



ABOVE Machin 'inverted shell' plate, c1825. This shape was also made by New Hall, Samuel Alcock, Minton and Hicks & Meigh. **RIGHT** '189' factory teacup, c1825.

LEFT Hilditch plate with 'Boy with the spotted dog' pattern, c1815. This is a mix of Chinese, Indian and Dutch elements on a Regency shape. **BELOW** Rathbone pearlware coffee pot, c1815, note the Greek keys and neoclassical rustic scene smuggled into the chinoiserie style.



ABOVE Ridgway tea service with Yates cups, c1825. **BELOW** Hilditch teacup with Greek keys and dogroses, c1825, £125, available from *Gentle Rattle of China*.



Minor factories, MAJOR ROLES

In the 19th century canny businessmen got in on the act of 'making pots', and they produced some fine pieces to rival many of the greats, says Willa Latham

It is thought that during the early 19th century there were around 300 factories in the Staffordshire Potteries, all churning out huge numbers of beautiful ceramics. This previously peaceful backwater had turned into a hellish landscape of bottle kilns firing day and night, belting out their noxious fumes and heat, surrounded by tightly packed workers' houses. While the famous factories are still celebrated today, much of the hard work in The Potteries took place in anonymity. We will never know the names and styles of every factory, and new discoveries are still being made today.

These lesser-known factories weren't necessarily smaller than the great ones, but they weren't founded by geniuses like Josiah Wedgwood, Josiah Spode or Job Ridgway. They were founded by families of smart people who built flourishing businesses, producing whatever happened to be the fashion of the day, and hiring the best workers they could afford. They may not have run showrooms in London or Bath, but they did well for themselves and weren't too fussed about

the exact style of their items: they were in the business of 'making pots'. The result was a truly British style of porcelain that mixed up many trends. And they did one very important thing: they made new fashions mainstream. Their wares – less expensive than those of the 'major' factories – reached countless homes all over the world.

Another, unintended, result is that today we are often confused about who made a particular piece. These factories didn't only imitate, they also provided overspill capacity for the leading factories, as well as replacements for their clients. Take a look at the illustration of a Ridgway tea service (facing page), with accompanying cups made by Yates. We don't always understand how the crossover of patterns and shapes happened. If Yates provided additions to Ridgway's tea services, presumably because Ridgway had over-committed itself, why did Yates make teawares with patterns identical to Coalport and Henry Daniel, but using a different pattern number? Was it simply copying a popular pattern because it

sold well? Or perhaps provided replacements for customers who had a few broken cups in their set?

Then there are factories that we don't even know the names of. There is the factory simply referred to as '189', of which only one numbered tea service was ever found, meaning previously unidentified items could be matched to this pattern. For many years there were the 'X, Y and Z' factories, of whom we now know a lot more, thanks to painstaking research by porcelain enthusiasts and scholars. It has been discovered that Factory X is Keeling and Factory Z is Thomas Wolfe.

Rathbone was another successful family business, which spent about 30 years churning out large numbers of useful transfer-printed earthenware, as well as beautiful and fashionable teawares, imitating others and providing extras and replacements. Hilditch was similar, as was Hicks & Meigh, of which I have a dessert service that could pass for Henry Daniel, including the gorgeous flower paintings in the style of William Pollard.

And I must mention the hugely under-appreciated Machin, some of whose most iconic shapes were misidentified as Ridgway by the respected porcelain expert Geoffrey Godden, robbing Machin of its well-deserved glory. The 'moustache' and 'inverted shell' shape dessert services are among the finest made in the 1820s, but the latter shape (which really deserves a whole essay to itself) was also made by Hicks & Meigh, New Hall, Minton and Samuel Alcock! So is it any wonder we're so confused about who made what?

Then there was the mysterious 'Blue v'; a line of sublimely decorated teawares simply marked with a blue 'v'. There are different theories about its origin; most likely this was a decorating studio that undertook high-quality decorations for factories, particularly

Rathbone, that couldn't afford to employ enough good decorators themselves.

The style of many of these wares is a curious mix of fashionable 1820s elements – chinoiserie, Regency cobalt blue with gilt, neoclassical Greek keys and landscapes, and very English roses. While European factories held fast to their more purist styles, British makers liked to mix it all up, and it was particularly the 'minor' factories that did the mixing. If creativity was not impeded by the strictures of a genius founder, why not put a neoclassical landscape within a border of Chinese masks, or Greek keys into an Imari design?

Today, we still have a lot to learn about the 'minor' factories, whose wares have deeply influenced our sense of style. So, with this, I celebrate their creativity and pragmatism, take a sip from my unidentified coffee cup, and enjoy!



Willa Latham

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