

THE DUESBURY PAPERS

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The two William Duesburys, father and son, owned and managed the Derby China Works on Nottingham Road for much of the second half of the 18th Century, and brought the factory to international fame. William Duesbury the elder (1725-1786) was the son of a Cannock carrier who, having worked as an enameller in London and Longton (Staffs), became one of the partners in the Derby works in 1756 to join with Andrew Planché and John Heath 'in ye Art of making English China as also in buying and selling of all sorts of Wares belonging to ye Art of making China'. By 1775 Duesbury I had bought-out many of his rival concerns, most notably the ailing but prestigious Chelsea factory, and had received a royal appointment. In 1779 with the bankruptcy of his 'sleeping partner' Heath, Duesbury assumed complete control of the China Works. His son William Junior (1763-1797) joined the business in the early summer of 1784 as his father's health began to deteriorate, and the efficiency and status of the firm continued to improve. William Duesbury I died aged 61 on Oct. 30th, 1786. The younger man too suffered from poor health, and some nine years later was obliged to take a business partner, the Irish miniature painter Michael Kean. Duesbury II died early in 1797, and although the quality of the China Work's products remained superb well into the Bloor period (1811-1848), the demise of the Duesburys saw the beginning of a long period of erratic, and sometimes chaotic, management which lead to the inevitable closure of the Derby China Works in 1848.

The 'Duesbury Papers' are the collective name for a huge quantity of surviving documents, mainly of 18th Century date, that relate to the Duesbury family and its business, and are presently housed at the Local Studies Library (administered by Derbyshire County Council), Derby. Unfortunately there are no records to indicate the exact provenance of the papers, but it is presumed that the manuscripts were presented to the then combined town library and museum in October, 1914 as part of the Bemrose Collection of local history books and documents. William Bemrose is well established as a late Victorian author, researcher and collector of Derby porcelain and related material. However his unique collection was split-up at his death in 1909; many of his ceramics were sold at auction in Nottingham that year, and he bequeathed the British Museum a number of important Duesbury and early Derby factory documents, including Duesbury's London Account Book (1751-1755). References also suggest that some Duesbury papers were lodged, or given, at one time by Jewitt to the Victoria and Albert Museum, but these I have not traced. Some Bemrose-owned pieces seem to have disappeared altogether, obvious examples being the original 'Plan of Mr.



W^m Duesbury
1725-1786.

1 Silhouette portrait of William Duesbury I, 1725-1786.

Duesbury's Garden, House and Manufactory' relating to the 1815 lease as published in 'Bow, Chelsea and Derby', and the famous silhouette portrait of the elder Duesbury.

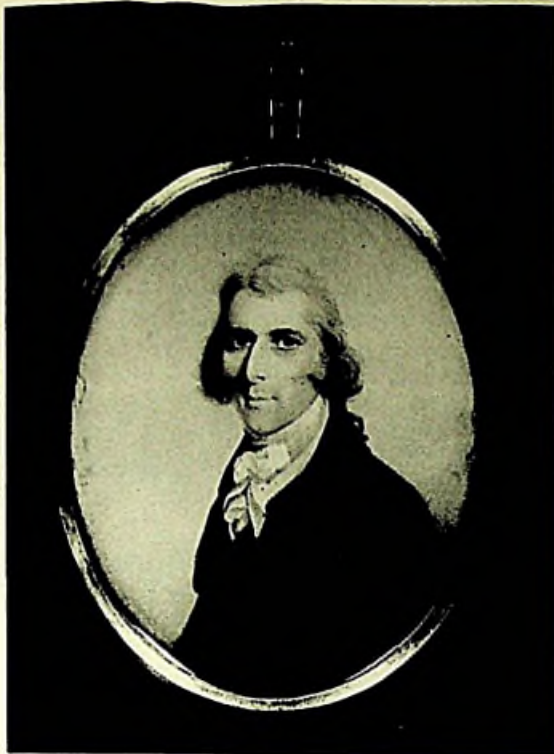
The Derby City Museums and Art Gallery also own a few documentary records from the 18th Century China Works, that I suspect were part of the original 1914 parcel from the Bemrose Library. The City Museum's pieces however largely consist of the more visually interesting, rather than written, examples: small rough sketches with the costings for a new pattern, designs for Chelsea-Derby vases and late 1790's plans and proposed alterations to the factory, to name but a few.

