

'A QUOTA OF BEAUTIFUL WORKS'

THE WEDGWOOD COMPANY AND 1851

Gaye Blake-Roberts

The Great Exhibition of 1851 provided a significant stimulus to the Wedgwood Company, which was beginning to recover from a period of financial difficulty and the loss of its pre-eminent position due to a lack of investment and new product development.

After some years of family disinterest and poor management, the Etruria estate – including the factory and Etruria Hall – were put up for sale in 1844. A year earlier, in August 1843, Frank Wedgwood (1800 -1880), had taken John Boyle into partnership, the first non-family member to be a partner. Boyle was an experienced potter, having previously been a partner at Minton. The real reason for the proposed factory sale is not clear, but it was possibly forced by Boyle's ill health and Frank's lack of commitment to ceramic manufacture.

With Boyle's death in 1845, Frank Wedgwood found himself responsible for repaying £15,280, which was Boyle's share of the partnership. One of the executors of the will was Robert Brown, a manufacturer of china and earthenware in Shelton, who signed a bond on 22 July 1846 providing personal security for the outstanding money. In return, Frank Wedgwood offered Brown a partnership with a two-fifths share for the first four years and afterwards an equal share.

The Revival of the Company

Brown was a competent manufacturer with considerable wealth. He was described by Llewellyn Jewitt as 'a man of enlarged understanding, of great experience and of wonderful business talent...and was possessed of a refined taste'. The injections of capital into the partnership provided an opportunity to progress aspects of factory modernisation and commence trials to develop new ranges of ware.

The period of the Wedgwood and Brown partnership, 1846–1859, was one of great change and endeavour after a period of stagnation, which started the resurgence of the Wedgwood company at an ideal time to show their new wares at The Great Exhibition of 1851.

At the official opening by Queen Victoria of The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, on 1 May, it was significant that the status of the Wedgwood

Company at that time meant that their display was not one of those chosen to be visited during the official tour of the exhibition.



Venus and Cupid or Cupid disarmed, in black basalt.

The *Illustrated Catalogue of the Industry of all Nations* stated about the Wedgwood stand:

'ETRURIA - the celebrated establishment founded by Josiah Wedgwood, and where the knowledge of Bentley and the classic taste and genius of Flaxman, combined with his own ability, gave a world-wide reputation to its founder - has sent its quota of beautiful works through its present occupants, Messrs. Wedgwood & Brown who have reproduced some of the best articles originally designed or executed by its famous founder'.

The reviewer in the *Art Journal* continued his comment with:

'...we rejoice to see this eminent house again prepared to assert its position amongst the principal Art manufacturers of the present day; attesting to the deserved character obtained for the establishment by the famous Josiah Wedgwood. These works are all carefully and beautifully executed, and deserve the high praise they will command; and the re-awakened attention which will be insured, to one of the most famed and tasteful of English establishments, in connection with plastic art'.

Jasper Ware

This contemporary comment shows the strides Wedgwood and Brown had made in re-establishing Josiah I's invention, jasper. The technique for the manufacture of large and elaborate items of jasper had virtually been lost and very little jasper production had taken place since the 1820s, with bas-relief ware being used as a suitable alternative.

It is possible that with the retirement of those employees who had worked directly under the founder, the techniques had been 'lost'. In 1844 a jasper body was re-introduced, after a



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From the *Illustrated Catalogue of the Industry of all Nations*, 1851, showing some of the Wedgwood pieces exhibited.

number of experiments by Francis Wedgwood (grandson of Josiah I), and by November 1847 jasper dip vases, in all colours, were back in production, although large solid-coloured jasper vases were not possible until a more stable material was developed in 1860.

The *Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue* makes specific reference to the jasper pieces, commenting:

'The entire series of works displayed by the present firm are of the classical form and style of decoration so well known to connoisseurs; the ground of each article being of a lavender tint, the figures and ornaments, in pure white clay in relief upon the surface'.

Carrara

The Wedgwood Company stand showed

new ranges of both useful and ornamental wares essential for the Victorian home, from vases through to kitchen items and plumbers' earthenware ideal for the newly developing urban expansion. The ornamental wares included highly decorative pieces manufactured in Wedgwood's new Carrara body, which was the company's name for Parian, first introduced into production in about 1849.

Carrara, white unglazed bisque ceramic, was named by Wedgwood after the marble from the quarries around Carrara in the Apennine Hills of Italy, which the ceramic body closely resembled. Many of the initial group of thirty models produced, detailed in a price list dated 1848, had originally been manufactured in black basalt or were taken from existing moulds.

The Carrara bust of 'Venus' shown at the exhibition, after the model by Antonio Canova, was probably taken from a cast supplied in 1819 by Benjamin and Robert Shout, and had been initially produced in black basalt.



Venus, modelled after Antonio Canova in 'Carrara', a white unglazed bisque ceramic.

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Black Basalt

Black basalt figures and groups were also shown in the display, including 'Eros and Euphrosyne' after a sculpture by Thomas Woolner RA (1825–91) which had been exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1848, and 'Venus and Cupid', also known as 'Cupid disarmed', after a model by Giovanni Meli.

Meli was a Sicilian craftsman who came to work in 'The Potteries' in about 1849, working for several factories before establishing himself as a Parian manufacturer. The large black basalt figure of Cupid, illustrated in the Catalogue, is described as being made for the first time 'for the Exhibition in Hyde Park' and as a 'charming figure'.

Visit by Employees

The enlightened attitude of the Wedgwood management at the time gave rise to a mass expedition to Hyde Park to see the Crystal Palace. Travelling by steam railway, virtually everyone involved with the Wedgwood factory was taken to visit the Great Exhibition, not only to view their contribution but also to have the opportunity to see the wonders of the world which had been gathered together for the displays.

Thomas Lovatt, a skilled ornamentor, recorded that 'Mr Wedgwood sent the whole of his workpeople, himself among them, to London to see the Great Exhibition of 1851, and ... when they reached the Exhibition they clapped stones together and sang'.

For employees who had probably never ventured out of their home towns before, this visit to London must have been a great adventure, opening their eyes to the styles and diversity of the pieces from around the world. Isaac Cook, the first curator of the Wedgwood Museum at Etruria, recorded the fact that 'members of staff travelled to the exhibition site to enjoy its wonders in open-topped carriages'. It would seem that everyone had a tremendous time including, for some, winning money in card games during the journey.

Achievements

Wedgwood's aim in participating in the 1851 Great Exhibition was in part to provide a shop window for the company's goods but more widely to captivate the expanding and ambitious world markets in an attempt to recapture the pre-eminence of the company and revitalise the traditional bodies. Wedgwood was awarded a bronze medal, proving that the company was again at the forefront of excellence in ceramic manufacture and design. ●

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Further Reading

'Illustrated Catalogue of the Industry of all Nations', *Art Journal* 1851.