Aspects of Ceramic History, Volume I.

Contents

I became aware of the Elers brothers' reputation as important transitional figures in the history of Staffordshire ceramics at an early stage in my museum career. Their name appeared in almost every account of the industry's early development. When their work was discussed writers would invariably include illustrations of what they believed to be examples. The captions to these illustrations usually said either 'Elers type' or 'Elers/Dwight. It struck me at the time that the importance attached to their influence on ceramic developments in Staffordshire was hardly compatible with the uncertainty that seemed to surround the identification of wares actually made by them. It was obvious that wares called 'Elers' or' Elers type', by some nineteenth and early twentieth century writers, could not have been their work not least because stylistically they were much later than the Elers' potting activities in the region.

When one is faced with an absence of reliable three- dimensional evidence there is an increased dependency on what may be rare documentary sources. The main documentary source, published that is, was Simeon Shaw's History of the Staffordshire Potteries of 1829. Unfortunately, Shaw, probably for reasons relating to cost, failed to include any illustrations. John Ward's History of the Borough of Stoke-on-Trent, published in 1843, does include an engraved illustration of what tradition tells us was the Elers' residence, namely Dimsdale Hall, but nothing of their actual products.

So what does Shaw say about them, the Elers that is? He leaves the reader in no doubt about their alleged impact on a community unaccustomed to outsiders, especially when the outsiders in question happened to be from a foreign country. He tells us that;

'About 1690, Messrs Elers settled at Bradwell, from Nuremberg, where they had a small manufactory, and according to tradition, another at Dimsdale, both in very secluded situations, and at a distance from the public roads; scarcely discernible from Burslem, and only partially so from the manufactories at Red Street.'(1)

I should mention that Red Street is an area located in the nearby village of Chesterton. Little is known about the 'manufactories' Shaw refers to. He continues with;

'Here for some time, the brothers made Red unglazed teapots, merely of the fine red clay of Bradwell, and a small proportion of the ochreous clay from Chesterton, to vary the shade; and also Black Porcelain, or Egyptian, by adding manganese in proportions agreeable to the dark shade wished for.'(2)

He goes on to write about the secrecy that allegedly surrounded their work, and employment of people he describes as being 'most ignorant and stupid persons.'

Shaw's story of the Elers was clearly based upon handed down information, in other words oral evidence. It is relevant to mention that in the preface to his book he informs the reader that;

'This volume originated in the Reminiscences of many aged Persons who had witnessed the time and manner in which the Art of Pottery had attained much of its importance.'(3)

However, on page 121 he provides details concerning an event of his own times involving two leading potters, namely Enoch Wood and J Riley. He records the incident as follows;

'We have obtained the following information concerning the oven which has been mentioned as having cast forth such tremendous volumes of smoke and flame, as were terrific to the inhabitants of Burslem, and occasioned that misunderstanding and persecution which ultimately caused Messrs Elers to quit their residence. The oven itself had five mouths, but neither holes over the inside flues or bags, to receive the salt, had any been used by them, or scaffold on which the person might stand to throw it in. The foundations were very distinctly to be seen in 1808, tho' now covered by an enlargement of the barn. E Wood and J Riley both separately measured the inside diameter of the remains at about five feet; while the ovens of the same date in Burslem were ten or twelve feet.'

Armed with this interesting information I visited Bradwell Hall Farm in the spring of 1955. As a mere seventeen year old at the time it would not have been entirely unreasonable if the then owner of the farm had given my enquiries short shrift. In actuality I could not have dreamt of a better response. Mr Twigge not only gave me total access to all areas of the farm but also allowed me to dig a series of trial holes.

The barn mentioned by Shaw had long since been replaced by a prefabricated structure. This proved to be an advantage because it allowed me to investigate the area originally occupied

by what Shaw described as having been seen by Wood and Riley. Despite digging down several feet there was, unfortunately, no trace of the oven's foundations. This stage of my investigations was not totally without results in that I unearthed more than a dozen small fragments of their red stoneware. The true significance of these fragments was to materialize some twenty years later when I resumed my work on the Elers.

Additional trial holes were dug in the summer of 1955 in other areas of the farm, including what is claimed to have been the moat. Unfortunately, no evidence of early structures was found. However, the number of red stoneware wasters recovered reached a total of seventy. A base fragment from a German grey salt-glazed stoneware mug was the single exception to an otherwise small collection of red stoneware fragments.

My trial excavations at Bradwell Hall were brought to a premature end because to have continued the work would have proved too disruptive to the routine of a busy working farm. It was after an absence of some twenty years that I returned to the site. The mid 1970s saw a temporary halt to Hanley Museum's role as a public service apart from responding to postal enquiries, a state of semi limbo brought about by the beginning of a building programme that would ultimately lead to the museum's re-opening in 1981. This restricted public service meant that for the first time we were able to research in depth certain aspects of the museum's collections. For my own part I took advantage of the situation to renew my interest in the Elers.

