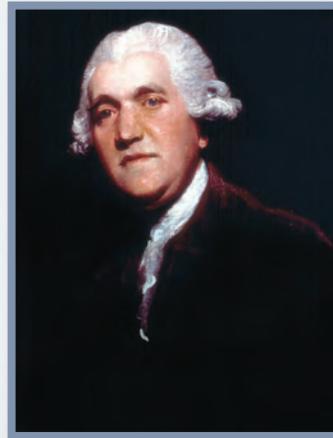


Uniting Art and Industry:

# JOSIAH WEDGWOOD

## Father of English Potters

Gaye Blake-Roberts



Portrait of Josiah Wedgwood by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1782

Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) was primarily a potter, but he was also a scientist, pioneer, philanthropist, family man, supreme marketer and innovative businessman. He was one of the most enterprising eighteenth-century industrialists and his products were amongst the most highly prized and desirable of the period. His activity turned the Stoke-on-Trent district into a centre for manufacturing high-quality and well-designed ceramics.

Jasper tea service decorated with feminine and domestic figures by Lady Elizabeth Templeton, 1780s



All images courtesy of the Wedgwood Museum

## A Rare Understanding

Josiah Wedgwood had a rare grasp of the physics and chemistry of the potter's craft, learnt both from practical experience as well as books, and was sensitive to changing fashions and tastes, particularly during the 1760s and 1770s. Almost instinctively, he responded by adapting designs, creating new shapes and patterns and introducing new materials, which put him beyond the reach of his contemporary competitors. Wedgwood also possessed exceptional vision and daring in the promotion of his wares.

A self-taught man and polymath of colossal energy and ambition he earned the tribute paid to him by William Ewart Gladstone who, in 1863, commented that Wedgwood was 'the greatest man who ever, in any age or country, applied himself to the important work of uniting art with industry'.

His innovation in the ceramic industry was not confined solely to mechanical methods. Wedgwood decided to try to improve all aspects of production, writing in his Experiment Book that he was: 'To try for some more Solid improvements, as well as the Body, as in the Glazes, the Colours & the Forms of the articles of our Manufacture.' Experimentation was very much part of Wedgwood's working philosophy.

## Creamware

Throughout the eighteenth century cream-coloured earthenware became more refined, technically perfect and aesthetically excellent until it reached its zenith with a fine form, thin body and a clear and brilliant glaze.

Creamware became one of the most versatile ceramic bodies of the Age, perfect for its purpose, being used for everything from elaborate ornamental items to humble utilitarian wares. Simeon Shaw, a nineteenth-century historian of the pottery industry, described it as: 'A species of earthenware for the table, quite new in appearance covered with a rich and brilliant glaze

Queen's Ware plate. Decorated with a feather edge and the centre in the form of a Tudor Rose. Hand-enamelled. Probably by James Bakewell, c.1769



bearing sudden alterations of heat and cold manufactured with the ease of expedition and consequently cheap.'

Whilst other potters prospered, Wedgwood flourished above all other manufacturers of cream-coloured earthenware. He was responsible for a product which dominated the pottery industry so that men no longer spoke of 'common pewter' but of 'common Wedgwood' instead.

His marketing expertise is well recorded. Wedgwood moved freely amongst the aristocracy and went to endless trouble and expense to win royal favour: a box of patterns and decorative creamware vases followed the famous green and gold tea equipage, or service, ordered by Queen Charlotte in 1765. Wedgwood became 'Potter to Her Majesty' and subsequently sold to every royal household in Europe, where his wares were acknowledged and extolled.

## Wedgwood and Bentley

Arguably the greatest influences on Josiah Wedgwood were his wife and cousin Sarah (1734–1815), and his great friend and later partner Thomas Bentley (1730–1780). In many respects Wedgwood and Bentley were opposites. Bentley was a city society man, highly educated and well acquainted with the classics; a successful general merchant. Josiah was an ambitious country potter with a fierce driving energy.

