

# CHANCE BROTHERS' IMPACT ON DOMESTIC GLASSWARE

David Encill

Chance Brothers of Smethwick was a prolific producer of glass and glass-related products in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its decision not to manufacture the newly-introduced, heat-resistant 'Pyrex' under licence in 1921 may well have been a commercial mistake, but much of Chance Brothers own domestic glassware is prized by collectors today.

In 1825, the process of pressing molten glass into a mould was patented by an American, John Bakewell and, for the first time, it offered a means to mechanise the glass industry. The idea was brought to England and from 1832 pressed glass was made by the Birmingham-based factories Bacchus and Green, Rice Harris and John Gold.

Chance Brothers' own foray into pressed glass manufacture was late in comparison and started in 1929 when the company attempted to break into the lucrative market of 'cooking glass', or 'heat-resistant oven-to-tableware' as it is known today. The Tyneside company of James A Jobling had monopolised the market since 1921 after licensing Pyrex from the inventors, the Corning Glass Company in the USA, and in 1929 was achieving annual net sales of £96,000 (about £5 million today). The Chance Brothers had turned down the opportunity.

## Orlak Cooking Glass

The trade name for their glassware was Orlak: the brainchild of Lieutenant Colonel Philip Gell (1897–1970), a Chance director, who was convinced that Orlak could rival Pyrex for price and quality. An internal report concluded that the Pyrex patent was 'bad' and, with just a slight variation to the mix of chemicals, any possible litigation could be circumvented. Chance Brothers then took the radical step of hiring a well-known designer, Harold Stabler, RDI (1872–1945), a partner in Carter, Stabler and Adams (later Poole Pottery).

A range of 29 different items was launched in 1929 and initially proved to be successful. With further marketing the popularity of Orlak grew, but it was not wholly profitable and the entire Orlak package was subsequently purchased by their erstwhile rivals, Joblings, in 1933.

Gell then left Chance to form The British Heat Resisting Glass Co Ltd in the same year, basing his factory in Hockley, Birmingham, and produced an almost identical product to Orlak, which was named, ironically, Phoenix. Whether this was due to Gell being disaffected by the sale of Orlak, or perhaps a ploy by Chance to covertly compete with Joblings, is not known, but the speed with which Gell was able to start up a new company and mass-produce goods within one year is startling.



A rare Orlak casserole dish from about 1930, complete with elegant outer casing.

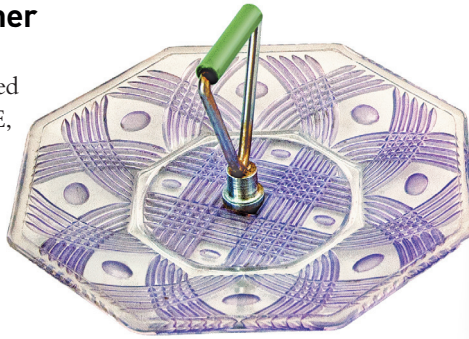
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## Robert Goodden, Intrepid Designer

Chance did not abandon pressed-glass manufacture and from around 1934 employed the services of Robert Yorke Goodden, CBE, RCA (1909–2002), then an architectural designer. Goodden proceeded to design one of Chance's most iconic tableware designs: Spiderweb. The contrast of vertical ribbing on the inside and horizontal concentric rings on the outside produces a beautiful optical effect. The likeness to lighthouse optics (yet another of Chance's industries) is compelling, and quite possibly deliberate, although Spiderweb was never marketed as such.

Soon after the launch of Spiderweb, Goodden designed an ashtray, heavily influenced by Art Deco, which is often seen with the name 'Parker' embossed on the base (for the Parker Pipe Co). Other scarcer variations of the ashtray appeared in various colours and decorations.

Refrigerator boxes based on Wilhelm Wagenfeld's popular Bauhaus design were made as early as 1937 and continued into the 1950s. These containers were originally made for Electrolux, having its name embossed on the lid.



A rare Britannia plate with Amethyst Deluxe decoration.



Lotus tots with fired-on decorative enamel motifs.



Spiderweb was perhaps Chance's most iconic tableware design.

## Post-War Production

Spiderweb continued production after the Second World War, when new machinery was brought in. The range was expanded and in 1950 numerous decorative ideas started to appear, notably a process named 'Matthey Crinkles' that created an effect like coloured sugar crystals fused to the glass.

Goodden was retained to design the Lotus range of 1948, but while the style of this glassware was elegant, it was too austere for the post-war market and sales did not meet expectations. However, his Lotus tot glasses sold quite healthily, appearing in various sizes and invariably decorated with transfers.

In 1949, two new ranges were introduced. First was Waverley – a high-quality design mixing cut-glass traditionalism with a modern, elegant slant. Second was Britannia: another high-quality pressing. Without doubt, this was the most popular design and came in many different shapes and sizes. The company had appeared to capitulate in wooing the public with more modernist designs and reverted to a more traditional cut-glass effect.

The Lancer range (1950) once again reverted to modern contemporary styling with a jug, dish and bowl, again with a prismatic optical effect. The half- and one-pint tankards were notable in including a blank octagonal area intended for advertising transfers and were obviously targeting the public house trade.

Gossamer (1951) was described as 'a design of fine tracery' and while it had a larger range than Lancer, the design was not to the same standard. Cato (1952) was the final throw of the dice. While the glassware design was quite simple, it was supplemented with coloured horizontal bands that varied in thickness. Examples are quite rare due to its short life-span.

Although another full tableware range, Flora, was produced c. 1950 for Crystalware Ltd in London, many problems were encountered before, during and after production and consequently examples are quite rare.

## Commemorative Items

Chance's major involvement at the Great Exhibition of 1851, glazing the Crystal Palace, meant the company was invited to exhibit at the 1951 Festival of Britain, which resulted in a few pressed-glass items featuring Abram Games's memorable motif.

For the Royal Coronation of 1953, Chance produced several items, all being decorated with with enamel transfers permanently 'fired-on'. The items included Lotus tots, Lancer tankards, a plain, straight-sided tumbler and two pin dishes.

## The Final Years

Once Pilkington Brothers had gained control of the company in 1952, major changes were implemented. Poor production figures and the influx of cheap imports merely reinforced this decision: without considerable investment in new machinery, domestic pressed glass could not compete. Wishing to concentrate on its core – and highly profitable – business of flat glass, Pilkington announced the closure of the division in 1953.

It was not all doom and gloom though; in 1951 Chance had revived the concept of its Aqualux range from 1939 and launched a totally new and innovative tableware: Fiesta. Here, ordinary sheets of window glass were shaped, decorated, and then heated over a cast-iron mould, causing it to 'slump' naturally to shape whilst simultaneously 'firing' the enamel decoration. Chance Brothers continued producing Fiestaware until 1981, when Pilkington finally closed the premises. ●

David Encill is publisher of Cortex Design and researcher into the glass industry of the West Midlands.

## Further Reading

David Encill, *Chance Expressions* (Cortex Design, 2007).  
Website [www.chanceglass.net](http://www.chanceglass.net)