Chapter XXI - The wares of the Limited Company

The period immediately after the formation of the Limited Company is generally thought of as a period of decline for the Pottery both in the quality of its wares and of their design. In some ways this is borne out by the pots themselves; in others it is certainly not so. The vigour and flair shown in the export wares for the Far Eastern market, for instance, exhibit even a marked improvement from the preceding period in the handling of the business. These will be dealt with in the next chapter.

The history of porcelain making in this period, though, would certainly bear out the worst that could be said of the Limited Company’s handling of the affairs. However, before we begin the discussion of porcelain it is necessary to draw attention to an article which appeared in the Glasgow News on Monday, April 1885. This extremely lengthy and important article describes a visit to the Pottery by an unnamed writer for the newspaper and describes the workings of the Pottery with many interesting sidelights on its wares, as well as discussing the wider issues facing potters at the time.

In the matter of china he describes at some length an innovation by the Pottery in the design of "five-o’clock-tea ware". This seems to consist of a stand which fits tightly over the bottom of the cup so that the cup may be held in the hand at "gardens parties, picnics, and in public rooms". It is said to be so good that the cup and saucer “might be passed over the heads of an audience to the platform for anyone speaking”. One gets the impression that what is being described is the well known ‘trembleuse’ ware of former days. (fig. 21.1) These cups and saucers had never been recorded by the Scottish Pottery Society nor referred to in any other publication. Perhaps they never took the public’s fancy and so were never made in any quantity; in fact, at the time the article was written “no full services of cups and stands have been made.” One such cup and saucer has now been identified, though its decoration was almost certainly done by an amateur. After this the story of porcelain in this period is all dismal.

Many Bell’s teasetes are known with one or two pieces not quite identical with the others but obviously intended as replacements for broken pieces. They do not bear the Bells mark but are instead marked Aynsley. This applies only to the teawares with plain ground colouring and gilding, not to those with painted decoration. It is obvious that a trade was carried on by Aynsley in producing replacements for broken Bell’s china. That this was the result of an agreement between the two potteries is given some credence by the fact that teawares are also found in different styles with the Bells mark overprinting an Aynsley mark. One group of teawares are of various elaborately moulded shapes shaded in a peach ground and with powdered gold applied at the rims. Another sort is usually of a similar shape with a delicate floral transfer pattern called Auburn applied over a ground colour of pale green or blue and finely clobbered. This last has been seen on an elaborate cabaret with teapot, sugar, cream, cups, saucers and tray all matching but with the Bell’s garter mark over an Aynsley mark.

Fig. 21.1 trembleuse (Decorated outside the Pottery)
It looks as though Bell’s at some point in this period gave up making china and simply bought it in from Aynsley and remarked it and, perhaps, decorated it. Whether or not they did decorate it is very hard to say since such teaset have never been reported in Scotland with just an Aynsley mark but only with one mark superimposed on the other. (figs. 21.2 & 21.3)

Parian ware too is not found in quantity and it seems likely that it was discontinued at the same time as or even before the giving up of china-making. The few jugs in Parian which are attributable to this period are in a definitely inferior body, though the standard of design is still fairly good. The one with moulded dandelions is particularly well designed. (fig. 21.4)

To this period we must assign the vases based on classical originals with the scenes used several times previously by the pottery. These were clearly meant for the top end of the market. (fig. 21.19)

Due to published descriptions of the Glasgow Pottery we can at least give an approximate date for the dropping of china-making. In a description of the Industries of Glasgow, dated 1888, (123) they are described as ‘makers of domestic and sanitary ware’ and as ‘the only manufacturers of porcelain in Scotland’ and as having ‘home, colonial and foreign markets’.
In the Hand-Book on the Industries of Glasgow and the West of Scotland, published by the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1901, however, it is described as making ‘ordinary household ware’ and ‘what is known as sanitary ware’ (124) ‘This ware’, we are told ‘which began by making closet basins and plug basins, has in recent years spread out into multifarious articles, some of which are ornamented with quite expensive decorations.’ Then, ‘this pottery at one period of its history also made excellent china, which had a very good name in the market. It was found, however, in both instances that it is difficult to have china and earthenware in the same factory.’ Considering the number of years for which Bell’s made both china and earthenware in the same factory, this last excuse seems very feeble and more like a concealment of the real reason. This may lie in Bell’s relationship with the Caledonian Railway Company.

