PROFITS, POLITICS AND PHILANTHROPY: THE ORIGINS OF WORCESTER PORCELAIN 1740-51

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With some justification, narrative accounts of the origins of porcelain manufacture in mid-18th century England tend to share two characteristics. Most, as Hilary Young has observed, are primarily aimed at providing the collector with the technical distinctions to be made between the outputs of each factory. Conversely, the majority of such studies also, even if by implication rather than design, provide a social history of the early factories which tend to focus upon those elements of the story which emphasize the similarities and connections between the different factories.[1] These similarities and connections may be summarised as follows

1) So many of these early ventures in porcelain manufacture arose almost simultaneously in that remarkable decade 1745-1755 – Chelsea, Bow, Limehouse, Derby, Lund's Bristol, Worcester etc. that it is impossible to avoid drawing the conclusion that they shared a common origin. This might be reinforced by the overwhelming contemporary evidence of a desire to promote British trade, arts and crafts in a "patriotic" cultural backlash against the imported fashions from Italy, France and the Far East.[2] Moreover with the disappearance of so many of these enterprises within their first thirty years, it seems as if that they shared a similar life cycle.

2) There is also the common experience in each factory of the hunt to perfect the most successful paste and the intense secrecy designed to protect the formula. Much research has been carried out in tracking the activities of men involved in the manufacture and decoration of porcelain in more than one place-Benjamin Lund, Robert Podmore, Richard Holdship, Robert Hancock, James Giles, Thomas Turner, to name but five luminaries associated with the early Worcester factory and at least one other. Not surprisingly, this led to the poaching of craftsmen, shapes, decoration and paste formula so that almost all factories were mutually interdependent as well as in competition with one another in the quest to meet the latest fashions demanded by an apparently insatiable market.

3) There is also a clear distinction made by historians, and indeed by 18th century contemporaries despite much borrowing of shapes and designs from Sèvres and Meissen- between the English factories and their continental counterparts which sets apart the former. English factories are deemed to have their origin in the spirit of lone entrepreneurship and experimentation, which did so much to stimulate the Industrial Revolution. Whereas Meissen, Sèvres *et al* had the backing of seemingly limitless royal and aristocratic funding, English factories arose in a far less cosseted economic environment; with the exception of Sir Everard Fawkener, possibly working for the Duke of Cumberland at Chelsea, there is little evidence of aristocratic involvement, much less royal or state sponsorship, other than in the issuing of royal warrants of approval like that received by Worcester in 1788. If the English ventures could not survive commercially on their own two feet, then they simply folded whatever their artistic achievement: this was the case of Limehouse, Lund's Bristol, Pomona, Longton Hall, Bow and Chelsea within one generation of the birth of English soft paste porcelain.

4) One finds, both as a cause and a consequence of this last point, similar patterns in the personnel of these early English partnerships. There are invariably inspirational "front" men with a talent for design like Nicholas Sprimont (Chelsea), Thomas Frye (Bow) and Dr Wall (Worcester); men of science and artisans involved in the manufacturing process like John Bowcock, (Bow) and William Davis (Worcester); there are also the men of commerce who supplied the money, even if they rarely participated in the day to day running of the factory, like Alderman George Arnold (Bow) and Edward Cave (Worcester); Huguenots and Dissenters like Sprimont (Chelsea), Briand (Bow), Benjamin Lund (Bristol) Richard and Josiah Holdship (Worcester) are also prominent in the history of early English ceramics.

5) Finally, there are also similarities between the operations of the different factories. Rivers, canals and coastal routes were vital in transporting raw materials and finished goods; capturing a foothold in the volatile London market was equally crucial for the long-term survival of any English porcelain factory; firms also quickly learnt from one another the best means of advertising, distributing and retailing their ware to a wider public.

This broad stereotype has much to commend it and it certainly emphasizes the nature of porcelain as a profitable fashion commodity and the general shifts in consumerism, invention and manufacturing underpinning the peculiarly English phenomenon of the Industrial Revolution. Inevitably, the pattern of events at a local level appears to fit into the broader narrative, making each factory a reflection of the others.

However, there is perhaps a danger that in putting the story of each individual factory within such a framework of understanding, we may be persuaded to overlook some of the more unique qualities of each factory and, in part, do a disservice to the bigger picture by neglecting its local variations. The Worcester manufactory is, I believe, a case in point for it is unique in two very different ways.

