



FROM LEFT Coalport ice pails in the famous 'Church Gresley' pattern, c 1810, £5,600 for a pair, *Gentle Rattle of China*; dessert plate by Thomas Dixon, c1845; early Thomas Rose teapot with dragon pattern, c1800.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT Fabulous wall plaque attributed to Coalport in the 1820s; peach-coloured dessert plates by Cecil Jones, 1820–25; Coalport Campana vase of the 1820s.



Salopian Roses

Staffordshire may be better known for porcelain, but Shropshire had its own stars – brothers John and Thomas Rose – both of whom left a lasting legacy, says Willa Latham

No exploration of the emergence of porcelain in Staffordshire would be complete without a trip to Caughley, in the neighbouring county, Shropshire, then called Salop. Large quantities of blue and white soapstone-based porcelain, very much like the Worcester wares, had been made in Caughley since 1772, by Thomas Turner. In fact, Chamberlain's pottery firm in Worcester used blanks from Caughley.

But it was farmer's son John Rose, born in 1772, who would soon become the more famous Shropshire potter. Having cut his teeth at an earthenware factory nearby, Rose bought up the struggling Caughley factory in 1799 and relocated it to the new town of Coalport on the Shropshire Canal. The town's name reflected its purpose, which made it an ideal place for potteries. Not only did John build his new factory at this newly established port for coal but, a year later,

RIGHT John Rose sucrier with 'finger and thumb' Imari pattern, c1805.



his younger brother Thomas followed suit, building his business on the opposite bank.

Were John and Thomas rivals or colleagues? They certainly made very similar porcelain shapes and patterns, but whether these were shared or closely imitated, we can't be sure. We do know, however, that the brothers were very different. Thomas had more funding and focused on the in-house design. He produced a huge number of highly creative and sometimes radical patterns, some of which can be easily mistaken for 20th-century Art Deco designs with their bold lines and colours; there were also some outrageous Imari patterns. John was the more practical one, running a larger enterprise that produced fewer patterns but had many of the better wares, which were sent to be decorated in London at studios such as Baxter, Muss and Randall. There is an etching of Baxter at work on John Rose items that are still around today. Personally, I think Thomas's designs are more interesting.

Although Thomas appeared to have the more stable funding, when his business

partner suddenly pulled out in 1814, the factory was put up for sale, only to be bought by his brother. John's business had also suffered in these turbulent times (several failed partnerships, bankruptcy and financial distress) but he was a shrewd and practical businessman who knew how to eliminate competition. Having first devoured Caughley, then his brother Thomas's business, he turned his attention to his big Welsh rival, Nantgarw.

The London retailers were all-important in the porcelain trade, and when Rose's main retailer, Mortlock, suddenly shifted his purchases from Coalport to Nantgarw, he was in trouble. Nantgarw porcelain was the purest porcelain ever made: a crisp white and impossibly expensive because it was unstable in the kiln. Coalport porcelain, on the other hand, in the words of painter and historian John Randall, had a 'dingy blue tinge'. It also varied greatly in quality and blemishes were hidden under the decorations. But it was cheaper!

Nantgarw was led by the troubled porcelain genius William Billingsley, whom I have written about before and will return to. Billingsley did not have a head for business and over-promised to Mortlock, so what seemed like victory would become his demise: he could not fulfil the orders.

Rose saw an opportunity and lured Billingsley and his business partner Samuel Walker to Coalport, along with their porcelain recipe, promising to produce the same porcelain. However, the recipe, which Rose privately termed 'frangible', 'costly and uncertain' and 'commercially quite unprofitable', disappeared and was never seen again. Rose had crushed his biggest competitor.

Around 1820 the Coalport factory could finally take flight without relying on outside decorators and

retailers. Rose could now afford his own large team of talented painters, opening the doors to a period of huge creativity: Thomas Dixon, Joseph Birbeck, Stephen Lawrence, Jabey Aston, William Cook and Cecil Jones, to name a few – along with several unnamed women, too. Coalport became famous for its excellent flower painting, poaching painters from the London studios and getting Billingsley to train up his young team of artists.

John Rose got to enjoy the fruits of a life of hard work, patience and shrewd business acumen. And what of Thomas? He retired to the family farm and gave up potting. Arguably Thomas was the greater artist of the two, but it was the more pragmatic John, who built the factory, who would have a lasting impact on British porcelain, and it is his wares that are still the focus for collectors today.

The story doesn't end with John Rose's death in 1841 however, as Coalport would go through yet more struggle and greatness later that century – but we'll take it one step at a time!

Willa Latham

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