



POOR MAN'S PICTURES

Part 1: Scripture Titles and other Religious Subjects

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I have always been attracted to items that can be described as 'folk art' and as a collector of British pottery there are plenty of pieces to covet. Amongst my favourites are lustre wall plaques, made in large quantities in the 19th century, mostly in the north east of England, particularly at Sunderland or Newcastle. They were cheap and plentiful in their day, and are often known as 'poor man's pictures', reflecting their suitability for adorning walls in relatively humble dwellings.

Wall plaques were made in the 18th and early 19th century in various pottery bodies, but it was the separate

developments of transfer printing and lustre decoration which were to spur the makers into volume production. The invention of splashed pink lustre is now almost always associated with the potteries of Sunderland but it was also adopted at Newcastle and occasionally elsewhere. The technique produced a decorative effect which proved particularly suitable for mugs, jugs and other similar pots, but was

rarely used for flatwares such as plates or dishes. It also worked particularly well on wall plaques.

Plaques are easy and cheap to produce, requiring relatively simple tools or moulds to make the shape, and then straightforward transfer-printing for the central decoration, the application of lustre for decorative borders, and often fairly crude application of coloured enamels for

Above. Figure 1. An assortment of 19th century wall plaques with religious subjects, mostly decorated with pink lustre and from either Sunderland, Newcastle or Stockton. The exception is the black-bordered rectangular plaque with a portrait of Dr. Adam Clarke, which is possibly from Staffordshire.



Figure 2. A plaque of the most common picture frame shape with inscription 'Prepare to Meet Thy God', made at Sunderland by Dixon, Phillips & Co, width 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ in., impressed maker's name around an anchor.



Figure 3. A small circular plaque, also inscribed 'Prepare to Meet Thy God', made at Newcastle by Cornfoot, Colville & Co of the Low Lights Pottery, diameter 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., impressed initials 'C.C. & Co.'.

highlights. The central prints cover a wide variety of subjects including ships and sailors, romantic views, sporting scenes, pseudo coats-of-arms (Foresters, Mariners, Farmers, etc), royalty and other commemoratives, the Crimean War, literature, temperance, flowers, an early railway train, the polka, the inevitable iron bridge at Sunderland, and a large number with religious overtones. While antiques with a religious flavour are

generally considered uncommercial, this is not true of these lustre plaques. Admittedly, the better non-religious subjects tend to be more highly prized, but there is still a good market for the so-called 'scripture titles'.

The simplest examples are printed with pithy phrases, usually within a floral wreath, often surmounted by a trumpeting angel accompanied frequently with a quote from Psalm 31, Verse 1, which reads 'In thee, O

Lord, do I put my trust: let me never be confounded.' The caution 'Prepare to Meet Thy God' is the most frequently encountered of this type although the original source, the Book of Amos, Chapter 4, Verse 12, is not always credited on the plaques or is given incorrectly as Chapter 6 (Roman V and I reversed in error). Two marked examples are shown here, the first by Dixon, Phillips & Co of the Garrison Pottery at



Figure 4. Another plaque with a slightly different picture frame shape, this example inscribed 'Praise Ye the Lord', by Samuel Moore & Co of Sunderland, width 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., impressed mark 'MOORE & Co'.



Figure 5. Again a different rectangular picture frame shape, this high quality example by an unknown maker inscribed 'Thou God, See'st Me', width 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ in., unmarked.



Figure 6. A much simpler rectangular frame, also inscribed 'Thou God, See'st Me', width 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ in., unmarked.



Figure 7. A much more ornate picture frame shape, this example inscribed 'Rejoice in the Lord', width 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ in., unmarked.

Sunderland (figure 2) and the second by Cornfoot, Colville & Co of the Low Lights Pottery at Newcastle (figure 3).

Four more examples of these simple phrases are illustrated here, one with 'Praise Ye The Lord' by Samuel Moore & Co of the Wear Pottery at Sunderland (figure 4), two by unknown makers with 'Thou God, See'st Me' (figures 5 and 6), and another with 'Rejoice in the Lord' from Psalm 33, Verse 1 (figure 7) of a type which has been linked with John Carr of the North Shields Pottery although I have not seen any marked examples. Other similar short phrases which are sometimes found include 'Seek Ye the Lord' and 'God is Love'.

