

The Severn Street Factory

1788 – 1900

Robert Chamberlain was probably the first apprentice taken on by the founder of Worcester porcelain, Dr. John Wall in 1751. He started work at the original Warmstry factory that stood on the banks of the River Severn and rose to the position of decorating manager. Chamberlain was a talented decorator, but soon after Thomas Flight bought the factory in 1783 he decided to leave to set up his own porcelain decorating business. At first he rented a workshop in King Street, just around the corner from Severn Street and employed many friends and colleagues from Flights, including his sons, Robert and Humphrey.

By 1786 Chamberlain had started regular business, probably decorating wares for his former employers and by 1788 had moved up the road to what was to become the nucleus of the present factory site. According to R.W. Binns, by 1792 buildings to the value of £700 had been erected.

Chamberlain's original factory consisted of a traditional style cluster of small buildings around a courtyard on a wedge shaped piece of land. They were two or three storeys, very basic brick construction with quarry tiled floors, slate roofs and exterior staircases. At first the Chamberlains were only decorator's, buying white glazed wares from the Caughley factory in Shropshire and also decorating porcelain for Caughley to sell themselves. They probably only needed to build two or three small decorating kilns at Severn Street.

Employment of throwers and modellers and purchase of large quantities of coal by the autumn of 1791 suggests that Chamberlain had started to manufacture porcelain and had built a biscuit kiln on the Severn Street site. Robert and his son Humphrey were very ambitious and by the turn of the century the Chamberlain factory had gained an international reputation. Orders from the Prince of Orange in 1796 and Admiral Nelson in 1802 reinforced their position in the market.

In 1807, following his visit to the works, the Prince of Wales granted Chamberlain his Royal Warrant and as Prince Regent continued to purchase porcelain from the Severn Street factory.



The new factory was bound by an ancient road and a wall facing south that divided the factory from the new Worcester Birmingham canal that opened in 1815. The wall could be clearly seen from the Bath road and was painted with a large advert for Chamberlains porcelain works.

In 1840 Chamberlain bought out his rivals, Flight, Barr & Barr and moved many moulds and copper plates as well as workers from the Warmstry House factory

to the Severn Street site. At least two new buildings were added at Severn Street to accommodate the extra workers. The three storey potting rooms, mould room and counting house to the east and burnishing & potting rooms to the west. By 1842 there were five small kilns, one large bottle kiln and the engine room and slip house was on the opposite side of Severn Street because of lack of space.



Some of Chamberlains buildings before demolition in the early 1930s

While Chamberlain tried to improve conditions, times were very hard and we know that by 1852 the combined workforce only totalled around 40. The factory was outdated and run-down and desperately needed investment in new buildings and machinery. The products were tired and old fashioned, Chamberlain's soft paste porcelain was aimed at the aristocracy who no-longer had much money to spend.

During the 1850s under the ownership of the Irishman William Henry Kerr (with Chamberlain still as a minor shareholder) the factory saw some improvements in both the products and the efficiency of the factory. Richard William Binns was brought in from Dublin to help with the artistic side of the business, while Kerr set about modernising the factory. He was a man of big ideas, bringing in the Irish architect, Robert Williams Armstrong to design at least three important buildings.



In 1852 he built the New Showrooms as part of a master plan to turn the whole factory around to face North with the entrance from Severn Street.

In 1853 Armstrong also designed, as an extension to a much earlier building, the new Decorating Block, a four storey building, one room wide and served by a central internal staircase. As a building design it was revolutionary in the ceramics industry. Designed along similar lines to Florence Nightingale's hospitals, the building is one room deep to allow maximum ventilation of the workrooms.

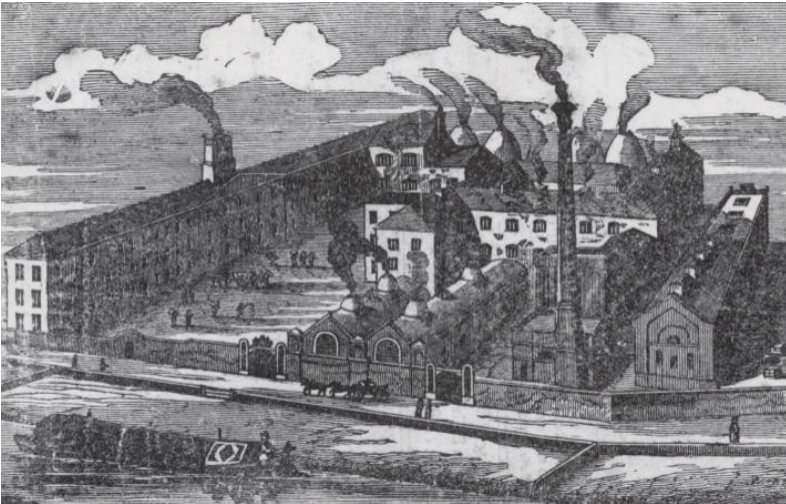
Large windows were designed to ventilate without creating drafts and to provide a maximum amount of daylight. Damp dark conditions had been a concern in the ceramics industry for some years and this building started to provide a much better working environment for the Worcester employees.



