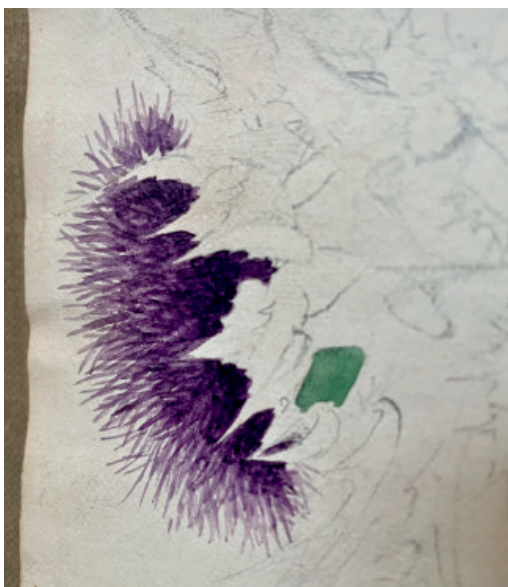




ABOVE FROM TOP Derby plate painted by an anonymous artist in the style pre-dating William Billingsley, c1790, at the Royal Crown Derby Museum; another plate in the same design painted by William Billingsley, c1790, at the Royal Crown Derby Museum. **ABOVE MIDDLE** A sketch of a thistle by William 'Quaker' Pegg, c1813, at the Royal Crown Derby Museum. **ABOVE RIGHT FROM TOP** Derby plate by William Billingsley, c1790, sold at Bonhams; a Derby dish painted by William 'Quaker' Pegg, c1813, at the Royal Crown Derby Museum. **BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT** Detail of the thistle sketch by William 'Quaker' Pegg; pair of Derby dishes by William 'Quaker' Pegg, c1815, sold at Bonhams.

FACING PAGE Coffee can from the Pinxton factory painted by William Billingsley, c1796, sold at Bonhams.



A Tale of Two Williams

By the mid 18th century, individual talents began to be recognised; none more so than Messrs Billingsley and Pegg, says Willa Latham



Following last month's introduction to some of the key porcelain decorators of the 18th century, today we shine a light on two particularly interesting artists, whose skill and influence were far-reaching.

William Billingsley, born in 1758, was a brilliant but difficult man, leaving behind a trail of debts alongside some important innovations in British porcelain. Encouraged by his mentor, the king of landscapes Zachariah Boreman, who we met last month, Billingsley developed a free, flowing style of flower painting, presenting flowers playfully from all perspectives with shiny highlights. These highlights were a novelty at the time: instead of painting around a white spot in order to create the effect of light on a petal, Billingsley applied his paint thickly and then wiped it out, creating a stronger, wet-looking effect. This, as well as the flowing style, was to become the quintessentially British style of porcelain painting, contrasting with the more restrained Continental style. He painted a 'prentice plate' with a border of running roses, each one from a different angle, that every Derby apprentice had to successfully copy as part of their training.

Billingsley is often called the 'most wrongly attributed painter in the history of ceramics' and you can find his name all over eBay! His style can be confusing as he occasionally painted some more contrived designs, depending on what was required; it is wise to mistrust the attribution of any Billingsley piece you find.

But Billingsley had bigger dreams than flowers; his true passion was making porcelain. English porcelain was still rather crude compared to the fine Continental porcelains, and Billingsley became obsessed with finding a British equivalent. He started the Pinxton factory in Derbyshire, which produced some beautiful porcelain but, due to the high kiln wastage, the business couldn't survive. He then ran a decoration studio in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, but mysteriously disappeared. In fact, he had walked hundreds of miles and renamed himself William Beeley to escape creditors, finally reappearing penniless in Worcester in 1808, where he was hired to improve the factory's porcelain body.

Billingsley's recipe caused so much kiln wastage that it was too expensive for commercial use and the savvy Worcester factory never adopted it, but paid Billingsley £200 for keeping it secret. Instead, he ran off to Nantgarw in Wales, using the money to set up another factory. The result was a short-lived but defining experiment of the finest British porcelain ever made. However, at 90 per cent kiln wastage (of every 10 items fired, only one

survived) money ran out quickly and Billingsley absconded yet again, this time walking a further 100 miles to Coalport, Shropshire, where he remained.

The story of the Welsh porcelain factories deserves a whole feature of its own, so I'll leave that for a later date. Instead, let us turn to another great genius, William 'Quaker' Pegg, regarded as the greatest porcelain painter of flowers of all time. Pegg's flowers are large, naturalistic and exuberant. Apprenticed to the Derby factory in 1796, the year of Billingsley's departure, Pegg developed a passion for flowers that took what was now Billingsley's tradition to a new place.

But Pegg became a Quaker and in 1801 he gave up painting, burned his sketchbooks and turned to making humble stockings at home. His talent couldn't be constrained forever though; in 1813 he returned for another wonderful stint of painting flowers, and thankfully the sketchbooks of this period still exist.

Pegg's almost abstract style was ahead of his time; his flowers are draped over the porcelain as if the universe isn't large enough to hold them. There is a wild, sensual quality to them; he celebrated God's Creation through his flowers. There is a sketch of a thistle that he showed to his mother, who couldn't make head or tail of it as it seemed so outlandish to her. The Derby factory, however, gave him a dish to paint it onto, and this became the famous 'thistle dish', which would be used as a 'prentice plate' for many years.

Pegg returned to the Derby factory looking odd, with a thick beard; his colleagues teased him that he didn't have the money for a barber. The truth was that, although he had been living in poverty, he didn't care about his appearance and he defiantly painted a wonderful, strange-looking self portrait in his sketchbook. In the years following, he threw himself into painting his ecstatic flowers. Later he wrote about his new sketchbook in his diary: 'I had once burnt all my Drawings and Drawing Books. Thus I built up that which I had once destroyed; but this I suffered for.'

Pegg eventually returned to a strict interpretation of his faith and stopped painting again, opening a corner shop with his wife and providing assistance to the poor around him.

With these two men, who changed the course of British porcelain, we are peeking into a new century with new porcelain enterprises... but more about that next time!

Willa Latham

Read Willa's blog gentlerattleofchina.com or follow her @gentlerattleofchina