

THE VAUXHALL PORCELAIN FACTORY, 1751-1764

by Dr. Bernard M. Watney, F.S.A.

The recent discovery of wasters and fragments of porcelain on the south side of the Albert Embankment, within sight of the Houses of Parliament, has added a new dimension to English ceramics. It has brought about the relocation of a group of porcelain which was originally identified and described by me over thirty years ago and ascribed to Liverpool.

The importance of this discovery is evidenced by the fact that this Vauxhall porcelain manufactory proves to be the third London factory whose location and products are now known*. It is the only one on the south bank of the river; Chelsea, further upstream, at first had a glassy paste with variable amounts of lead, Bow to the east employed a bone ash paste and analysis has confirmed that soapstone was used at Vauxhall. Unlike the Worcester soapstone recipe, their mix often included a fair percentage of calcium. The biscuit firing produced a silicate of calcium and magnesium, known as diopside: a unique finding so far in porcelain analyses, acting as a useful and characteristic marker, not only for domestic wares, but also for figures which are now known to have been made at Vauxhall. When first described by me only domestic wares had been considered.

The following documentary facts are now known about the Vauxhall factory.

The first evidence of plans to make porcelain is the granting of a soapstone licence by Lord Falmouth to the pottery owners Crisp and Sanders in June 1751, three years after Lund of Bristol had obtained the earliest such licence. The first shipment, weighing nearly thirty tons, occurred just over a year later.

Contemporary accounts reveal that the Vauxhall manufactory of Crisp and Sanders also had premises on the riverside at Nine Elms upstream in the direction of Battersea. Here was undoubtedly a convenient place for landing raw materials. The presence of a windmill, drying sheds, other premises and a yard are indications that perhaps the early stages of manufacture of the paste was undertaken at Nine Elms.

John Sanders had occupied the Vauxhall pottery site at least since 1743 when his insurance mentions a tile kiln in particular. He was obviously of an inventive turn of mind as we can gather from a statement in the Public Advertiser in 1754 "We hear that Mr Delamain the inventor of the kiln for burning white glazed earthenware with pit-coal instead of wood, has lodged a model of his kiln with the ingenious Mr Sanders, Potter of Vauxhall."

*Since giving this paper the Limehouse factory site has been excavated, making a fourth.

Nicholas Crisp was a very different character. At one time rich and associated with the East India Company, in 1740 he came to live just off Cheapside in Bow Church Yard where he was described as a jeweller and watchmaker. From 1754, however, his overriding interest seems to have been, as a founder member of the Society of Arts, promoting the use of indigenous raw materials in manufacturing processes, especially in relation to porcelain and allied trades. For example, he was on the committee which awarded a premium to Jacob Lieberich in 1759 for the manufacture of crucibles from Cornish clay and granite. Then, in 1764, he himself was awarded a premium by the Society of Arts for the discovery of a native source of cobalt resulting in "a Manufactory of Zaffre and Smalt." It was perhaps no accident that he eventually chose to move to Devon near good native sources of materials from which to attempt to make porcelain for the second time.

There is documentary evidence that John Sanders of Vauxhall increased the number of buildings on the factory site shortly after the granting of the soap-rock licence in 1751.

The first announcement of a sale of Vauxhall porcelain appeared in the Public Advertiser for 21st May 1753. "At Mr Sander's near the Plate Glasshouse Vauxhall is now to be sold, a strong and useful Manufacture of Porcelaine ware made there of English Materials. The Degree of Success, which has already attended the several Attempts, lately made in England for establishing a Manufactory of Porcelain in Imitation of the Ware of China, gives Reason to hope, that this Design will still be carried on, till it arrive at its due Degree of Perfection——." This advertisement is in line with Crisps' preoccupation with native resources. A mention that one of the essential properties of chinaware is the ability to withstand the hottest liquids without breaking was a claim made by other contemporary manufactories. Evidence has recently been found that by 1755 Vauxhall was producing figures, it has been discovered that a Samuel Martin "pd Mr. Crisp of Bow church yard for four small figures of Vauxhall China a guinea & a half as pr recd of Smith for Crisp & Co."

