

FROM LEFT
An Empire-style caryatid vase with 'Gypsy Girl' painting, c1815; tea cup trio with fabulous neoclassical decorations, c1815.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Shipping jug for the owner or captain of this wonderful American ship, 1800–1810; saucer in fashionable cobalt blue but with Etruscan gilt details, c1810; a pair of ice pails with lion masks and bird handles, c1820.



HERCULANEUM

Liverpool's best kept secret

Though not a potter himself, Samuel Worthington kept an eye on Wedgwood from afar and, for a few decades, put Liverpool on the map, says Willa Latham

It wasn't only Staffordshire porcelain that became highly fashionable in the early 19th century. Close to the now-famous area of 'The Potteries' was another important factory that I call Liverpool's best-kept secret: Herculaneum.

Like Staffordshire, Liverpool had always had a busy industry of small potteries. But with its focus on international trade, Liverpool never spent time or funds to develop these businesses, which mostly produced 'Delftware', a tin-glazed earthenware named after the more famous Dutch centre of earthenware.

This all changed when one young man observed the famous Josiah Wedgwood doing business in Liverpool. I wrote about Wedgwood in the June 2022 issue, so you may remember what a remarkable and highly innovative man he was, and that he was deeply involved in establishing the Trent and Mersey Canal.

Samuel Worthington, brother-in-law of a Liverpoolian lawyer, was looking for new opportunities. Described by a contemporary as 'a most intelligent, pleasant man', he started managing a

Welsh slate quarry for Lord Penrhyn, a client of his brother-in-law. The slate was exported through Liverpool alongside huge quantities of Staffordshire pottery. Watching this spectacle, Worthington must have thought: 'I can do this!'. So he engaged three of his excellent trading connections to start a proper factory.

In 1796, Worthington opened his brand new factory and, inspired by Wedgwood's Etruria factory, he called it Herculaneum; both fashionable neoclassical names at the time. In order to compete in an already crowded market, Worthington's marketing materials promised 'to ship goods without either pilferage or breakage; the evils, which are of such magnitude, when crates are conveyed by inland navigation' – and this worked.

Worthington was an industrious man with huge energy: he ran a quarry and a pottery, exporting slate and minerals mined in Wales through the pottery, as well as copper slag found on the Herculaneum site. Not only that, he also sold Welsh farm produce to the urban population of Liverpool! True to its name, Herculaneum developed a range of

wonderful neoclassical designs in fine earthenware and porcelain. It was also, by the standard of the times, a rather enlightened establishment with a Methodist chapel, a benevolent fund and a Sunday school.

In the first few years of its existence, the factory produced a vast quantity of high-quality earthenware: pearlware, stoneware and elegant creamware. Much of this was plain, as the American market demanded cheap yet top-quality items; some decorated in simple colours, some blue-printed, and some with elaborate shipping themes. There were wonderful jugs made for shipping folk, with transfer prints of large three-masted ships and often religious poems to give hope and faith to sailors at sea. There was a keen market for these seafaring items in the US, but also in The Netherlands and Denmark.

Not being a potter himself, Worthington was not attached to what he made, but noticed what sold. When, in 1800, newly invented bone china started flowing through Liverpool's docks, he quickly began producing bone china. With his eye on the world, he drew on neoclassical themes: sprays of Etruscan details, beautiful campana and caryatid vases, graciously moulded reliefs of classical figures and romantic landscapes were churned out in great numbers.

Now why is it that I haven't seen more of this, you may ask? That's why I call it Liverpool's best-kept secret! Although Herculaneum clearly marked their earthenware, they often didn't mark their porcelain, and experts throughout the 20th century have struggled to identify it. This confusion goes so far that at some point, ironically, a whole range of 'Etruscan' or 'Greek' transfer-printed patterns were wrongly ascribed to Herculaneum; you can still see them all over the internet written up as Herculaneum, while much of the porcelain is confused with other factories.

In 1806, Worthington withdrew and left the management to a team who would take the factory to fantastic heights for the next 15 years. Designs were ever better, order books ever larger. But the greatest trap for any business is its own success. Herculaneum, being run by quarry owners, kept a quarry-based accounting system that couldn't give them the detailed cost of each item so indispensable for a factory. After 15 years of boom followed bust: machinery was worn, the workforce lazy, and the price of coals, materials and decoration a mystery.

After cutting away the expensive porcelain production, during the 20 years that followed the factory kept making really beautiful transfer-printed earthenware – but the years of true glory were over.

Finally the Liverpool docks claimed the land that Herculaneum was built on and in 1840 the factory was wound up. Today, there are still pieces scattered around the world, often unseen or misidentified. So next time you see a Staffordshire mystery piece, give it some thought – it could have been made in Liverpool...

Willa Latham

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

Gentle Rattle of China; caryatid vase and ice pails images: Bonhams; shipping jug image: Earle D. Vandekar of Knightbridge, Downingtown, PA USA