From their initial meeting in Liverpool, Bentley called on Wedgwood daily and they discussed religion, politics, commerce, canal navigation, art, poetry, logic and pottery. On most topics – except pottery – Bentley was better qualified to speak, and Wedgwood eagerly sought his opinions and emulated his tastes. Bentley's education and good taste moulded the successful trading activities of Wedgwood's business, especially in London, from where he provided a constant stream of information on changing fashions and styles.

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Portrait of Sarah Wedgwood by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1782



Portrait of Thomas Bentley by or after John Francis Rigaud, 1778



Wedgwood's Etruria factory seen from across the Trent and Mersey Canal, 1950s

## The Factory at Etruria

Wedgwood outlined his concept for a new and enlarged ornamental ware factory in a letter to Bentley dated 8 November 1766. He had located a suitable piece of land, the Ridgehouse Estate, between Burslem, Hanley and Newcastle-under-Lyme just outside the main pottery conurbation. The purchase did not take place for a further twelve months, but by February 1767 an informal partnership agreement between Wedgwood and Bentley had been reached.

With the acquisition of the Ridgehouse Estate, Wedgwood commissioned a Derby architect, Joseph Pickford, to design a 'vase works', a house for Josiah and his family, Bank House for Bentley and accommodation for the workforce. Although he understood the tastes of the aristocracy, Wedgwood was equally conversant with the problems of his fellow potters, the workmen, and the general difficulties of the industry.

His new factory had a front elevation of just over 150 yards running parallel to the planned route of the Trent and Mersey canal, which he and Bentley promoted and supported. The construction of the factory and houses was protracted, partially due to inclement weather. However, the transfer of the ornamental ware production to Etruria was completed by the summer of 1769 and an official opening ceremony was held on 13 June.

## A Passion for Vases

The opening of the Etruria factory virtually coincided with the arrival of the dominant neo-classical architectural style and the development of great new country houses inside which ornamental vases became one of the most important aspects of interior décor.

Writing on 1 May 1769 Wedgwood commented that in London 'Vases were all the cry', adding that he must '...endeavour to satisfy this universal passion'.

So great was the demand for 'antique'-style vases that, in addition to copying surviving classical antiquities, Wedgwood like other manufacturers took designs from printed source books.

Josiah's avowed aim was to become 'Vase Maker General to



Ceramic collections at the Wedgwood Museum

the Universe'; an ambition he could be said to have achieved with his vases that imitated natural stones, such as Agate, Blue John and Porphyry, as well as those manufactured in Black Basalt.

The perfection of Black Basalt was a closely guarded secret. In September 1767 he wrote to Bentley:

*I am still going on w.th my tryals, & want much to show you some of them, but I can neither send them in a letter, nor say so much about them to you as I would like, for L.rs [letters] are liable to Accidents and therefore I must, though brim full, contain myself till I see you.*

By 1767 he was already 'picking up every design, & improvement for a Vase work, & am every day more & more convinced that it will answer to our wishes', fulfilling his intention to 'Astonish the World all at once'.

During this extremely creative period, Sarah wrote to Bentley that: *my good man is upon the ramble continually and I am almost afraid that he will pay out the price of his estate in Vases he makes nothing of giving 5 or 6 guineas for but you will see them soon and judge for yourself, if we do but lay out half the money in ribband or lace there is such an uproar as you never heard.*

Five years later Wedgwood boasted that he had 'upwards of 100 Good forms of Vases, for all of which I have the moulds, handles & ornaments'.



Pair of Elizabethan-style flower vases. Black Basalt, 1920s



Jasper vase



Pair of Agate vases on Black Basalt bases. Decorated with heavy swags and gilding to the handles, 1770s

## An Astute Businessman

Wedgwood's friendship with Bentley and association with Dr Erasmus Darwin, of Lichfield, thrust him into a circle of educated and enquiring minds, which fed experimentation at his factory.

The success of Wedgwood's vases in the period 1769–72 led to over-expansion of production and created cash flow problems with much of the partnership's capital resources being tied up in materials and overheads. Wedgwood responded to this crisis by drawing up a 'Price Book of Workmanship' in August 1772 in which the costs incurred in manufacturing and selling his wares were itemised.

