

Two 'A' Marked Porcelain Saucers Enter the Ashmolean

JVG Mallet

'Always listen to that man: his opinions may be wrong, but they're his own.' That advice was given me around 1960 by AJB Kiddell of Sotheby's concerning Billy Winkworth, a man with a remarkable eye for the visual arts. It was from Billy that I first heard of the rare 18C 'A' marked porcelains, a category of which many examples are marked with the letter 'A', either incised before firing or painted in underglaze blue. Ever since 1937 this ware has aroused controversy among lovers of English porcelain and it continues to do so today.



1. 'A' marked lion knob teapot (Victoria & Albert Museum)

'A' marked porcelain was first discussed at a meeting of the English Ceramic Circle in 1937¹, when both English and Italian attributions were inconclusively considered and the porcelain was, perhaps without full conviction, deemed soft-paste. Billy Winkworth remained convinced the ware was English because a recumbent lion finial on the lids of its hexagonal teapots was in his view of Staffordshire origin, first found on brown teapots attributable to the Elers brothers. Billy, who had handled as much oriental porcelain as anyone of his generation, assured me he had

never seen this particular recumbent lion, encircled by its tail, on the lids of ware from the Far East, let alone from continental Europe (1,2).

In 1962 at my interview for an Assistant Keepership at the Victoria and Albert Museum, I was asked if I had a research project in mind and, having anticipated the question, I replied: 'A rare group of porcelains known as 'A' Marked'. Across the table Arthur Lane, Keeper of Ceramics, seemed to jump. I hadn't known he had not long before made a case in a Swiss ceramics journal inclining towards a North Italian attribution, backing this by evidence from spectrographic analysis². Lane's article was ill-fated, not just because the printers jumbled the sequence of the paragraphs after he had read proofs, but also because, far from the article eliciting news of 'A' Marked ware in continental collections as he had half expected, pieces continued to turn up in the UK only.



2. Base of teapot showing 'A' mark (Victoria & Albert Museum)

Shortly before my interview a part tea-service of the ware had appeared at the London Antique Dealers Fair, its sugar-basin painted on the lid with a children's cricketing scene (3). Before Lane got wind of this the dealers concerned, P and K Embden, had sold the service to an



3. Sugar Bowl lid with cricketing scenes after Gravelot (Melbourne Cricket Club)



4. Cream jug with scenes after Gravelot (Victoria & Albert Museum)



5. Acorn knob teapot with scenes after Gravelot (Victoria & Albert Museum)

Australian cricket fan named Anthony Baer, for whom the early cricketing subject was its only attraction, and who gave the sugar-bowl, with other memorabilia of the game, to Melbourne Cricket Ground, gladly ceding the remainder of the service to the V&A (4,5). The Embdens had, however, excluded two saucers from their sale to Baer because they were damaged, and these, the two that have now entered the Ashmolean Museum, were bought by Lane's Deputy Keeper, Robert Charleston, for his private collection (6,8).

Whether because of my cheeky intrusion into Lane's topic of study at my interview, or in spite of it, I secured the post in the V&A's Department of Ceramics. A year later Lane was dead and Charleston had succeeded him as Keeper. It came to my knowledge that some of the subjects painted on the Embdens' part service were enamelled after illustrations by Hubert François Gravelot to a book entitled *Songs from the Opera of Flora, with the Humorous Scenes of Hob Design'd by ye celebrated Mr. Gravelot; & Engraved by G. Bickham junr* (7,9). I told Charleston of this and he said he was himself working on a paper tracing to engravings after



6. Saucer and base showing 'A' mark with a scene (see below left) after Gravelot (Ashmolean Museum given in memory of RJ Charleston)



7. Gravelot Engraving of Hob Surprised by Sir Thomas with Mr Friendly's Letter



9. Gravelot Engraving of Mr Friendly as a Ballad Singer at a Country Wake



8. Saucer and base showing 'A' mark with a scene (see above right) after Gravelot (Ashmolean Museum given in memory of RJ Charleston)

Gravelot the other subjects on the service, which illustrated children's games, cricket included. Charleston generously suggested we collaborate. A paper read in March 1970 to the English Ceramic Circle resulted³.