It is believed that some, if not all, the Bemrose papers relating to the Duesbury's were given to him by Mr. Huish, a Derby solicitor, in 1889, and would presumably be thrown away if Bemrose had not accepted them.

The information and observations hereafter derive from those 'Duesbury Papers' in the Local Studies Library, Derby. First impressions of this collection include its huge size, and difficulty in finding specific documents. Some papers are only 2-inch scraps while others are folded letters; there are legal agreements on vellum, small notebooks, and 20th Century manilla envelopes whose contents are just illegible decomposed bits! The manuscripts' actual contents are equally diverse, being reminiscent of what one expects of the constituents of the Duesburys' own desk/bureau: with important documents filed for safety, but also chatty family letters, notes or doodles that are surprisingly preserved, perhaps quickly slipped into a drawer in an attempt to tidy the working surface. Most of these extraneous papers appear to date to the later 1780's and 1790's and Duesbury II's management, which may indicate something of the character of the young factory owner. Included is a bundle of the Duesburys' household bills that hint at the quality of life for a middle-class Derbyshire family with accounts for example from grocers, seed and cheese suppliers and the haberdashers, and significantly the payment for French lessons for the young William Duesbury. They also indicate the common business practice of allowing two or more years of credit to accumulate before payment for goods was expected: an important factor in the attempt to successfully administer the China Works' finances. Other piles of documents which do not directly relate to the Derby factory include Kean's personal accounts and Richard Egan's correspondence from Bath.

Many of the business papers survive without reference to their original context and yet they can provide intriguing snippets of information. For example within a group of I.O.U.s and receipts for money between Duesbury II and the flower painter William Billingsley in the 1790's, is an odd one dated 1766 that obviously represents a contract between their respective fathers. Perhaps the ex-Chelsea decorator, Billingsley Senior, did out-work for the China Works before his death in 1770, and the elder Duesbury felt some responsibility to employ the sixteen year old Billingsley, aware of his likely talents and background, at an atypical apprentice rate of 5/- per week for five years.

Unfortunately the documents dating to the period 1755-1782, before the closure of the Chelsea factory, are severely limited, and information to be gleaned from them even more restricted. The papers do include two pocket notebooks listing the large quantities and quality of wood acquired from Derbyshire woods used for firing. There are ten apprenticeship indentures, and articles of agreement covering ten other employees, both for all aspects of the process of manufacture. The only particularly well known artists named in this period are Gauron, a "very ingenious modeller from Tournay"

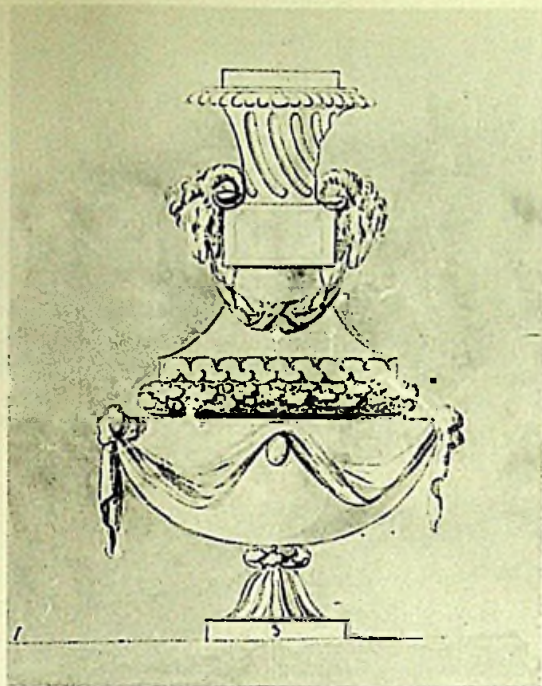


2 Miniature portrait of William Duesbury II, 1763-1797. Gouache on paper, 3 1/2 ins. Derby City Museum.

who wants to come to England according to a letter to Duesbury by the dealer Thomas Morgan, probably in 1770, and "Mr Stephan" whose bills for the purchase in London of "13 French prints from Sayer and Bennet" and "a print of Andromache and another of Cleopatra" from Messrs. Ryland and Coustos were receipted in September 1774.

