

18TH CENTURY STAFFORDSHIRE EARTHENWARE FIGURES

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The primary purpose of this paper is to question the wisdom of using generic titles based on potters' names as a means of classifying Staffordshire earthenware figures. It is generally acknowledged that some kind of classification is necessary and an alternative system based on a technical/visual description will be suggested.

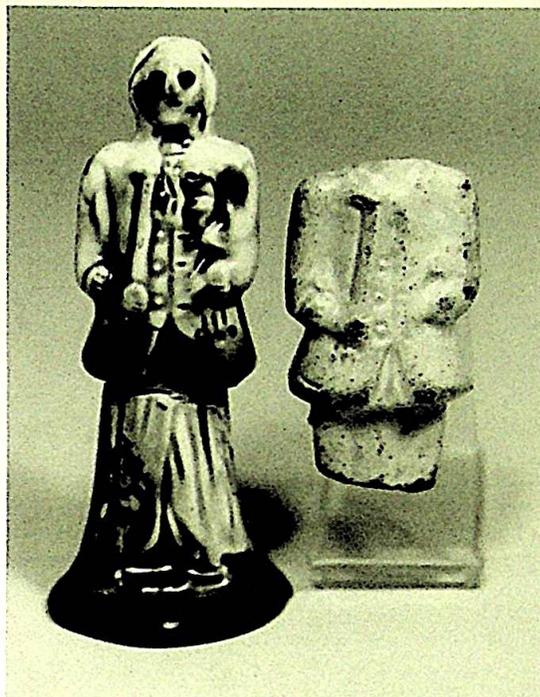
The use of a potter's name for generic grouping is often excused on the grounds that everyone knows that Astbury, Whieldon or Pratt means Astbury-type, Whieldon-type or Pratt-type. My contention is that any use of a potter's name carries with it, directly or indirectly, characteristics specifically related to the person whose name is used.

For example in Plate 1 if we call the figure on the left Astbury-Whieldon we consciously or subconsciously further classify it – made about 1750, after saltglaze before more sophisticated models. None of these things are true about this piece or necessarily about any other naive figure. A generic title based on a potter's name also makes us complacent, we don't have to discover the right name, we don't have to consider a date as late as 1765 and we have a tidy sequence of figure development from salt-glazed to pearlware.

The salt-glazed torso on the right in Plate 1 was excavated at Fenton Low, a potworks owned by Thomas Whieldon but as far as we can tell never occupied by him. A green glazed example of this figure is in the collection of the Museum of London (3197/12). Green glaze was a technical development introduced and popularised by Josiah Wedgwood about 1759. The evidence suggests that the figure must post-date 1759, at which time the Fenton Low site was occupied by the Warburton family. Therefore we can say that figures of this type were produced by Edward Warburton at Fenton Low about 1760–65.

The above argument was laid out in some detail in order to illustrate the problems associated with generic titles. The rest of this paper will be a discussion of specific groups of figures dealt with, as far as possible, in chronological order.

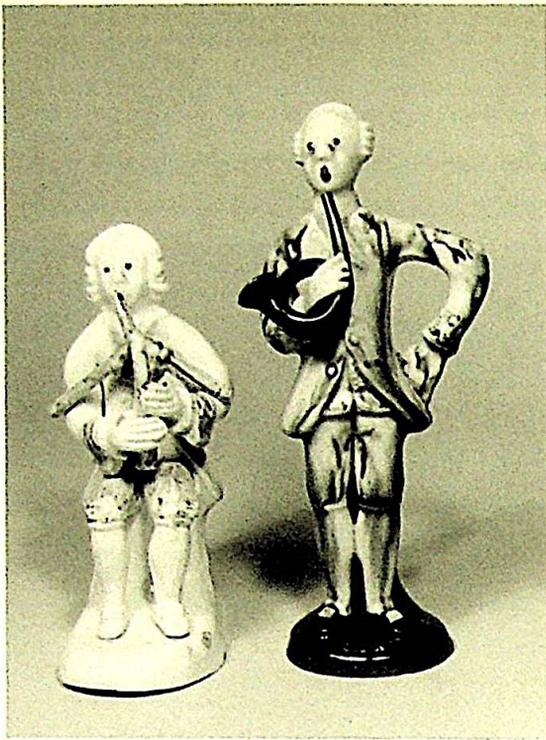
The earliest earthenware figures are those often referred to as Astbury. You may think I am pedantic to resist the use of generic titles based on potters' names, but here we have a good example of the name controlling our understanding of the wares. John Astbury who is supposed to have made these figures died in 1743. In consequence they have been dated to the early 1740s when it is much more likely that they were made