Robert wrote the introductory section of this joint paper and described the career and influence of Gravelot in England, comparing his illustrations of children's games with those subjects as painted on the 'A' Marked service. He enlarged the checklist of 'A' Marked ware to twenty-eight pieces and also introduced evidence of an experimental production of porcelain around 1749–50 by Alexander Lind at Gorgie, near Edinburgh, with patronage from the Duke of Argyll. Could the 'A' Mark stand for Argyll? For my part I described the incidents from *Hob's Opera* and considered as conceivably responsible for the 'A' Marked porcelain from various British porcelain factories, especially those from which no ware had at that time been identified. This led me on a wild goose chase from Stepney, Stratford, Greenwich, Bow, Hoxton, Limehouse, Vauxhall and Kentish Town in London, to Staffordshire and to the West Country, where I mentioned Calstock, Penrhyn and Bovey Tracey, as well as Champion's and Cookworthy's unsuccessful experiments at Bristol with Cherokee 'Porcelain Earth' sent by a correspondent in Charleston, South Carolina.

This part of our paper has in many ways been overrun by subsequent discoveries. In particular the porcelains of Limehouse and Vauxhall are now quite well understood as a result of archaeology on the factory sites and can be ruled out of contention. On the other hand we were premature in dismissing the claim that 'A' Marked porcelain might have been made under the first patent taken out by Thomas Frye and Edward Heylyn in 1744 for the forerunner of the Bow porcelain factory.

In 1993 I delivered to the English Ceramic Circle a follow-up paper in which it was possible to increase the number of pieces to thirty-five or thirty-six, including an attractive cane-handle enamelled in colours in what I described as the factory's 'high style' as contrasted with its 'stock patterns' (10). These finer pieces were distinguished by iron-red scrollwork of an early rococo type associated with Gravelot. From close study of 'high style' pieces I concluded that, despite some differences, they were all the work of a single hand with a skill in figure-drawing rare in Great Britain at this date.



11. Tea canister (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest 1940)

Another piece which I allotted more tentatively to the 'A' Marked class is an unmarked rectangular tea canister that had attracted my attention in the National Gallery of Victoria at Melbourne (11). This canister is rather crudely enamelled and gilded with the orientalisng *Island* pattern which, as I admitted, is found on porcelain made according to the phosphatic soft-paste formula of the second Bow patent of 1749. However I once again brushed aside thoughts of its production and that of the whole 'A' Marked class under the 'proto-Bow' patent of 1744 for what seemed a decisive technical reason: the slip-cast technique of potting favoured in the production of 'A' Marked wares was not used in the production of porcelain recognised as Bow.

When Robert Charleston died in 1994 his heirs generously gave me the two 'A' Marked saucers mentioned earlier (6,8) in recognition of our friendship and collaboration over research



10. Cane handle (Victoria & Albert Museum)

into the ware. The circumstances described above should explain my attachment to the pieces and why, in my nineties, I feel the time has come for me to present them in memory of Robert to a museum he loved.

The subjects on the Charleston saucers illustrate two scenes from a popular musical drama by John Hippisley recounting the intrigues whereby an heiress, Flora, who is immured by her guardian, Sir Thomas Testy, elopes with her lover, Mr Friendly. A Somerset yokel, Hob, the comic character in the piece, is intercepted carrying a letter from Mr Friendly to Flora and thrown down a well. On the Saucer in (6) we see Hob surprised with Mr Friendly's letter and searched by Sir Thomas and his minions. In (8) we see a later scene where Mr Friendly disguises himself as a ballad-singer at a country wake, watched by Flora and her attendants from behind the wall over which she will make her escape. The scenes are skilfully and quite closely copied from the engravings issued in 1737 by George Bickham Junior after Gravelot's designs, but with sufficient differences to demonstrate the independent capability of the person who enamelled them on the porcelain. Below the engraved scenes are printed the words and music, so you can, if you wish, Sing a Song of Saucer.

