



Righteous Ridgway

Willa Latham uncovers the mysteries of Staffordshire's Ridgway family, from their instinct for creating exquisite porcelain to a virtuous reputation that secured their legacy

After our detours to Shropshire and Wales, this month our journey takes us back to Staffordshire, where an explosion of porcelain production was taking place in the first two decades of the 19th century. Once the porcelain recipe had found its way to the already existing pottery industry in Staffordshire, suddenly there was porcelain everywhere you looked. Production moved out of family backyards and into large, shiny factories that clever and ambitious men of the Industrial Revolution built on virtually every street corner.

Last month we looked at the turbulent history of the Welsh potteries, where the scandalous but brilliant William Billingsley burnt up his investors' money and eloped in the dead of night. This month, there will be none of that colourful behaviour; we are visiting the Ridgway factory, the product of a deeply righteous if perhaps slightly boring man called Job Ridgway. This factory grew to be one of the jewels of

Staffordshire porcelain, lasting well into the 20th century.

Job Ridgway, born in 1759, became a poster boy for the rapid transformation in Staffordshire. The son of a poor earthenware maker with a kiln in his backyard and more children than anyone could count, little Job was shipped off to be an apprentice in Swansea and then Leeds, and quickly became a smart and capable potter. He returned to develop his own factory in Staffordshire, where he made beautiful drabware and pearlware. In 1808 he took his sons, John and William, into partnership.

Job and his sons turned their hands to porcelain, and quickly realised they had a natural talent for it. Soon, the factory was churning out huge quantities, both for the country's wealthy elite and the middle classes. The porcelain was fine, pure, very white and yet sturdy and pleasing to the touch. The Ridgways had an instinct for the quickly changing fashions of the time, embracing the exuberant and bright Regency style with all its gilt,

BELOW A lavishly decorated dessert service made for a duke by John and William Ridgway, c1825, *Gentle Rattle of China*.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

An early jug with mask, vines and neoclassical scenes, Job Ridgway & Sons c1810, Angela Grant (ridgwaypatternbook.org.uk); an early Job Ridgway drabware dish, c1808; a tea cup with typical apricot, periwinkle and gilt decoration, John & William Ridgway c1815; a teapot by John & William Ridgway in cobalt blue, gilt and flowers c1825, all *Gentle Rattle of China*.



flowers and cobalt blue. Ridgway's reputation meant the company attracted some of the best decorators of the day, likely absorbing several from the declining Welsh factories.

Another key to their success was that Job and his sons were deeply religious. In most factories of that era, workers were forced to work impossible hours; too much alcohol was drunk, and abuse of women and children was rife. But at the Ridgway factory, work stopped at 7pm, everyone would wash, then gather for prayers and go home. The Ridgways paid their workers well and treated women with respect, separating them from the men so that they had a safe environment to work in.

Pieces produced by the Ridgway factory shared consistent qualities: exquisite porcelain; designs that have a glow and warmth about their colours; plentiful use of acanthus motifs; and beautifully hand-painted flowers and landscapes. In addition, Ridgway manufactured a great number of attractive and distinctive shapes that were widely imitated at the time, but are unmistakable to the connoisseur.

And yet today it's not always easy to recognise a Ridgway piece. The factory didn't mark its porcelain so it can be tricky to identify, and mysteries keep cropping up. While many of the famous potteries have had several books written about them, Ridgway in comparison has been thinly researched. *Ridgway Porcelains* by the great Geoffrey A. Godden contains a lot of useful information, but it also includes several

misidentified styles that have inevitably caused confusion. An excellent contemporary source for anyone interested in Ridgway is ridgwaypatternbook.org.uk – a work in progress and a labour of love.

Over the course of the 19th century various potteries would be founded by the extended Ridgway family, with brothers, cousins and uncles producing earthenware and printed designs. John and William parted ways in 1830 to each take the work forward with their own sons – John producing porcelain that received a Royal Warrant, and William concentrating on earthenware. Today, there is still a glut of beautiful tableware around, some of it under the names of later partnerships. I'm sure many of us will have eaten off a Ridgway, Brown-Westhead, Moore & Co, Adderley or Cauldon plate at some point.

This seems to be the story of Staffordshire, and there are countless others... but we'll continue this next time!

Willa Latham

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