A very simple pocket account book belonging to Duesbury I is dated November 1773-1774. It contains little more than lists of names and payments, without reference to services rendered, but included within its covers the following are of interest: "paid of Mr. Jam Giles his draft a six weeks £71-11s." (Feb. 7, 1774), and, almost indecipherable, "for employing the Deares" (presumably some connection with the modeller John Deare), while Mr. Cunningham was paid five guineas for a model of 'Macaley' in December 1773. The Duke of Devonshire paid a £3 bill.

William Wood was Duesbury's London agent and manager of the company's Covent Garden showroom from its opening in 1773. Wood communicated with the Derby factory by letter but there are few surviving examples, and most of these are in appallingly shattered condition. Wood's messages were brief and to the point. The general impression of Wood's role in 1776 is largely one of debt collector and payer of bills in London "for there was a great dearth of money on the books". A few more specific details can be found such as Wood's



3 Design for a Chelsea-Derby period vase. Watercolour, 9½ x 7½ ins. Derby City Museum.

request for the factory to make 'button flats' for he had met someone who could take "all we can make" (Oct. 15, 1776), and one of the factory's leading exporters, Mr. Williams purchased £1,900 of goods the following week for shipment abroad. On June 25th, 1776, Wood sent Duesbury a 'press release' for his approval to announce the visit of the Queen with the Duchess of Ancaster. There is no record of an earlier royal visit within the 'Duesbury Papers'. Legal papers relating Duesbury's ownership of the Sucstone Mine and Brassington Liberty are dated 1776 and 1778. But these documents do not record why the mine was acquired; ownership of other property locally, or in London, seems to have been an investment rather than a resource, along with stocks and shares.

William Lygo was appointed as Wood's successor in 1777, but there is also little surviving correspondence between Lygo and Duesbury I.

Other documents of the early 1780's period are of minor business interest recording for example the odd bills for transporting lime from Breedon and Crich, or coals from the Derby Wharf. A small factory account book written in 1783 sights payments to various members of the Duesbury family, and surprisingly must have been the work of Duesbury I's daughter Anne, then aged nineteen, and before she married Egan. By the early summer of 1784 the elder Duesbury's health obviously began to deteriorate seriously and Lygo starts to write to the twenty-one year old William; letters signed 'WD Jnr' are sent to all sorts of business contacts. In August Duesbury I asked his son to clear up the Chancery Court

case concerning the ownership of unfinished porcelain on the purchase of the Chelsea works in 1770, for his father was "too ill to leave . . . any great length of time" and he "would like it cleared up while he is still amongst us". Duesbury Junior also wrote to the Canal Committee to urge them to finish the canal banks so that he might lay out the rooms in the manufactory without fear of flooding (Dec. 23rd 1784).

The period from about June 1784 to Duesbury I's death on October 30th 1786 is particularly intriguing, for the 'Duesbury Papers' would indicate a clash of personalities and perhaps management styles between father and son. The younger man seems to have charged into things without the control or caution of his senior, and the father clearly seemed concerned that his successor wished to change the factory too quickly. On February 3rd 1785 a legal agreement between the two Duesburys was drawn up restricting the building within the next two years of any offices to the value of £65 6s other than "the store or drying room, the dayroom or cellar and the coolroom with staircase". On the evening of April 6th 1785, according to a surviving insurance claim, fire damaged £53 of the factory, necessitating some rebuilding: one wonders if this part of the premises was outside the agreement!

Before his father's death Duesbury II also introduced changes at the London showroom, discontinuing the practice of selling goods to the nobility at a Spring sale, for which the trades 'China Society' duly thanked him. Thereafter goods were sold through 'Duesbury's Annual Catalogue of his Derby Porcelain' to the dealers only, when the purchase of cheap goods and 'seconds' was particularly popular. One wonders how the experienced Lygo felt about such changes brought about by the novice to the company, and what their early relationship was like. The first letter from Duesbury II to Lygo is dated April 2nd 1785, it has a polite chatty tone but still contains remarks that makes today's reader feel uncomfortable, referring to a knife mender as a "dam'd fool" and telling his manager in detail how to pay every attention to Lord and Lady Grantham. By July the following year Lygo had obviously expressed dissatisfaction with the current working arrangements and appears to have hinted that he might leave the firm's employ. In October 1786 a new contract had been drawn up for Lygo to work for seven years, with twelve months notice. That month Duesbury I died, which was "nothing more than what has been expected for a long time back" (Lygo, Nov. 3rd 1786). A stroke months before appeared to have deprived Duesbury I of his speech and the use of one side of his body.

