STOURBRIDGE GLASS A CUT ABOVE THE REST

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Glass has been made continuously in the Stourbridge area for over 400 years and today it remains the only region in the British Isles to maintain production on a sizeable scale. In the seventeenth century products included window glass, bottles and phials; the next century saw the introduction of more elegant drinking glasses, decanters and tableware; but the nineteenth century established Stourbridge craftsmen as world leaders in glassmaking of all kinds and the area was esteemed alongside the great European centres of Venice and Bohemia (the present Czech Republic).



lthough the glass from the area has always been referred to as 'Stourbridge Glass' it is ironic that no glass was ever made in the town itself. From the earliest days, the glassworks were situated around the periphery of the town, in the parishes of Lye, Oldswinford, Hagley, Wollaston, Amblecote and Wordsley, as well as in Brierley Hill and Dudley.

In the first two decades of the seventeenth century, Stourbridge was a busy market town acting as the focal point of the area with important leather and clothing trades. Every trade used the town's new banks whose bills were headed 'Stourbridge', hence the name 'Stourbridge Glass' became the accepted generic title on the letterheads of the glasshouses.



In the Regency cut style, this early nineteenth-century celery vase is engraved with the Earl of Dudley's coat of arms.

The beginnings of the English glass

French Origins

industry date to 1567 when glassmaking families from the Lorraine region of France, including the Tyzacks, the Henzeys and the Titterys, came to London and the Weald of Sussex. Over the next fifty years these 'gentleman glassmakers' moved west and northward and set up their forest glasshouses where there were plentiful supplies of wood. Their main product was broad window glass, made by the blown and slit-cylinder method, but they also produced green bottles, phials and chemical glass such as alembics.

In 1612 the first Lorraine glassmaker is recorded in Kingswinford when, on 26 April, the register at St. Mary's Church in Kingswinford records 'John Tysacke, the sonne of Paule Tysacke and Bridgett his wife was bapt(ised).' Paul Tyzack was attracted to the area by the rich deposits of fireclay needed to make the glasshouse pots to hold the molten glass, and the ready availability of coal, the new wonder fuel for the glassmakers. Glass was almost certainly being made using coal on Lord Dudley's lands near Kingswinford, a further inducement to Paul Tyzack.

By 1600 the government and the crown had growing worries about the decimation of the forests by many trades, leading to concerns for the future supplies of timber for the building of ships for the navy. In 1615 a Royal Proclamation finally banned all glasshouses from using wood. From then on, glassmakers settled in one area and a centuries-old tradition of peripatetic glassmaking came to an end. Between 1610 and

1614 Paul Tyzack built the first recorded glasshouse in the area, known as Colemans near Lye, about a mile east from Stourbridge town centre, giving him the recognition now as being the founder of the Stourbridge glass industry. Other Lorraine families followed him and built their glasshouses in Brierley Hill and Amblecote. As the century progressed they became respected members and benefactors of local society. They expanded their glassmaking to include vessel glass but unfortunately none of their glass products can now be identified.

The Lead Revolution

With the accession of Charles II in 1660 glassmaking was to alter drastically. In the 1670s in London George Ravenscroft discovered lead glass which immediately offered an English alternative to the huge imports of Venetian glass,

with its more durable and reflective qualities, which could take cutting and engraving more easily. For the next four centuries lead glass became the main British glass material and many of the Stourbridge glass factories turned to its production.

House

During the eighteenth century the local glass factories followed the national fashions starting with the heavy baluster style of wine glasses at the beginning of the century, moving to the lighter and more graceful glasses of the Rococo period in the 1730s and 1740s, followed by the fashion for air-twist and opaque-twist stem wine glasses in the middle of the century and finally moving to the cut and engraved glass in Neoclassical style in the 1780s and 1790s.

With one exception no glass from the century can be identified as coming from the area and our knowledge of their products is based on contemporary newspaper adverts or from the accounts of travellers coming through the area.

Daniel Defoe, Richard Pococke and Celia Fiennes plus a number of anonymous authors all commented on 'the great manufacture for glass of all sorts', but of greatest fascination for most of them was the making of the 'beautiful spiral threads of a different colour' which formed the stems of opaque-twist wine glasses.

The only identifiable eighteenth-century glasses from the district are the opaque white vases and scent bottles with enamelled decoration often in Chinoiserie style, made in imitation of contemporary porcelain.

At the end of the eighteenth century the area was at the centre of another glass technological revolution when two glass cutters, one from Dudley and one from Stourbridge, harnessed steam power to drive their glass-cutting lathes. Until then the hand-powered lathes could only achieve a shallow cut whereas the new technology gave very deep and crisp cuts and established glass cutting as one of the trademarks of many of the Stourbridge factories until 2007, when the last of the great factories, Royal Brierley Crystal, finally closed its doors.

British and Stourbridge Regency cut glass quickly became the great fashion across Europe, but inevitably by the 1830s a reaction set in among European glassworks which developed new techniques such as casing, to compete against the British cut glass invasion.

Astute Stourbridge glasshouse owners quickly responded to these innovations. For example, William Haden Richardson of the Wordsley Flint Glass Works travelled around Europe visiting glassworks and bringing back examples which were copied and put into production within a year or two of his visits.

Coloured, gilt, marbled, transfer-printed and cased glass became the norm amongst the top Stourbridge factories, especially after the repeal of the Glass Excise Act in 1845, which relieved the financial pressures on the companies and led to greater experimentation of styles and techniques.