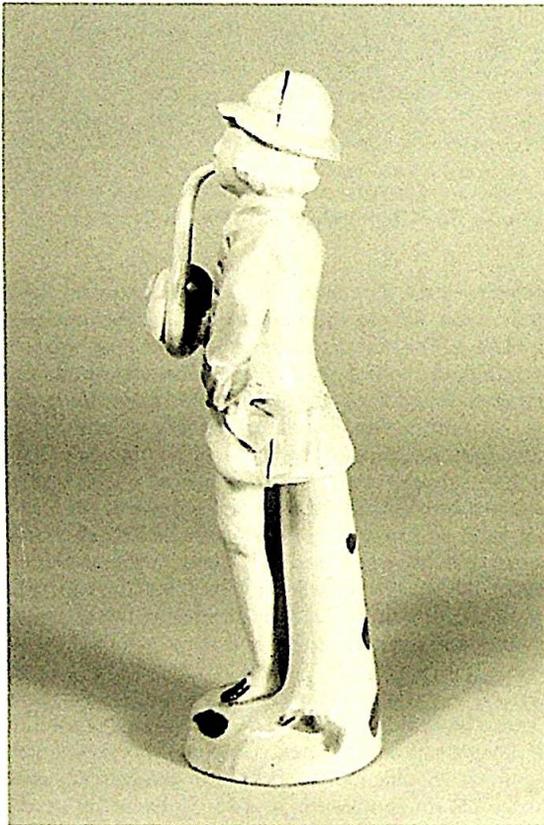
1 Mid eighteenth century naive figures. Left: small figure reconstructed from two halves of other figures. Right: torso excavated from Fenton Low, white salt-glazed stoneware.

sometime later. The subject matter of these wares tends to be rather simple and familiar such as the musician in Plate 2. The bases are often made from Staffordshire red clays, the bodies usually from white clays probably imported from Devon and Dorset. The figures are made by a combination of hand modelling and press moulding, you can often see the seam line down the sides of the heads and torsos as shown in Plate 3. The bodies and bases were moulded separately, many of the limbs are solid and may have hand modelled details. The separate parts were joined together with slip and dried before the piece was fired to the biscuit state, coloured metal oxides were applied for decoration before liquid glazing and a second fire.

Several factors lead to the conclusion that these figures cannot be dated to 1740. First of all consider the use of moulds to produce these figures; whilst primitive earthenware moulds had been used to produce slipware plates and rough teawares in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the plaster of Paris moulds needed to make figures of this kind were not in general use in



2 Mid eighteenth century naive figures of two musicians.



3 Side view of a musician showing fire-cracks along the seam line.

England until about 1745 when Ralph Daniel is credited with their introduction to North Staffordshire from France.¹ Ralph Daniel would have been 23 years old at that time and his travels on the Continent are unlikely to have taken place many years prior to that date. Secondly we must consider the use of a double firing cycle combined with a liquid glaze which is also a post 1740 introduction; the earliest known piece made in this way is a bowl in the British Museum inscribed EB 1743 and attributed to Enoch Booth the originator of the process. It may have been some years before this development was combined with the use of coloured oxides as a means of decoration and it is not known on any piece which can be dated to the 1740s with any certainty. It seems most unlikely, therefore that John Astbury was responsible for the early figures, but as the attribution is said to be traditional and not wishing to overlook the slightest possibility that they could be Astbury's work, the past literature has been investigated. No catalogue or book of the nineteenth century credits Astbury with figure making and no relevant documentary evidence of the eighteenth century is known. The name was first introduced in the present century for the convenience of collectors and dealers. This class of ware needs further research and investigation, particularly in the light of the spate of fakes produced earlier this century and until more convincing evidence for dating and attribution is produced I propose to call this group mid eighteenth century naive figures.

