

Staffordshire Figures

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TOWARDS THE CLOSE of the 17th century many potters in North Staffordshire were successfully manufacturing 'Slipware' (earthenware decorated with clay mixed with water to the consistency of cream) for the dairy, kitchen and table and it was about this time that the earliest Staffordshire figures emerged in the form of animals made by the simple process of pressing moist clay into two-piece moulds. These rudimentary 'toys' (later known as images, image-toys, or chimney ornaments) illustrate the first attempts in The Potteries to fabricate and market a product which was decorative rather than useful. At the turn of the century slipware ovens were packed to capacity with domestic utensils and initially zoomorphic figures were little more than a side-line for any potter wishing to pursue a novelty. Alongside the slipwares Staffordshire potters were also leading the field in the manufacture of lead-glazed earthenwares and salt-glazed stonewares and it was during the first fifty years of the 18th century that the foundations of a figure-making industry were being firmly laid. So far as salt-glazed stoneware is concerned figures always constituted but a relatively small proportion of the potter's output, so different from the lead-glazed earthenware figures from about 1740 onwards attributed to Astbury, Whieldon and many other Staffordshire manufacturers.

As with the earlier slipwares most Staffordshire salt-glazed figures were manufactured by pressing slabs of clay into a two-piece mould and subsequently uniting the halves with liquid clay. This technique resulted in a seam on either side of the figure which the potter attempted to remove by fettling and sponging. More often than not the junction is still evident and can best be seen on the interior of hollow examples where little or no secondary work took place and a characteristic of these early pieces is the primitive modelling. What is usually considered to be the most original and famous class of Staffordshire figure-groups in salt-glazed stoneware is the 'pew-group' so named because costumed male and female figures are depicted in various attitudes seated upon a high-backed settle. Here the manipulative skill of the artisan in arranging thin slabs of clay, press-moulded sections and hand-modelled appendages is outstanding.

A wide variety of salt-glazed bird and animal figures were produced between 1725 and 1755 the most popular being dogs, cats, horses, cows, bears, deer and sheep. The majority were specifically intended as ornaments but others served a useful purpose for example the cow-creamer which was brought to the table filled with milk or cream. The tail served as a handle, which when tilted, allowed the contents to issue from the cow's mouth. Though without doubt unhygienic it was nevertheless a novelty which was to be repeated in incredible variety by a succession of potters for the next century and a half both in earthenware and porcelain. Few salt-glazed cow creamers have survived but by no means as rare are bear-baiting jugs with a detachable head designed for use as a cup. Shreds of clay were applied to imitate fur and the muzzled bear is usually seen hugging a dog between its paws. The most prolific figure in salt-glazed stoneware is the cat either plain white with eyes picked out in brown, or in 'solid-agate' where by 'wedging' different coloured clays a marbled effect is obtained, the veining being apparent throughout the body. Solid-agate cats usually have a white face but where white and blue clays are intermingled the cat's ears are usually painted in cobalt. Collectors are warned of the many spurious copies which exist. Being relatively easy to reproduce, moulds from original salt-glazed cats have been taken by forgers who



'Solid-Agate' Salt-Glazed Cat. c. 1745,
Ht. 5"



White Salt-Glazed Cat, c. 1745, ht. 5"

either by pressing or slip-casting have with some degree of success imitated those first issued in about 1745. The white cast examples should cause no problem because the casting process was never used in manufacturing the prototypes – a genuine white salt-glazed cat displays all the signs of press-moulding on the hollow interior. Solid-agate forgeries however have to be press-moulded but can be detected by the poor marbling, the way in which cobalt-stained clay discolours the white and the excessive weight. The eighteenth century pressers were skilled artisans and their figures of cats were seldom heavy. A final word of caution – in recent years some blue and white solid-agate cats have been made in earthenware covered with a thin smear of lead glaze but a forgery of this type does not show the 'orange-peel' surface finish so characteristic of salt-glazed stoneware.

Second only to cats were salt-glazed dogs made in quantity from about 1745 onward. Perhaps the best known are pug-dogs sitting on rectangular slab bases, the forerunners in Staffordshire of the popular lead-glazed earthenware and porcelain examples. Another favourite subject at this time was the reclining horse which more often than not is modelled to a high standard as were lambs, sheep, deer and both male and female figures. From about 1750 the Staffordshire potter passed to the enameller small standing figures, dancers, actors, swans and other birds to be decorated in bright colours. Though of undoubted charm they were never marketed in anything approaching the quantity of their undecorated counterparts which today makes them the most sought after (hence expensive) branch of the salt-glaze trade.

