

The Worker's Story

"I feel proud of carrying the baton and passing it on. I think we all did the best we could for this amazing company".

These are the words of former Works Manager David West, but they are echoed by almost all the interviewees who have taken part in the Porcelain Museum's oral history project.

Recording started in earnest in spring 2007 and since then we have captured some magical stories that, as well as covering the manufacturing and production of porcelain, provide an insight into the social lives of the workers and most importantly the camaraderie and community spirit that existed between them.

The earliest memories date back to the early 1930s and several of our interviewees started at Royal Worcester before the war. They describe the factory as dark and dingy, with the bottle-kilns belching out smoke, and workers huddled over their benches, a place where nothing much had changed in a hundred years.



These were the first impressions of engraver Ted Taylor, who worked as an engraver at the factory for 50 years.

"There was a pervading smell in the department... this was because everyone innocently smoked in those days. The foreman smoked a pipe, one of the senior engravers smoked a pipe, and two others smoked Players cigarettes, or something like that – very strong. The whole department was wreathed in this tobacco smell, and old clothes – I

could always imagine I could smell old clothes."

But whether our interviewees started in the 30s or 90s, whether they stayed 50 years or 2, they all came away with a feeling of belonging to a big family. Many still keep in touch with each other, meeting regularly and laughing at happy memories, such as this one from Freda Griffiths who started as an apprentice Paintress just after the war.

“Everybody wore turbans at work...they used to put their rollers in either about ten o'clock (if they had time in the ten o'clock break) or at lunchtime. They'd all sit and do each others' hair and put these little metal clip rollers in, and then wear turbans all day because they were going out at night.”

Stella Chambers described her first day in the burnishers department in 1952.

“The first job I ever did was a box of Warmstry coffee cans. I had to ‘wet sand’ – that’s, like, a piece of rag on your finger, dipping it into water, then into sand and going round. Then you had to ‘dry sand’ it all – with a chamois leather and silver sand. That was my first job, and I’ve never known such a long day! I was absolutely shattered I was and that bored of doing these cans all day, but they had to be just right and if you left a bit of brown round the handle she’d give you an agate stone and you had to pick all the bits of brown out.”



Ken Harris talked about his uncle Bob Bradley who was foreman of the figure-makers and worked with Doris Lindner on the model of Princess Elizabeth on her horse Tommy, which was presented to her in 1948.

“My uncle Bob Bradley... him and Doris Lindner – combined together to make the first one and then he put it altogether and that. It was the one when she did the first Trooping of the Colour, and she was sat on

the black horse she had then... Tommy, was it?. And when Princess Elizabeth came to Worcester (in 1951) she came round to have a look at it. I remember the visit very well... we all crowded to the end window 'cos we could look down on to the shop where she was going in so we saw her come down the yard and going into the shop. She went in there to see Bob and I've got the photo of her being introduced to him. He was awarded the British Empire medal after, like, in recognition of all the work he did there.”

We have completed 33 interviews, recording the memories and experiences of over 45 workers. Whilst this is only the tip of the iceberg, it gives us a valuable insight into life behind the scenes, and vital information on how things were done before automation.

Harry Meyrick worked in the cup making shop from 1936, aged just 14

“Finished cups would be put onto the stillages over night. The next morning they would get taken up, they would be on five foot boards with about two dozen cups on each board, they would take their own work down to the green room, the cups were still in clay then, you see. They were inspected before they went into the biscuit kiln. If there were any rejects they would stop you, if they were bad ones, if they could find any faults, you were in trouble. They’d dock you that.”



Gilder John Masters, who started at the factory in 1951, describes where the gold was kept at Royal Worcester and how it was never wasted.



“They had a great big safe in the Gold Room – and that was where all the gold was kept. When I first went, there was an old chap called George Harrison in charge. He was a chemist and he knew all the colours and the golds and everything. In the (gilding) department you had a safe where you kept the everyday gold. I looked after that... it was locked all the time. Everybody had a bottle and their name was on the bottle, so you knew who was wasting gold and who wasn’t wasting gold!..... There was one incident when a lady got gold on her dress in the china department and the chap who was in charge of the Gold Room, George Harrison, took her a smock, and told her to

go to the Ladies and take her dress off and put the smock on and he took her dress away and soaked the gold out! Of course, we used to keep all the gold rags... if you were wiping the gold off, or wiping the bottles, the rags with gold on were kept and burnt, or sent away, and we used to have the reclaimed gold come back.”

Conditions in the paintresses room in summer were sometimes unbearable, with heat from the kilns below adding to the stifling temperatures. Freda Griffiths explains how Daisy Rea helped keep her girls cool.

“The summer was the worst. Miss Rea used to bring round a little cloth, and she’d have a bowl of cold water and wring it out, and she’d come round and she’d actually put this cold pad round the back of your neck and on the inside of your arms. Then she used to give you the pad and say ‘now, put it on the back of your knees’, because it’s where your arteries are closest to the surface and if you held it there long enough you’d cool your own blood. It’s an old Victorian practise, she said. People did almost faint with the heat, because the kilns were still walloping out the heat, look. How those poor men worked in the kilns I’ll never know!”



Keith Chambers talked about the Royal Worcester factory in the 1970s.

“ The interesting thing is anything to do with ornamental was posh. You didn't really speak to them, they didn't speak to you. They were the posh people. You make a few teapots, that's fine. We make figurines, we make the rich stuff, giftware, and so there was a clear class system within Royal Worcester and anything to do with ornamental making was posh. Anything to do with ornamental decorating was really posh. And the other thing is, you didn't leave your department, you didn't go wandering the factory. I had a lady who worked for me in later years, who worked in our cup shop, one of the areas I managed, for nearly 40 years, when I asked her to take something over to one of the painting departments she didn't know where it was. And in the end I had to take her over because she had never moved, had no cause to move around and it was frowned upon. You didn't go in other peoples departments.”

Harry Meyrick described the bottle kiln workers in the 1930s.

“The bottle kilns were hard work They used to have saggars and what they used to do, the lads, well you'd have to see it to believe it, they used to have caps on and they would put a ring inside the cap and they would carry the saggars on their head. And up on ladders and place them in the kiln, right high up, one on top of the other. And when they had to go in again after the firing, they had to go up there and they could only work for about 20 minutes to half an hour because it was too hot and they had to have a break and drink water.”



The museum will continue to record the memories of ex-employees and is working on a plan to make the recordings available to researchers and our gallery visitors. Copies will also be made available via the Worcestershire Library and History Centre and the Worcester Record Office.

Thank you to Julia Letts who conducted all the interviews and of course to all those ex-employees who allowed us to share their memories of working at 'The Porcelain'.

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