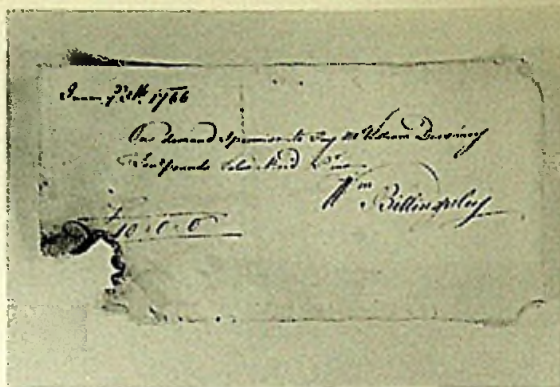
From July 1786 until December 1795 there are well over five hundred letters from Lygo in London to the Derby China Works, amounting to the largest single group of documents in the 'Duesbury Papers'. It would be interesting to know why this sudden profusion of letters exists; the simplest explanation may be it is just a flook chance of survival, but it could represent a deliberate change of policy in the nature of how the business was run under Duesbury II. For example the two venues

could have become administratively more independent; Duesbury II certainly did not visit London very often and Lygo may have been given more day to day authority, thus written communication became more vital. Other suggestions for the change in management style will be discussed later.

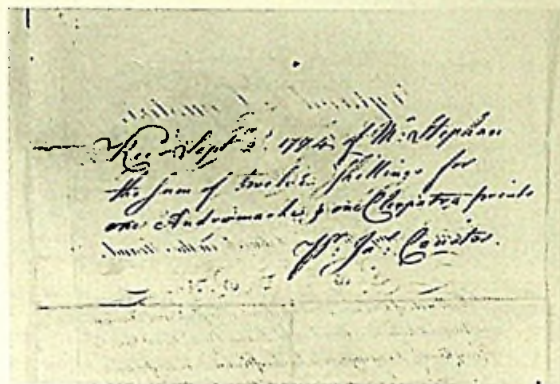
Unfortunately this most informative correspondence is almost without exception one way, and the disclosures are rather akin to eavesdropping a modern day telephone call: you hear one side of the conversation but not the original question, or a reply. Nevertheless the Lygo letters give a fascinating insight into the Duesbury family business and something of the character of the management team. Also included is a comparison of other factories' goods, notably Worcester, and the ceramic trade and trends in general. On average Lygo wrote to the younger Duesbury two or three times a week, and sometimes daily. The exchange of information in later Georgian England was surprisingly speedy; letters and small boxes, containing bank notes or trial specimens of a raw material, could be put on the mail coach in London at 4 a.m. to reach Derby later the same evening or the early hours of next day. Larger goods travelled by waggon, which appears to have been less frequent, perhaps two or three times a week. Bulk goods like clay or bone-ash usually sailed around the coast from London to Gainsborough and then reloaded onto the navigable River Trent and onto Derby via the Derwent. Even these boats were fairly regular and dispatched heavy goods arrived at the factory within seven to ten days.

The quantity and range of information in the Lygo letters is considerable, whereas Wood's letters were brief half-fulscap size, Lygo's are often two to four full pages long. Alongside the business reports are news from family friends and relatives (notably the wayward brother James), details of the stock market, political comments and an update on the affairs of royalty, especially the Prince of Wales' financial situation or George III's health. Lygo was also instructed to purchase barrels of fish, wines, clothing and carpets *et al.* for the Derby family, and letters tell of his success in tracking down such personal goods. I was surprised to find such a close relationship develop between Lygo and Duesbury II, but there was a probable social connection between the two families for Lygo's parents lived in Church Broughton, a small village about twelve miles to the west of Derby, this being the parish of the Rev. Chawner, Duesbury II's brother-in-law. The letters nevertheless are always formally addressed "Sir" and signed "Sir, your very obedient servant".

It is impossible to give all the business details included in the nine and a half years of Lygo's letters, and many examples are already well reported in the various Derby porcelain reference books. However it was a pleasure to find some of the better known quotes in their full and original context, like Lygo's suggestion to finish badly fired white ware not "anything like our patterns but like Worcester" (July 2, 1786), and the various details of the Duke of Clarence's 'Hope' 'crockery' in 1791.