As a starting point I re-read a paper by the eminent ceramic historian, William Honey that he had delivered to the English Ceramic Circle in 1932.(4) Honey's main objective in writing the paper was to separate the surviving red stonewares that were stylistically characteristic of the late seventeenth century from red stonewares that were clearly eighteenth century in date. It is much to William Honey's credit that subsequent events largely confirmed his attributions. His paper succeeded in going further than any previous contributor to the subject of early English red stonewares. He was not, however, able to say which pieces were Elers and which were from John Dwight's Fulham Pottery.

The positive thing for me that stemmed from reading this paper was that it succeeded in re igniting my interest in the subject. Like Honey I divided, in this instance, Hanley Museum's red stonewares into two groups, namely wares that were clearly of eighteenth century date and pots that on stylistic grounds were more typical of patterns current in the seventeenth century. As with other writers on the subject William Honey described the pseudo Chinese seal marks found on some red stonewares from the time of the Elers to the late eighteenth century, and came to the conclusion that they were of little help with regard to the business of making specific attributions. R.L.Hobson in his Guide to English Pottery and Porcelain Collections in the British Museum, published 1904, came to a similar conclusion. On this subject he writes; 'No marks were used by the Elers, except perhaps, those imitation Chinese seal marks which are found on red ware of all periods, consequently the identification of their work is very difficult.'

By a process of elimination I found that by setting aside pieces that were obviously post 1750, for example, the engine turned red stonewares attributed to Wedgwood's Burslem period, I was left with three pots in the museum's collection that matched those dated by Honey to the late seventeenth century. A cursory examination revealed that all three items were very similar in colour with finely turned foot rims or bands in relief, and sprigged ornamentations of a pseudo oriental type. I was struck by the fact that there was an obvious difference between their inner and outer surfaces. Upon examining them much more carefully it became apparent that the throwing rings found on many wares from all periods were absent. This was, of course, to be expected where lathe turning had been applied but on all three examples, a mug, a tea bowl, and possibly what was a finger bowl, the benefits of turning had not been used on their inner surfaces. This feature is easily explained when one

considers the finishing processes that would have been applied by the Elers. In this connection Shaw tells us that;

'No research has ascertained the time, or the person, to whom must be assigned the truly important improvement of turning on the lathe. There has been mention that it was suggested by the method of turning Ornaments from Spar in Derbyshire; and another suggestion is that Messrs Elers introduced it in about 1692.'(5)

In turning a pot in a lathe, or on a potter's wheel, a cone, either of wood or clay, is needed to hold the piece firm while it is being spun during the process of removing unwanted clay. Given that the most obvious feature seen on fine red stonewares is their smooth, almost blemish free surface, broken only by the presence of applied reliefs, producing an inner surface of equivalent quality posed obvious difficulties. In other words smoothing, for example, the inside of a bowl was done with either a piece of dampened cloth or the turner's fingers instead of in a lathe. This practice was obviously far less successful in creating a flawless finish than lathe turning. It was infact this technical shortcoming that revealed the Elers' making methods. Most other potters attempting to make fine red stonewares would automatically have opted for throwing on a wheel, followed by turning. It is important to remember that the Elers are said to have worked as silversmiths prior to taking up stoneware production.

The only explanation for the grainy surface, and small blow holes on the tea ware's inner surface is that they had been formed by casting. Now, casting with slip or liquid clay was until then an innovation that had been attributed to an early nineteenth century potter named Tendelle. He had discovered that certain chemicals from the alkali group were dramatically effective in converting a mixture of clay with a small amount of water into a creamy consistency. Was it at all possible that the Elers had anticipated Tendelle's discovery by at least a century?

My sudden interest in slip casting prompted the memory of seeing a reference to the link between this technique and the Elers in a published source. Upon checking my then reading list I remembered that what was little more than a vague memory turned out to be a couple of paragraphs in the Rhead brothers' book mentioned earlier. In short they were being very dismissive of information contained in a letter written by Josiah Wedgwood. This is what they had to say on the subject;

'The saltglazing is a controversial matter, but Wedgwood's statement that the Elers made ware ''by casting it in plaster moulds and turning it on the outside upon lathes'' is astounding. To turn cast ware upon a lathe is a feat so difficult as to be nearly impossible. And there can be no compensating advantages.'(7)

Now, while the Rheads were experienced ceramic designers and, therefore, supposedly well versed in manufacturing principles, they made the unfortunate error of evaluating Wedgwood's account in the context of late nineteenth century industrial methods.

Aspects of Ceramic History, Volume II.

Contents:

Aspects of Ceramic History, Volume III.

Contents: