



Annie Clarke c1910.



Bretby 'rising sun' backstamp with shape number and decorator's date marks.



Three of the workshop 'girls' - Eva Clarke furthest from the camera.

Bretby art pottery - the early years

by Judith Clarke

'Every pot tells a story' and this wonderful private collection of Bretby pottery and photos certainly does that. The pieces belong to the family of Annie Potter, nee Clarke, who worked at Bretby from 1899 until she married in 1916. Bretby evolved out of several very interesting and illustrious pottery strands. Back in 1879 in Middlesborough Christopher Dresser and his business partner John Harrison set up Linthorpe Pottery. Dresser was the art director and the manager was a man called Henry Tooth. In the three years Tooth worked at Linthorpe his chemical knowledge developed into a skillful ability to produce ceramic glazes. He left Linthorpe in 1882 and by 1883 had co-founded his own art pottery at Woodville, South Derbyshire. His partner was William Ault who had also worked at Linthorpe and the firm was officially known as Tooth & Ault, or Bretby.

Early production consisted mainly of decorative earthenware along similar lines to that produced at Linthorpe. When Ault left in 1887 to establish his own pottery at nearby Swadlincote Henry Tooth took the opportunity to begin to expand his ranges, now under the name of Tooth & Co. The usual vases and decorative vessels were supplemented with finely modelled figures, novelty items and an increasing use of glazes that resembled other materials such as copper, cloisonné and bamboo. Around this time Annie Clarke started work at Bretby. The year was 1899 and she was just thirteen. Like many girls of her time and with the pottery close by she never spoke of doing anything else. She and other young decorators, such as Emily Steel, thought of themselves merely as 'pot work girls'. The pieces shown here all date from around the period 1903-1915 and include a beautifully painted wall plaque of a sailing boat, a bird and foliage design plaque (both of which Annie decorated) as well as the novelty monkey/suffragette figure and examples of Bamboo Ware. Henry Tooth was responsible for most of the Bretby designs at this time.

This period was very fruitful and new ranges or versions of earlier wares were constantly appearing. These included the early Applique Ware and a range called Carved Bamboo, in production for a long time and among some of the most commonly seen Bretby nowadays. There was Bronze and Jewelled Ware (utilising large Art Nouveau swaths of decoration and inset ceramic 'cabochons'), Matzone (an example of which is the plaque with sailing boat decoration shown here), Dickensian ranges, Clanta, Copperette and Cloisonné. The pottery produced ewers, stick stands, jardinieres, bowls, spill vases, mantel

clocks, wall plaques, pitchers, trompe l'œil novelties such as the Huntley & Palmers' biscuit plate, finely glazed art vases and character and animal figures. In addition there were the kind of bizarre novelty items that refused to follow the ethos of art pottery in terms of subject or method of manufacture i.e. not aesthetically pleasing nor hand-thrown. (much Bretby pottery was press moulded)

According to Annie's family Henry Tooth was a conscientious employer and had his workforce checked regularly for signs of lead poisoning. Tooth's workforce also included his son W.E. Tooth and daughter Florence who designed and decorated. Annie, like so many talented young people, probably underestimated her own skills and presumably was glad to leave her work when an offer of marriage came along. She left the works on a Friday in 1916, married on the Saturday, and moved into her new home on the Monday. Indeed at a much later date, when Annie was about to move house, much of her Bretby 'collection' was lost for ever. Aided by her grandson Peter, she smashed up many of the pieces as they were too bulky to take with her - a story which will horrify the many ardent collectors of this fascinating ware.

The current market for Bretby is a healthy one and prices are steadily rising, especially for larger items such as the jardinieres and stick stands in the shape of animals. For a good example of a jardiniere on stand you might expect to pay £500-£900 and the Bretby stick stands in the shape of an owl or like the bear example shown here currently command £500-£600 in perfect condition. Prices are also high for early pieces, perhaps £600-£900 for a pair of vases and for art pottery attributed to Christopher Dresser designs.

Henry Tooth died in 1918 and over the next decade the Tooth family ties were gradually loosened with Bretby Pottery up to the point where the pottery was bought by the Parker family in 1933. The history of Bretby after then is outside the scope of this article. However Bretby continued until as recently as 1998 and remains a company. Barbara Parker informs me that the decision to close was taken reluctantly in the face of ever increasing competition from cheaper imports. Its fate was not helped either when the factory museum was broken into in July 1997 and some £25,000 worth of rare pieces were stolen including a unique bust of Henry Tooth. Fortunately a good proportion of the pieces have now been recovered and the rest of the Bretby collection is in safe storage as are thousands of original moulds.

Though the museum isn't open and some of the site has now been demolished the Company still gets plenty of calls from interested collectors and they try to assist people whenever possible with dating their pieces. The number for Bretby Art Pottery is 01283 217434.

Finally the warmest thanks to Grace and Les Cuthbert for relating the story of their family connection with Bretby and for permission to reproduce these photos of a treasured collection.



Small novelty monkey/suffragette ashtray.



Typical Bretby wall plaque in excellent condition.



Detail of hand painted wall plaque. (decoration by Annie Clarke)



Detail of large jardiniere stand with elephant's heads.



Detail of wall plaque.



'Matzone' wall plaque - part of a group of three.



Bretby bear 'majolica' stick stand c1915.



Wall plaque - one of a pair.



Small cloisonné vase with hand painted decoration.



Detail of stick stand; there is also a version with a monkey clasping a 'bamboo' stick.