



TOP ROW FROM LEFT Chinese Qianlong coffee cup decorated in London, c1770; large Chinese Yongzheng charger, c1730; Chinese Qianlong teapot, c1750. **MIDDLE ROW FROM LEFT** Hybrid hard-paste teapot by New Hall with Chinese design, c1790; the 13 European factories in Canton, c1875; (inset) business card of William Hussey, China & Glass Man in London, 1764. **BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT** Chinese Chongzhen ewer for resale to Turkey, c1650; Miles Mason saucer with Chinese design, c1805; Miles Mason teapot with 'Pagoda' design, c1815. **FACING PAGE** A very early New Hall coffee cup, c1785.



The road to Staffordshire

*East India Company imports came to a halt in the late 18th century, and it's here that Staffordshire found its feet as a major centre of porcelain production, says **Willa Latham***



Having admired the beautiful 18th-century British porcelain made in London, Derby and Worcester, it is time we turned our attention to Staffordshire, the next area of expansion for the industry. But

before we travel to Stoke, let's first set the scene...

Chinese porcelain had been imported to Britain in huge quantities since the early 18th century, largely fuelled by the growing British appetite for tea, which in turn sparked a desire for teapots and cups. Much cheaper and more plentiful than British-made porcelain, Chinese wares (consisting mostly of blue-and-white 'Nankin') served a dual purpose on the long voyage from Canton (nowadays Guangzhou), valuable both as a commodity and as ballast: as tea is too light to keep a ship upright in rough waters, the porcelain provided stability.

The East India Company had been importing tea and porcelain since the early 1700s and held a state monopoly on both products. In fact, in those days you could say that the East India Company *was* the state; they held all the power and ran most foreign affairs.

Upon arrival, the china was auctioned off to 'chinamen', who would then split up the lots for retail. One of these chinamen was Miles Mason, an ambitious young Yorkshireman who had come to London and married the daughter of a fellow trader in 1782.

At this time the price of Chinese porcelain wasn't just low – it was getting lower all the time, particularly once Mason had established himself in the trade. Mason and a few other chinamen had formed a 'ring', fixing the East India Company auctions to keep the prices low, and then selling the lots to each other at depressed prices. The East India Company took the rogue traders to court, but the judges – who, like everyone else, despised the power the EIC wielded – declared that Britain was a free country, and threw out the case.

There were other problems with Chinese porcelain, too. The suppliers in Canton were just as untrustworthy as the London chinamen: matched lots turned out to be mismatched, breakages were common, and many pieces were substandard. This was not like making a purchase on Amazon; if it took two years for a shipment to arrive, you couldn't simply return it, and so the East India Company was often stuck with dead stock. Meanwhile, the government was imposing ever-higher duties to pay for the ongoing wars with France, which added to the East India Company's costs.

Enough was enough, and in 1791 the East India Company decided to stop importing Chinese porcelain.

They didn't tell anyone, and it took the chinamen three years to work out that there was no new supply! This, of course, created a huge shortage of teaware, just at the point when tea had become the main drink in Britain.

Mason, being at the heart of this import crisis, realised there was a business opportunity. He could see there was money to be made, and in 1796 he started a partnership with experienced potter Thomas Wolfe in Liverpool. A few years later he founded his own Staffordshire factory making 'British Nankin', effectively replacing the 'missing' Chinese porcelain.

Meanwhile, about 10 years earlier, the recipe for hard-paste porcelain had arrived in Staffordshire from the South West where William Cookworthy had been making porcelain, first in Plymouth and then in Bristol, since 1768. At the time, this was the only true hard-paste porcelain, considered to be the purest form of porcelain, in Britain. But Cookworthy's very small enterprise failed, and in 1781 his business partner Richard Champion took the patented recipe north to a group of six earthenware potters in Staffordshire. The cost of fuel and workers was much lower in Staffordshire, while the workers were highly skilled, and Champion offered them exclusive use of the recipe if they bought him out as a collective. And so, a new factory was born; at first it functioned in various kilns with workers provided by all six partners, and later it settled in premises that were to be called New Hall, where it would become a successful factory with a huge output.

New Hall porcelain was innovative; as the original Cookworthy recipe was expensive to produce and had weaknesses, the shrewd Staffordshire men tinkered with it so they could fire the wares at a lower temperature, saving on fuel costs. The result was a beautiful, strong, slightly greyish 'hybrid hard-paste' porcelain. Even when much whiter bone china became the standard, many of the more traditional customers still preferred this grey porcelain as it looked and felt more like the Chinese porcelain they were used to.

Of course, neither the Mason or the New Hall porcelain recipe would stay secret for long; soon, many potters in Staffordshire, already a major centre of earthenware production, started making porcelain. What followed was an entirely new wave of porcelain production... but we'll save that for next time!

Willa Latham

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