the time Duesbury took control, production assumed a more conventional course. For the next twelve years or so the Meissen influence was so strong in the shapes, decorative styles, and figure models that Derby actually advertised its wares as indistinguishable from Meissen.

This was an exaggeration, of course. Although the English factories made some excellent porcelain, Meissen maintained its forefront position until the Meissen factory was destroyed during the Prussian invasion of Saxony. The Prussians attempted to reestablish the industry at Berlin, but failed.

After Meissen, everyone started to copy the styles and techniques of the Sevres factory in France. This went on until Sevres became a victim of the French Revolution. I should explain that in these early days, everyone copied everyone else. This was quite open and unashamed. Myra Challand, in her book Derby China through Three Centuries, calls copying "an international activity."

The period from 1770 to 1784 in Derby's history is known as the Derby-Chelsea period. Experiments carried out at Chesea both before and after Duesbury's ownership, resulted in improvements of color and of glaze. Bow, which had also been acquired by Duesbury, experimented with the addition of bone ash, to add flexibility to the porcelain recipe, and thereby also made important contributions to Derby quality.

William Duesbury had persuaded many aristocratic and royal customers to purchase his products, and the factory had produced several figure groups featuring members of the royal family. In 1775 George III granted the Royal Warrant to Derby, and the crown was incorporated thereafter into the factory mark.

Great technical strides in the industry allowed figure making, in particular, to gain greatly in precision. The figures of contemporary statesmen, writers, and actors were "very competent likenesses," something never attempted before. Several exceptional modelers worked for Derby beginning in 1779. One, Pierre Stephan, was exceptional and remained for 25 years. This fidelity to one work place, however, was unusual in the porcelain industry.

I'd like to say here that the story of the porcelain modelers and decorators, both at Derby and at other English factories, would make a fascinating paper in itself. The workmanship, quality, specialties such as figurines, flower painting, landscapes, etc. are almost endless, and these artists tended to drift from one factory to another, confusing the poor collector about who worked where--and when.

These men were often eccentrics, with all the artistic temperament of artists in other fields. They disliked regimentation, were difficult (and sometimes impossible) to control, and often unwilling to work regularly, or for the required 10 1/2 hours per day, six days a week.

But they were as essential to the industry as the quality of the porcelain itself.

One of William Duesbury's great strengths was his recognition of this and his ingenious methods of controlling his artists' time and quality as much as it could be done. Myra Challand says Duesbury used "binding contracts" sworn on the Bible and before God; and a system of fines (even for being in a part of the factory not their own place of work). He lent his artists money and even paid necessary debts, which he used like the wages he sometimes held back for several weeks, to induce an artist to complete unfinished work he owed Duesbury. Sometimes a worker was incorrigible and Duesbury lost money, but his results seemed better than most.

It is difficult for us to realize today that the idea of a structured working week became the "norm" only as a result of "the progressive factory system and the Victorian work ethic." Before that no such concept appears to have existed.

Duesbury carefully supervised potting and decoration, and he was tireless in traveling between his factories and the London showroom.

He also extracted from employees agreements to keep factory secrets and instituted work-study methods to make sure men were paid only at the rate agreed for the completion of satisfactory work.

The more one learns about Duesbury, the easier it is to understand his survival in a very tough business!

On the other hand, employees had much ground for complaint. The bottle kilns used from the end of the 17th century to the 1950's "contaminated the skylines and blackened the air for almost 200 years."

The buildings at Nottingham Road, doubtless typical of their time, had small, high windows and "would have been dark, cold in winter, hot in summer and surrounded by industrial hazards: toxic colours, dust

disease, and intense heat from kilns and dtying stoves."

"Wedging clay, still done by craft potters, which involved cutting and slapping together sections of solid clay to mix it to a suitable consistency for shaping, ruined lungs and back. This work was often done by cheap labor--the women and children."

The lifting and loading and climbing up and down high ladders inside baking hot ovens, burned away hair, eyebrows and moustaches. Mixing and dipping wares into glaze vats filled with lead crystal particles caused lead poisoning. Painting and gilding in poor light ruined eyesight; bending over for long periods of time caused distortions of the spine and neck."

The beautiful 18th and 19th century porcelain we prize so highly, came into being at a high cost to the many dedicated artisans and artists who created it.

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After 1784 Duesbury did away with his old factories outside Derby and concentrated his entire production operation in that town.

John Spargo in his book Early American Pottery and China gives a good picture of the problems the English potters encountered in trying to develop a china "body" that would be delicate in appearance but impervious to damage by boiling liquids. He writes, "...the English potteries at first devoted themselves to the artificial type (china) having glass and sand as its most important components. They seemed to have encountered great difficulty in making ware of this type, particularly in firing it in the kilns.

"As early as 1749," he says, "Thomas Frye of the Bow Pottery" tried a process "in which bone ash was used with a small amount of glass." From that time on the amount of calcined bone was increased and the glass was decreased proportionately.

