

The Story Of Porcelain in England

This article gives a brief overview of the history of porcelain in England.

This FREE article was produced by www.antique-english-porcelain.co.uk

For more FREE articles about Early English Porcelain, please click here.

Considering that we use porcelain every day, it is quite staggering how quickly it has become an everyday object that is simply taken for granted, unloved (unless informed it is worth something), and often unrecognised.

It is not that long ago that the race to discover the secret of porcelain manufacture held the key to great wealth, fame, and fortune, and the seemingly magical qualities of porcelain were revered by Kings, Queens, and the most influential figures of the day.

The history of porcelain production in England is a remarkable one, a story of hardship and adversity, of incredible ingenuity, and finally of discovery and the birth of a new industry that would grow rapidly, employing thousands of workers, and whose trade at home and abroad, would create economic prosperity.

Once that the history and the social and industrial significance of porcelain is understood, it is difficult not to see it in an admiring new light, or at least to simply have a much greater respect for it.

The story of the manufacture of porcelain in England begins in the 18th Century, but it is necessary to step back even further than that to fully understand the passion that drove the early pioneers onward.

During the 17th Century markets with the East had been opened, with large quantities of exotic luxury goods such as fine silks, spices, and teas being imported back to the West. To the people of Europe these wares were like nothing they had experienced before, and the demand for these fashionable imports was immense – it was a sign of high social standing to be in possession of these new, somewhat alien wares.

Amongst the imports, literally at the bottom of the pile, were the Chinese porcelains. They were originally brought back simply to protect the precious and delicate cargoes on board the early wooden trading ships because, no matter how well they were maintained, sea water always found its way into the hold, which would obviously prove catastrophic should it come into contact with the silks, spices or teas.

Porcelain on the other hand was impervious to sea water, it could be submerged for the entire journey of several months, and it would still be saleable when it was unpacked and dried (as has been shown with recovered cargoes from sunken ships like the Nankin Cargo, where the porcelain has been submerged for several Centuries).

The crates of porcelain could be packed at the bottom of the hold, and everything else could be packed on top, safely out of the water, which made porcelain an essential commodity for the merchants, even if it was initially somewhat less lucrative than the rest of the cargo.

At this point the Chinese had been making porcelain for more than a thousand years before it reached our shores, but for them it was simply the product of naturally occurring clays and other materials, in much the same way that our traditional pottery was constructed from native red clays. However, when it reached the West it created a sensation.

The body of the new porcelain wares was pure white, it was incredibly fine, and yet also incredibly strong, being able to withstand boiling water without cracking, and almost magically it was translucent, allowing the transmission of light through the material itself.

Compared to our indigenous earthen wares which were heavy, brittle, completely opaque, and generally dull in colour, the Chinese porcelain was rapidly in great demand, and also rapidly became very expensive, earning itself the nickname of “White Gold.”

The importation of Chinese porcelain grew swiftly, with shiploads of 250,000 pieces at a time being common by the end of the 17th Century, and this demand for, and obsession with porcelain was not lost on businessmen, merchants, Kings, and of course potters, who recognised that if they could unlock the secrets of making this incredible material for themselves, then fame & fortune should surely follow.

The demand for porcelain was a natural one, since the fine and delicate wares complimented perfectly the fine and delicate teas that gentile society so revered.

The first (definitively proven) porcelain made in Europe was in Germany, and I include this digression because it illustrates how strong the desire to discover the secrets of producing porcelain was.

In around 1700 a young alchemist named Johann Friedrich Böttger had come to the attention of Augustus the Strong of Saxony because of his claims of being able to unlock the secret of transmuting base metals into gold, and he was essentially imprisoned until he was able to fulfil this age old desire for the King.

In 1705 Böttger, still imprisoned, was allowed, after his inevitable failure, to instead concentrate on discovering how to make porcelain. By 1708 he had succeeded in making hard paste, or true porcelain, the result being the establishment of the Meissen factory in 1710.