In 1857 or 1858 the Caledonian Railway Company made an extension of the Buchanan Street goods Station, probably in order to make access to their new Locomotive Workshops in St Rollox easier. This involved the closure of Pulteney Street at its southern end and caused Bell’s to close Rae Street and instead form Stafford St and Lanark St. in order to have easy access to their own works. In 1896 the same railway company had an Act of Parliament passed (125) to give them powers of compulsory purchase in order to extend Buchanan Street goods Station again so as to build a potato shed which would also act as a central point for banana distribution. By 1904 they had already bought the North British Pottery for £18,500 (126). It is likely that Bell’s had foreseen that they, too, would be swallowed up in the reorganisation and made plans accordingly for having a smaller works.

But if the finer bodies present us with a picture of gloom, the earthenwares do not. The number of patterns originated in this period is the highest for any period, especially when one takes into account the export wares for south-east Asia. Here is a list of the recorded patterns for the home market which originate at this time.

Abergeldie- B (Fig. 21.5)  
Aboyne- B  
Agra  
Antoinette  
Arcadia- Z  
Auburn  
Autumn  
Ballater- B  
Birds Nest  
Blythswood - B  
Bracelet- B  
Braemar- B  
Brazil (Fig. 21.6 & Co. Fig 21.7 & Co Ltd.)  
Burns II - found only on wall plaques.  
Burns III  
Cameo - J  
Canova - J  
Castile  
Chanon  
Clematis (Fig. 21.8)  
Clifton - Granite - B  
Clydesdale  
Coburg
Corea - Z
Crathie
Daffodils
Deeside - B
Derby - J (Fig.21.9)
Drumlanrig - B
Dunbiane - B
Empress - J
Erchie
Eviction- found only on wall plaques. (Fig.21.10)
Fantasia - Z (?)
Ferns
Florence
Glasgow Exhibition
Glenartney -B
Glencairn - Appendix III
Glenshee - B (Fig.21.11)
Gouda- B
(Grecian) - in sponge printing, but never named by Bells.
Haarlem
Invercauld - B
Japanese - Z
Kelvin Grove- J (Fig.21.12)
KIlmeny
Levi lle
Lily
Linnet- J- Z
Loch-na-gar - B (Fig.21.13)
Lorraine - B
Margarite
May Flower
Mikado - Z
Mossigli (Fig.21.14)
Oban- B
Old Dutch - J
Orleans - B
Passion Flower
Pompeii
Rosalind
Rosebery
Sandhurst - B (Fig.21.15)
Sappho
Sarawak
Seymour - B
Singapore
Stork
Strathearn - B
Sybil

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As well as this, many of the older patterns, like Louise and Tamerlain continued to be very popular and were made in great quantities. Tamerlain is curious in that it was made also in several centres in western Europe. Petrus Regout in Maastricht as ‘Timor’ and Keller & Guerin in Luneville both made the pattern. It is based on an older Chinese pattern showing a pair of lovers in a garden and has nothing to do with Tamerlain. Corea should really have been included with these since it begins before 1880. Those marked with a ‘J’ have been recorded only on jugs. Those marked with a ‘Z’ are ‘Japanese’ patterns which retained their popularity for some time; it was one facet of the craze in western Europe at that time for things Japanese.

The patterns marked with a ‘B’ belong to a group which first appeared at this time. The patterns are all border band patterns, though some of them protrude fairly far into the middle of the ware, they are all floral and stylised though the stylisation varies greatly in degree and they all combine formal elements, like diaper, C-scrolls and lattices with the stylised floral design. Many of them, though by no means all, are named after estates in Scotland. Glenshee shows a very strong influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Tullibardine of Art nouveau, but all of them belong to their period and show that Bell’s was still more than capable of keeping up with the times in design. They do not accord with modern taste but the great numbers in which they are found shows how popular they were when they were designed.

