



NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH POTTERY

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In my mind there are four main areas of antique collecting: furniture, pictures, silver and jewellery, and ceramics. All of these are subject to strengths and weaknesses in the overall market and each has its own specialist areas within which values fluctuate, but a visit to any of the major fairs such as those held at the NEC or Olympia

will amply demonstrate how important ceramics are to the overall health of the antiques trade. The number of stands dealing in pottery and porcelain is quite staggering.

So how do all these dealers fare in difficult times such as the last year or two? The truth is that many struggle, some fail, some just retire gracefully, but some seem to go from strength to strength. It is a funny old game but I have always believed that those who do best are those who work the hardest. And in difficult times like these, the hard workers stand out from the crowd.

Knowledgeable collectors can do remarkably well when times are tough. Dealers are keen to sell and can be reluctant to buy. Many of them have more than adequate general stock and are only searching for exceptional or unusual pieces. This means it can be a buyer's market, and standard but collectable items are sometimes overlooked. I could cite any number of instances of good objects selling cheaply at auction purely because the dealers do not need more stock.

In my own area of British pottery from the 19th century, we have seen a fall in auction prices over the past twelve months or more and this should eventually lead to a corresponding fall in retail prices. It is hard to tell whether the worst is over but prices do seem to be stabilizing again, albeit at a significantly lower level.

Two typical pearlware examples are a Bristol Pottery spirit barrel (figure 4) and an attractive cow creamer (figure 2). The spirit barrel, decorated in coloured enamels in a style associated with William Fildes, would happily have fetched in excess of £300 two or three years ago, possibly significantly more. It sold in June 2004 for £219. Cow creamers have always been popular and examples like the one illustrated would often reach four figures. This one sold in October 2004 for £713. Both these results indicate a significant fall in value.

Staffordshire figures have traditionally had a strong following but have also seen a shift in values. Portrait figures are now unloved whereas animals are still popular. The strength of the decorators' market seems to be saving the animals, which have a wider appeal, whereas the figures seem to have been cast to the wolves! This is amply demonstrated by an equestrian portrait of Dick Turpin

Above. Figure 1. A Staffordshire portrait figure of Dick Turpin, mid-19th century, height 14 1/4 in., unsold at £150-£200.



Figure 2. A pearlware cow creamer, probably Yorkshire, first quarter of the 19th century, length 7in., £713.



Right. Figure 3. A Staffordshire fox-hunting group, mid-19th century, length 10 1/4 in., £322.

(figure 1) and a mid-19th century fox-hunting group (figure 3). Dick Turpin would normally have sold quite happily for at least £200 and often more, whereas this example failed to sell in October with a realistic estimate of £150. Not a single bid was forthcoming. On the other hand, the fox-hunting group sold above top estimate for £322. It was a nice figure, in good condition, and more detailed than similar examples recorded in the literature. A good figure like this could still be an investment for the future. At the time of writing the Royal Assent had just been given to the bill to ban hunting with dogs, and there are many in the antiques trade who wonder how this will affect antiques with a hunting theme. We will have to wait and see!

Several types of pottery have always been a niche market and relief-moulded jugs are a case in point. They are an acquired taste and not sufficiently colourful to attract the wider decorative market. Despite the fascination behind many of the designs, prices have remained fairly stable for nearly two decades and nowadays they are difficult to sell. Buyers are very selective when collections do appear. The set of four Camel

pattern jugs by Samuel Alcock & Co (figure 5) did sell but the price of £161 seems unbelievably good value. The truth is that the demand is just not there for these jugs right now, and I see little prospect of any improvement.

At first sight the next jug (figure 7) appears to fall into the same category, but it is an earlier caneware jug decorated with sprigged designs rather than being

relief-moulded. Its significance lies in the subject matter, including sprigs of Nelson and HMS *Victory*. It would have been made shortly after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and as we are now in the bi-centenary year such pieces are selling well. It made £575 in October, a price which demonstrates how special interests can buck the trend. Commemoratives are suffering along with many other collecting fields through a dearth of new collectors. There is a general trend towards less cluttered lives, and youngsters are attracted to more modern and colourful things. Along with relief-moulded jugs, this piece is not impressive to look at and its appeal is to established collectors rather than decorators.

The decorators' market is significant and any slowdown here is less noticeable. There are still buyers for attractive services, typically the brightly coloured ironstone wares from Mason, Spode, Ridgway and other makers. The example shown here (figure 6) is not actually stone china but good quality earthenware described as 'Dresden Opaque China'. The part dinner service, of which only some of the main pieces are shown, sold for £2,013 in October. With several impressive pieces and a



Figure 4. A Bristol pearlware spirit barrel decorated in the manner of William Fifeild, height 4 1/2 in., £219.



Figure 5. A set of four relief-moulded Camel pattern jugs by Samuel Alcock & Co, c.1855, heights between 7in. and 11in., £161.

good selection of plates to adorn a dresser, its decorative merits are fairly obvious. The buyers are also still there.

My own specialist field of blue and

white printed pottery provides the final two examples of the highs and lows. The fine Swansea puzzle jug (figure 8) sold for an amazing £3,220

in October while the Ridgway dinner plate (figure 9) could only stutter to £55 in the same sale. The puzzle jug is a classic case of a desirable rarity opening wallets. I felt that the estimate of £400-£600, while on the low side, was quite defensible taking account of some restoration and the current market, but fortunately for the vendor several bidders disagreed, with at least three prepared to better £2,000.

On the other hand, the dinner plate depicting 'Christ Church, Oxford' from John & William Ridgway's dinner service showing various Oxford and Cambridge colleges is a standard item which turns up quite regularly. Three examples sold last year for £109 in February, £173 in June, and £55 in October, with a fourth failing to sell on eBay with a starting price of only £39.99 in November. Obviously we should not read too much into individual results like these, but two points do stand out clearly – the market is erratic (there will always be freak results like the £173), and there has been a clear downward trend.

I am not convinced that the general fall in values reflected above is a bad thing for anyone. Yes, the current



Figure 6. Representative pieces from a 'Dresden Opaque China' part dinner service, c.1820-30, £2,013.



Figure 7. A Nelson commemorative caneware jug, c.1805-10, height 7in., £575.



Figure 8. A Swansea blue-printed puzzle jug with the Precarious Chinaman pattern, c.1800-15, height 6¼in., £3,220.

downturn is causing problems for the trade generally, both dealers and auctioneers, but lower prices just might encourage the new collectors who we all desperately need. I don't claim to have a crystal ball telling me if, or when, the market will pick up, but in my opinion the bargains available now will not last. If you want to start a collection, now is the time to do it. If you are prepared to trawl the auctions you should be able to find good quality pieces at very affordable prices. Any real rarities will probably cost you two arms and three legs, but there are lots of bargains to be had. Search for them!

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Figure 9. A dinner plate by John & William Ridgway with a view of Christ Church, Oxford, c.1820-30, diameter 9¼in., £55.