

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Rococo Revival plate painted by Joseph Bancroft (who came from Derby), c1841; a Caughley milk jug, the pattern possibly engraved by the young apprentice Thomas Minton, c1780; coffee cup, c1825; a page from Minton pattern book no.4.



PRINT & PATTERN

Having engraved the iconic Willow pattern for Spode, Minton went on to produce some of the finest porcelain of the early to mid 19th century, says Willa Latham

Some of you have asked: 'When will you write about Minton?' We all know Minton from its fame in the late 19th and 20th centuries. But few people know about this great factory's humble stop-and-start beginnings.

It all began with earthenware. As a boy, Thomas Minton had been apprenticed at the Caughley factory in the 1770s, where he learned to engrave the plates for their famous blue-and-white transferware. He turned out to be extremely talented, and soon set up his own studio, engraving copper plates for the Spode factory, which was known for its beautiful transfer prints, including the famous Willow pattern.

He didn't stop there – in 1793 he started an earthenware factory. We know very little about those early years, as his wares were unmarked and so they were effectively 'lost', but his output must have been significant as he was supplying other businesses such as Wedgwood, Chamberlain, Davenport, and various London and Dublin retailers. Much of this was modest blue transfer-printed earthenware, which would

always remain an important part of Minton's output. When porcelain production came to Staffordshire, Minton began production at his business partner Joseph Poulson's nearby pottery in 1798. The two men started making elegant porcelain in the Georgian taste, often copying other factories' patterns; there is significant crossover with New Hall, Chamberlain and Coalport.

As these early pieces were not marked, over the years they were wrongly attributed to more famous factories. It wasn't until the 1960s that the researcher Geoffrey A. Godden uncovered early Minton porcelain. The pattern books were discovered in the process and can now be found online: pages and pages of neatly drawn designs, delightful in their fine beauty, many of them with a deceptive simplicity that hides great elegance. Decorations at Minton were superb, even in this modest early period; Minton had a knack for finding the best decorators and this would become a factory tradition.

Minton realised his commercial success would depend on the availability of affordable clay. Rather

than being dependant on an unpredictable market, he bought vast clay deposits in Cornwall and started the cooperative Hendra company together with other potters, among which were Wedgwood and the New-Hall owners. This secured a continuous supply of clay at low prices.

After the expensive Napoleonic Wars, Britain's economy was in the doldrums. Then Poulson died, and it was exhausting to run two factories, so in 1816 Minton took a break from porcelain production. But he was not sitting idle; expecting an economic revival at some point, he used this time to build a large new factory – a gamble that paid off. By the time the economy revived, the new factory was ready and, from 1824, porcelain was produced in great quantities.

Thomas Minton was not only a prolific potter, he also fathered 10 children. One of those, Herbert, grew up to be a great potter and business leader himself. By 1830 he ran the entire factory, while his elderly father liked to sit with the older employees, chatting and watching them work all day. Herbert was called 'faster than an electric telegraph' as he always seemed to be everywhere at once, starting work every morning at five o'clock, come rain or shine. Like his father, he always found the best potters and decorators; when the Derby factory failed in 1830 he quickly nabbed top decorators such as Thomas Steele and Joseph Bancroft. He also developed an encaustic tile business that would later become world famous; the Capitol in Washington, DC, would get its floors laid with Minton decorative tiles.

When Thomas Minton died in 1836, he left the factory, – to everyone's great shock and disappointment – not to Herbert, who had devoted his life to running the factory, but to his entirely uninterested eldest son, Thomas Webb Minton. Herbert was devastated. The only sensible explanation is that Thomas Webb Minton had a son, while Herbert was childless; this way the factory remained in the family. Thomas Webb did not feel like running a factory and surrendered half of his fortune to Herbert so that he could keep developing the business, probably unaware that this noble act would secure the future of the best British porcelain.

With so much talent and energy, Minton became an attractive place to work and it went from strength to strength. In the 1830s, Regency was left behind for the new Rococo Revival style, which produced some truly sumptuous and luxurious designs for tableware and vases. And, when this fashion petered out, in 1848 Herbert attracted the famous Léon Arnoux from Sèvres, who was eager to start a new life and make an impact. His leadership as the head of decorations would foster a new era of Victorian porcelain making – an era that would be effectively shaped by Minton... but that's for next time!

Willa Latham

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

EARLY MINTON MARKS & NUMBERS ARE COMPLEX...

- Earliest unmarked earthenware 'lost'
- First porcelain period (1798–1816) initially only pattern numbers, after 1805 also a faux Sèvres mark. You can find the patterns in the pattern books at themintonarchive.org.uk. Many of these patterns were also used by other factories!
- Second porcelain period (1824 onwards) sometimes Minton marks, sometimes no marks, sometimes retailer's marks
- Rococo Revival tableware: compare to shape books at themintonarchive.org.uk
- Ornamental wares often not marked, or with faux Sèvres or Meissen mark
- There were countless other marks as well! And after 1842 sometimes the standard 'diamond' mark
- Introduction of the famous globe mark in 1863



ABOVE & LEFT A page from Minton Pattern Book No.1, Crazy Cow pattern; pearlware teacup with Crazy Cow pattern.



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