The first and best-known distinctive characteristic of the factory set up in 1751 is that it alone has remained in production, without interruption down to the present day.[3] This is, indeed, a remarkable achievement which needs explanation. However, this was not solely due to any peculiarities of the original partnership which guaranteed its survival in the long term. Although the composition of the partnership did perhaps give it a commercial advantage and was crucial to the successful establishment of the factory in the first place, ultimately it was a large measure of good fortune which allowed it to be rescued on a number of occasions when it might easily have shared the premature demise of its competitors.

In fact, this fascination with its unbroken longevity has perhaps diverted attention from a second unique aspect of the Worcester factory, one which is far less well known. This involves us not looking forward from 1751 but rather backwards in time. Unlike any other factory, the Worcester partnership enjoyed a lengthy prehistory, a prehistory that needs to be reconstructed if we are to understand fully the nature of that enterprise.

Whilst there is no doubt that the same fascination with the magic of porcelain and the profit margins it promised (but seldom delivered) characterised the Worcester partners as much as those of its rivals, I believe that there were other factors at work in the creation of the factory which need examining. I would like to advance the claim that the Worcester venture was, at least up to a point, seen by its instigators as a joint civic enterprise designed to protect an endangered community, a viewpoint which sets it apart from its competitors. The relationship between politics, philanthropy and profit did not always run smoothly, as later events were to prove, but to understand fully the origins of the factory we need to explore the links between the partners and earlier projects in the city.

The starting point of this hypothesis is that seminal primary source of 18th century ceramic history, the 1751 deeds of partnership now on display in the Museum of Worcester Porcelain. Whilst, as I have indicated above, there are similar stock characters involved – doctors, chemists, Quakers, merchants – no other partnership comes even close to the fifteen gentlemen of Worcester in terms of size. Most of the original factories had no more than three to six partners and there was usually one figure that predominated. More often than not the demise of one partner heralded the collapse of the entire project; the losses of Frye at Bow and Sprimont at Chelsea were irrecoverable even though both were well-established concerns by the time of their deaths.

Of course, there may have been sound commercial

and financial reasons for this enlarged partnership. The partners could generate more funds to secure themselves against the difficulties of launching the project; difficulties which they would already have noted bring about the demise of Limehouse. Indeed, if Benjamin Lund was one of the principals of Limehouse that failed[4] and who then went onto Bristol, he may have been able to provide advice in person to John Wall and his associates before the takeover of his factory. Moreover, the collective deliberations of so many men with practical commercial experience as merchants, drapers and glovers etc. may also have given them an edge in formulating the most effective market strategy. It is also likely that by concentrating on producing shapes which did not try to compete with much cheaper Chinese goods, by avoiding the more volatile swings in taste for decorative luxury items and by emphasizing practicality in its tableware, the Worcester factory found a more enduring niche in the market place. This, in turn, allowed them to outlive Bow, Chelsea and Longton Hall who all went under in the 1770s in the wake of the devastating economic depression of 1772,[5] a calamity which forced even the indomitable Josiah Wedgwood to review his costs with a growing sense of helplessness.

Furthermore, one is struck by the number of partners who were actively involved in day-to-day affairs, in addition to their investment of money. The large number of partners could also be explained by the range of necessary business expertise which each could bring to the fledgling factory. Wall and Davis are credited with the discovery of the porcelain paste-whether by direct or indirect means remains a debatable point. Wall is usually identified as the charismatic talisman whose personality and contacts put together the partnership and whose artistic inclinations probably influenced at least some design decisions. Davis seems to have supervised the administration of routine affairs such as indenturing apprentices and issuing the tokens sometimes used for payment .The two Holdship brothers were responsible for the operation of the transfer printing department. Edward Jackson, a merchant who specialised in the shipment of salt down the Severn, would have been well-placed to oversee the crucial transport operations bringing the clay and soapstone from Cornwall and the timber and coal from Shropshire not to mention the distribution of the final delicate products to the inland and overseas markets. The goldsmith and watchmaker Samuel Bradley was involved in the retailing of the finished products at his shop in the High Street and possibly also in the workshop. He also certainly took in apprentices. Even more peripheral figures such as London based partner Edward Cave was able to promote the newly opened factory in his publication *The Gentleman's Magazine* whilst Richard Thorneloe, according to one tradition, ventured into Cornwall in the 1760s in search of a new source of soapstone- the magical ingredient that made the Worcester tea ware resistant to crazing and cracking when filled with hot water. There is a strong possibility identified by B S Smith[6] that the draughtsman and cartographer John Dougharty planned the extension and development of Warmstry House and, although there is no identifiable evidence, it is by no means unlikely he had some input in the choice of designs for the porcelain itself. I have some ground for believing that the role of Richard Brodribb as Treasurer for the company may have been of greater importance than hitherto believed. If this is the case then it would not be unnatural to assume that his younger brother John may also have helped in this capacity and perhaps adds to the significance of the splendid mask head jug dedicated to him and his new wife on their wedding.[7]