A wider range of more sophisticated models was produced in the mid-late eighteenth century. These were also made from cream coloured earthenware again decorated at the biscuit stage with coloured oxides sponged onto the body before glazing and re-firing, after the manner of tortoiseshell and similar wares. The subjects include contemporary figures and models of animals. The moulds are usually simple with as few parts as possible (extended limbs and accoutrements are kept to a minimum as these need additional moulds and assembly processes). Because of the relatively cheap method of production these figures would have been inexpensive compared with enamelled saltglaze and the even more costly porcelains available from the mid eighteenth century.

Figures such as those in Plate 3 are often attributed to Thomas Whieldon. Fairly extensive excavations on the site of his pottery revealed a wide range of wares from slipwares to sophisticated enamelled creamware, amongst the thousands of fragments recovered were pieces from six figure models, hardly the quantity one would expect from the man who is credited with making almost every mid eighteenth century figure we see. We have to remind ourselves that by 1750 about 150 potworks were in operation in North Staffordshire and many may have made figures alongside their main tableware productions. We must also remember that Whieldon does not necessarily mean 1750-60. Thomas Whieldon continued in business until about 1780 making tortoiseshell, creamwares and salt-glazed stonewares apparently not moving with his illustrious contemporaries into jasper, basalt or other neo-classical



4 Creamware figures 1750–80. The figure of Rodney on the right possibly dating as late as 1782.

stonewares. The figure on the right in Plate 4 is Admiral Rodney, titled vertically down the left hand side of the plinth. The earliest this item could possibly be is 1768 when Rodney contested the seat in the Northampton election and a few tinglazed plates are known from this period. It could have been produced when Rodney was appointed Rear Admiral of Great Britain in 1771, however as portrait figures were so rarely made it seems unlikely that these two events of localised interest should have been immortalised in clay. It is far more reasonable to suppose that the figure was made 1780–82 when Rodney's success in naval battles made him a national hero and when many other commemoratives were issued. A model of this type would more usually be dated to 1750–60 and it is hoped that this example serves to justify a wider date range than has hitherto been accepted. Perhaps we could call this group creamware figures 1750–80.

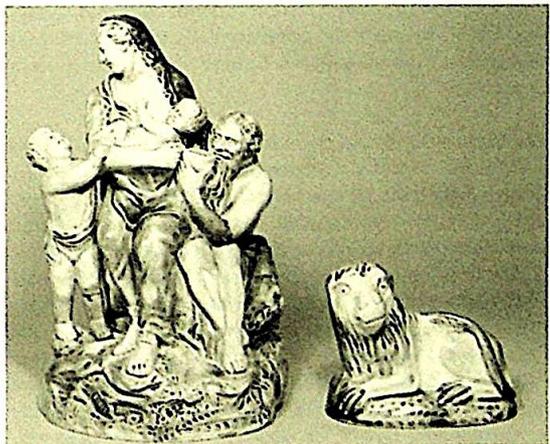
I believe that these figures must have been produced at least well into the 1770s, otherwise we lose continuation of production. If, as commonly held, the early naive figures were 1740s and the more sophisticated tortoiseshell figures were 1750–60 what was made from 1760 to the late 1770–80 period when coloured glazes were introduced?

As we move into the last quarter of the eighteenth century we see the introduction of pearlware figures many of which were decorated with coloured glazes such as those seen in Plate 5. As they are indeed pearlware they must post-date the development of this particular glaze technique (the contemporary name was china glaze).

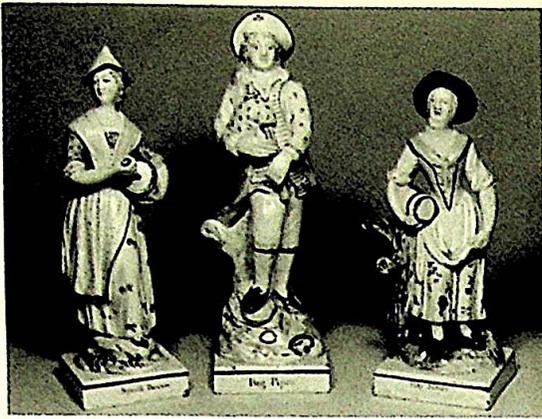
Recent research into pearlware has been unable to pinpoint its introduction but at its very earliest it can only be pushed back to 1775.²

