

Luster Wall Plaques

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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 I’ve found plenty of pieces to covet. Amongst my favorites are luster wall plaques, made in large quantities in the nineteenth century, mostly in the

northeast 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.



A plaque of the most common picture frame shape with inscription “Prepare to Meet Thy God”, made at Sunderland by Dixon, Phillips & Co., impressed mark.



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

Plaques and their makers

Wall plaques were made in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in various pottery bodies, but it was the separate developments of transfer printing and luster decoration that made volume production possible. The invention of splashed pink luster 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 molds to make the shape, and then straightforward transfer-printing for the central decoration, that was then enhanced by the application of luster for decorative borders, with colored enamels for highlights. The central prints cover a wide variety of subjects including ships and sailors, romantic views, sporting scenes, pseudo coats-of-arms, royalty and other commemoratives, the Crimean war, literature,



A simple rectangular plaque with a relatively common portrait of John Wesley, unmarked.



A circular plaque framed in yellow and black with a portrait of Adam Clarke, unmarked. Courtesy Special Auction Services, Midgham, near Reading, England.



Possibly the most common of all the maritime subjects, this plaque with its patriotic verse was made by Dixon & Co. at Sunderland, impressed mark. The verse reads, "May Peace and Plenty In our Nation Smile, Trade with Commerce, Bless the British Isle."



An orange bordered plaque depicting the man of war "Duke of Wellington - 131 Guns", possibly made at Ball's Deptford Pottery, unmarked.

temperance, flowers, an early railway train, the polka, the inevitable iron bridge at Sunderland, and a large number with religious overtones.

Scripture titles

While antiques with a religious flavor are generally considered uncommercial, this is not true of these luster 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 are printed with pithy phrases, usually within a floral wreath, often surmounted by a trumpeting angel and the quote "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, shown here on a plaque by Dixon, Phillips & Co. of the Garrison Pottery at Sunderland.

Collectors will also find mottoes such as "Praise Ye The Lord" and "Rejoice in the Lord." Another very common phrase is "Thou God, See'st Me" (with various punctuation variations - grammar was not necessarily a strong point among nineteenth-century potters!), and others found include "Seek Ye the Lord", "God is Love" and, somewhat rarely, "Forgive and Ye shall be forgiven".

Two longer inscriptions are particularly common, one shown here with the text "But man dieth and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the Ghost and where is he." Again there are slight variations on the wording, with some starting "For man dieth ...". The other longer inscription reads "Behold God will not cast away a perfect man, neither will He help the evil doers". Some of these exhortations can be rather grim!

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 most common of which 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

The most collectible of all the religious plaques depict either John Wesley or his fellow preacher Adam Clarke. These are not uncommon and a wide range of shapes can be found. The Wesley portraits are usually accompanied by the text "The best of all God is with us" whereas Clarke normally has the quote "He that believeth shall be saved." The second of these is not strictly a luster plaque, with yellow and black bands replacing the usual pink luster, but this type of decoration is equally collectable.

Maritime subjects

Religious subjects account for around half of the designs that have been recorded, although they seem to have been made in greater quantities so are much more commonly found than the non-religious subjects, by far the largest proportion of which show maritime themes. The most common depicts an untitled sailing ship together with a short verse:

May Peace & plenty on our nation smile
And trade with commerce bless the British Isle

The example shown was made by Dixon & Co. of the Garrison Pottery, but the print was also used by other potters. Other unnamed ship designs are found, one of which is titled "A Frigate in Full Sail", but there is a stronger market amongst collectors for portraits of named ships. The most common of these is probably the "Northumberland 74" (by Dixon again), closely followed by "The Duke of Wellington - 131 Guns", shown here on a later plaque with orange luster border, although earlier pink examples are quite common.