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this was an exercise in team building, which modern management consultants would recognize as very progressive and that this must have played in the success and survival of the factory in the first decade of production. However, it is difficult to sustain the argument that the Worcester factory survived where others failed *solely* because its collective commercial acumen was so much greater than that of its rivals. It shared many of the flaws and problems such as uncertain production methods and fierce competition which brought other firms to their knees. Nor does it seem plausible to argue that the uniquely large size of the partnership was brought about solely by the lure of extravagant profits. It is worth remembering that none of the partners had any real experience of the ceramics industry prior to what was almost certainly a brief and unsuccessful period of experimentation by Wall and Davis in 1750-51 and that they would have been as aware of the failure of Limehouse as the success of Bow. There was no local pottery to provide an experienced work force and the buy out of Lund's Bristol stock, utensils and workmen was a vital step in the setting up of the new factory in Worcester. We can also, for instance, pinpoint the inbuilt structural imbalance caused by the role within the firm of Richard Holdship whose personal financial resources were overstretched by the purchase of Benjamin Lund's soaprock licence and Bristol factory stock as well as Warmstry House, the site of the original Worcester factory. The well-publicised quarrels with Robert Hancock over the claims for pre-eminence in the printing department and his own bankruptcy and defection to Derby made Richard Holdship a disruptive, albeit important, force in the crucial first decade.[8]

However, this protracted series of feuds was far from being in evidence in the years prior to the formation of the partnership and it is to this period that I wish to direct attention. Rather than focus upon why Worcester was able to continue production for over two hundred and fifty years – which is something of an historical red herring – I wish to concentrate upon asking why they started the factory in the first place. This is where the truly unique characteristics of early Worcester porcelain lie. The principal observation about the partnership being made here is that these were not men who came together for the first time in 1751. Although the deeds focus solely upon the commercial relationship between the fifteen partners, an investigation into Worcester's local records reveal a considerable prehistory of dealings and activities which suggest that civic and political concerns featured largely in the origins of the factory. Prior to 1751, it is possible to find a unity of purpose which the partners believed they could carry into the world of commerce, and which, indeed, probably helped contain subsequent bickering thus contributing, albeit marginally, to the longer term success of the factory.

One historian has pointed out recently the compatibility of commercial motives with political and philanthropic interests in many improvement schemes in 18th century cities.[9] In Worcester these political and social commitments are intimately interwoven with the iconography chosen to adorn a significant portion of the early printed porcelain, allowing us to understand the role the latter played as a new form of blank canvas for expressing a wide range of aspirations; aesthetic, cultural, social, economic, religious and political. Whilst much of the imagery is aimed at claiming a wide audience some of it can also appear surprisingly partisan, reflecting a vivid interaction of the local and national loyalties being mobilised amongst the professional and commercial classes at a time of crisis. Much recent research has highlighted the importance of the role of these classes in the formation of a modern national identity[10] and the porcelain factory was but one way in which this process can be observed in mid-18th century Worcester. In summary, we cannot understand fully Worcester porcelain without understanding Worcester itself. From before 1740 until the establishment of the factory in 1751 we can get glimpses of this relationship between the partners and the city which they saw themselves serving. It is to this story that we must now turn.

Worcester in the middle decades of the 18th century was undergoing a series of overlapping short and long term changes which threatened the socio-economic, moral and political stability of the city, changes that were being echoed elsewhere in the country as improved transport links, the growth of a global empire and early industrialisation changed the pace of life in Britain. With these changes came disruptions to established patterns of commerce and employment and these in turn brought demands for political action from authorities who were not always able to respond.