Two longer inscriptions are particularly common. The main example shown here has the text, 'But man dieth and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the Ghost and where is he' from the Book of Job, Chapter 14, Verse 10 (figure 8). Several features of this particular plaque suggest an attribution to Maling of Newcastle but the inscription was very widely used. An interesting detail to note is that on this plaque it begins correctly 'But Man

Dieth...' whereas it is much more common to find 'For Man Dieth...' (see, for example, a marked Dixon plaque in figure 1, lower left). The punctuation and layout of the wording varies. The other longer inscription which is commonly seen reads, 'Behold God will not cast away a perfect man, neither will He help the evil doers', again from the Book of Job, in this case Chapter 8, Verse 20 (one example, also by Dixon, can be seen in figure 1, bottom row, second from right). Both the plaques

in figure 1 are marked, but unmarked examples were not necessarily made by the Dixon firms.

The use of texts from the Bible accounts for the majority of these 'scripture titles' but some are decorated with short poems or verses. The example shown here (figure 9) bears the rather strange poem:

'Ready the spirit of His love,
Just now the stony to remove:
To' apply and witness with the blood,
And wash, and seal the sons of God'

I have not, as yet, encountered this verse on any other plaque although it is recorded on a jug, attributed to the Garrison Pottery by John Baker in the excellent museum book *Sunderland Pottery*. Note the rogue hanging apostrophe near the start of the third line. This is not the only occurrence of strange punctuation: the phrase 'Thou God, See'st Me' which appears on the plaques in figures 5 and 6 has been noted without the comma, with the apostrophe moved to 'Thou God, Sees't Me', and even as 'Thou God Seest Mee'. It seems that grammar was not necessarily a strong point amongst 19th century potters!

The most common of the religious poems was issued by

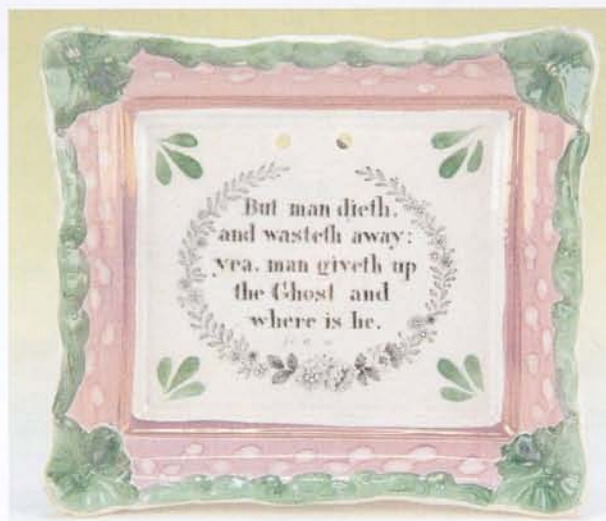


Figure 8. A plaque with less common green edging, typical of the Maling firm of Newcastle, this one with a longer text beginning 'But Man Dieth, and Wasteth Away ...', width 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ in., unmarked.



Left. Figure 9. A small circular plaque with an unusual and lengthy verse beginning 'Ready the Spirit of His Love ...', diameter 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., unmarked.



Right. Figure 10. A plaque of the most common shape but with an unusual central print depicting 'Wisdom and Virtue conducting Youth in the paths of Religion', width 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., unmarked.

the Dixon firm and reads:

'The loss of gold is great
The loss of health is more
But losing Christ is such a loss
As no man can restore'

Slight variants in the wording are known, and again the same verse can be found on other items, particularly mugs and jugs, listed by Baker as made by the Dixon firms but also by Samuel Moore & Co and the Scotts of the Southwick Pottery.

