

CHAMBERLAIN'S WORCESTER PORCELAIN 1783 - 1850

In 1783, Robert Chamberlain (c.1736 -98), head of the decorating department for Dr. John Wall at Warmstry House, left the company to start his own porcelain decorating business in King Street, Worcester. At first he bought blank undecorated porcelain from other factories such as Caughley in Shropshire, but by the late 1780's he was making his own wares at a new factory site in Severn Street, Diglis.



The Chamberlain factory quickly established an enviable reputation for the production of finely painted porcelain. Admiral Lord Nelson and his mistress Lady Hamilton visited Chamberlain's factory in August 1802 and ordered an extravagant breakfast, dinner and dessert service in 'Fine Old Japan' pattern. Only the breakfast service was completed before the hero's death at Trafalgar in 1805. Lady Hamilton purchased the service in 1806 for £120, 10 shillings and 6 pence.

Surviving factory records tell us about the wealthy customers who spent vast amounts of money on porcelain. Large services with elaborate decoration could take several years to produce. Everything was done by hand and each item could be fired in the kiln up to ten times, each firing taking several days and putting the item at risk each time.

The Prince Regent awarded his Royal Warrant in 1807 and in 1811 a large book of designs was created for him to select a dessert service. He could not decide on one pattern and had every piece in his service decorated in a different design. It is believed that Chamberlain developed a special type of porcelain, known as 'Regent Body' for this very important service.



One of the most important services ever made at Worcester was ordered by Lord Nevill, Marquis of Abergavenny in 1813. The order included a complete breakfast, dinner and tea service in rich Japan pattern. 254 crest, mottoes and coronets painted onto the service were charged for separately, at 5 shillings each. He also ordered two enormous mugs, painted by Humphrey Chamberlain, costing a fantastic £ 42 and a 'New Long Ink' stand at £15, 15 shillings.

Humphrey Chamberlain Junior (1791-1824) Robert Chamberlain's grandson, was an accomplished porcelain painter. He specialised in copies of oil paintings produced in intense rich colours and was admired in his day for high quality brush work, difficult to see with the naked eye. He was sometimes allowed to sign his work, which was very unusual at this time. He died at the young age of 33.

Chamberlain sold porcelain through his shop at no.33 Worcester High Street and through china and fancy goods dealers in other large towns. In 1813 Chamberlain opened a London showroom at 63 Piccadilly, moving to 155 New Bond Street in 1816.

Customers would choose the decoration for individual 'cabinet' pieces. Views of country houses and figure subjects taken from prints of well-known paintings were very fashionable. The factory built up a large library of source material for the artists to work from. Scenes from Shakespeare's plays were copied from engravings published by John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery in Pall Mall. Decoration with copies of oil paintings gave porcelain the status of minor works of art.

In the 19th century the East India Company shipped many goods to Britons living abroad. Chamberlain exported large quantities of porcelain to India and the services ordered in 1817 for the East India Co. headquarters at Fort St. George, Madras were the largest ever made at Worcester. The order included over 7000 items at a total cost of £4,190, 4 shillings.

The 1840's were a decade of great change at the Worcester factories. The former rivals, Chamberlain & Flight, Barr & Barr joined forces under the name of Chamberlain & Company in 1840. Porcelain continued to be made in Severn Street, Diglis, where the factory still operates today. The new firm developed ideas and products to try to meet the increasing demand for novelty in design. Buttons, and porcelain door furniture took up a large part of the business, but financially things were difficult. Their efforts were severely restricted by a now old factory and a lack of modern machinery.

Many old churches were being restored and new ones were built during the middle years of the 19th century. Chamberlain & Co. produced medieval style encaustic floor tiles at the old Warmstry factory.

In 1851 the last of the Chamberlain family, Walter, retired, leaving the factory in the sole charge of the Dublin business man, William Kerr, who was to dramatically change the fortunes of the company during the 1850's.

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