What underpinned the economic crisis in Worcester was the collapse of its highly specialised branch of the Levant wool trade occasioned by the demise of the Ryeland sheep and changes in the pattern of reciprocal trade.[11] Wool was the principal industry of the city and there was a sharp fall in the number of weavers from the time that Defoe visited the city at the beginning of the century and when Jonas Hanway made his observation in 1753 that "our Turkey merchants, who some years since figured at the top of the commercial world, now bow their diminished heads". It is highly probable that the Brodribb brothers and John Berwick, three of the original fifteen partners of 1751, were prominent retailers of cloth and needed to diversify into new products. In order to reclaim the prosperity which had seen the elegant rebuilding of early Georgian Worcester, the business community of Worcester needed to find another staple trade to replace its wool.

Added to this problem was the demobilisation of 70,000 soldiers in 1749 at the end of the war of the Austrian Succession and the climax of the Gin Craze. The result was a moral panic amongst the propertied elite about lower class lawlessness and alcoholism and the need to restore social discipline through education

and employment. *The Worcester Journal* of January 9th 1744 reported some of the effects of demobilisation in the city where five soldiers who had been committed for robbery attempted to escape and kill the turnkey whilst another two, James Painter and William Armstrong were arrested for robbing Joseph Bradley of his coat, two waistcoats and his hat. As late as November 1755, on the eve of the Seven Years War the same source was to report that Dr Wall's travelling servant was relieved of ten shillings by Edward Sheward, a deserter from a recruiting party in Kidderminster. Isaac Maddox, the bishop of Worcester, was a prominent campaigner for both the temperance movement and the Society for the Reformation of Manners and his views were increasingly shared by the gentry and merchants as they were expounded both in the pulpit and in numerous pamphlets.

The situation was exacerbated further by a complex set of political difficulties associated with the power vacuum left by the fall of the Walpole Ministry in 1742 and the crisis brought about by the 1745 Rising of the Young Pretender. The fragmentation of the Whig and Tory "Country" or "Patriot" coalition which had assisted in the overthrow of Walpole now threatened the ability of the Hanoverian regime to deal with both the '45 and the socio-economic crisis described above. In their desire to claim ownership of the problems, party interest could often take precedence over the greater good. Worcester Whigs considered local Tories tainted by association with Jacobitism whilst the latter objected to Quakers, nominally barred from civic office for not taking oaths of allegiance, taking up positions in local turnpike trusts. There was an increasingly partisan atmosphere in the city elections of 1741 and 1747 during which period local Tories on the Corporation tried to extend the right to vote to gentry in the surrounding counties by creating large numbers of honorary freemen who would support the Tory candidate.

In Worcester, a group of men who were alarmed by the situation began to form around the charismatic Isaac Maddox and local Whig grandees like Sir Samuel Sandys of Ombersley and Sir Thomas Vernon of Hanbury Hall. From the 1730s onwards these men looked to renovate the economic and political stability of Worcester and in doing so laid the foundations for the partnership that launched Worcester Porcelain.

It is perhaps not too surprising in a provincial city like Worcester to find local connections. Wall, Doharty and Pritchett all attended King's School and Wall and Davis had long collaborated over promoting Malvern Water in the 1730s. Wall and Doharty may well have attended the same Masonic Lodge. Wall became the ward of Sir Samuel Sandys on the death of Wall's father and went on to marry into the family via the daughter of the city clerk Martin Sandys. However it is more surprising to discover the extent to which the partners appear to co-operate around the Maddox-Sandys-Vernon axis. We find a number of the original partners involved in the rebuilding of Worcester churches and in contributing to the Constitution Club which raised soldiers to fight the Young Pretender in response to Maddox's pleas to defend the Protestant religion. Richard Brodribb became involved in a protracted wrangle between the City Corporation and the Guardians of the Poor concerning the effective implementation of the Poor Law and the operation of the local workhouse.

There were also clashes over the building of an infirmary to improve the moral and physical health of a troubled city, a cause dear to Maddox's heart and also that of Wall who became one of its serving physicians. The Whig activists made angry rebuffs to claims in the local press, presumably made by Tories as the 1747 elections approached, that the voluntary subscription to finance the scheme was an unparliamentary and therefore unconstitutional tax. A number of the future 1751 partners were also involved as Whig activists in the elections of 1741 and 1747. Some like John Berwick and Richard Brodribb, turned out to act as party agents and, of the nine partners out of fifteen who can be traced in the poll books, all proved to be Whig voters.