What began as something of a ceramic novelty rapidly blossomed as figures became part of an expanding stock-in-trade not only in salt-glazed stoneware but in lead-glazed earthenware and also in porcelain. Towards the middle of the 18th century demand was such that an increasing number of Staffordshire potters became encouraged, on the strength of growing sales, to extend the variety and standard of clay images. Unfortunately none of these

early wares were marked and though we can never with absolute certainty link pot to potter there are traditional labels which are used in the classification of distinctive types. One who must receive pride of place is John Astbury (1688–1743) of Shelton who is usually accepted as the first Staffordshire potter to “employ the Pipe Clay, from Biddeford”. This white importation was used in conjunction with local red clay beneath a clear lead glaze to very good effect and the combined techniques of hand-modelled and press-moulded figurines of which the best known, under the term ‘Astbury-type’, include hussars, foot-soldiers, tradesmen, dancers, orators, actors, singers, and perhaps best known, a wide selection of musicians playing bagpipes, drums, horns, trumpets and other instruments. A great deal of interest is invariably generated whenever such items come on to the market but collectors are urged to exercise the greatest possible caution because of the relatively good copies which have circulated during the past sixty years both in this country and the United States.

Another master-potter, in every sense of the word, was Thomas Whieldon (1719–95) of Fenton who incidentally took the young Josiah Wedgwood into partnership in 1754 for a period of five years and became High Sheriff of Staffordshire in 1786. Excavations on the



Lead Glazed Astbury-Type, Musician,
c. 1745, Ht. 5 $\frac{3}{8}$ "

site of Whieldon's pot-works have confirmed his vast production range but sadly no figure sherds came to light. However, the traditional belief that he was a figure-maker is supported firstly by an entry in his account and memorandum book held by the City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent which details "Glazed Images" and "Unglazed Images" and secondly on technical grounds. One of his specialities was 'tortoiseshell' ware for which metallic oxides were laid upon a cream-coloured body beneath a clear lead glaze and there are sufficient well-modelled figures extant employing this technique to embrace them under the label 'Whieldon-type'. In his "History of the Staffordshire Potteries" (1829) Simeon Shaw tells us that Thomas Whieldon "made toys and chimney ornaments coloured in either the clay state or bisquet, by Zaffre, manganese, copper, etc. and glazed with black, red or white lead" – a description which ties in closely with what is now generally classified as most probably Whieldon. Here it should be pointed out that there appears to be a reluctance on the part of many dealers to accept the more guarded museum reference to 'Astbury-type', 'Whieldon-type' or indeed on occasions 'Astbury-Whieldon type' but unless fresh information becomes available enabling us to be more specific it is advisable that these convenient groupings should still stand in relation to the figures most likely to have come from the kilns of these two eminent Staffordshire potters.

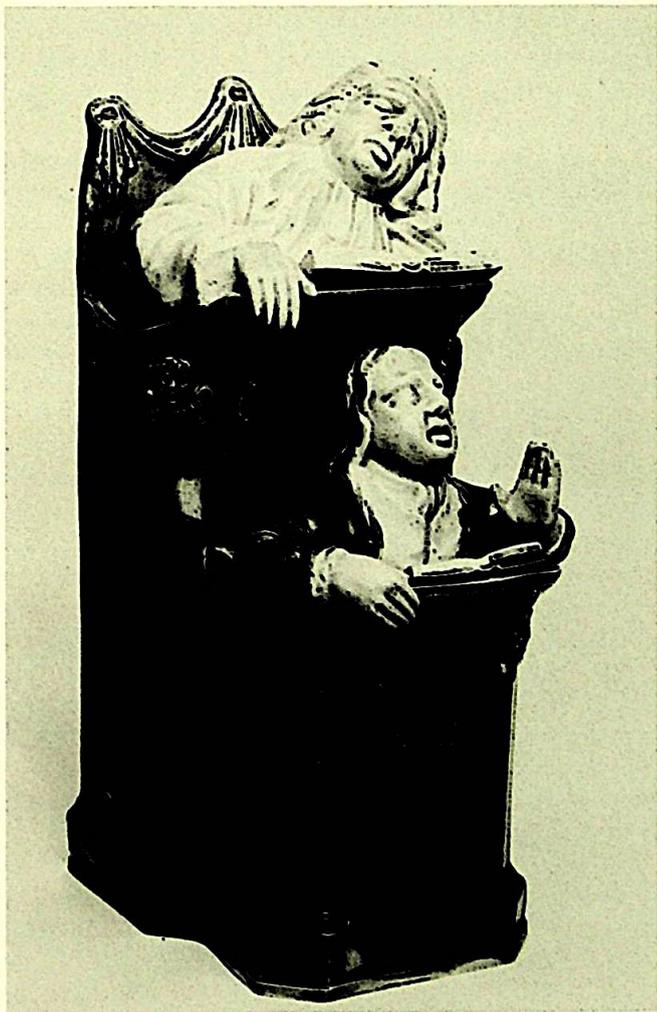
Considered by many to be the most skilful and versatile manufacturer of earthenware figures was Ralph Wood (1715–72) who commenced business in Burslem about 1748. He and his son Ralph (1748–95) were among the first potters to impress the family name upon their wares and to employ a system of marking figures with an impressed mould number which was of particular benefit to the customer when asking for repeat orders. Over 80 of these mould numbers have so far been identified and can be found listed in "The Wood Family of Burslem" by Frank Falkner. The highest numeral recorded is 169 on a figure inscribed 'Fortune' indicating the wide range issued from the Wood factory but it should be emphasized that not all figures carry the name neither do they all bear a mould number. Fortunately on technical and stylistic grounds unmarked specimens should not cause the student or collector too many problems when one examines the incomparable coloured glazes and superb modelling which are such obvious features in the work of the elder Ralph Wood. His famous pulpit group known as 'The Vicar and Moses', 'Hudibras', 'Old Age', 'King David', 'Apollo', 'Roman Charity' (to select but a few) illustrate so vividly his outstanding contribution to the history of the Staffordshire earthenware figure.

