



Chamberlain's WORCESTER

Robert Chamberlain was an accomplished decorator and businessman, who helped to shape the future Royal Worcester factory, says Willa Latham

Last month we looked at the rise of the successive Flight & Barr partnerships that took the 18th-century Worcester factory to new heights during the following century. But this might not have happened without the company's great rival: Chamberlain's Worcester.

Robert Chamberlain (c1736–98) had been head of the decoration department of the original Worcester factory. But, when it came under the ownership of John Flight in 1783, Chamberlain left to set up his own decoration studio across the street, adding a shop soon after. Crucially, Chamberlain took many of Worcester's artists with him, which added to Flight's troubles: having taken on an outmoded, failing establishment without enough decorators, it would take a decade for Flight to revive the business.

Chamberlain, on the other hand, had found a lucrative niche in the market. Not only did he sell many different kinds of porcelain and glass in his shop, but he also had access to blanks for decorating, via his financial backer, Thomas Turner of Caughley in

Shropshire. And not only that: as Flight had been left short of decorators, he was forced to send many of his wares across the road for Chamberlain's to decorate.

Thus began a wonderfully confusing period for anyone trying to identify Worcester or Caughley porcelain from the 1780s – could it be a Flight piece decorated by Chamberlain's, or perhaps a Caughley design imitating Flight but decorated by Chamberlain's... And, to add to the confusion, Chamberlain, unhappy with the quality of the wares he was receiving from Caughley, soon began making his own porcelain. This then set off another chain of imitation with Caughley copying Chamberlain's!

A pair of armorial plates (pictured above) demonstrates the problem. The one below was made by Caughley, the other above it by Chamberlain's, and both are decorated as part of the same Chamberlain's dessert service. The key difference is the porcelain itself: Flight & Barr used the original soapstone-based recipe used at Worcester, which resulted in a dense porcelain that is slightly 'oily' to the touch, while

Willa Latham; Eric Nilson collection

Chamberlain's continued in the Caughley style with a hybrid hard-paste porcelain that was harder and more greyish in appearance with a translucent shine. Eventually both started marking their wares, ending the confusion.

The Caughley factory didn't last beyond 1799, but the two Worcester factories each carved out a share of the star-studded market; their rivalry driving superb design and execution. While Flight & Barr received a Royal Warrant in 1788, Lord Admiral Nelson snubbed the factory on a visit in 1802, placing a large order with Chamberlain's instead. In 1807, a visit and Royal Warrant from the Prince of Wales (soon to become Prince Regent) followed. These Royal Warrants were important advertisements for a factory: once a royal was a patron, the rest of the nobility would follow. Even the nine-year-old Princess Victoria bought her first porcelain trinket, presumably a little toy animal, at the Chamberlain's shop in London, marking the beginning of her lifelong passion for porcelain.

Chamberlain shamelessly used the designs of his previous employer and now rival, which included the Royal Lily pattern, the Queen's pattern and the Kylin (dragons in compartments) pattern. Having taken some extraordinary artists with him, he continued to attract new ones. George Davis, who had worked at the original factory, painted fantastical 'fancy birds'. The famous Thomas Baxter painted for the factory during the last two years before his untimely death in 1821. Thomas Steele, previously at Derby, added his beautiful fruits to the Chamberlain's style. Even Fidelle Duvivier, of Derby fame, spent two years teaching apprentices how to paint his beautiful monochrome landscapes. But perhaps the most unique talent was Robert Chamberlain's grandson, Humphrey, whose life, like Baxter's, was cut short by an early death. Humphrey Chamberlain became famous for his superb figural paintings on dessert services, particularly scenes from Shakespeare's plays. Can you

imagine the lively chatter of 18 people trying to identify the plays whose scenes were only revealed once everyone had finished their desserts?

Like its great rivals, Chamberlain's excelled at large table services and made stunning ornamental wares. Its time of triumph was the first two decades of the 19th century, when British nobility spent eye-watering sums on porcelain. But with the rise of the new middle class, who desired more practical wares, alongside the sudden emergence of Staffordshire porcelain, the rivals couldn't keep up. In 1840 they stumbled into an awkward marriage of convenience with an ailing Chamberlain's buying up an equally ailing Flight, Barr & Barr. It wasn't until the 1860s, when Grainger's, a third and minor rival, was added to the rather unhappy union, that the great Royal Worcester factory emerged. Once successfully amalgamated into Royal Worcester, however, the traditions and skills of these three great factories would inspire an entirely new chapter. First, though, we must return to Staffordshire to see what was happening there... but that's for next time!

Willa Latham

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP A plate with the 'Independence' pattern, made for American clients to celebrate the newly formed USA, c1795; a toy teapot painted in the manner of Fidelle Duvivier, 1813–1816; a coffee cup with the 'Kylin' pattern taken from the Worcester factory, c1810. **FACING PAGE FROM LEFT** A jug in the 'Best Queens' pattern, taken from Worcester, 1795–1800; a porcelain basket painted with fruits by Thomas Steele, 1830–32, £1,250; a dish with the pattern designed for Lord Admiral Nelson, c1805, £425, both *Gentle Rattle of China*; a pair of armorial plates, one made by Chamberlain's (top) and one by Caughley (bottom), both decorated by Chamberlain's for the same dessert service.