



FROM LEFT A Nantgarw dish decorated in London 1818–1820 that sold at Bonhams; Paris fluted tea cup c1820, £575 for a trio of tea cup, coffee cup and saucer, *Gentle Rattle of China*; Nantgarw plate decorated in London, 1818–1820, sold at Bonhams; Nantgarw plate decorated by William Billingsley c1818, at Nantgarw Chinaworks Museum.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Nantgarw plate decorated by Thomas Pardoe 1818–1820, sold at Bonhams; a Swansea plate decorated in the style of William Pollard 1815–1817, sold at Bonhams; Nantgarw cream tureen decorated in London with typical ‘Billingsley’ roses 1818–1825, Nantgarw Chinaworks Museum; Swansea teapot c1816, *Gentle Rattle of China*.



Wonderful Wales

For a short but glorious period, South Wales was once the epicentre of fine porcelain manufacture and decoration, setting a benchmark for British wares, says Willa Latham

This month, our journey takes us to Swansea in South Wales, and the porcelain factory at Nantgarw (pronounced nant-GA-roo).

In the long history of British porcelain, the Welsh factories could be regarded as a flash in the pan. But while they only produced porcelain for a few short years, they had a lasting impact on British porcelain production. At the heart of their story lies William Billingsley, a troubled genius.

You may remember Billingsley as one of the famous Derby artists who changed the way English roses were painted. But this was just one of his many achievements. His true passion was making porcelain and he was determined to create a British porcelain that could rival its French equivalent.

RIGHT A Swansea plate decorated by Henry Morris 1815–1817, sold at Bonhams.

In 1795 he left Derby to strike out on his own, and a succession of failed businesses followed. First he produced very fine porcelain in Pinxton, but ran out of money; the pattern was to repeat itself in Mansfield, in Brampton, and at the Worcester factory. The trouble was, Billingsley’s exceptionally fine porcelain had very high kiln waste, which means that nine out of 10 items were ruined during firing.

By 1813, Billingsley was in so much debt that he changed his name to Beeley and ran off to Wales, where he set up yet another factory, this time in Nantgarw. Although small, this factory would make history in its few short years, and today it is a wonderful museum with a working kiln – you should visit if you can.

Billingsley was soon making the finest porcelain ever seen in Britain but, with 90 per cent kiln waste, the factory was just not viable.

In 1816, the Swansea factory, which had tried and failed to produce its own



porcelain, invited Billingsley to help them. He quickly established a beautiful, commercially viable porcelain and also trained a team of talented young decorators, among them David Evans, William Pollard, Henry Morris and George Beddow. And it was here, at Swansea, that an entirely new style of flower painting was developed: free, fresh and informal, featuring graceful fine flowers and humble weeds scattered over a simple white ground. Sensational in its day, Swansea’s porcelain quickly became all the rage among the London elite.

But despite this success, Billingsley was not satisfied with the quality at Swansea and he returned to Nantgarw to try again. Once more, he raised the bar, achieving an extraordinarily fine, extremely white almost translucent porcelain. The market went crazy over these Welsh wares and smart retailers were quick to place large orders. Billingsley, who had no head for business, happily obliged, despite ongoing issues with kiln wastage, and for two short years Nantgarw was once again producing sublime porcelain, mostly decorated in London.

Meanwhile, Swansea continued to produce the porcelain that Billingsley had produced for them, much of which was decorated in-house by the artists Billingsley had trained. The shapes designed under the guidance of Billingsley were a feast of neoclassical perfection and elegance. The decoration was fresh and novel, and soon adopted by decorators across Britain.

But the party couldn’t last. Within two years Billingsley had once again burnt through his investors’ money. John Rose at Coalport, who lost business in London to Nantgarw, got wind of their difficulties, and

invited Billingsley to try his recipe in Coalport. Billingsley escaped in the dead of night, leaving his investor with the debt. Predictably, the porcelain recipe was soon ‘lost’ and never seen again. Meanwhile, the Swansea factory suddenly lost its main investor and switched back to producing earthenware. And, with this, in 1820 the curtain fell on Wales.

In spite of their short existence, the Welsh factories left a lasting mark on British porcelain. They set a standard of porcelain quality that was never again achieved, but that would forever remain the benchmark. The other achievement was the fresh style of flower painting, soon adopted by all British decorators. Many of the talented Welsh painters travelled on to the Staffordshire factories, teaching others in their new-found artistic freedom: David Evans to Coalport, William Pollard and Henry Morris to Henry Daniel, George Beddow to paint landscapes at Ridgway... but we’ll talk more about that next time!

Willa Latham

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

Bonhams; Nantgarw Chinaworks Museum; Gentle Rattle of China