When the younger Ralph Wood came out of his apprenticeship he was hired for the year 1769 by the Burslem Potters Thomas and John Wedgwood. We cannot be certain when he joined the family business but following the death of his father in 1772 he entered into partnership with his brother John (1746–97) for about ten years following which they went their separate ways. Both sons included a wide variety of figures amongst their products and reissued many of the models launched by their father but whereas his speciality was in the use of coloured glazes both Ralph Wood II and John painted enamel colours on top of the glaze. This method of decoration was widespread in The Potteries during the last quarter of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century. We get some idea of the range made by Ralph from a sales account dated 1784 when he supplied a large order to fellow potter Josiah Wedgwood which included the following figures, "George & Dragon, Venus, Neptune, Shepherd, Apollo, Man with lost Sheep, Charity, Gardener, Sailor's Lass, Stag, Hind, Goat, Sheep, Ram and Elephant". One of John Wood's Sales Ledgers held by the City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent covering the period 1783–7 reveals that he was manufacturing similar titles and both he and his brother are known to have made Toby jugs as did their father before them.

Enoch Wood (1759–1840) cousin of Ralph and John was another member of that

renowned Burslem family of potters. He built up an extensive business, owned several factories and earned for himself in later days the title, 'Father of the Potteries'. From an early age his technical accomplishment in the use of clay was outstanding as can be seen from a large ceramic crucifix in Burslem Parish Church modelled when he was 14 and the better known blue-and-white jasper plaque "The Descent from the Cross" executed when he was 18. When John Wesley embarked on one of his preaching tours of Staffordshire in 1781 Enoch during five separate sittings modelled the fine portrait bust we know so well today. At the age of 24 he began to manufacture earthenware as a Master Potter and for a short while took his cousin Ralph Wood into partnership. The style of the firm changed in 1790 when James Caldwell became the partner under the trade name 'Wood & Caldwell' lasting until 1818 when the firm became 'Enoch Wood & Sons'

The compass of Enoch Wood figures was very wide and varied greatly in both subject matter and size indeed some of his models were the largest ever to be made in The Potteries. He was not limited solely to earthenwares but experimented with different clays including black basalt which at the time was very popular with many of his fellow potters. Numerous original ideas came from his factory such as the well known 'Night Watchman' and 'Parson and Clerk' which show the high standard of workmanship so characteristic of most of his



'Vicar and Moses',
coloured glazes, Ralph
Wood, c. 1770. Ht. 9¾"

products. Others were derived from sculptural prototypes for example 'Baachus and Ariadne', 'St. Paul preaching at Athens', 'Fortitude', 'Prudence', 'Madonna and Child' etc. Enoch Wood built up an extensive trade with North America which flourished for a while after his death but the factory closed in 1846.