This went on until 1800 when "Josiah Spode entirely abandoned the use of glass and made porcelain of a paste or body composed of china-clay (kaolin), calcined bone and feldspar (petuntse). His formula became world-famous. To this day Spode's formula with proportions of the ingredients varying somewhat in different factories, remains the standard English type. The degree of softness of the paste depends on the amount of bone ash used."

Spargo says that some "natural hard-paste porcelain has been made in England since the middle of the 18th century to the present...notably Parian and biscuit porcelain."

"William Cockworthy, a chemist of Plymouth and pioneer of the Plymouth and Bristol potteries, was the first English potter to make a genuine hard paste porcelain." The English had even found sources of kaolin and feldspar (petuntse) in Cornwall and elsewhere. But they have had less success with it, except for Parian and biscuit ware, than their preferred "bone china". Derby is mentioned as one factory that had had a particularly difficult time controlling the quality of its china "body". While Derby turned out much exquisite porcelain, that inability to control quality must have cost them dearly.

William Duesbury's son, William Duesbury II, inherited a thriving business when his father died in 1786. Like his father he was an astute businessman and a shrewd manager. He carried the factory along in fine style between his father's death and his own death ten years later. In 1795 he took Michael Kean into partnership.

Kean was a very fine miniaturist and forward-thinking businesman. It was his idea to extend the original factory buildings onto a plot of leased land adjacent to the original site.

Duesbury II died two years after taking Kean on, and Kean married his widow, Elizabeth. He got her share of the business and her money and

later they separated.

Kean was portrayed in a contemporary account by John Haslem, as a wild-tempered Irishman whose rages resulted in actual physical attacks on the workmen. These, in turn, kept a weapon on hand to defend themselves. Kean operated the factory until 1811 but not surprisingly "was disliked and finally forced out of business."

Kean went back to Ireland and the management of the factory devolved on Robert Bloor, a clerk, who took over the lease of the site, and the day-to-day running of the business. Bloor was not a potter and knew little about the technicalities of making and decorating porcelain. He inherited many problems, most of them financial.

The Bloor period of management coincided with the use of the new bone china body, introduced about the 1790s, and also the use of the newer, heavier oil colors for decoration. These two changes, along with the adoption of mercury gilding which replaced the honey gold of the 18th century, resulted in very richly colored, flamboyant designs known as "Japans". These were English copies of Japanese export pieces made purely to comply with Western taste, in cobalt blue, iron red, and gold.

Virtually all English factories made versions of these patterns in every type ceramic body, "in a profusion of imitations."

Bloor took advantage of this profuse pattern style. For one thing, the heavy, rich colors and gold appealed to King George IV and he remained a patron of the factory. Also, the dramatic coloring served to conceal, with decoration, minor flaws which previously would have made the pieces unacceptable to the public. "This meant full utilization of kiln loads," imperfect as well as perfect, "with the finished goods being sold in enormous auctions" in order to bring in needed money as rapidly as possible. Bloor is also said to have brought out imperfect pieces from storage, and decorated and sold these, too, at his auctions.

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Bloor Derby porcelain has a poor reputation among collectors for the very practices that Robert Bloor used to keep the factory afloat at all. Even so, Myra Challand tells us that "the desperate, demanding years brought about serious illness and for about the last 20 years of his life Bloor was in an asylum." During his illness (1828-1844) the factory was under the control of James Thomason.

From 1844 Robert Bloor's daughter, and her husband, Thomas Clarke, managed the factory. Finally disaster became inevitable in 1848 when Robert Bloor died. Challand writes: "The company which the Duesburys had created, which had succeeded in spite of rejecting the 'factory system' established by Josiah Wedgwood, and which had rivaled Europe's finest products for almost a hundred years, died too."

Twenty barges were loaded with ware, moulds, patterns and machines, and what was left of the Derby Porcelain Company's assets were ferried to the factory of Samuel Boyle, the major buyer, at Fenton in Stoke-on-Trent.

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But a small group of Derby craftsmen.refused to accept defeat. They lacked the means to bargain for the big factory; but they had the skills and the standards and the will to nourish a small offspring of the parent plant that had contributed so much of beauty and quality.

William Locker, Samuel Fearn, John Henson, Samuel Sharpe, James Hill and Sampson Hancock started their own factory on King Street in Derby in 1848, and styled themselves "Locker and Co. Late Bloor".

The buildings the group chose for their new venture were clustered on King Street, close to a 17th century public house. The side had in early times accommodated a Roman-Christian St. Helen's church and Norman abbey. Later it was the site of an imposing townhouse, and later still a spar factory.

The group moved moulds, machinery, raw materials and pattern books not already disposed of to other manufacturers, from the old factory to "begin a new chapter of an old book."

Locker, having been chief clerk at Nottingham Road, assumed control of the new factory until his death in 1859. The partners then took in George Stevenson, a draper, and from 1859-1863 the company was styled "Stevenson, Sharpe & Co", and later "Stevenson and Co." It is not clear whether Sampson Hancock began acting as manager at Locker's death, but this seems likely since Stevenson was a draper, and more likely to have brought financing to the firm than managerial skills. Sampson was certainly manager from 1868, when the company style became "Sampson Hancock" until his death.