The first floor decorating department

Armstrong also designed the new Flint and Bone Mill that was erected in 1852. Kerr and Binns abandoned the old fashioned production of soft paste porcelain in favour of white bone china and creamy coloured parian, both types of porcelain, but with slightly different recipes. This expenditure was too much for Kerr and he decided to sell his part of the business in 1862.

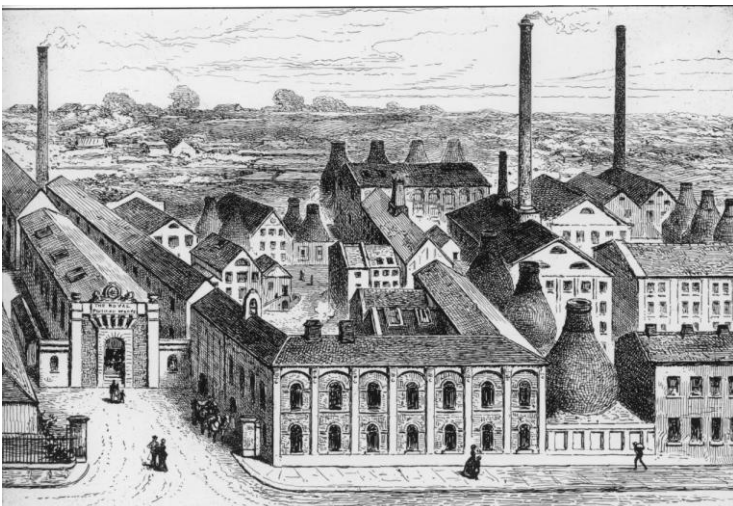
A new injection of cash was still needed to try to bring the aging works into better repair and in July 1862 a new company, The Worcester Royal Porcelain Company was formed.



At this point in its history, the Severn Street factory was concentrated to the north of an ancient road, with a few cottages and other insignificant buildings next to the canal. In the 1840s the boundary wall had been replaced with a wrought iron fence with two ornate gates into the works.

Richard Binns remained as Managing Director running the artistic part of the business in joint charge with Edward Phillips who looked after re-building the factory. The company fortunes improved very rapidly as they set about improving the works, however confidence was still low and expansion progressed very slowly. They tried to buy as much adjoining land as possible, including a wedge shaped area between the ancient road and the canal and the crucial piece of land bordering Severn Street. When this proved difficult, in 1865, Royal Worcester threatened to move and bought land elsewhere (The Worcester Pleasure Grounds, now the Arboretum) They even commissioned Scrivener & Sons to design a new garden factory. Finally the land owner John Stone reached agreement in February 1866 and Royal Worcester decided to stay put and expand the existing factory.

The architect, Walter Scrivener was employed to design a series of new buildings including three new biscuit ovens and hovels, warehouses, mould rooms, additional workrooms and stockrooms, however his most well known building has to be the new frontage to Severn Street with it's archway into the works.



Walter Scrivener's Severn Street façade was expanded in the 1890s, but remains much the same today.

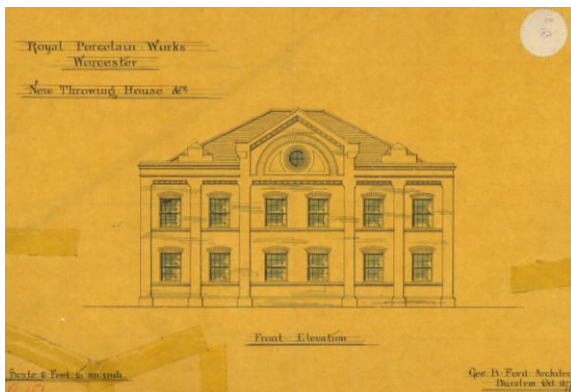
In the 1860s Phillips & Binns expanded the range of bodies produced – glazed and unglazed parian were used for ornamental vases and especially figures, bone china was favoured for dessert and tea wares and plaques and from

1868, and a more affordable high fired stoneware body known as 'Royal Worcester Vitreous' was used for large dinner services.