In spite of such favourable beginnings the factory did not survive for long for in 1758 John Sanders died and left the pottery business to his son William and his son-in-law Henry Richards. On 1st January 1760 Viscount Falmouth transferred the soaprock licence, granted on 24th June 1751, to John Baddely of Shelton and William Yates of Newcastle-under-Lyme, for a term of ten years. Finally, in November 1763 Nicholas Crisp became a bankrupt. The inevitable final sale of wares from the Vauxhall Porcelain factory took place six months later.

The Daily Advertiser 28/30 May and 1 June, announced: "To be sold by Auction by S. Taylor, Exchange-Broker, at his Room over the Royal Exchange, on Thursday next, at Twelve o'Clock, by Order of the Assignees of Mess. Crisps, All the entire Stock of their valuable Porcelain Manufactory at Lambeth, which is removed from Convenience to Taylor's Room over the Royal Exchange; consisting of curious Figures, all Sorts of ornamental Toys, Knife-handles, and Variety of all Kinds of useful Sorts, etc. To be seen on Tuesday Morning, from Eleven o'Clock, till Six, every Day, and on the Sale-Day, till One; where Catalogues may be had gratis; and at his House in Bartholomew-Close." The sale lasted two days from 31st May till 1st June.

Several disparate sources reveal the names of four key employees at the Vauxhall factory. They were the enameller John Bolton, the figure-modeller John Bacon, John Britain an experienced china-painter and Hammersley an image and mould-maker.

The Bankruptcy Order Books reveal that at Whitsuntide in 1755 William Kempson, a button maker from Birmingham, prevailed upon John Bolton who then lived and was employed in the China manufactory at Vauxhall in the County of Surrey under the management and direction of Messieurs Crispe and Saunders to quit their service and to engage himself in the service of the said William Kempson in a Porcelaine Manufactory which the said William Kempson had then an intention to set up and establish at Kentish Town in Middlesex. John Bolton, who was called in to manage and direct the undertaking, is unlikely to have stayed in Kentish Town for long as William Kempson and his partner in Birmingham, Michael Alcock had a joint commission of bankruptcy awarded against them on the 23rd of January 1756. Certainly he was back in Lambeth in 1760 when the Bowcock Papers, concerned with the Bow Factory, contain a receipted bill "For Richd Dyer at Mr Boltons' Enameler, near the church Lambeth."

Crisp was a Haberdasher and their records show that on the sixth of June 1755 John Bacon was bound apprentice to Nicholas Crisp for seven years, however he did not take up his freedom till July 1764, by which time Crisp is described as a traveller. Bacon who became an RA and was awarded their first gold medal for sculpture, must surely have been Crisps chief modeller. The Gentlemen's Magazine of 1799 mentions that Bacon painted porcelain for Crisp as well as forming figures and small ornamental pieces. At a later date Bacon modelled figures for both Wedgwood and for Duesbury.

After the failure of the Vauxhall concern, Crisp moved with some of his workmen to Bovey Tracy near Exeter where he remained till his death in July 1774. The letters of William Cookworthy to Thomas Pitt, his principal partner at Plymouth, show that Cookworthy used Crisps' Bovey Tracy factory partly as an experimental

station, sending materials to be fired differently, in the soft paste manner, with wood rather than coal. Later, Cookworthy found wood best too. It seems unlikely that Cookworthy sent Crisp any materials for making hard paste as there is a reference to Bolton, the enameller, in the correspondence "who is concern'd with N. Crisp", attempting to obtain supplies of coal at St. Stephens in Cornwall by outright industrial espionage. As early as 1767 Cookworthy had appropriated three of Crisps' chief potters. Hammersley and Brittain had both been at Chelsea, Bow and Vauxhall beforehand. The third was a skilful burner. John Britain eventually became Richard Champion's manager at Bristol. In 1775 he was called on to give evidence when Champion petitioned Parliament for an extension of his patent. He said that "he has great Experience in several China Manufactures . . ." John Bolton, then a prisoner for debt in the Fleet, was also examined in connection with Champion's petition.