One of the highlights of this period was the Gold Enamel Dessert Service made by the Thomas Hawkes factory in Dudley for the banquet attended by the new Queen Victoria at the Guildhall in London in November 1837.

In 1851, at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in Hyde Park, the Stourbridge glassmakers showed off their achievements for the first time on the international stage against competitors from America, France, Germany, Austria and Bohemia. When Richardson's Wordsley Glass House won a gold medal for its exhibit, it was a fitting acknowledgement of the world status that Stourbridge glassmakers were to maintain for the rest of the century.

The Genius of Engravers, Etchers and Cameo Carvers

fter 1851 the fashion for coloured, enamelled and gilt glass went out of favour and the technique of copper-wheel engraving became popular. Immigrant engravers from northern Bohemia came to Stourbridge and introduced deeper engraving methods showing off popular European subjects of the Last Supper, stags in woodlands, and copies of famous paintings of the day. The greatest of these geniuses was William Fritsche who spent his working life at Thomas Webb & Sons, one of the three great companies of the period. By 1878 Fritsche had developed the engraving technique known as 'Rock Crystal', in which the very thickly blown lead glass is deeply cut and engraved with marine or floral scenes and then polished to restore the original sheen of the glass.

A speedier version of wheel engraving was acid etching on glass. In 1861 John Northwood invented the geometric and the template etching machines, the latter for creating figurative work, as well as perfecting the etching mixture of hydrofluoric acid. Northwood had learnt his trade as an apprentice at the Richardson glassworks and he became the greatest all-round glass pioneer in Stourbridge and in Britain. His greatest achievement was to rediscover the lost art of cameo glass when in 1876 he successfully carved the first accurate copy of the Roman cameo 'The Portland Vase', thereby establishing a tradition which continues to this day.



A group of Art Nouveau vases by Stevens & Williams of Brierley Hill.

Northwood carved another six important examples of cameo glass before taking the job of Art Director at Stevens & Williams where he transformed the company into one of the greatest in the country. Meanwhile his assistant on the Portland Vase, George Woodall, moved to Thomas Webb & Sons and established a rival cameo glass team there. At the height of production the Woodall team had seventy decorators and carvers assisting them. Woodall became the greatest cameo carver of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when his creations were sought after by royalty and nobility.

The Golden Age of Stourbridge Glass

he last quarter of the nineteenth century was the Golden Age of Stourbridge Glass. The factories created a veritable kaleidoscope of colours, techniques and processes, and machinery, many of them protected by a host of patents. The level of originality was unbelievable, with firms such as Thomas Webb & Sons and Stevens & Williams creating over 1,000 patterns each year.

Webb's also pursued a vigorous international exhibition policy. After their success at the Paris Exhibition of 1878, where their director Thomas Wilkes Webb was awarded the Legion of Honour, the only British glassmaker to achieve this, they showed at Sydney (1879), Melbourne (1880), London (1884 & 1885), Edinburgh (1886), Melbourne (1888), Paris (1889), and Launceston in Tasmania (1891-2).

A list of products created by the top firms during this period includes names such as: 'Silveria', 'Moss Agate', 'Bronze', 'Ivory', 'Burmese', 'Alexandrite', 'Air Trap', 'Silver Deposit', and 'Crackle' or 'Ice glass', using techniques such as heat-sensitive glass, iridescent glass, machine-threaded glass, pull-up decoration, trapped enamel decoration, and millefiori glass. Many of these were inspired by historical examples from the great centres of glassmaking, including Venice, but others were created by the imaginations and skills of their own glassmakers, glass chemists and technologists.

The area even 'exported' glassmakers to other countries. Arthur Nash had worked at Webb's and must have supervised the making of 'Bronze' iridescent glass there before moving to the glass factory of Louis Comfort Tiffany in New York where he was largely responsible for Tiffany's famous 'Favrile' glass. In 1903 Frederick Carder left the employment of Stevens & Williams and also went to America where he was the glass 'brains' behind the setting up of the world-famous Steuben factory in Corning in New York State.

Four hundred years after the arrival of the first recorded glassmaker in the area, the French-born Paul Tyzack, local glassmakers were still travelling to other countries and influencing the course of world glass. By 1900 Stourbridge glassmakers were, like the British Empire, at the height of their powers, and like Britannia, they too felt their glass ruled the waves. ●

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The Red House Glass Cone at Wordsley in 1902. Built in about 1790, it was operated by Stuart Crystal until 1936.

THE ENGLISH GLASS CONE

he eighteenth century also saw the gradual development of the English glass cone. Peculiar to Britain, the brick cones, standing between 80 and 120 feet high, acted both as a chimney to maximise the heat from the coal furnace, and as a roof over the glassmakers who worked in the space between the cone and the central furnace. Between 1770 and 1920 there were thirty glassworks in the area, many of them featuring a glass cone. Today only the Red House Cone survives in Wordsley, one of four left in the country and the most complete example with the last surviving annealing tunnel in the world.

Further Reading

Jason Ellis, Glassmakers of Stourbridge and Dudley 1612 -2002 (Exlibris, 1993). D R Guttery, From Broad Glass to Cut Crystal (Leonard Hill

Limited, 1956).

NATIONAL GLASS FAIR

Sunday 11th May & Sunday 23rd November - 10.30am until 4.00pm National Motorcycle Museum - B92 OEJ www. nationalglassfair.com