

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Serving dish, c1827; a Rococo Revival vase with serpent handles, c1832; teapot in the 'half-orange' shape with very fine landscapes, c1825; a serving dish from Alcock's first year of porcelain production, c1822. **BOTTOM OF THE PAGE** Rare 'wave-edge' vase, c1825.



THE ALCOCK MYSTERY

Willa Latham goes on the trail of one of the most enigmatic figures in British porcelain

Last month we looked at the beautiful but often misunderstood porcelain of Rockingham in Yorkshire. This month, we're back in Staffordshire, looking at an equally misunderstood yet important factory, and the man who unravelled its mystery in recent years.

Often mistaken for Coalport, Minton, Ridgway or, indeed, Rockingham, the porcelain of Samuel Alcock has remained something of an enigma. No books have been written on this prominent factory, and even reputable dealers sometimes sell these pieces under different names, unaware of the typical styles, shapes and patterns of Alcock porcelain.

Samuel Alcock was born in 1799. A precocious young boy, he was apprenticed to his uncle, a well-known businessman. Alcock was not born into a potting family, he came to produce porcelain out of his business acumen rather



than tradition. In 1822 he went into partnership with Ralph Stephenson, a potter of blue-printed earthenware. They started to produce porcelain and soon the factory was thriving. Alcock applied his business instinct in every way possible, styling the factory Samuel Alcock & Co in 1826, while Stephenson took a back seat before retirement. During the 1820s, the company produced beautiful wares with flower paintings in a small number of typical shapes, alongside more traditional earthenware.

In 1840, Alcock opened an impressive new factory and this is when production could really be ramped up. The factory was inaugurated with a splendid 'Grand Ball and Banquet', hosting fellow potters and local nobility, as well as a supper the next day for 900 friends and employees,

The Murray Pollinger Collection/Gentle Rattle of China

served across nine inns. Imagine the buzz around town: the lavishly decorated ballroom, complete with Messrs Ridgway, Minton, Wedgwood and many more, sipping their drinks.

Alcock had a fine instinct for the middle-class Victorian hunger for pretty homeware: tableware, vases, busts, baskets... the list goes on. Not being born into a tradition, he was held back by neither a particular style, nor good taste: if Alcock knew something would sell, he made it. Deep ground colours, beautiful flowers and landscapes, Rococo Revival frills and, interestingly, sometimes all of those crammed together into one design. He even attracted some top potters, who also designed some very refined items. You can't quite put your finger on the Alcock style.

And yet the name is hardly found in the market today. Why is this factory, so important to the Victorian middle class, so invisible? For one, hardly any porcelain was marked. And, furthermore, the pattern books disappeared. Not only that, the pattern numbers themselves seem completely nonsensical, confusing every collector.

For many years I had been looking for information. I had heard on the grapevine that there was a gentleman in Norfolk who knew all about Alcock, but I couldn't find out who he was, so I remained in the dark. Then one day last year, I received a call asking me to help a family work out what to do with a large porcelain collection that had been owned by their father. And I quickly realised that the gentleman I had been looking for had posthumously found his way to me.

Literary agent Murray Pollinger spent years travelling up and down the country buying pieces of Alcock and putting them together like a large puzzle, with the help of his friend, Stephen Bressey. Murray delved into museum archives, patiently photocopying

scraps of evidence and sticking them in folders. Slowly, a picture emerged. I found stacks of scrap paper with long lists of numbers scribbled down in pencil. Numbers and more numbers... until, finally, he had cracked the formula: there was logic to the pattern numbers after all! Together with Bressey he wrote an excellent article.

Murray was a kind, modest man – even friends and the people he bought from didn't know about his research. He would buy a piece of 'Minton', smile politely and add it to his Alcock collection. He didn't talk about it. After he died, porcelain cabinets and boxes of research notes were sitting there, lovingly packed away in a little side building at his country house, perfectly ordered in his trademark style, but with no instructions.

When I was contacted by the family for advice on what to do with this legacy, I felt heartbroken that I had missed out on meeting this fine gentleman, who I'd been trying to track down for years. Yet he has now become part of my life, as I have not only befriended his wonderful family (and cats), but am thrilled to be able to honour his legacy and enable the mystery of Samuel Alcock to be deciphered at last. Thousands of pieces are hiding in plain sight and, thanks to Murray and Stephen, we can now finally begin to appreciate them. If this has piqued your interest, sit tight, as both the porcelain and the research are set to appear in public later this year...

Willa Latham

Read Willa's blog gentlerattleofchina.com, follow her @gentlerattleofchina



FROM FAR LEFT Floral 'true trio', c1843; teapot and milk jug in the 'written' shape, c1826; porcelain basket, c1840.