Many of the figures are hand pressed in simple two-part moulds but an increasing number have limbs and accessories modelled separately from the body needing extra moulds and necessitating an extra assembly process. The assembled figures were fired to the biscuit stage ready for painting with glaze. The plain pearl glaze is translucent with a bluish tint produced by the addition of a small amount of cobalt to the standard lead glaze used for creamware. Other metal oxides used to tint the glaze are copper for green, iron for yellow, manganese for brown and extra cobalt for a stronger blue. The range of subtle shades derived from these metal oxides were the only colours able to withstand the temperature of a glaze firing. The coloured glazes were painted onto the biscuit (once fired) earthenware body. In haste to complete the work little nooks and crannies were left unpainted and therefore bare of glaze. This is a point to look for when the decorating method is in doubt. Another helpful point in checking whether or not a coloured glaze has been used is to look into the deep folds of the drapery and if the glaze is coloured you notice the deeper the pool the deeper the colour. This particular characteristic is used to great advantage by the modellers whose range of subjects included many with flowing and draped garments which gave better expression to this medium. The potters continued to show contemporary figures going about their daily work. New subjects reflected the classical revival which dominated the arts in the late eighteenth century, there were also models from literature and an interest in biblical themes.

Coloured glazed figures are usually attributed to Ralph Wood, but as recent research has shown his output was restricted to a production period of about 1789–1801 and many of the figures were made by other potters including John Wood whose work is recorded in documentary sources held by the City Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent. The reader is referred elsewhere for a fuller explanation of the work of John & Ralph Wood.³



5 Coloured glazed figures. Left: a complex group entitled 'Charity'. Right a simple two part moulded lion.

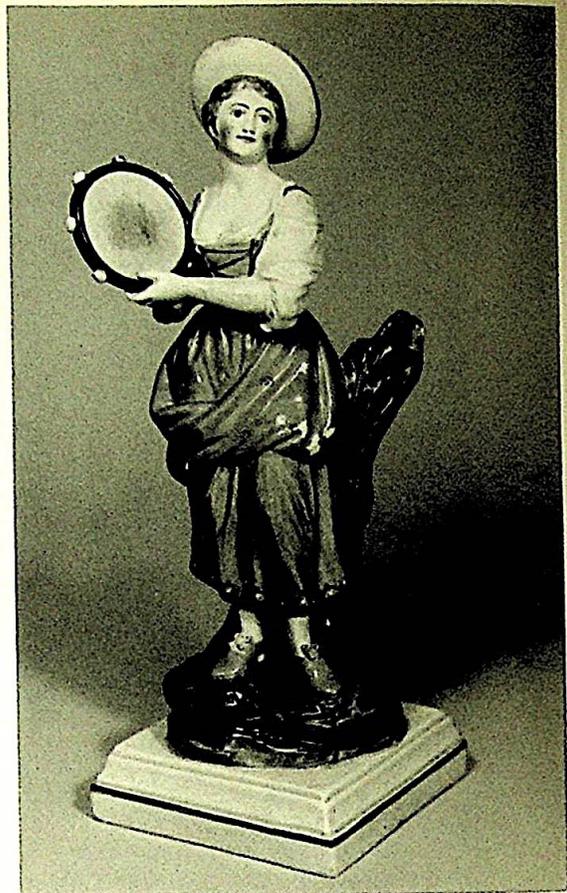


6 Pearlware figures with overglaze painted enamel decoration. The subjects were all made by John Wood but there is no evidence that these models came from his factory.

A number of marked Ralph Wood figures are known and a lack of technical knowledge in past authors meant that the significance of the pearlglaze was overlooked and under the pressure to date pieces as early as possible the wares were attributed to the wrong generation of Ralph Woods. This in turn resulted in half a century of mis-attribution and deterred serious research into this class of figure. Surely this supports the case for avoiding generic classification based on personalities. Perhaps the term coloured glaze figures will allow room for inquiry into documentary evidence including factory records, excavations and the specimens with manufacturers' marks such as Bourne and Fell.

Pearlware figures were also decorated with overglaze painted enamels offering a wider choice of colours. These were applied after the biscuit and glaze firings and as different colours mature in the kiln at different temperatures the number of subsequent enamel firings varied according to the range of colours used. Blue and green can stand a fairly high temperature so they may have been applied and fired together, pinks and red need a lower temperature and so are added and fired later. Gold requires the lowest temperature of all and is always fired last. Obviously the additional labour and fuel costs meant that enamel painted figures were a costly item to produce.