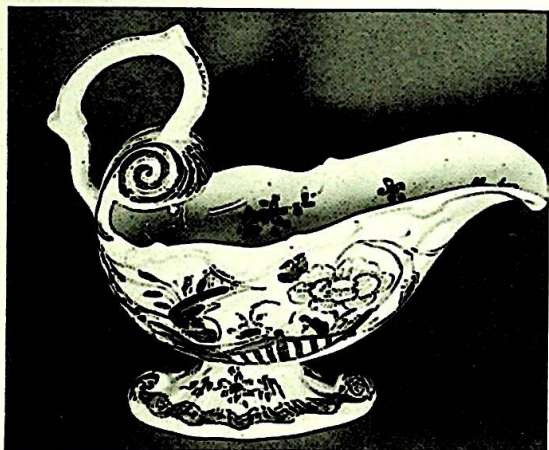
Excavations at 38-46 Albert Embankment

We must await the Museum of London's published findings before any authoritative assessment can be formed of the excavations at Vauxhall. The most recent investigation of the site followed others in 1979 and 1987 and was completed in mid-February 1990 before the area was built upon. Nevertheless, a few preliminary observations are warranted. The London and South Western Railway Company purchased a large part of the site in the 1840s and constructed arches to support the track across the area where it is thought that the main kilns existed. The part that was recently available for excavation has yielded some very complex features at many different levels, due to continuous occupation as a pottery from the 1740s till the 1840s, ending with Singer and Pether who made tesserae for tessellated pavements between 1835 and 1846. Some kiln floors were uncovered but it would appear that they were difficult to date accurately. In spite of these disadvantages, some more wasters from the Crisp and Sanders period were unearthed to be added to those already described.¹ Unfortunately however, no figure fragments were found. Three glazed pieces of a mug or jug were moulded with the top part of a cartouche and KING OF PRUSS . . . beneath. It is typical Vauxhall porcelain but the moulded inscription narrows the date down to about 1757. Another interesting piece is a crisply-moulded biscuit part of a sauce-boat depicting a cob-nut and fish-roe pattern which was likely to have been copied directly from a Bow example of about 1758. An unusual octagonal teapot spout bears an underglaze blue pattern which is close to that on a Mennecy knife handle. Of the twenty or so additional blue and white fragments, one in particular of a Chinese pagoda beside a willow tree is known on tea wares in collections of this porcelain. No further colour trials were discovered, the only one being from the previous dig.

The fact that no polychrome or transfer printed wasters were seen is in keeping with their great rarity on other eighteenth Century porcelain sites that have been excavated.

A description of the Vauxhall output

The factory under discussion produced a wide range of shapes, including figures, and a wide range of designs. Nevertheless a sufficient number of wasters and fragments, decorated with distinctive patterns in underglaze blue, were found on the South Bank site to reallocate the whole group from Liverpool to Vauxhall.² The wares hold together as a distinct group on visual examination, and furthermore, most fluoresce an intense white under short wave ultra-violet light due to some unidentified substance in the glaze. The body contains soapstone, often associated with sufficient calcium to form diopside, a magnesium calcium silicate, on firing, rather than enstatite, a magnesium silicate and this acts as a useful marker, especially in the search for Vauxhall figures.



