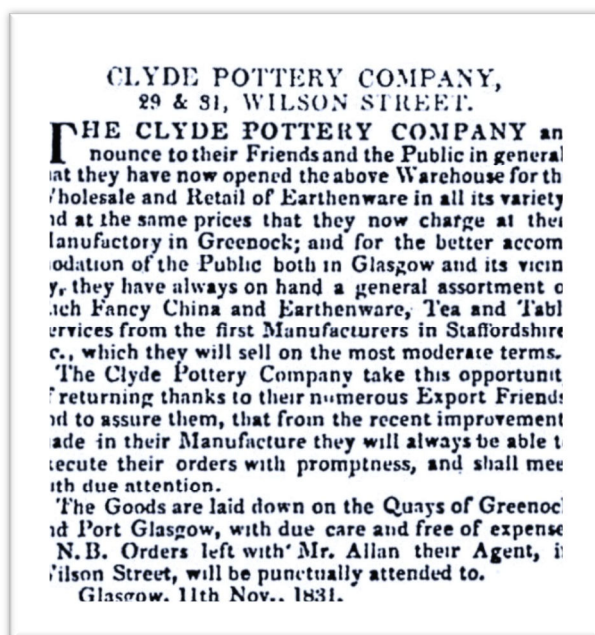


# Clyde Pottery Wares in the McLean Museum Collection.

Valerie N.S. Boa, Curator of the McLean Museum and Art Gallery, Greenock



In 1861 the Greenock Philosophical Society was formed. One of its aims was to create a museum and in 1876 James McLean, a local timber merchant and member of the Society, founded the McLean Museum and the Watt Lecture Hall on the Society's behalf. The main object of the museum was to build up '*a collection to illustrate the industries, the Natural History, and the Antiquities of the town and its neighbourhood*'.

The museum opened its doors on the 3rd of November, 1876 and donations flooded in from the townspeople and from sea captains who collected exotic material for the displays while on their travels around the world. The Curator's report for 31st December, 1877 records the following donation to the industrial department in the museum's gallery 'A case of specimens from the Clyde Pottery Company'. This small, but significant entry, noted in the 'Greenock Telegraph' of 1st January, 1878, documents the acquisition of an important collection and resource for those interested in the history of pottery manufacture in Scotland. The Clyde Pottery Company's donation to the museum is still in existence today. It comprises samples of the raw materials used in pottery making and wares in the various stages of manufacture chosen to illustrate the different processes being employed in the pottery at that time. It also includes a selection of attractive and varied finished wares, pieces which were undoubtedly presented to demonstrate the range and quality of the pottery's output.

There are samples of the China clay and ball clay from Cornwall which formed the body of the wares: flints from the north of England and Cornish pegmatite for the silica glaze, borax for the flux and a set of powdered colours made from metal oxides which were used to decorate the wares.

A full set of plaster moulds for a single piece - a Toby Jug - exists. The figure of the 'Snufftaker' was moulded in five parts. The face and body of the jug, the hat, each hand and the handle were made separately then the smaller parts were attached to the main jug body with wet slip clay prior to firing. The museum has a complete Toby Jug at the biscuit stage of manufacture. This has been fired once but the second or glaze firing, where the glaze is added to the piece to make it impermeable to moisture and to decorate it, has not been carried out. Unfortunately, the museum also owns a finished version of the piece.

Another series of exhibits shows the basic stages involved in making cups and plates. The specimens include a cup case mould, a cup profile and moulds for cup handles. The cup profile has the following inscription incised on it 'J. Hay, 1875 Feb 12th SPANISH'. The display also has examples of plate moulds and profiles demonstrating how a plate was made by placing a flat piece of clay on the mould, positioning the profile against the clay and rotating the wheel to shape the underside of the plate.

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GREENOCK POTTERIES,  
Port-Glasgow Road, June, 1855.

The sponge ware exhibits are particularly interesting as the actual sponges used in stamping simple repeat designs onto the biscuit ware have been preserved, a rare and possibly unique occurrence. Scottish potters employed two methods of sponge decoration 1. Either they bound the sponge with linen threads to pull it into a dense mass, the pattern being produced by the position of the threads, or they used a piece cut from the tough root of the sponge and cut a pattern on its surface. The Clyde pottery sponges are of the latter type. Three differently patterned sponges are still in existence along with examples of wares at the biscuit stage bearing decoration applied by these sponges.

The museum has also acquired a splendid sponge ware punch-bowl decorated with butterflies and ostrich feathers (the emblem of the Prince of Wales). Although the bowl is unmarked, sherds from the 1973 excavation of the site show that the Clyde Pottery was using identical sponge patterns on its wares so the Greenock origin of the bowl is virtually certain.

The process of transfer decoration is demonstrated by a series of three plates of the popular 'willow pattern'. The transfer - a design printed onto tissue paper with metal oxides suspended in printer's oil - was applied to the slightly porous surface of a plate at the biscuit stage of production. It was firmly rubbed down so that the design transferred to the plate, then the paper was floated off in water. The next stage was to fire the plate to remove the printer's oil, and the second plate is shown with the design appearing in reddish-brown tones after this had been done. The third and final plate shows the finished ware after it has been glazed and fired. The plate is now the familiar blue and white colour of the 'willow pattern' as the intense heat of the glaze firing has altered the glaze colour. The underside of the plate bears the mark 'Stone Ware' with two scrolls in blue, one of the few pieces in the 1877 donation to bear any sort of back stamp.

Hand painting is in evidence as a method of decoration on many of the wares in the collection. Its power is well demonstrated in an exhibit which comprises two wash hand basins for plumbing in, one in its biscuit stage of production and one glazed and decorated. The latter has the lion's head spout for the water ornamented in gilt and a ring of hand painted roses around the inside of the basin. Sometimes transfer designs would be 'filled-in' by painting sections of the pattern with colour. The colour could be applied before the article was glazed (underglaze) or afterwards (overglaze). The process of enamelling with overglaze colours is known as 'clobbering'.

The material received in 1877 from the Clyde Pottery includes a range of round basins for plumbing in, both in their biscuit and glazed states, and similarly an assortment of different sizes of vegetable dishes in biscuit and glazed stages of production. A particularly fine piece from this acquisition is a pink and white cheese dish ornamented with Vine leaves, berries and corn sheaves in relief moulding and decorated with gilt.

The museum is still actively collecting wares made by the Clyde Pottery. As part of a long term project to build up a representative a collection of these as many different pieces and patterns as can be acquired. The collection includes punch-bowls, plaques, plates, vegetable dishes and ashets along with some unique and individually made commemorative pieces. We were fortunate in 1986 to be able to acquire the extensive collection of Clyde pottery formerly owned by Peter Denholm with the generous assistance of the Local Museums Purchase Fund and the museum is also the repository for the sherds retrieved from the 1973 excavation of the site of the pottery, from which we hope to learn more as research is undertaken on them.

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