The earliest documentary evidence for enamelled figures is in John Wood's account book where in 1786 he recorded the sale of enamelled versions of the mower and hay maker, sportsman and lady, and Diana and Apollo alongside his coloured glaze examples. (see Plate 6) There is no evidence that John Wood was the first Staffordshire potter to produce enamel decorated figures and it may be that other potters such as James Neale and Enoch Wood were producing similar wares. (see Plates 7 and 8) From John Wood's account book we can see that coloured glaze figures continued to be made for the cheaper end of the market whilst enamelled versions costing more than twice as much must have been for the wealthier customer.



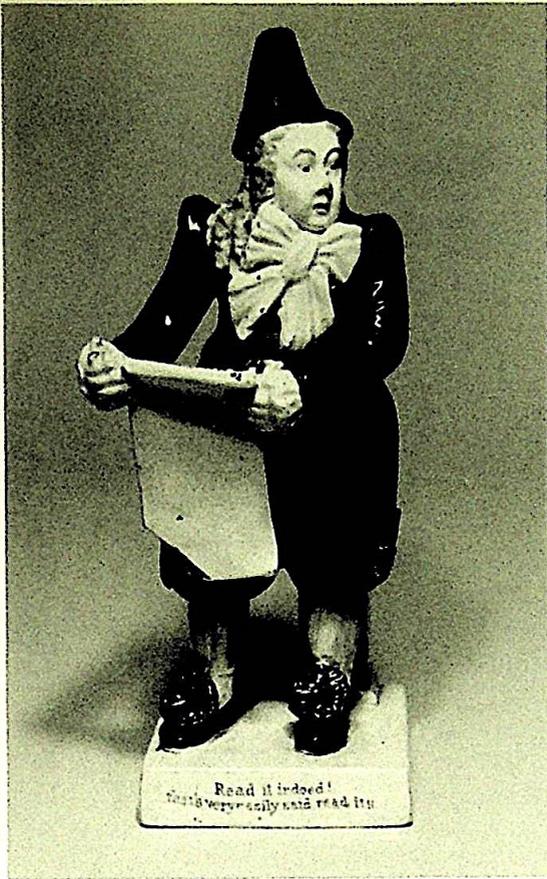
7 Pearlware figure with overglaze painted enamel decoration the base impressed 'NEALE & Co.'

Enamel painted figures of the late eighteenth century have more or less escaped the fate of a personality based generic title except for one group of small figures on square or rectangular bases with an enamel painted iron-red band which are ascribed to Enoch Wood. I know of no marked examples and in view of my pragmatic approach you will not be surprised to find that I think attributions based on iron-red bands should be treated with scepticism. For the majority of figures awaiting attribution the generic group title, late eighteenth century enamel painted figures should suffice.

It is not intended that a classification based on technical or visual descriptions should be negative, nor do I advocate the abandonment of potters' names - have I not introduced new ones in Edward Warburton and John Wood? But the indiscriminate use of names in the past has not only prevented us from searching out the truth, it has laid insubstantial foundations for our present knowledge. I suggest my system because all figures can be classified by technical/visual descriptions enabling collectors, dealers and museums to have a named category of figures which does not involve subjective qualities. Each class may be further subdivided under headings which may include manufacturers' names.

- ¹ Shaw, S. *History of the Staffordshire Potteries* 1829. pp.162-3.
- ² Lockett, T. A. 'The Later Creamwares and Pearlwares', *Creamware & Pearlware*, City Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent & Northern Ceramic Society, 1986.
- ³ Halfpenny P. A. 'The Wood Family', *Ceramics*, May/June 1986.

All photographs courtesy City Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.



- 8 Pearlware figure with overglaze painted enamel decoration depicting the actor John Liston. The base impressed 'WOOD'.

The largest sub-classification in each category is bound to be wares awaiting attribution. These can be subjected to proper scrutiny and attributed on the basis of documentary evidence, whether that be direct such as a mark or indirect such as comparison with positively identified wares.

I know that historical methodology is alien to most collectors but I encourage investigation and classification not to deter an interest in pottery but through it to achieve a better understanding and a new level of enjoyment in the pieces we love so well.

During the next twelve months I shall be preparing a book provisionally entitled 'British Earthenware Figures 1740-1840', if any readers have comments upon my views or have marked or documentary pieces I would be most grateful to hear from them.

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