1 Blue and white sauce boat which has a counterpart decorated with polychrome transfers.

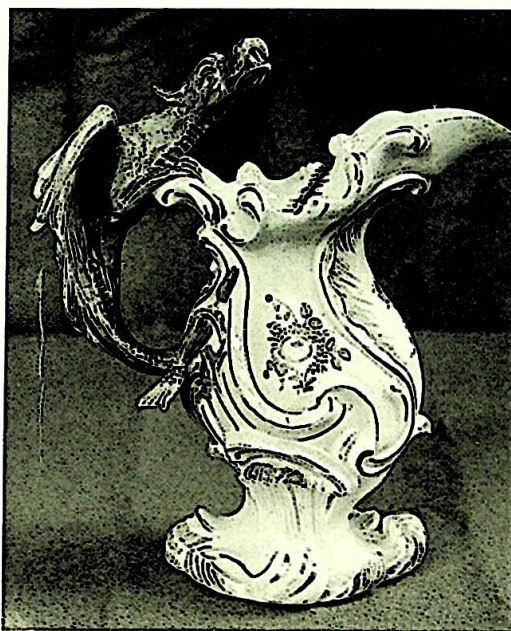
The blue and white shapes are best represented by the many and varied sauce-boats. Some of which, like the cups and mugs, remind one of Bow. Others, with intertwined snake handles, suggest delft. Many of the sauce-boats have polychrome equivalents (plate 1). For example, the documentary blue and white boats with silhouettes of the Duke of Marlborough and Commodore Howe have a polychrome printed version in the British Museum. Even the remarkable rococo, polychrome and gilded piece (plate 2) has a blue and white version and the shape was also reproduced later at Plymouth.

A rare blue and white slip-moulded cream jug, not only has both enamelled and polychrome printed versions, but the saltglaze prototype is recorded as well. An obvious saltglaze influence is seen again in some moulded dishes, the rare crabstock handles of teapots and the small cornucopias which are found both with underglaze blue and overglaze decoration. The elaborate rococo ewers with dragon handles (plate 3), however, are presumably after the silver and only enamelled versions are known.

The immediate impression given by the rapidly painted blue and white designs, whether Oriental or European,



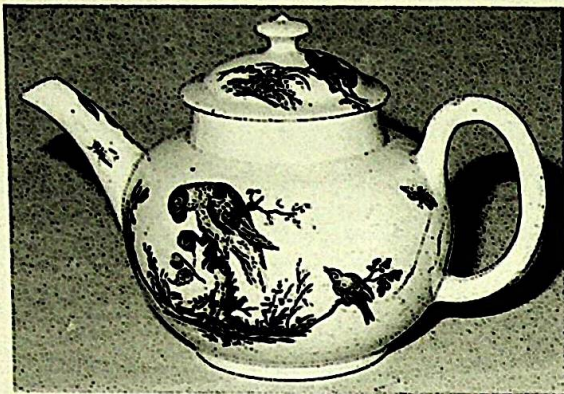
2 A blue ground rococo sauce boat of which blue and white and Plymouth hard-paste versions are known.



3 Dragon-handled ewer painted decoration, Victoria and Albert Museum.

is a strong link with delft. A relationship which might well be expected from the long established delft potting traditions at Vauxhall and Lambeth. Some of the decorative underglaze motifs, such as a central knobby twig with two 'bottle brush' plants growing outwards from its base were used again at Plymouth. Plymouth also copied some of the Chinese designs and a distinctive crescentic border. In polychrome, the hand of a painter of cocks and hens may be noted again on some Plymouth sauce boats.

Some of the copper plates used for printing on Vauxhall porcelain were used again at Bristol by Champion. This could be explained by a Vauxhall potter, John Britain, moving from Vauxhall, via Bovey Tracy, to Plymouth and then Bristol.