The workmanship at King Street was a continuation of the Duesbufy search for quality. The King Street premises continued production in craftsman's style, used methods and materials that varied little from earlier periods. They continued to make the old figures (dwarfs, elephants, seasons, peacocks, Japans); enamels became brighter and for the first time figures were painted with blue eyes. They also made a brighter gold.

The King Street factory never, at any time, employed more than 40 hands compared to an estimated one to two hundred at the old factory on Nottingham Road. While it is known that china blanks from other potteries were brought in for decoration, the King Street group continued to make the majority of the porcelain pieces they decorated.

Sampson Hancock, who was a fine painter as well as manager, continued to run the company until 1898. After his death the works were carried on by James Robinson, his grandson, until 1916. They were then purchased by W. Larcombe who, the following year, took F. Howard Paget into partnership. During the last few years Paget was in control, at the last with H. Werner as manager.

The book, Royal Crown Derby, by Twitchett and Bailey, states, "It is very important to clear up two points about the King Street factory. (1) "...in the very early days the old Nottingham Road mark was used, as well as the listed marks. It was not...until Llewellyn Jewitt, the ceramic historian, suggested in 1862 that the S&H mark should be used that this was adopted with a variation of the old mark, crossed swords not crossed batons, as has been previously stated by other historians." (2) Dating of King Street productions requires a great deal of care as unlike other factories, they did not adopt the "England" mark in accordance with the American McKinley Tariff & Trades Act, 1891. After 1862 the same mark was used unaltered until 1935. The King Street group remained rebels throughout their history. Much late King Street production is therefore offered for sale as 19th century, erroneously described as Stevenson & Hancock.

Beginning in 1877, the King Street factory had a keen competitor right in its own back yard. Edward Phillips and William Litherland--a Liverpool glass and china stockist and a Worcester potter--formed the Derby Crown Porcelain Company in 1875 and built a factory on Osmaston Road in Derby. They installed the finest equipment and spared no expense to make their factory the most modern in Europe. There were three biscuit (1st firing) kilns, and three glost (2nd firing) kilns and improved technology for doing most of the work that had previously been done entirely by hand. Over 400 workers were hired, which must have been welcome news for the people of Derby, and new cottages were built to house key workers.

Derby Crown Porcelain Co. was confident that no competition could be offered by King Street despite its long pedigree and Royal Charter. Bone china was the new company's main product, but this was augmented by earthenware, Parian ware and eggshell china. Decorative styles were,

throughout the industry, influenced by the activities of archaeologists who were bringing back to England ancient objects from foreign lands; by all things from India, at that time being promoted as the Jewel of the British Empire; and by an avananche of exports from Japan after the Shoguns were overthrown there in 1868.

The Sotheby Encyclopedia of Porcelain states: "Large quantities of the Imari pattern were produced. Then as now they were enormously popular. But it was the superbly strong ground colors and outstanding gilding and jeweling which set the Royal Crown factory apart. Finest of all the decorators was Desire Leroy, a Frenchman who had trained at Sevres and who specialized in meticulously accurate painting and gilding. Other skilled painters at Derby were Rouse and Dean. Their work stood viewing under a magnifying glass and rank with other Victorian masterpieces...but overall Derby's painting did not reach the height attained by (some) other factories."

The period between the beginning of the King Street factory (1848) and the Osmaston Road factory (1877) had seen enormous advances in technology. Most of the new ideas were unacceptable or impractical in the King Street building, but were automatically incorporated into the Osmaston Road operation.

In 1916 the larger company, now the Royal Crown Derby Porcelain Company, after being awarded it own royal charter by Queen Victoria on July 1, 1890, attempted a merger with the smaller company, but for some reason the deal fell through. It wasn't until the dark days of the 1926 General Strike in England and the 1929 Wall Street Crash in the United States, which crippled the industries of both countries, that both King Street and Osmaston Road suffered reverses and found themselves working at reduced capacity. This situation finally resulted in the Royal Crown Derby Company acquiring the King Street factory for £4,000

in 1935. The purchase price covered equipment, work people, the right to patterns, moulds, and the old mark with its 18th century Royal Charter. According to Royal Crown Derby by Twitchett and Bailey, the purchase of the King Street factory by the Royal Crown Derby Porcelain Co. in 1935 "forged the direct link with the old Nottingham Road factory and has validated the claim of china having been made continuously since about 1750 in the famous old town of Derby." While they don't claim direct descent for the Royal Crown Derby Factory, the inference may be there.

The old Duesbury mark was used occasionally after this purchase, which still causes enormous identification problems for collectors. It is possible for figures marked in this way to be genuinely mistaken for King Street work of an earlier era.

In the 1960s, although 85% of all Derby production was being exported, the factory was so badly in need of expensive renovation that only a takeover by Allied English potteries saved the company from financial disaster. In 1969 the company became part of the Royal Doulton group, itself a subsidiary of the Pearson financial organization.

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