Other ships to be found include "The Gauntlet Clipper Ship", "The Great Eastern Steam Ship" (launched in 1857), "La Bretagne - 140 Guns", the "Truelove from Hull", "The Unfortunate London" (so titled to record the ship's demise in the Bay of Biscay in 1866), "The Star of Tasmania", the "Union", and the "Gudrun". There is also an untitled print of the General Steam Navigation Company's ship "Trident" which has the ship's name on one of the masthead flags. Two other plaques depict the "Flying

Cloud of Boston" and the "Agamemnon", but be warned that these are reproductions and not nineteenth-century originals.

Other maritime subjects include the Eddystone lighthouse, the sailor's farewell and sailor's return, and various versions of the "Mariner's Compass". Verses with a nautical flavor were also popular.

Armorial and commemoratives

Another interesting group of designs show pseudo-armorials, one of which is "The Mariner's Arms" and another "The Farmer's Arms". The example shown here has the "Ancient Order of Foresters" on a typical plaque by Dixon, Phillips & Co. The order was founded in 1834 from the earlier Royal Foresters and is a fraternal organization of friendly society type, rather similar to the Freemasons. Masonic plaques are also not uncommon.

Although relatively few in number, some of the most interesting designs are commemorative in nature. One popular subject was Richard Cobden, a Member of Parliament who came to prominence through his fight to repeal the Corn Laws, finally achieved in 1846. Other plaques show Queen Caroline, King William IV and Queen Adelaide, Sir Robert Peel, and George Kinloch, an exiled Scottish radical reformer elected to parliament for Dundee in 1832.

The period of the Crimean War (1854-56) produced various commemorative plaques, at least three of which feature the patriotic inscription "May They Ever be United". The example shown here is unattributed but other designs were produced by Dixon & Co. and Samuel Moore & Co.

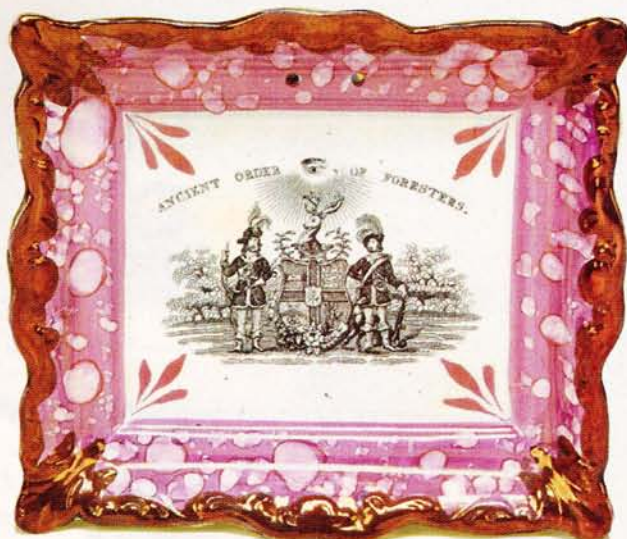
Miscellaneous designs

The Moore firm produced a good selection of plaques which, apart from those already mentioned, include a design titled "Waverley" (from the Walter Scott novel), a similar Chantry pattern, two different hunting scenes titled "Sporting", at least one general romantic scene, and, perhaps most significantly, a set of eight temperance designs derived from engravings by the caricaturist George Cruickshank which he produced in 1847 in aid of the temperance movement. They depict the decline and fall of a family caused by the demon drink, leaving the father "a hopeless maniac"!

The Dixon firm also produced a wide range of more general designs, represented here by one of a pair of romantic landscapes, and at least one view of the famous iron bridge over the River Wear at Sunderland. Several views of the famous bridge are known on plaques, but it is strange that other views appear to be so rare, the only other significant example of which I am aware reproduces a print of All Saints Church at Newcastle (just possibly made by Thomas Fell).