4 I.O.U. from William Billingsley Senior to Duesbury I, 1766.



5 Receipt for payment for prints of 'Andromache' and 'Cleopatra' from Mr. Stephan, 1774.

More significant in many ways than such quotable examples of trade practice is the accumulation of a fact here and there, or a tone in the correspondence. This sort of information is only obvious on the second or third reading of the letters in strict chronological order. From tiny details topics, as for example the transport of the period previously discussed, have not only been given a backbone but fleshed out. Communication between Derby and London could be daily and therefore not much different from today's 'hi-tech' age. Only on a few occasions did Lygo report that porcelain goods arrived damaged despite travelling 130 miles on turnpiked or fowl roads; very rarely did goods go astray or were delayed in transit.

One of the most frequently posed questions relating to the old Derby China Works concerns the source of raw materials: the clay, enamels, gold *et al.* The letters show that even towards the close of the 18th Century the factory was having problems in obtaining good quality material in any reliable quantity. Lygo spends much of his time visiting possible suppliers, and sending test samples back to Derby. A particular problem was the search for fine yellow enamel and cobalt blue. The yellow enamel coming from Italy and Holland was

6 Lygo's figures showing the discrepancy between the quantity of gold sent from London and the value of china received in 1792-1793.

A letter dated August 1789 concerned with shipping goods from St. Austell to Hull suggests that Cornish kaolin was to be used, and in 1795 Wedgwood "forwarded a sample of their Cornish Clay and Stone to try". Other odd references to clay include the preparation and sieving of 'Stourbridge clay', Lord Dunmore's clay sample (Jan. 1796) and in a references in Duesbury's biscuit kiln trials in 1790 "clay made up at the Vauxhall manufactory". A letter to Duesbury II from his wife in 1795 records "Mr Beard has some excellent clay to show".

I have come to the conclusion that Lygo's importance to the success of the Derby China works in the so-called 'Golden Age' of the mid 1780's to circa 1800 has been considerably underestimated. Lygo was obviously an excellent and very conscientious manager, he was always

7 One of the many sketches by Duesbury II showing technical improvements for firing circa 1790.

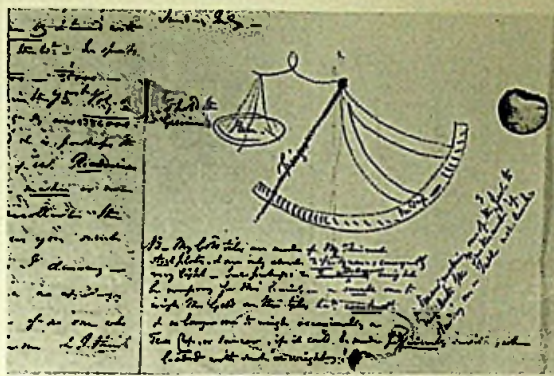
Casks of bone ash were shipped from London around the coast. The regular suppliers appears to have been a firm called Spicers, but when their newly-built kiln failed in 1791, Lygo was forced to look elsewhere commenting of his search that bone of "good quality and not too contaminated with dirt was not easy to procure and ship in quantity". Lygo found himself picking through "a source of fine bones, without sheep's

aware of the competition and kept abreast of current fashions or economic developments that might effect the factory. From the Lygo letters Duesbury II fairs less well, being slow or totally negligent in answering Lygo's pleas for information or specific goods, particularly in the 1790's. Reading the letters one feels it is Lygo's patience and persistence that improves the service to the trade, and keeps the private customers sweet. For example on August 3rd 1787 a catalogue was "to be printed in the best manner" as Duesbury's instructions, for the dealers' sale at the end of November. Lygo indicated it was a great pity that the heights and prices of the pieces were not to be included. Eight letters and a proof catalogue later, the latter already designed with the appropriate gaps for the missing figures, Duesbury relented to Lygo's firm but polite suggestions, and the catalogue was dispatched before the sale with ammendments.

