

The spirit of invention

The arrival of the recipe for porcelain in the British Isles prompts an explosion of experimentation, says Willa Latham

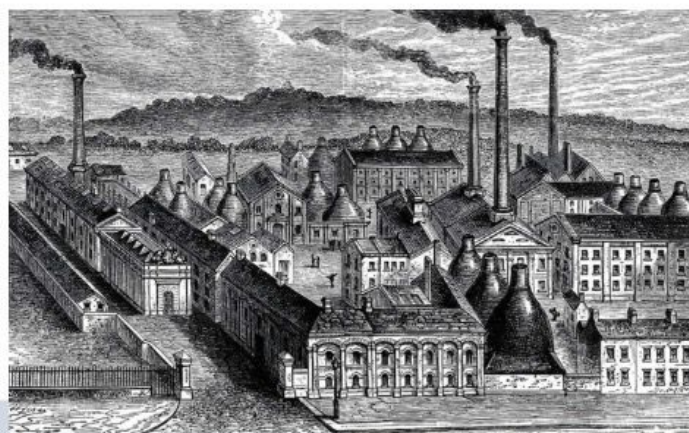


As we saw last month, the arrival of the recipe for 'white gold' in early 18th-century Europe, first in Germany at Meissen and then, a few years later, in France at Vincennes, heralded a new chapter in the decorative arts. Meanwhile, in Britain, the East India Company continued to import huge quantities of porcelain direct from China. Ships were loaded with it not only because porcelain was so popular, but also because it provided useful ballast to safely guide these vulnerable ships through their perilous journey around the wild waters of Africa. The porcelain was then sold off to retailers at auctions in London.

However, by 1740, the knowledge gained in Europe by itinerant migrants was making its presence felt, and all over the country people started to experiment with making their own porcelain. And as the British Isles have a unique geological make-up of rock, stone and clay deposits, people had plenty of materials with which to experiment. Some used kaolin clay, similar to what had been used in China, others used feldspar rock, lime or soapstone. Most of it came from Cornwall – and if you are one of the many people who turn pots as a hobby today, this is probably where your clay comes from.

So if you imagine arriving in Britain in around 1740, clambering up the white cliffs of Dover and peering across the island in front of you, you will see that over a period of about 10 or 20 years, small porcelain 'manufactories' are springing up all over the land. If you let your eyes wander you will notice that dotted around London are Limehouse, Bow, Vauxhall and Chelsea. Further to the north sits Derby, nestled in the heart of England. Moving further north you come upon Newcastle-under-Lyme and Longton Hall in Staffordshire, with Liverpool just to the west. Moving south you find Worcester, then Bristol where England meets Wales. Directly south from there on the Devon coast is Plymouth and finally, if you let your eyes move west to the far corners of Cornwall, you see clay being dug from huge pits, one of which houses today's Eden Project. If we view all these enterprises equally, it is fascinating to see how many people are tinkering with porcelain kilns, all within this very short period.

Today, we tend to only remember a few of them for the simple reason that most came and went within a few years, leaving behind very few traces. Making porcelain is prohibitively expensive, particularly if you lack experience and suffer a high proportion of kiln failure that must be discarded. Porcelain production in Britain has always been



ABOVE 19th-century engraving of Worcester's Royal Porcelain Works. **RIGHT** Historical illustration of traditional kaolin manufacture using a water wheel, near St Austell in Cornwall.



privately funded, so factories would come and go depending on the business acumen of their managers and the depth of the pockets of their financial backers. Some of these small short-lived potteries did important pioneering work, although they are now lost to history.

Only four early factories made it through a significant period of time and are therefore still well-known today: Chelsea, Bow, Derby and Worcester. Of these new English porcelain factories, many had grown out of the countless existing potworks where excellent earthenware was made, but several were started by enterprising immigrants.

In Chelsea, a Walloon Huguenot silversmith called Nicholas Sprimont applied knowledge picked up in France to turn his silver dishes into porcelain. In Bow, Irish immigrant Thomas Frye conducted experiments in his friend's backyard using 'Cherokee clay' imported all the way from America. Meanwhile, a French Huguenot refugee called André Planché was firing porcelain toy animals in his backyard in Derby, based on skills his father had learned at Meissen. And in Worcester, it was Dr John Wall, an Englishman, physician, artist and philanthropist, who tinkered with porcelain in the kitchen of his friend's apothecary shop. But more on all of this at a later date!

Skills brought from Europe by itinerant migrants enriched the 18th-century spirit of experimentation. And once this met the British hunger for porcelain and their expertise in building a cracking good kiln, suddenly the time was ripe for the beginning of a rich and wonderful new chapter in the British decorative arts that collectors all over the world still enjoy today.

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