Several other designs are worthy of mention, including an early railway train with the locomotive named "Express", a couple dancing "La Polka" (by an unidentified maker with initials B & Co.), a cock-fighting scene titled "Set Too" [sic], a politically incorrect print of a "Negro Family", and a genre scene titled "Old Jack the Donkey and his Master Joe". Just to show that the finer arts were not entirely neglected, there was an early plaque with a print depicting a fair lady harpist emblematic of "Music". This black-bordered plaque is one of several similar designs, others including the boxer Jack Langan, portraits of both John Wesley and Adam Clarke, and figures representing "Faith" and "Hope" (and presumably also "Charity"). They are markedly different from examples known to be potted in the northeast, and I suspect they are from Staffordshire.

A group of five more miscellaneous subjects concludes this survey. These are a much later rectangular plaque depicting "General Lord Kitchener"; a scene depicting panning for gold titled "California"; another rectangular plaque with a "Success to the Farmer" verse; a circular plaque which is hand-painted with a portrait of the boxer



A typical Garrison Pottery plaque made by Dixon, Phillips & Co. with a pseudo-armorial design for the "Ancient Order of Foresters", impressed mark.



A typical Sunderland plaque, "May They Ever Be United", dating from the Crimean War with sailors holding British and French flags, unmarked. Courtesy Dreweatt Neate Auctions, Newbury, England.



Number five from a series of eight temperance designs titled "The Bottle" made by Samuel Moore & Co. at Sunderland, printed mark.



Five assorted non-religious wall plaques depicting "General Lord Kitchener", a scene of panning for gold titled "California" by Samuel Moore & Co., a "Success to the Farmer" verse, the boxer Tom Spring, and a children's subject titled "Our Early Days - The Experimental Philosopher"; various dates between 1820 and 1900. The Farmer verse reads, "Success to the Farmer and prosper his plough, Rewarding his ardent toil all the year through, Seed time and harvest he ever shall get, He's trusted all to providence and so may he yet."

Tom Spring; and another plaque with a children's scene titled "The Experimental Philosopher." The last of these is part of a small series generally titled "Our Early Days", with central prints which are more commonly found on children's plates of the Victorian period. The Kitchener portrait is also one of a series, this time of Boer War leaders, most of which are found in green-bordered frames with gilt flecking. Others probably made by the same firm include a selection of Victorian and Edwardian royal commemoratives, and a few more general scenes such as a group of horses. The quality is none too high and except where the subject matter dictates otherwise, they do not, as yet, command very high prices.

Plaque shapes and colors

It can be seen that the most common shape is an ornate rectangular picture frame, most often marked by Dixon & Co. or Dixon, Phillips & Co. of the Garrison Pottery at Sunderland seen around the motto "Prepare to Meet Thy God.". However, the same shape was used by many other makers ("May They Ever be United.") and I have seen marked examples by Samuel Moore & Co., John Carr & Sons, the Middlesbrough Pottery, Scott of Southwick, and others. Samuel Moore tended to use a similar shape but it is slightly larger and has shell-like corners ("The Bottle"), but again this was copied by other potters, albeit usually smaller in size. There is a range of other rectangular shapes although relatively few are marked.

Circular plaques are less common, but again marked examples can be found by Dixon, Moore, and several smaller factories such as Cornfoot, Colville & Co., Thomas Ainsworth of Stockton, and the Albion Pottery. The range is wide and attributions are fraught with difficulty.

Although most of the plaques shown here are decorated with pink luster, usually splashed and sometimes in combination with copper luster edging, examples can also be found with orange luster (The Duke of Wellington - 131 Guns). These are usually of later manufacture, and there is a tendency to attribute them all to Ball's Deptford Pottery at Sunderland. The Balls certainly purchased many molds and copper plates from various other factories when they closed, which explains why many of the designs are so common. They were probably the greatest producers of orange luster examples but would not have had a total monopoly in production.

I have kept notes of these plaques over the years, and without serious research have assembled records of over 200 different designs, 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. ■

All photos by the author unless otherwise noted. The author wishes to thank the auctioneers Dreweatt Neate of Newbury and Special Auction Services of Midgham for images.