



LEFT TO RIGHT A Flight, Barr & Barr plate with a rich Imari pattern, used at the Brighton Pavilion, c1825; Flight & Barr beaker in the style of John Pennington, 1796–1800, which sold at Bonhams for £828; a plate from the dinner service made for William IV, 1829, now in the Museum of Royal Worcester; Flight, Barr & Barr pair of pot-pourris c1815–1830.



Worcester takes FLIGHT (& BARR)

Before the great Royal Worcester factory was founded in 1862, the city had already enjoyed a golden time in ceramics, says Willa Latham

While the Staffordshire Potteries took off in the early 19th century, the city of Worcester, which had already been making porcelain for much longer, did not sit idle either. This month let's look at the famous Flight & Barr era.

Now I can hear those of you familiar with this manufacturer moan: Flight & Barr? I thought it was Barr, Flight & Barr... or no, was it Flight, Barr & Barr? I know, this is hugely confusing, but today let's shine some light on the matter.

By the 1770s, Dr Wall's famous porcelain factory (the first in Worcester, founded in 1751) was in decline – fashions changed and Dr Wall had failed to keep up. He retired in 1774, died soon after and in 1783 the factory was sold to its London agent, Thomas Flight, an east London banker. Flight put his sons, Joseph and John, in charge. But if they thought they'd won the lottery, they would quickly discover that they had taken on a hugely outmoded and troubled concern that would take years to turn around. However, turning it around they

did: they battled dirty kilns, lazy workers, problems with sulphur that ruined the glaze, tired old blue-and-white patterns and, worst of all, the chief manufacturing clerk who stole ingredients, covering this up by refusing to disclose the porcelain recipe and obstructing any improvements.

Slowly but surely the brothers dealt with the problems and made progress. They got lucky when, in 1788, George III paid a visit, bought porcelain and gave a Royal Warrant. This was a life saver as a Royal Warrant could make or break a factory; once the King and Queen used your porcelain, nobility would follow.

In 1791 Joseph died and John took his brother-in-law, Martin Barr, into partnership. This is where the first of the three 'Flight & Barr' periods began. I am saying three, as the factory would still change its name twice more, creating that terrible confusion. The period between the great Dr Wall and the arrival of Barr is called the 'Flight' period, but this was mostly a transition that did not leave us much high-quality porcelain. By the time Barr arrived, the factory was in

a much better place and had started to decorate more exuberantly: the sublime 'Hope' service (featuring monochrome paintings of a woman – Hope – by John Pennington) was created for the Duke of Clarence, and the 'Kylin' pattern, with its weird and wonderful polychrome monsters (based on an ancient Chinese mythical beast called 'Qilin'), was revived.

In 1804 Barr's son Martin Jr joined as a partner, and the name changed once again, to 'Barr, Flight & Barr'. This is when the style changed from the rather restrained French aesthetic to more flamboyant designs with a neoclassical feel. Fresh colours, great paintings, and bright gilt all helped to wow the elite, and customers were falling over each other to order the tea and dinner sets they'd been using at each other's parties. If you were a British noble, you'd go to a party, finish your plate, look at the mark on the underside, and hurry to the Barr, Flight & Barr showroom to order your own service.

Martin Barr had developed a wonderful orange ground colour that would become all the rage. John Pennington produced refined paintings *en grisaille* (in beautiful shades of grey). An excellent team of decorators were paid by the hour so as not to rush them in their task. They collaborated tightly, each painting details on a piece that best suited their skills; ground colour, flowers, gilding, main images, and, importantly, those marks that meant people could rush to buy their own service after eating off the same at a dinner party.

When Martin Barr Sr died, his second son George became partner in 1813 and the factory name changed again, this time to 'Flight, Barr & Barr'. Sales exploded. They hired the famous painter Thomas Baxter, who only stayed a few years but trained up a generation of high-class painters. Today it is extremely difficult to correctly attribute Baxter's work; while everyone hopes to have a Baxter on their shelves, in reality many of those pieces were painted by his

students. And it is worth giving some consideration to the huge number of talented people in a small city like Worcester, once opportunities and a good teacher are made available.

As the Prince Regent became a major customer, this helped to push the style further towards the very exuberant Regency fashion with its feathers, shells and exhilaratingly clashing colours. Flight, Barr & Barr became the go-to for large armorial services for royalty, nobility and even the wannabes who would make up their own coats of arms. Gorgeous dinner and dessert services were produced, as well as countless teawares and stunning vases; the Prince Regent furnished his Brighton Pavilion with an outrageous Imari service.

As the public's taste started to move towards the Rococo Revival in the 1830s, the factory couldn't keep up. And with Joseph Flight's death in 1840 the curtain fell and the factory sold itself to its rival, Chamberlain.

Now, Chamberlain is a whole other story, without which probably much of the above would not have taken place... but that's for next time!

Willa Latham

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

• The Museum of Royal Worcester's new **Showstopper Trail** is open and online. Explore the stories of Worcester porcelain through 25 glorious objects, revealing behind-the-scenes archive and insights: museumofroyalworcester.org/showstopper-gallery



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A Flight dish painted by John Pennington for the famous 'Hope' service, c1790; a plate and tureen from the Flight 'Kylin' dessert service, c1790, sold at Bonhams for £3,360 for the whole service; Flight & Barr orphaned tea cup, peach with gilt Greek keys, c1804, £115, *Gentle Rattle of China*; Flight & Barr teapot still in the restrained French style, c1792.

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