The innovation in dinner ware, according to the Glasgow News article, an elegant square shape in dinner ware. Presumably what is meant is a square dinner plate rather like those that are now described as ‘steak plates’, if so, they have not been recorded. There are some square plates known from this period but they occur in ones and twos only and this fact,
combined with their depth, proclaims them to be bread plates, though they occur totally without an accompanying tea set.
The article goes on with its description of the wares in the show rooms, “The leading stock styles are Bell’s Derby ware and Bell’s Japanese pattern ware, and the massive ware one meets with at sea on board a Peninsular and Oriental steamer. Several of the sets are profusely but tastefully decorated and the display of plaques, jardinières, and flower vases is ample and effective. The works are readily accessible from the upper part of Buchanan Street, and as an art factory they are creditable to the city. The writer has visited similar works in Longton and Hanley, and while some of these may be more extensive and more devoted to art specialities, Glasgow possesses in these works the skill for the higher spheres of pottery development.” Plaques occur quite commonly, most with transfer-printed patterns but some with hand-painted designs: jardinières are rarer, though Yarrow, a jug pattern, is also known on jardinières: vases are fairly rare from this time.

Again, this article makes no mention of sponge-printed earthenware. This reticence is usual in writing about pottery, nevertheless the Glasgow Pottery was making spongeware in large quantities as it had done throughout its existence and in fact at this time was producing some of the most refined and beautiful spongeware ever produced by any pottery. The refined ware was all destined for the market in South East Asia, India and Sri Lanka (or Ceylon at it then was) and very little of it is ever seen here, since spongeware was so despised that it would not even be smuggled out by the employees. One exception is a magnificent charger in the collection of Huntley House in Edinburgh.(127) As well as this they could be producing ordinary spongeware of the sort which was given to the rag and bone man and destined for the lower end of the market. The spongeware produced by all the whiteware potteries in Scotland at this time is of rather poor quality with the exception of Bell’s and Methven’s export ware to be described in the following chapter.

A paragraph in the Pottery Gazette for December 1, 1908 (p. 1429) confirms earlier information and throws an interesting light on the last decade of the Company’s existence.

“J. & M. P. Bell & Co. Ltd., Glasgow Pottery, are manufacturers of porcelain and earthenware, their speciality being fine sanitary ware. Their productions do not concern our readers as trade commodities, but they are exceedingly interesting, both on account of their variety and quality. The range of cabinet stands and ship cabinet stands is very large, including a number of own patented and registered specialities. They make sitzbaths, foot baths, child baths, and bath knob handles and shields.” It would seem that the whole basis of production had changed and the home market in ordinary earthenwares largely given up.

From time to time the Pottery Gazette mentions the Glasgow Pottery, for example in May 1879 it describes the Pottery as having the lion’s share of a very large export order to south east Asia.

In November 1881, the following paragraph is of great interest: “A china painting craze has seized hold of Scotland lately, and in Edinburgh and Glasgow enterprising merchants have started classes for the development of this fashionable taste. Messrs J. & M. P. Bell & Co. (Limited) Glasgow get most of the plaques and dessert services to burn, and are said to be making a good thing out of the business.”(Figs 21.17 & 21.18)
Most of the wares known would fit quite happily into the first part of the existence of the Limited Company and it seems quite certain that after 1900 the production in the factory radically changed and rapidly declined, probably stopping entirely in 1910. Some at least of the factors that caused this are described in the Glasgow News article and will be discussed later but here it must be stressed that very few wares can be attributed with certainty to a time much after 1900. No examples of ship’s sanitary wares or any other of the wares mentioned in the Pottery Gazette have ever been described.

This is surely the beginning of the craze which was to continue into the 1910s and produce so much fine painted ware from the “Glasgow Ladies” and others which is so popular with collectors today.

fig 21.17 Plaque, impressed bell on back decorated outside the Pottery

fig 21.18 Plaque, impressed bell on back decorated outside the Pottery

fig 21.19 Classical vases