4 A teapot with polychrome transfer prints, Museum of London.

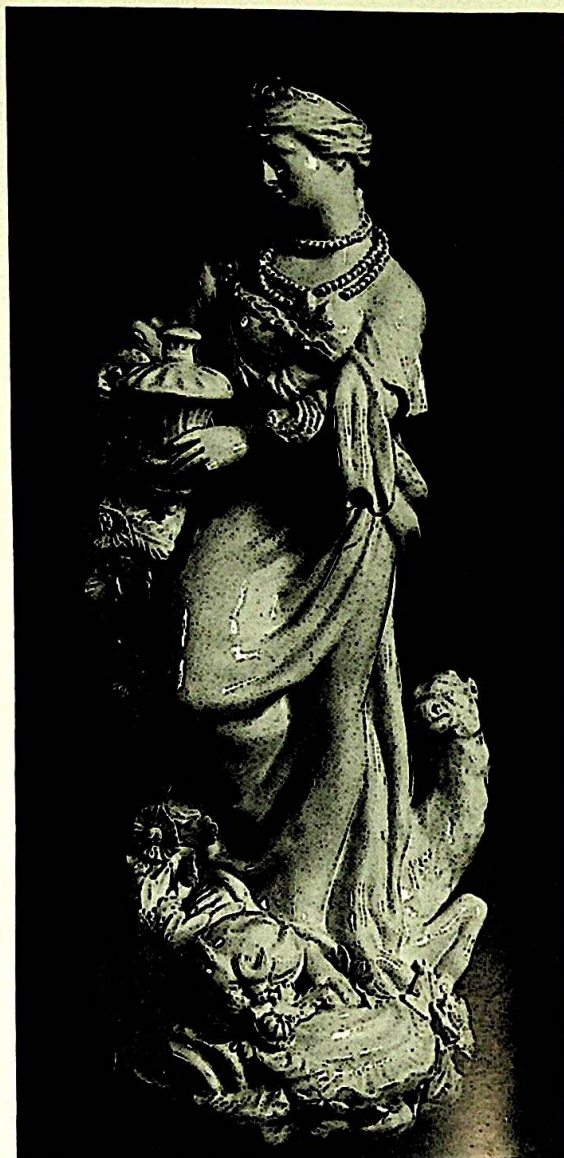
The Vauxhall polychrome floral prints are similar to the painted flower sprays, however, the latter are executed with more care, although using the same palette. These, in turn are not dissimilar to some of the London decoration on Chinese export porcelain.

The earliest dated piece is a cream jug inscribed in underglaze blue 1756. The last date to appear is 1764 and this occurs on pieces decorated in the Imari palette of underglaze blue and overglaze iron-red and gilding. The inscriptions are in gold and occur on tea wares and a large covered jug, the latter in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

There is a group of figures which were originally considered to be late Longton Hall. They have an atypical paste and glaze but, at the time seemed to fit into no other category. It is this group which is being reexamined with a Vauxhall attribution in mind. In the present state of our knowledge, none can be accepted as Vauxhall unless the analysis shows the presence of major amounts of magnesium, and preferably as diopside. All late Longton figures have now to be looked at again, especially those which were used as prototypes at Plymouth, like the rare *Minerva* figure. So far two figure groups, which were copied at Plymouth, have proved to be of a Vauxhall type paste. They are the *Infant Seasons*, all marked with an impressed K, and the *Continents* (plate 5).

Other possible Vauxhall figures, which have no Plymouth version are the large figures of *Hercules and the Arcadian Stag* (plate 6) and *Hercules and the Nemean Lion* (plate 7). They are certainly unlikely to be Longton, especially as Longton made a different, smaller version of the latter.

The newly identified Vauxhall figures are unlike Longton examples in that the soft clay has been smoothed with a finger on the base before firing and finger prints can be seen inside the base of some examples. It may be of interest that the large *River God* at Cambridge has been found to have a glassy paste, as does the *Duke of Brunswick* on horseback; so these sculptural figures must remain Longton Hall.