Enquiries into the ware have continued since the time when Robert Charleston and I were involved. A major advance was Ross Ramsay's identification of the source, at the Iotla Mine in North Carolina, from which the 'Unaker' clay specified in the 1744 Bow patent was brought to England. The Ramsays and Anton Gabszewicz calculated it was possible, indeed probable, that in 1744 the American projector, Andrew Duché, could have contacted both William Cookworthy of Plymouth, and Heylyn and Frye of the nascent Bow venture and that he could have sold to the last two information on his crucial kaolinite 'Unaker' ingredient⁴. Chemical investigations by Ian Freestone had already by 1995 indicated that the 'A' Marked porcelains showed 'a good correspondence with the first Bow patent' taken out by Heylyn and Frye in 1744, and later investigations have strengthened this view⁵. Indeed Ross Ramsay, following as closely as possible the recipe indicated in the 1744 patent, has succeeded in making an analogue of 'A' Marked porcelain⁶. It is a porcelain that does not fit comfortably into the old classifications of 'hard paste' or 'soft paste' but is something of a hybrid between the two.

When a glazed but undecorated teapot-lid that Gabszewicz recognised as similar in form to that on the 'A' Marked teapot in the V&A's part tea-service was excavated on the Bow Factory site, it seemed all problems as to attribution of the ware had been resolved (5); chemical analysis showed the excavated lid to be consistent with 'A' Marked wares and with the formula described in Heylyn and Frye's first patent⁷. Wasters of fluted cups of a characteristic 'A' Marked form were also identified among finds from the Bow site, confirming this view.

However, the 1744 patent does not tell us who devised its formula, and here we may have to consider not just the claims of Andrew Duché but also those of Thomas Briand, a 'Stranger', who demonstrated porcelain of his making to the Royal Society on 10 February 1743. True, the ware Briand exhibited was declared to have been made of 'native materials of our own country', with no mention of clay from America. As described, it was also highly resistant to thermal shock, which would not have been the case with early English soft-paste porcelains⁸. But what are we to make of the ultimately litigious connections between Briand and John Weatherby and John Crowther, who had become partners in the Bow factory? In April 1748 Thomas Frye was present with Weatherby and Crowther at an attempted reconciliation between Briand's widow and a Staffordshire potter, Joseph Farmer. At issue was a secret recipe of Briand's for 'a beautiful Earthenware little inferior to Porcelain or China Ware'⁹. As reported, the Bow partnership's earlier experience of Briand's porcelain formulae was also negative, though we should remember that they, as much as Farmer, would have wanted to protect themselves from the widow Briand's financial claims. As Angela Bridge and Nicholas Bundock put it, Weatherby and Crowther may be telling the truth, but they 'may not be telling the whole truth'¹⁰. Whatever the reality of those claims, some connection between Briand and the Bow venture is certain.

The Bow proprietors' flirtation with hard-paste formulae based on kaolin can only have been a brief and insignificant 'bubble' before they settled successfully for the more economical bone ash (phosphatic) soft-paste porcelain produced under Frye's second patent of 1749. I am in agreement with Michael Noble in seeing this as the meaning of a much discussed, undated letter from John Campbell in America to Arthur Dobbs in Northern Ireland, describing the sample of white clay he is sending as resembling 'what I saw at Bow for their China ware (which I believe is only a bubble with the undertakers)'¹¹. Campbell's letter describes a situation unlikely to have existed much before 1749.

An anonymous *Account of Thomas Frye*, published at Dublin in 1788 and 1789, describes this early phase of manufacture at Bow and blames its failure on a high tax placed on the South Carolina clay, but the Dublin writer was ignorant of Frye's second, soft-paste bone ash patent of 1749 and its successful exploitation and modification for some years, even after Frye's retirement and death¹². He does, however, seem to be describing 'A' Marked wares when he writes:

The few vessels which were made, were esteemed very fine; particularly in the elegant designs, and manner of painting the figures, which exhibit the abilities of our artist to great advantage. Such of them as remain at this day, are highly prized among the curious; and it is certain, that he had brought the art to such perfection, that in some particulars he equalled, and in others exceeded the Chinese themselves; particularly in point of transparency and painting. In glazing, his ware was defective¹³.