In England things moved a little differently, and it was some time later before porcelain production commenced. It is however interesting to note at this point that modern excavations at the premises of a potter called John Dwight have yielded porcellaneous material, suggesting that he was experimenting with some degree of success as early as the 1670's, although it is unlikely that he made any porcelain for commercial purposes.

In England, as elsewhere in Europe, there were numerous attempts underway to make a porcelain body to rival, and more importantly to compete with the Chinese imports, but the problem for the English potters was not the lack in technical ability, or experimental ingenuity, it was a far more fundamental one.

Whereas the experimenters at Meissen had uncovered a large natural source of white clay, very similar to the Chinese Kaolin clay which is one of the essential ingredients for porcelain manufacture, the English had no such abundant sources of white clay with which to commence production.

To overcome this problem, Thomas Frye and Edward Heylin (the eventual manager & co-owner of the Bow porcelain factory respectively) filed the first English patent for porcelain in 1744, in which they gave one of their ingredients as:

“...The material is an earth, the produce of the Chirokee nation in America, called by the natives unaker, the property of which are as follows, videlicet, to be very fixed, strongly resisting fire and menstrua (dissolution) is extremely white, tenacious, and glittering with mica.”

This filed patent clearly shows that the experimenters were well aware of the cause of their failure to successfully produce true porcelain, and their solution to it was to import white clay all of the way from America for use in their production.

It would seem, however, that this option was either not commercially viable, or some other reason caused its use to be abandoned, because all of the Bow porcelains, even from the very earliest c.1745, are made using calcined bone ash as an additive, and a new patent using bone ash was filed shortly afterwards.

It is worth mentioning that it is suggested that Frye & Heylin may have used the original formula to make the elusive “A” class porcelains, which consist of cups, teapots, and other small pieces (only around 37 pieces are known to exist). Chemical analysis of these wares does seem to imply that they are a very likely candidate as the originators of these rare pieces.

The solution of substituting different materials adapted by the proprietors at Bow was quickly followed by the rest of the English experimenters, with calcined bone ash, frit, and soaprock, being the predominant additives.

The result for the English manufacturers was a soft paste, or artificial porcelain which although appearing similar to the Chinese original, was not as strong, with some of the formulas cracking or “flying” when boiling water was added, although it was softer to the touch and more aesthetically pleasing.

The earliest manufacturers were financially backed by successful traders, such as Heylin & Wetherby at Bow, goldsmiths & silversmiths, such as Gouyn & Sprimont at Chelsea, and businessmen such as Dr John Wall & his partners at Worcester.

The earliest English porcelain is a strange mixture of contemporary English silver shapes, decorated with naïve pseudo Chinese scenes in imitation of the imported wares, which is partly what gives the early English porcelain its charm and appeal for collectors.

During this early phase many factories were established, but often lasted for no more than a few years before they were forced into closure, their proprietors bankrupt, partly because of technical difficulties in manufacturing porcelain, but also strangely because even then they found it difficult to compete commercially with the Chinese imports. Limehouse for example lasted a mere 3 years, making their wares today extremely desirable and extremely valuable.

Gradually in England the market became more fragmented, with Chelsea manufacturing high quality, European influenced wares for the high end of the market, and Bow and others concentrating mainly on making blue & white table wares in direct imitation of the Chinese for the lower end of the market.

As the 18th Century progressed, the fashion for Chinese blue & white wares waned, and gradually the smaller factories catering for the bottom of the market were forced into closure as they could not afford to adapt to changing fashions, nor had they the ability to produce the finer, high quality wares that were now in vogue.

The eventual emergence of cheaper pearlwares from Staffordshire, and the development of firstly the more robust hybrid hardpaste wares around 1780, and then the invention of Bone China by Josiah Spode around 1800, signalled the end of the era of English soft paste porcelain, and ushered in a new century of innovation and industrial expansion for the new leaders of the porcelain manufacture.

The only survivors from the birth of English porcelain were the giants such as the Worcester & Derby factories who had been able to experiment, adapt, and cater for the rapidly changing fashions that society craved.

-

For more free articles, a free online reference library, a free newsletter, and galleries of porcelain for sale, please visit:

www.antique-english-porcelain.co.uk