My own favourites are a small series decorated with circular prints emblematic of various virtues. The example shown here (figure 10) depicts 'Wisdom and Virtue conducting Youth in the paths of Religion' but I have come across two others: 'Justice crowning Fidelity whilst Victory is confirming the act' and 'Faith teaching Innocence and Resignation the precepts of Christianity'. The plaques themselves are of the most common picture frame shape but with purely pink lustre borders with no associated copper lustre edging. I have not yet seen or heard of a marked example. I suspect that the central prints were originally engraved for use on children's plates, but I must confess that no such piece appears in Noel Riley's comprehensive book *Gifts for Good Children*. I would be fascinated to hear from any reader who knows of examples of the prints on items other than plaques, or indeed if further designs from the same

series exist.

Perhaps the most collectable of all the religious plaques are those depicting John Wesley or his fellow preacher Adam Clarke. These are not uncommon and a wide range of shapes can be found. Two examples of each are shown here (figures 11 to 14). There are two different portraits of Wesley, one a side view as on both examples here, the other a three-quarter view. Both are accompanied by the text 'The best of all God is with us' together with a further inscription referring to the establishment of the Wesleyan Methodist Society in 1739. The similar portraits of Clarke have a different text 'He that believeth shall be saved' and the inscription describes him simply as a Wesleyan Minister. Serious collectors might find Roger Lee's small booklet titled *Wesleyana and Methodist Pottery* a useful source of information.



Figure 11. A simple rectangular plaque with a relatively common portrait of John Wesley, width 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., unmarked.

Although most of the plaques shown here are decorated with pink lustre, usually splashed and sometimes in combination with copper lustre edging, many of them can also be found with orange lustre. These are of later manufacture, and there is a tendency to attribute them all to Ball's Deptford Pottery at Sunderland. The Balls certainly purchased many moulds and copper plates from various other factories when they closed, which explains why so many of the texts are so common. They were probably the greatest producers of orange lustre examples but would not have had a total monopoly in production.

As can be seen from the variety of plaques shown here, many different shapes exist although they fall mostly into two types, rectangular and circular. There are, however, many different variants which are never marked, making attribution fraught with difficulty.

The most common shape of all is an ornate rectangular picture frame (figures 2, 10 and 14) which is associated mainly with the Garrison Pottery firms of Dixon & Co or Dixon, Phillips & Co. Marked examples are not uncommon, but remember that the same shape was used by many other makers and marked examples are known from Samuel Moore & Co of the Wear Pottery and the various Scott partnerships at the Southwick Pottery. Another, somewhat similar shape has

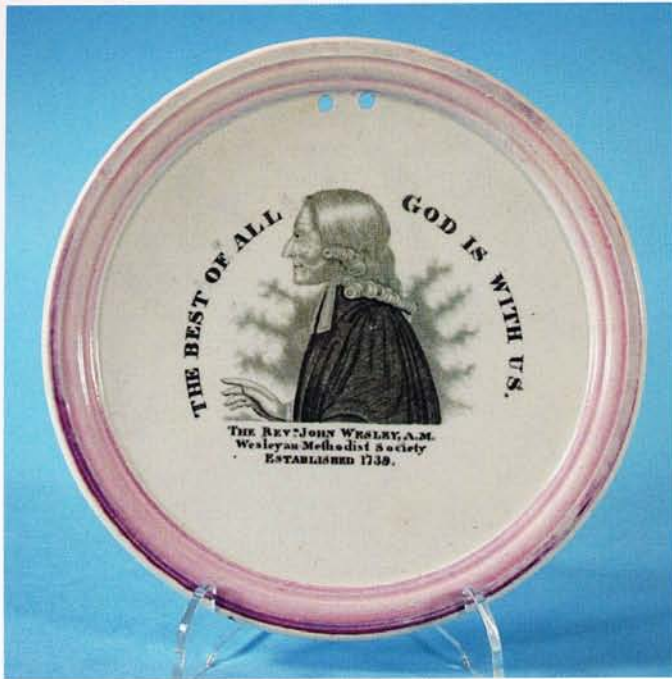


Figure 12. A small circular plaque with the same portrait of John Wesley as figure 11, diameter 6⁵/₁₆in., unmarked. (Special Auction Services)