This is one of the earliest cost accounting documents to survive from any British manufacturer. It contains a detailed list of costs: 'I have been puzzling my brains all the last week to find out proper data, & methods of calculating the expence of Manufacturing, Sale, loss &c to be laid upon each article of our Manufacture, & a very tedious business it has been.' The document is typical of Wedgwood's response to any problem: look at it carefully, discuss it, find a solution, and implement that answer.

Wedgwood was never slow to take advantage of new techniques, including steam power. The Etruria manufactory also saw the application of the division of labour. Whereas previously pottery articles had been made from start to finish by a single workman, they were now produced at each stage by a specialist, which improved the dexterity of the craftsman and saved production time and expense.



Tray of Wedgwood experimental Jasper trials, 1770s

## Jasper ware

Towards the end of 1772 the ornamental business of Wedgwood and Bentley was suffering one of its periodic declines. Dependent on customers in a fickle society, and in the face of emerging competition, Wedgwood sought to make a new product. Perhaps the creation of Jasper ware was his most important contribution to ceramic history, the outcome of about 5,000 recorded experiments.

His experiments were completed within two years – from December 1772 to December 1774 – and led him to isolate, though not fully understand, the materials he needed. By the beginning of 1775 Josiah had declared himself 'absolute' in white Jasper, blue and '...Likewise a beautifull Sea Green, and several other colours, for ground to Cameos, Intaglios &c'. For nearly two more years Wedgwood struggled with intractable materials which seemed to have a will of their own, causing him to write in June 1776 in frustration: 'This Jasper is certainly the most delicately whimsical of any substance I have ever engaged with.'

Jasper never became the easiest of bodies to work with or fire and there were still occasional obstacles to be overcome. Nevertheless, by the end of 1777 Jasper was regularly in production. Wedgwood's choice of colours for Jasper, dictated largely by the metal oxides available for the staining of the clay mixture, bore a close relationship to the colours most favoured for interiors by the architects Robert Adam (1728–1792) and James Wyatt (1746–1813).

With his new Jasper body, Wedgwood was able to employ talented young artists to provide designs and patterns. The range and popularity of Jasper demanded an ever-increasing number of models and *bas-relief* designs to be produced. Wedgwood sought the opinions of several distinguished ladies to provide the inspiration for a series of feminine and domestic subjects.

During the last decade of the eighteenth century Wedgwood followed fashion again, producing work commissioned in the romantic style, much of which showed a sentimentality of concept and design. In retrospect it seems strange that such work should have been commissioned simultaneously with the classical works inspired by Roman artists. But in the latter part of the century there was a distinct reaction against what was seen as the austerity of classical design in favour of the more sentimental and modern domestic scenes. With the production of such subjects Wedgwood appealed predominantly to female taste, and it is not surprising to find that the artists who designed them were women – Lady Diana Beauclerk, Elizabeth Lady Templeton and Emma Crewe.

## Wedgwood's Legacy

In 1769 Wedgwood suggested to Bentley that their days should be spent 'In the pursuit of Fortune, Fame & the Public Good'. It was not an unworthy ambition. He made a great fortune and he achieved abiding fame. When he died Wedgwood's pottery was known all over the world and it can be claimed that he made a lasting contribution to the public good. He married art to industry and applied the principles of formal beauty to things of everyday use. He set standards that made the appreciation and the ownership of articles of fine

quality and design open to everyone.

Wedgwood will always be remembered for his influence on industrial design, of which he was one of the founding fathers. His multifaceted activities ensured his position in history by, according to the historian William Beeton, his effect upon the 'whole subsequent course of pottery manufacture of England and of the civilised world by his individuality, his skill and his taste'.

On his death in January 1795 the *Manchester Mercury* paid tribute to him by stating that he was 'Possessed of great public spirit, and unremitting perseverance, with a mind fraught with general intelligence'. He was a truly remarkable man. ●

**Gaye Blake-Roberts** is Director of the Wedgwood Museum (see Places to Visit) where visitors can see the products Wedgwood made, and where his numerous manuscripts and letters provide a unique insight into the man and his work.

### Further Reading

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