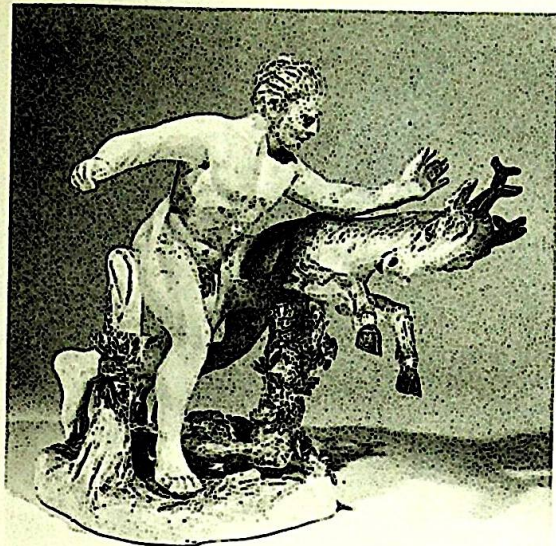


5 *Asia* from a set of *Continents*, Vauxhall, later copied by Plymouth.

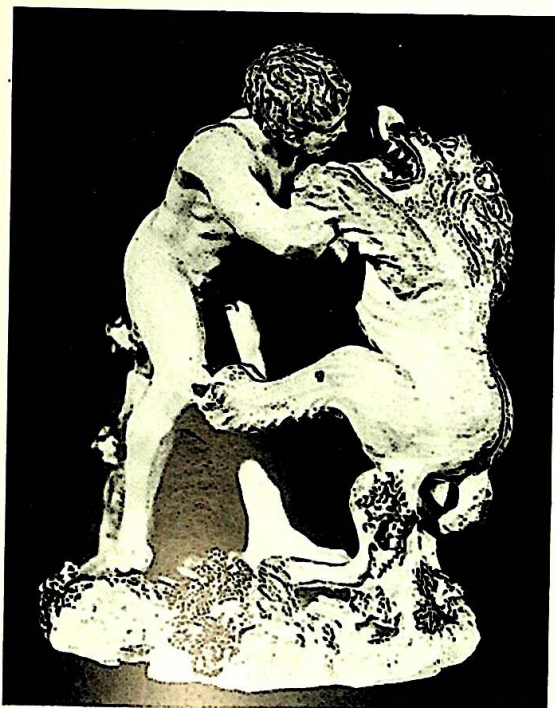
Vauxhall decoration on Longton Hall Figures

We do not know what range of activities Crisp carried on at his three houses in Bow Church Yard, in particular, how much porcelain decoration, such as printing, was undertaken there. However, the discovery of a colour trial piece on the Vauxhall site suggests that at least some onglaze decoration was carried out within the factory, even though John Bacon is stated to have been employed as a porcelain painter by Crisp at Bow Church Yard.³

The Longton Hall factory had their London warehouse at the corner of St. Paul's Church Yard which was only a few minutes walk away from Bow Church Yard. On 10 and 11 July 1760 Longton had its closing down London sale. This was two months before the Salisbury



6 *Hercules and the Arcadian Stag* possibly Vauxhall



7 *Hercules and the Nemean Lion* possibly Vauxhall, Katz Collection, Boston Museum of Fine Art

five day sale of "upwards of ninety thousand pieces". Both these sales were arranged by Samuel Clark, sworn exchange broker of Cheapside, London.

Longton Hall figures in the white at a bargain price would have been an ideal purchase for Crisp with his ability to transfer print and enamel; just at the time the Vauxhall output must have been drying up after Sanders' death and with the soap-rock licence sold.



8 Longton Hall figure of *Spring* decorated with Vauxhall polychrome transfers.

Vauxhall type over-painted, polychrome printing is found on a number of Longton figures, some of which are also known in the white. The group includes the large *Britannia* figures and their stands, the so-called *Farmer*, two candlestick groups emblematic of *Spring* and *Autumn* and a seated *Season*, *Spring* (plate 8). Besides these figures, there some stands for *Hercules and the Lion* and the pair of *Scops Owls* which are painted in the Vauxhall manner.

References

- 1 Trans. English Ceramic Circle, vol. 13, pt. 3, 1989
- 2 Idem
- 3 The Gentlemen's Magazine, 1799