Regular private buyers required the best and were treated with considerable courtesy in order to keep their custom. Some transactions hardly sound profitable but presumably were good 'P.R.' For example on January 24th 1787 the Duke of Bedford returned £3 9s. worth of china as being unsuitable. The Duke seems to have been a particularly difficult client to please, not liking two different sets of sample desserts patterns created for him in December 1786, for he did not like landscapes nor blue or green borders. Incidentally the Duke also commissioned, in 1795 from Derby, tiles for his dairy with yellow edges, decorated with flowers, birds and insects; there is no record as to if the tiles were finally produced.

Loans of porcelain were also given to good customers. Miss Whitbread hired a teaset to entertain the royal family on a visit to the brewery (April 30th 1787). Lady G. Cavendish was lent some vases and figurines while her order for "a group of four antique seasons, and a pair vases no. 107" was completed (July 2nd 1789). While Lord Aylesbury was allowed to borrow four dozen plates from a service that had been specially made for the Duke of Marlborough, on the strength of a promise to order a dessert service of his own, but his household managed to break four of the borrowed plates. On receiving a new "very beautiful" pattern dessert from Derby, which Lygo had "no doubt of its selling" (May 1787), he immediately called upon Aylesbury, as was the practice, to obtain an order, but the Lord was out. By the end of the month the Prince of Wales was celebrating his clearance of substantial debts and a £10,000 increase in his allowance with the purchase of some Derby porcelain: a dessert service decorated with the Prince's feathers but also one of the new pattern - '65'.

Some of the best clients obtained pieces from brand new moulds without necessarily paying for this extra work: Lady G. H. Cavendish ordered a "dejeuner teapot to a new modall and rather smaller" decorated with pattern 84; while Lady Spencer requested a syllabub cup and pail (July 1790). Ladies were also supplied with china in the white along with small quantities of enamels for



8 Duesbury II's letter ordering balances for weighing gold to his own design; included is a long reference to work published in the "Philosophical Transactions", vol. 66 p 509."

them "to have a go" at decorating in their own homes. These amateurs' efforts were returned to Derby for firing, and perhaps gilding; such practice may account for some odd unattributable pieces today. In 1790 pieces included an ambitious garniture of vases, a table top and a large set of cups.

Lygo passed his own and customers' comments and complaints onto Derby. It is he, rather than someone at the china factory itself, who seems to exercise quality and aesthetic control of the goods sent to London. For example when sent 'Hamilton' shaped cups with outsize saucers he wrote "the person that looks out the ware for painting is very much to blame for doing it in that way for it hurts the sale of goods when finished at a great expence" (August 17th 1789). Such incidents were not that uncommon, in 1793 totally wrong shaped hollow ware pieces were received to make up a long awaited order. Special commissions were painted in the wrong colours; Mrs. Leigh's dessert service was returned for the sprigs were red instead of the requested green (May 25th 1789). Patterns too are criticised: pattern 108 was "too naked", while in January 1789 Lygo said he had never had two tea pattern 100 sets alike for some had more sprigs on in proportion to their size. Tea pattern 116 and dessert 87 were condemned for they had 'borders too much in Wedgwood style' (Jan. 6th 1790). But the manager also praised designs: dessert 84 being "A very selling pattern".

The most common shape for a late 18th Century dessert plate has a moulded spiralling flute. Its huge production may well be the result of this comment by Lygo to Duesbury: "did you observe how different the 2 sets looked on account of the shape of the plates that set with the fluted brim plates looked 100% better than the set with the common 12 scalloped plates" (Oct. 3rd 1789).

Among Lygo's suggestion is a plea, that the modern collector would understand, for the saucer of a landscape-decorated cup to be made "not so deep by ¼ inch so not hide the beauty of the painting" (Dec. 1792).

overlooker might be the means of" wrote King to Duesbury who was holidaying in Cumbria, and he went on to say "the necessity of your presence in this critical situation of affairs" was required. In December 1795 the partnership with the little known Kean is announced, and there appear to be no more letters from Lygo to Derby dated after January the following year. This has been but a brief sortee into the 'Duesbury Papers', I hope to be able to continue my searches, perhaps others will join me, and realise the potential of these largely unrecorded manuscripts.

Footnotes

- ¹ Further details of trade practice and industrialisation can be found in the catalogue 'Wm. Duesbury: father and son, men of industry', 1987, Judith Anderson, Derby City Museums.
- ² An independent assessment of the characters of both Duesburys is being compiled by Mr. Sasha Tullock of the Academy of Graphology.

May I extend my thanks to the staff at the Local Studies Library, Derby.