Increased demand for all types of figures during the last quarter of the 18th century witnessed a great number of Staffordshire potters following in the wake of Astbury, Whieldon and the Woods and by the early 1800s countless small 'pot-banks' were manufacturing nothing but figures. Of the majority we know nothing save for an entry from a Trade Directory or a trade card. Attribution is often made extremely difficult in the absence of factory marks and as with the pioneers we can do no more in certain instances than classify forms and styles of decoration into types. Happily our next contributor to the ceramic story did mark some of his wares and traded not only in earthenware but creamware, black basalt and porcelain. James Neale was a London merchant who acted as agent for a number of Staffordshire earthenware manufacturers, became a partner of Humphrey Palmer of the Church Works, Hanley and took over the business about 1776 trading at first as 'J. Neale, Hanley' and later as 'Neale & Co.' The figures made by Neale possess a distinctive quality, invariably small, extremely well-modelled, carefully decorated in enamel colours and though earthenware possess a finish akin to porcelain. The fine and appealing craftsmanship is most evident in his versions of the 'Four Seasons', 'Minerva' and 'Diana' but of equal quality are various portrait busts, Toby jugs and black basalt figures.

So very different from the sophisticated ceramics made by Neale is a class of figure that made its appearance in Staffordshire during the closing years of the 18th century continuing into the 19th century which was decorated with underglaze high temperature metallic oxides with the colours orange-ochre, pale yellow, grey-brown, blue and olive-green predominating. Nowadays it is usual to describe this group as 'Pratt-type' (relating them to the Pratt family of Fenton) but it should be stressed that the term must only be regarded as a convenient tag and that there were countless anonymous potters in Staffordshire and elsewhere supplying the growing demand for these cheaper-priced cottage ornaments. Despite the fact that the bulk of Pratt-type figures exhibit exceedingly primitive modelling and artless decoration they nevertheless represent an aspect of purely English folk art and have an attraction all of their own.

Most potters in Staffordshire during the earlier years of the 19th century chose to use enamel colours on top of the lead glaze which afforded them a greater range in the process of decoration which generally speaking became garish. The century also ushered in widespread mass-production which eventually led to a falling of standards. Wages for figure-makers were incredibly small and the output per worker phenomenal. It is against this setting that we examine some of the potters in the 'Walton School'. John Walton began potting in Navigation Road, Burslem about 1806 and developed a marked style in earthenware figures and groups almost invariably set off against a background of spreading branches in the manner of the Chelsea and Derby 'bocages', a fashion copied by many of his contemporaries. His bright and cheerful chimney ornaments included religious subjects like the popular 'Flight into Egypt' and the companion piece 'Return from Egypt', 'Sacrifice of Isaac', 'Elijah', 'Widow of Zarephath' and the Evangelists. One of his most famous earthenware productions was the 'Tithe-pig' group and other bucolic subjects which sold well were 'Bird-nesting', 'Feeding poultry' and models of sheep, goats and cows. Somewhat similar in style and subject matter is the work of Ralph Salt (1782-1846) of Hanley who prior to becoming a manufacturer of earthenware toys was a "lusterer and enameller". The scope of Salt's wares was very wide and to him goes the credit for modelling the 'Dr Syntax' series.

Within the 'Walton School' one should bracket John and Ralph Hall of Burslem and Tunstall, John Dale, John and Richard Riley of Burslem and the Tittensor family of Shelton. A short review of the figure makers of North Staffordshire cannot of course do full justice to the countless potters involved in this trade when it is realized that there were scores of factories large and small working in competition at any one time throughout the 19th century. Burslem certainly had its share, some in the back streets, were nothing more than plagiarists but there were others whose distinctive style and originality was in due course to capture the attention of so many collectors. There was no delicacy of modelling or carefully controlled decoration in the wares attributed to the Burslem "toy and figure maker", Obadiah Sherratt (c. 1775–c. 1846) yet despite the obvious lack of refinement they must have been extremely popular in their day and of course in the modern saleroom a group in good condition is certain to command a high price. A feature normally associated only with Sherratt is the way in which his figures stand on a table-like structure supported by four or six legs (depending upon size) often with inscriptions relating to the subject. 'Bull-Baiting', 'Polito's Menagerie', 'The Death of Munrow', 'Ale-Bench', 'Teetotal', 'Neptune' and the companion 'Venus', 'The Roring Lion', 'Grecian and Daughter' to name but a few.

The staggering demand for chimney ornaments throughout the Victorian period stimulated the Staffordshire potters to preserve in clay a three-dimensional pageant of royalty, popular heroes, politicians, religious leaders, sportsmen, stars of theatre and opera, villains, famous animals, cottages, castles, etc. to grace the mantelshelf. As many collectors will agree, the demand is still there.



Enamelled Earthenware "Tithe-Pig"
Group, Walton School, c. 1815–25.
Ht. 6½"