



ON THE ROCKS

Rockingham is used as a catch-all term for Rococo Revival wares, but the true pottery deserves credit for producing some of the most ambitious porcelain, says Willa Latham

If you are a porcelain collector, you will have seen the phrase ‘Rockingham style’: a lazy term often seen in auction houses or on eBay, used for teaware in early Victorian Rococo Revival style. This month, let’s delve deeper into this elusive design and find out what lies behind it.

Our journey takes us to South Yorkshire where, among picturesque hills, the small Swinton Pottery had been making earthenware since the 1740s. In the less than two decades between 1826 and 1842, it would also make some of Britain’s most celebrated porcelain.

Local brothers John and William Brameld ran a thriving business. When, in 1806, it faced financial trouble, the Bramelds sought assistance from their landlord, the immensely wealthy 2nd Earl Fitzwilliam of the grand Wentworth Estate.

The Earl obliged but, despite his intervention, the factory continued racking up debt. Ceramic production is a costly endeavour that the Bramelds didn’t have sufficient working capital for and, to make matters worse, management fell into the hands of the three Brameld sons. The eldest, Thomas, was a talented designer and potter, but lacked business acumen.

When bankruptcy struck again in 1825, Thomas Brameld returned to the Earl for further assistance, even though he had yet to repay the initial loan. Caught in a predicament, the Earl found himself torn between the unpaid loan and the fate of the 270 people employed on his estate. But when he found out that Brameld had been experimenting with making porcelain (a probable cause of the bankruptcy), the rather glamorous Earl got excited and decided to support this new endeavour.

This partnership between aristocratic patron and local potter, although commonplace for continental potteries, was a unique arrangement in Britain. Other British porcelain factories enjoyed patrician support, but none depended on their benefactor as heavily as Brameld did. And while this generous arrangement would enable the small factory to make some of Britain’s finest porcelain, its position in the fiercely competitive British market set it on a trajectory that would end in tears less than two decades later.

Both men possessed equal measures of artistically ambitious yet financially clueless aspirations. They styled the factory ‘Rockingham’ and borrowed the griffin from the Earl’s coat of arms as the pottery mark.

Willa Latham; Jonathan Puri; Bonhams; ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Brameld, armed with his exceptional talent as a designer and potter, embarked on a mission to break into a crowded market dominated by the formidable Staffordshire industry. Rockingham was late to the game, so his only option was to dazzle high society.

And so, his inaugural venture commenced with the creation of two vases unparalleled in size, quality and, to our modern sensibilities, hideousness: the Rhinoceros vases. At 114cm tall, these gargantuan vases, almost impossible to fire, show a jumble of styles and features including, strangely, a gilt rhinoceros on top. Even so, the carbuncles wowed the public and, in 1826, put Rockingham firmly on the map.

Rockingham started producing vast quantities of exceptionally beautiful porcelain, both modest everyday tableware as well as lavish designs commissioned by the aristocracy. Today, fans of the 2017 *Beauty and the Beast* film can’t help but notice the teapot adorned with a crown, based on a Rockingham original. This crown proudly showcased the factory’s royal patronage; merely four years into its porcelain production, the pottery hit the jackpot with a huge 200-piece royal dinner service, ordered by King William IV. Brameld couldn’t believe his luck.

But things didn’t go to plan. Brameld, so very talented, but incorrigibly unrealistic, underestimated the cost of producing the service. With insufficient working capital or managerial experience to sustain the factory while undertaking this mammoth project, the workforce descended into chaos. A year passed, then two, then three and, when the service was finally finished in May 1837, it had depleted the entire business capital. Tragically, the service never made it to the King as he died a month later. Queen Victoria was the first to use it at her coronation in 1838.

The Earl, meanwhile, after supplying further financial support, had died, leaving his son in control. He did not share his father’s love of porcelain and, after a hard look at the finances, he decided it had burnt up enough capital. To spare Brameld the humiliation of bankruptcy, the Earl seized all assets and let him spend the remainder of his life in a modest estate cottage.

The grand Rockingham porcelain adventure had come to its conclusion, but its effort to make a name for itself would last. To this day, collectors, auctioneers and dealers alike still conflate the name ‘Rockingham’ with a specific early Victorian Rococo Revival style, which, given the sad demise of this great factory, is a small price to pay for eternal fame.

Willa Latham

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

RECOGNISING ROCKINGHAM

How to identify Rockingham porcelain

- Much teaware sold as ‘Rockingham’ or ‘Rockingham style’ is not by Rockingham! It is often by various Rococo Revival makers
- The most reliable identification is by shape. There is a defined number of unique shapes that are documented in several well-researched books widely available online
- On tea and tableware, the biggest pieces can have a griffin mark – but the smaller items often don’t. Vases are often unmarked
- Many Rockingham pieces are made in thick, milky porcelain that has a tendency to craze, but the highest quality pieces are generally faultless
 - Rockingham attracted several very talented painters such as Thomas Steele (of Derby, Chamberlain and Minton fame) and his son, Edwin, John Creswell and George Speight. These high-quality Rockingham pieces are not seen on the market very often



LEFT Rhinoceros vase and cover, made by Rockingham, England, 1826, V&A Museum. **FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Creamware dish, c1820 (before porcelain production started), £130, *Gentle Rattle of China*; a plate painted by John Creswell, c1826; armorial plate made for the Earl of Essex, 1830–1842, *Bonhams*; a teapot on stand, 1832 – a teapot of this style starred as Mrs Potts in the film *Beauty and the Beast*; coffee cup, c1835.