

Digging for early porcelain

The porcelain wares produced in this country since the 1740s have generated great interest and have been extensively studied. Unfortunately, documentary evidence for this branch of the early ceramics industry is very slight, and the pots themselves often provide the only clues for exactly how the industry was developing. This has serious limitations.

Porcelain manufacture is ideally suited to archaeological investigation. Losses during production were considerable, and vast quantities of waste resulted from failed firings. This has often survived beneath the ground as evidence for early factory processes and products, and archaeological excavation on early factory sites can bring these to light once again after more than two hundred years.

The potential of archaeology in the study of early porcelain is therefore tremendous.

William Littler at Longton Hall

Porcelain was first produced successfully in North Staffordshire at Longton Hall in about 1751. The factory was run by a partnership of businessmen and the potter William Littler, but bankruptcy in 1760 ended the venture.

Excavations at Longton Hall uncovered the most complete remains of an 18th-century porcelain factory ever found. These include the factory's biscuit and glost ovens, a decorating kiln and a drying kiln, firebricks, shelves, supports, firebars and plugs from these, which were displaced by demolition.

Other important finds include many porcelain wasters whose frequently warped forms suggest serious problems during firing. Moulded wares and vessels decorated in under-glaze blue and over-glaze enamels have many parallels with surviving pots in modern collections.

Also found were large quantities of saggars and kiln furniture used for firing wares. These finds are very unusual and tell us a great deal about the ways in which the Longton Hall factory tried to deal with the problems of firing porcelain.

William Littler at West Pans

Shortly after the bankruptcy of the Longton Hall factory in 1760 William Littler moved to West Pans in Scotland and began once more to produce porcelain.

"William Littler China-maker at West Pans, near Musselburgh" remained in business until around 1777. Newspaper advertisements for Littler's porcelain refer to "all kinds of useful and ornamental china" and to vessels in "mazarine blue and gold".

Exactly which surviving porcelain wares were made by Littler was a matter of some debate until recent excavations located his factory at West Pans. These brought to light porcelain wasters made there and discarded on the site.

Many well-known moulded patterns were found, some with under-glaze blue-painted decoration, and on the basis of these it is now possible to identify some of Littler's Scottish porcelains. So far, however, none of the blue and gold wares thought to be by Littler have been found on the site.

The Longton Hall - West Pan Puzzle

The West Pans wasters form the basis, for the moment, for identifying Littler's Scottish products. However, there are some remarkable similarities amongst the West Pans finds to sherds found at Longton Hall. Clearly similar moulded patterns were produced at both factories, and it is possible that Littler took moulds with him on leaving Staffordshire to use in his new venture at West Pans.

It should be no surprise that Littler continued to use Longton Hall moulds after his move to Scotland, but this highlights the problems of relying solely upon moulded details for the attribution of wares. There are

some types which will be impossible to assign to either factory with confidence, and therefore the excavated wasters take on added importance.

Another significant link between the West Pans and Longton Hall finds can be seen in the kiln furniture. The circular 'stick stilts' are a most unusual type which is peculiar to these two factories, underlining a continuity in manufacturing methods which followed Littler to Scotland.

The Limehouse Factory

Limehouse, London, was the second porcelain factory in England. Newspaper advertisements of 1747 and 1748 listed "Limehouse Ware", and named the factory's proprietor as Mr. Wilson.

Nothing was known of its products, however, until excavations in 1990 in the vicinity of the factory at Duke Shore on the Thames. These revealed little of the factory's buildings, but several hundred porcelain and saggars fragments were discovered.

These give a clear idea of the range of wares produced there and a large group of porcelains can now be assigned to Limehouse. They are typically decorated under-glaze in blue with European and oriental subjects. Moulded forms, including sauce boats with lion's mask and paw feet, are also common.

The Limehouse wares were fired without the aid of kiln furniture and were prone to collapse in their saggars due to poor temperature control.

The factory had failed by early 1748. Among the goods sold off were "All the Goods in Trade of the Limehouse Manufactory, commonly called English China; consisting of great Variety of Sauce-Boats, Tea-Pots, etc."

Porcelain Production in Newcastle-under-Lyme

The documentary evidence for porcelain production in Newcastle-under-Lyme is slight. In 1746 a factory occupied by William Steers was advertised for letting; it included "three Pot-Ovens, one lately built on purpose to burn China". Steers was from Hoxton, Middlesex. In 1743, before moving to Staffordshire, he had applied for a patent to make porcelain but was not successful.

Steers occupied the factory where Samuel Bell had made earthenwares between 1724-44. It was situated in Lower Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme, and was later known as the 'Pomona' factory, after the late 19th-century Old Pomona Inn.

Excavations in 1969-71 found evidence for both Bell's operation and for the manufacture of porcelain. A small quantity of badly blistered and warped porcelain vessels, mostly decorated with under-glaze blue painted oriental patterns, suggested short-lived experimental production which failed. The sherds were found close to a small oven, in which they were probably fired. This appears to have been the culmination of William Steers' attempts to make porcelain. He had returned to London by 1748 and became a doctor.

Early Worcester

The Worcester factory was established in 1751 at Warmstry House on the banks of the Severn. Doctor John Wall and William Davis had discovered a new method of making English porcelain which soon proved to be impractical. In 1752 the Worcester Porcelain Company bought out Benjamin Lund's Bristol factory, which was successfully producing soaprock porcelain, and adopted its recipes.

The Worcester factory's early years are poorly documented, but excavations between 1968 and 1984 on the site of Warmstry House recovered vast quantities of factory wasters which had been dumped on the banks of the river. These deposits were excavated to depths of up to 6.7 metres.

The finds included potters' tools, decorators' trials and colour tests, saggars, oven bricks and some kiln furniture. Among the thousands of porcelain fragments were sherds of some of the factory's earliest wares. Numerous early patterns in under-glaze blue were identified and known moulded forms were found. The rapid move towards transfer-printed decoration from the late 1750s is well-illustrated by their increasing quantities in later deposits.

Samual Gilbody at Liverpool

Samuel Gilbody produced porcelain at his "China Manufactory" on Shaw's Brow, Liverpool, from about 1755 until his bankruptcy in 1760. His factory is probably one of two shown on an 1769 map of Liverpool.

Gilbody advertised "at the lowest prices China-ware of all Sorts, Equal for Service and Beauty to any made in England". The archaeological evidence for his products has come from the chance discovery of dumped layers of wasters and other building debris during roadworks in William Brown Street, first in 1966 and again in 1990.

No excavation in the formal, scientific sense was carried out, but large numbers of sherds were recovered from the upcast from the work and from the sides of trenches. The vessels are mostly thrown with under-glaze blue decoration, although distinctive moulded handles and spouts were found. These sherds have proved invaluable in identifying the products of Gilbody's factory and many matches have been made with surviving vessels.