Of particular note was the election of 1747 when the Whigs successfully overturned on appeal the election of the Tory candidate, Thomas Winsford, on the grounds that the votes of so many newly created honorary freemen should be discounted and the accusation that Tory activists had turned away legitimate Whig voters, resident in London, who were making their way back to their home town to record their vote. It was a bitterly fought election with much skulduggery; one of the Whig candidates, Robert Tracy, was accused of rape whilst Winsford was mercilessly lampooned for changing his name on coming into an inheritance. The final act was a piece of unashamed Whig triumphalism; Tracy entered the city through a plaster and lathe arch, replete with party propaganda, despite an explicit prohibition made by the Mayor and Corporation against any such construction. The iconography of the arch, featuring Hercules and Antaeus, found its way onto the so-called Tracy Mug now to be found on display in the Museum of Worcester Porcelain. A similar occasion arose in 1749 to celebrate the signing of the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle when members of the Constitution Club erected another such monument close to the river which was once again laden with Orangist, Hanoverian and Masonic symbolism. These protracted political battles, which came to a head in the 1747 election, bred a trust and unanimity of purpose. Not only did these formative experiences bond together the fifteen gentlemen in a range of enterprises before the creation of the factory but they also help shaped the nature of the business.

The concern to impose social and economic order in the city is reflected by the discipline in the factory and the strict segregation of the sexes, not dissimilar to the workhouse regime and that of the Infirmary. The encouragement given to local boys to receive training and take up apprenticeships with the firm, mostly supervised by Samuel Bradley, William Davis and the Holdships, reflects the interweaving of personal self-interest with concern for the community. The Infirmary was not only promoted by Maddox and John Wall but its financing by public subscription provided a model of accountable financing which the factory would later adopt. The political inclinations of the partners were not only reflected Tracy Mug but also in an extensive range of later printed pieces which commemorate the Hanoverian Whig heroes of the 1750s and 1760s, George III, the King of Prussia, the Marquis of Granby, William Pitt and Admiral Boscawen. There is indeed, a long-established view – probably stemming from a speech made by Gladstone in the city and reiterated by R.W. Binns – that one of motives for creating the factory was to attract a number of pliable workmen who would vote for the Whig interest. It is difficult to substantiate this view because the poll books are patchy for the second half of the century and the accounts of contemporaries like Libby Powys would appear to indicate that much of the work was carried out by women and children who would not, of course, have been allowed to vote. Nevertheless, there does appear to be something to be said for the notion that Worcester porcelain did arise out of a partisan interest in the city at a time when it was undergoing a considerable crisis. The desire by a number of local traders and professional men, none of whom had any previous experience in the pottery and ceramics industry, to create a porcelain factory does need an explanation and this would seem to lie in a far broader agenda than that envisaged by the earlier factories created in London and Bristol. The latter were driven by men like Sprimont and Frye who appear to have been solely focused on the operational aspects of porcelain production; their counterparts at Worcester saw the desire for profits underpinned by a pre-existent mutual interest in philanthropic schemes and political activism that characterised the first decade of production and beyond. It was this, rather than its somewhat fortunate longevity, that allows Worcester to claim to be unique amongst the first generation of porcelain factories in mid-18th century England.

NOTES

1. See Hilary Young *English Porcelain 1745-95; Its Makers, Design, Marketing and Consumption* (V & A Publications 1999)
2. William Hogarth was one of the prime advocates of the need to promote a native British artistic tradition in his engravings ridiculing chinoiserie decoration, Italian opera, French cuisine which would culminate in mercantilist and even xenophobic commercial pressure groups such as the Anti-Gallican Society and the Society for Encouraging the Arts.
3. Sadly this state of affairs is now under threat as production is increasingly transferred overseas.
4. Dr Richard Pococke
5. Elizabeth Adams and David Redstone *Bow Porcelain* (Faber and Faber 1981) Appendix VII p217
6. Brian Smith "The Naughty China Works" (*Transactions of Worcs. Archaeological Society vol 16 1998)*
7. Of the other partners nothing is yet known that connects them to the running of the factory although I remain optimistic that continuing to trawl through the Worcestershire Record Office will produce additional nuggets of information
8. Even to the point where his own brother Josiah intervened in the bankruptcy proceedings on behalf of Richard's wife Betty whose inheritance had been sold off in order to finance her husband's investments in Worcester
9. Paul Langford *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman* (OUP 2001)
10. Linda Colley *Britons; Forging the Nation 1707-1837 (Yale 1992)*
11. Gwen Talbut "Worcester as an Industrial and Commercial Centre 1660-1750" *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society vol 10 1986 pp 91-102*