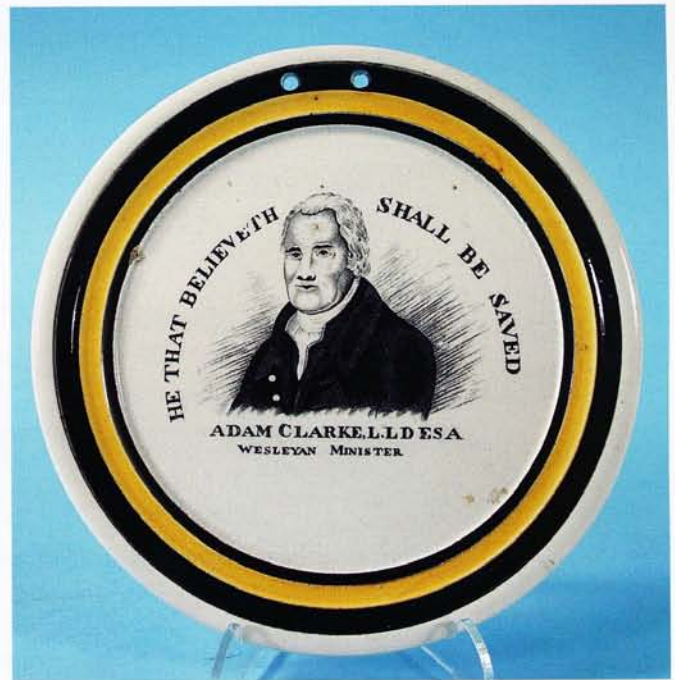


Figure 13. Another circular plaque, this one framed in yellow and black with a portrait of Adam Clarke, diameter 7¹/₁₆in., unmarked. (Special Auction Services)

different border moulding and less pointed, rather shell-like, corners (figures 4 and 8). When marked, examples are usually by Samuel Moore & Co but other potters also adopted the shape. Moore examples tend to be larger than the others; those by Maling of Newcastle are slightly smaller and often exhibit coloured edges or corners (figure 8). Four other rectangular types are included here (figures 5, 6, 7 and 11) with two more in the main illustration (figure 1) and I have never seen any of these with a maker's mark.

The circular plaques also vary considerably, and since some, at least, may have been turned by hand on a wheel, the shapes appear less consistent. The two with yellow and black rims (figure 1, second from left in the front row, and figure 13) are probably relatively early products by Dixon & Co. I have seen one marked example and have been kicking myself ever since for not buying it! The small plaque by Cornfoot, Colville & Co (figure 3) is also relatively distinctive and marked examples with various prints are not uncommon. Two others in the main illustration can be

attributed fairly safely. The example with 'Prepare to Meet Thy God' (top left) has an impressed mark for the Stockton Pottery of Thomas Ainsworth, and 'Seek Ye the Lord' (bottom right) has green enamelling which is very typical of the Maling firm at Newcastle. The three remaining circular plaques are unattributed (figure 1, front row centre, figure 9 and figure 12).

I have kept notes over the years, and

without serious research have assembled records of nearly 200 different lustre wall plaques of which nearly half are religious, and that does not include the many slight variants which can easily be found. They are fascinating survivals of an earlier age and are hugely decorative en masse. I commend them to you, and would always be delighted to hear from fellow collectors or anyone who might be able to add any snippets to our knowledge.



Figure 14. A typical Dixon, Phillips & Co plaque, again with the portrait of Adam Clarke, width 8¹/₁₆in., impressed mark. (Special Auction Services)

The second part of this article, covering non-religious plaques, will appear in a future issue of *Antique Collecting*.

Unless otherwise stated the plaques illustrated are from the author's collection, with photographs kindly supplied by the auctioneers Dreweatt Neate of Newbury. We are also indebted to Special Auction Services of Midgham, near Reading, for figures 12-14.

Dick Henrywood is the consultant responsible for toys, collectors' items and blue-printed pottery at the auctioneers Dreweatt Neate of Newbury.

