

# THE STOURBRIDGE GLASS INDUSTRY: THEN AND NOW

Graham Fisher

Stourbridge Crystal was renowned the world over in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Changes in taste and fashion, as well as shifting patterns of global manufacturing, led to a steady down-sizing of the Stourbridge industry in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and the loss of many of the iconic names associated with glass. But all is not lost.

Innovation, artistry and industry can still be found in the area.

In 2012 Stourbridge not only celebrated the 400th anniversary of the start of the glass industry in the area, it also marked the 50th anniversary of the Studio Glass Movement, in which artists use glass as their mode of expression to produce individual pieces. Stourbridge has become a Mecca for the movement and its practitioners.

There is more than a rich past. Plowden & Thompson in Wordsley still makes specialist glass equipment, whilst Tudor Crystal offers thirty per cent full lead crystal-ware; and there are numerous skilled craftspeople remaining, ranging from engravers to furnace technicians.

Broadfield House Glass Museum, in Kingswinford, holds one of the finest collections of Stourbridge Glass in the world, and has hothouse facilities where resident glassmaker, Allister Malcolm, conducts demonstrations and undertakes commissions. Red House Glass Cone, Wordsley, is an internationally-acknowledged attraction, being one of only four complete cones left in Britain. It also has hot glass facilities.

An impressive example of regeneration can be found at the Ruskin Glass Centre and Webb-Corbett Visitor Centre in Amblecote. Various phases and

several million pounds down the line, this is hardly indicative of a moribund industry. It, too, has a hothouse and is home to a *mélange* of respected glassworkers. Additionally, Ruskin is the epicentre of the biennial *International Festival of Glass*.

This combination of what is happening now, and what is yet to come, encourages the notion that the Stourbridge Glass industry may be on the cusp of a revival.

## The Portland Vase

There are many beacons that indicate the majesty of Stourbridge Glass; but there is one that gleams in celebrating both its achievements and its optimism for the future.

The Portland, or Barberini, Vase is, arguably, one of the most enigmatic pieces of cameo glass that the world has ever seen. Of Roman origin, around 25-100 BC, it is an exquisite example of cameo, which comprises a dark under-layer superimposed with a lighter over-layer that is etched or carved away, leaving the



Contemporary studio glass made in Stourbridge. *Through the Looking Glass* by Allister Malcolm, resident glassmaker at Broadfield House Glass Museum.

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lighter design standing out in relief. The vase is accompanied by a circular base disc that was not part of the original.

The panorama engraved around the vase has puzzled observers for centuries. *The Journal of Glass Studies*, Vol 32 1990, alone offers 44 interpretations.

First seen in Europe in 1601, it was acquired by the Barberini family on the death of Cardinal Del Monte. Here it remained until around 1782 before being sold, then passing through various hands, before being secured by Sir William Hamilton, who brought it to England.

The Duchess of Portland bought the vase from Sir William, her friend, in 1784. Following her death in 1785, it was purchased at auction by her son, who allowed Josiah Wedgwood to copy it in his 'Jasperware' ceramic technique.

In 1810, the vase was deposited in the British Museum. One February afternoon in 1845, it was smashed by William Mulcahy, alias Lloyd. Museum craftsman John Doubleday repaired the vase and, exactly 100 years after it was first broken (it has been deliberately re-broken and repaired twice since), it was formally acquired by the British Museum in 1945.

The 1845 incident had a curious corollary; whereas, until that time, the vase had been of largely academic interest, its new notoriety created a swell of public attention. Stourbridge Glass proprietors rose to the challenge.

Amongst these was Benjamin Richardson, who, with William Hodgetts, was proprietor of a glassworks at Wordsley. They decided to exhibit at the Paris Exposition of 1878 and encouraged an employee, Josef Locke, to reproduce a Portland Vase. Glassblowers made over thirty blanks; Locke worked on one for almost a year. Although he never finished the figures, he won an exposition medal of second prize. It now lies in the Corning Museum of Glass (CMoG), Corning, New York State. Though a masterly piece, it was to be overshadowed by events.

Hanging in CMoG is a sign that states: "In 1873, Philip Pargeter of the Red House Glass Works at Wordsley, England, told John Northwood: 'I believe I can make the Portland Vase if you can decorate it.' Northwood accepted the challenge. The blank was blown at Pargeter's factory, and Northwood spent the next three years carving it."

Northwood's *magnum opus*, which now also resides in CMoG, was completed in 1876 using simple tools of his own design. It was the first replica Portland Vase to be successfully completed in the original medium, and his accomplishment was celebrated throughout the world.

## Mastering the Technique

Numerous craftsmen, including the Woodall brothers, were inspired to master the technique. George Woodall became considered to be the finest cameo engraver of his time. The tradition is continued

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The 2012 Portland Vase.

today by the stunning work of contemporary cameo artists such as Helen Millard, Jonathan Harris and Terri-Louise Colledge.

The Richardson-Locke and Northwood-Pargeter re-creations represent the pinnacle of nineteenth-century cameo glass. There were further efforts in the twentieth century, notably the amphora interpretation of 1990 by Steve Bradley, who completed the entire process himself, from blowing the blank to effecting the decoration and making a stand. There is also the 1987 undertaking by Josef Welzel, who reproduced an amphora with lid, in deference to scratching on the original, suggesting it may have been capped.

## The 2012 Portland Vase Project

This brings our journey into the twenty-first century, and the achievement of the team brought

together by Ian Dury, of Stourbridge Glass Engravers, for *The 2012 Portland Vase Project*. His intention was to demonstrate that Stourbridge still has the skills for which it is traditionally famed, and to lay to rest the myth that the industry is dead.

Combining the talents of glassmaker Richard Golding and cameo engraver Terri-Louise Colledge, and aided by a small army of assistants, including my own role as chronicler, the team produced four flat-bottomed vases, one amphora and an Auldjo Jug, this last piece being a possible precursor to the original Portland Vase.

Of these, one flat-bottomed vase, the amphora, and the Auldjo Jug were engraved, together with a replica base disc. A 'spoilt' vase was carved with Greco-Roman sporting figures, in recognition of 2012 being London Olympics year.

Ian Dury has since expressed his wish that his artifacts be displayed in the new Glass Museum that is being proposed by the British Glass Foundation (BGF). Founded in 2010, following the announcement of plans to relocate the Stourbridge Glass collection from Broadfield House, BGF is working with, *inter alia*, Dudley MBC to secure a permanent home for it. Ian Dury's motivation for his magnanimity is to promote the rich history of Stourbridge's glass past to help advance its future. And there can be no finer exemplar of that than the 2012 Portland Vase. ●

**Graham Fisher** is a freelance writer and presenter specialising in inland waterways and with a particular interest in glass.

### Further Reading

Graham Fisher, *Jewels on the Cut* (Sparrow Publishing, 2010).

Graham Fisher, *The 2012 Portland Vase Project: Recreation of a Masterpiece* (Sparrow Publishing, 2012).

### Websites

Broadfield House Glass Museum:

[www.dudley.gov.uk/see-and-do/museums/glass-museum/](http://www.dudley.gov.uk/see-and-do/museums/glass-museum/)

The British Glass Foundation: [www.britishglassfoundation.org.uk](http://www.britishglassfoundation.org.uk)

The Ruskin Glass Centre: [www.ruskinglasscentre.co.uk](http://www.ruskinglasscentre.co.uk)

Red House Glass Cone: [www.redhouseglasscone.co.uk](http://www.redhouseglasscone.co.uk)