



Pinched jug, novelty cat figures and Watcombe tulip vase and a selection of other wares.

Torquay Pottery

by Judith Clarke

Thatched cottages, sailing boats, black cockerels and quaint country sayings all conjure up the typical image of Torquay Pottery and yet, like its slightly misleading name, this kind of genial fare produced in the South Devon area tells only half the story.

It helps to think of Torquay as a kind of family tree with the establishment of Watcombe Pottery in 1869 as the beginning of the lineage (which eventually amounted to some twenty or so). Founded to make use of the discovery of a rich bed of clay in the surrounding area this pottery was closely followed by the establishment of the Torquay Terracotta Company at nearby Hele in 1875.

Watcombe produced classically inspired pieces in both plain and glazed terracotta ware. Urns, busts and figures were the order of the day and the TTC eagerly followed suit. Fine examples of this kind of ware are greatly sought after (especially early Watcombe pieces based on Christopher Dresser designs) and the collections of Torquay pottery at Torre Abbey, Torquay and Torquay Museum fully represent this facet of early production.

Although established as a pottery site in the 1860s the Aller Vale Art Pottery began production in 1881 and was founded by John Phillips, a man heavily into the prevailing arts and crafts ethos. The example of Aller Vale marked a shift in emphasis among the potteries to slip decorated and sgraffito ware, mirrored by its North Devon counterpart, Brannam Pottery. By around 1890 Longpark was also well established.

By 1901 two of the 'family' branches had merged (Aller Vale and Watcombe becoming the Royal Aller Vale and Watcombe Pottery Company) and as time went on many of the employees moved around from pottery to pottery and in some cases went on to set up their own businesses. Popular local motifs consisted of the 'scandy' pattern - a stylised scroll like decoration, Aller Vale's blue on white scroll pattern known as Sandringham, and the Kingfisher decoration favoured by Watcombe and Longpark.

With the advent of increased leisure time for the masses, the south Devon area became ever popular as a tourist destination. By the 1920s the potters of south Devon were working furiously to keep up with demand for mottoware or cottageware as a holiday souvenir or gift. The factories themselves were popular tourist attractions, much as potteries

Books:

The pioneering work *The Old Torquay Potteries* by D&E Lloyd Thomas, published 1978, can be found through your local library. Anyone writing articles on Torquay Pottery must acknowledge a huge debt to the research work of Virginia Brisco, author of a prolific number of books and other material covering all aspects of Torquay Ware. Her titles include: *Torquay Mottoware*; *Torquay Commemorative and Advertising Wares*; and *Let's Collect Cottagewares*, 1992, a detailed and fascinating book for the cottage fanatic.



Large Watcombe jug at top showing a fine example of the 'scandy' pattern.

nowadays have to be to keep in business. Mottoware is very popular with collectors and pieces bearing a saying in local dialect currently seem to be at a premium; the 'do al gude you kin' and 'if you cant be aisy be as aisy as you can' kind of thing. Typical inscriptions range from the devotional, literary and punning and most of them contain good honest country wisdom with none of the pretensions of the city.

Some of them do actually say 'look on the bright side' and generally they're uplifting in a lowest common denominator fashion. Many are the early equivalent of the t-shirt slogan, 'drink like a fish - water only,' the holiday chuckle and cuddle, the kiss-me-quick, all preserved on a piece of red Devonshire soil.

With the passage of time the items produced were increasingly of a functional nature as opposed to the predominantly decorative early ware. The TTC which had reopened as the Torquay Pottery Co Ltd in 1908 closed permanently in 1939 and with the closure of Longpark in 1957 and Watcombe in 1962 the days of Torquay Pottery were over (with the exception of Dartmouth Pottery which was established in 1947 and is still going strong).

On the current market there are a profusion of dishes, inkwells, vases, mugs, commemorative items, teapots, novelty items, match strikers, tea services, candle holders, pinch, udder and tyg vases, tea pots, tea services and jardinieres for the collector to choose from as well as specific ranges such as motto and cottage ware.

The red-bodied ware is easily recognisable and the slip and sgraffito decoration are warm and welcoming. Identification of particular potteries becomes easier as you begin to learn the particular nuances and signature marks of each one, such as the Watcombe cottages which always have two storeys.

Larger items such as giant shop display tea pots and early more decorative pieces are some of the most sought after. Occasionally very special (often exhibition) pieces have sold for a couple of thousand pounds but on the whole prices tend to be anywhere from £10 - £80 plus for pieces of tableware with mottoes and for decorative vases £50 - £80 plus. Expect to pay around £200 - £500 for larger advertising wares, terracotta figures, wall plaques, some animal figures and jardinieres.

Apart from the well known names of Watcombe, Aller Vale, Longpark and the Torquay Terracotta Company there's also a highly collectable range of lesser known producers such as Devon Tors, Daison Art Pottery, Barton and Lemon & Crute.

There's no doubt that Torquay Pottery has come of age in the collecting world and has greatly consolidated its position over the past decade with prices to match.

Further Information:

To really soak up the atmosphere you should come and visit. See where Watcombe used to be. Find the old Longpark tower and come and visit the fine collections at Torquay Museum and at Torre Abbey where there's a large display of some of the early terracotta wares including classical figures and miniature violins and banjos.

The *Torquay Pottery Collectors' Society* was established in 1976 and has a world wide membership (some 1500 and growing) of collectors devoted to the items produced by the South Devon potteries. Details can be obtained from TPCS, Torre Abbey, Avenue Road, Torquay Devon TQ2 5JX.



Selection of Torquay Pottery showing decoration on back of Queen Victoria commemorative jug.



Pair of Watcombe vases.



Puzzle jug, pinched vases and a nice example of a decorative tray with local motto.



Commemorative jug celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee 1897 - Watcombe. About £250.



The Longpark Tower.



Torquay Terracotta Company match holder and striker c1895-1910. £150.