The new products were so successful that a crisis point was reached in 1873. The factory struggled to meet orders in all departments and works manager E.P.Evans reported to the board that they had to find a way to expand. The slip house was trying to mix 5 different materials in two tanks!. Royal Worcester Vitreous had proved so popular, together with an increase in demand for china, that the whole works was stretched to its limits. Evans suggested that Vitreous production should be separated from china in its own new buildings to make the factory more efficient.

In 1874 George B. Ford of Burslem was chosen as the architect for the new factory development and extensive alterations were planned. The main idea appears to have been to organise the factory buildings in a fan shape with the products moving through the various departments from left to right, aiming to reduce the distance the porcelain was moved between processes. For first time it was also proposed to erect significant buildings on a large area of land to the south of the road, bordering the canal.

Due to the enormous cost of the redevelopment and the need to minimise disruption to production, the re-building went ahead in a very piecemeal fashion. The new throwing house was the first to be completed in 1878, setting a new high standard for the factory. Although it was basic painted brick with tile and wooden floors there was plenty of space, and daylight, with good ventilation.



The New Throwing House built in 1878

The 1870s improvements were not just about construction. The first internal telephone system was installed in 1874, piped steam heating was also introduced to the factory – not so much for the employees, but for the porcelain. In the ceramics industry sharp changes in temperature were a problem, causing rapid drying of green wares or rapid cooling and cracking of costly pots emerging from a kiln. Mould chambers were

traditionally situated on the top floor of buildings as a source of insulation against temperature fluctuation, but heating made life better for everyone.



Fire was also a constant concern – roofs of kiln sheds were increasingly made of corrugated galvanised iron. An incident at Severn Street on 26th November 1879 when one of the new bottle ovens caught fire, inspired the installation of extra water hydrants, 'Fireproof' doors and the company even bought a small fire engine.

The 1870s alterations included new biscuit bottle ovens and sheds, new underground slip house tanks, bone burning sheds, an extension to the decorating block and alterations to the saggar house, but the

most important addition was the first museum building that opened to the public in 1879. A grand first floor gallery was built to proudly display past productions to the ever inquisitive public who swarmed to Worcester in their thousands, keen to learn about technology and industry. The building stood to the south of the ancient road and it was R.W.Binns proudest day when he showed Albert & Alexandra, Prince and Princess of Wales around his museum in December 1884. A carriage awaited the Royal couple outside the museum doors and they then proceeded along the road to Sidbury, which was from then on known as Prince's Drive.



Behind the museum three large bottle ovens, with their adjacent placing rooms were built in the 1870s and on the opposite side of Prince's Drive a series of buildings housing the final parts of the production process, dipping rooms (for glazing), small decorating kilns, a finishing house and three further bottle kilns were erected, expanding an earlier block.

Prince's Drive seen from the back gates of the factory in Mill Street c.1880.

In the 1880s still more additions to the factory were designed by architect, Thomas Sutton. The new printers & engravers building, the three storey Parian block and extensions to the slip houses, modellers and mould makers rooms and a new white ware warehouse. A new packing house and straw store, separate to all other buildings, was also built to comply with new insurance regulations.

Binns claimed that between 1852 and 1880 the factory had expanded from 80 employees to over 800, but in the 1890s the tide started to turn and the introduction of new import taxes into the USA started to affect Royal Worcester's fortunes. The purchase of the Grainger factory, which was in a very poor state of repair, in 1889, also put a huge strain on the Royal Worcester finances.

More affordable ranges of decorative wares carried the company through the difficult years of the 1890s, but the factory had to lay off some of the work force and re-examine the entire business and its products. The twentieth century is another story, the introduction of electricity, tunnel kilns, laboratory ware, war work, post-war reconstruction, hard porcelain, limited editions and the expansion of the 1960s and 70s.

The Severn Street factory has many stories to tell. For over one hundred years many of the Victorian buildings have been shrouded by later additions and even the workforce, engaged in daily production for much of their lives, will not have had the opportunity to really appreciate them as they were designed.



The original museum used as a slip casting workshop in 2006

We are now looking forward to a new chapter in the fascinating history of the Severn Street site. As a result of the current redevelopment, for the first time, it will be possible to walk along Prince's Drive, past the throwing house, Binns museum and many other Victorian buildings en route to Mill Street. The old factory buildings will be refurbished and the whole site will be given a new lease of life for future generations.

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