When Robert Charleston and I were writing there seemed to be a clear-cut difference between the forms and the potting techniques of 'A' Marked porcelains and those of the phosphatic soft-paste wares of Bow. It still seems as if the two groups are largely products of different sets of workers. However, a degree of overlap has now been demonstrated. For instance a coffee cup of the fluted 'A' Marked form has proved on analysis to be of a phosphatic soft paste and has been said to be press-moulded not slip-cast like 'A' Marked examples¹⁴. When we consider the decoration enamelled onto these wares it has proved possible, though not without difficulty, to demonstrate a degree of continuity between the two groups¹⁵. Surprisingly, the rectangular tea canister at Melbourne already mentioned, whose enamelled and gilt decoration with the *Island* pattern seems to make it a linking piece¹⁶ has proved on analysis to be formed of an essentially hard-paste body of 'A' Marked type, but with the added ingredient not of bone-ash but of magnesium. This last ingredient was presumably introduced in the form of Cornish soaprock. In the earliest years of Bow, then, a number of experiments were made with its paste, but development of certain simple patterns can be traced on several of these different bodies.

With 'high style' enamelling such as that on the Ashmolean's two saucers, no such continuity can be shown. The rare skills of miniaturistic draughtsmanship needed to adapt Gravelot's prints and the other intricate scenes found on 'A' Marked porcelain are lacking on early phosphatic and steatitic Bow. There were very few skilled draughtsmen in 1740s London and, though Thomas Frye was one of these, if he had painted on 'A' Marked ware, as the writer of the Dublin account of him suggests, we might have expected him to persist on his new phosphatic porcelain.

It is here that Thomas Briand re-emerges as a conceivable participant in production of 'A' Marked porcelain because we now know he was 'an *Enamel-Painter* by Profession' who had 'travelled all over Europe and has had the Honour to paint the Pictures of most of the *Sovereign Princes* where he went'. This quotation is from an account of Briand's medical case, endorsed by the man himself, published in 1745 by Dr Cromwell Mortimer, Secretary to the Royal Society. The account is headed, 'The CASE of Mr. *Thomas Briand*, who set up a Manufacture of *Porcelain* at *Lambeth*'¹⁷. So, were the 'A' Marked porcelains made at Lambeth in what Bridge and Bundock call 'a very small, short-lived concern'? This could have been taken over and transferred across the

Thames and up the River Lea to Bow. The exact relationship between the ventures of Briand and Frye awaits clarification, but the existence of such a link is now beyond doubt.

The early history of Bow must be affected by this, but attempts to push the factory's beginnings back in time before 1744 depend heavily on the idea, launched by the recently deceased Pat Daniels, whom many of us will recall with affection, that porcelain busts of George II with accompanying socle and wall-bracket must commemorate either the Battle of Dettingen (1743), in which George fought, or the defeat of the Jacobite invasion of 1745–46, and that since no factory other than Bow was at that time available to have made the busts, they must have been made by Bow¹⁸. This is not a firm historical basis for dating early Bow porcelain to a time before we have evidence of activity by its partnership or on its site.

The victorious imagery of the wall-brackets could with equal or greater likelihood commemorate Britain's *Annus Mirabilis* of 1759, in the Seven Years' War, which supporters of William Pitt the Elder would have been eager to celebrate. This later date opens the possibility of attribution to other English factories that more habitually used a steatitic soaprock ingredient, and among these Roger Massey's arguments in favour of Vauxhall seem the most persuasive. It is worth comparing the victorious imagery of the busts and wall brackets with that of Vauxhall's figure of *Britannia* holding a portrait plaque of George II¹⁹.

We still don't know the meaning of the 'A' Mark from which the hybrid porcelain takes its name. Might it stand for Alderman George Arnold (1691–1751), a major investor in the Bow factory? If so, why should his name alone stand for the partnership? Another suggestion is that 'A' might stand for Argyll²⁰. The third Duke of Argyll and his protégé, Alexander Lind of Gorgie, near Edinburgh, were interested in obtaining information about the factory. We need not doubt that by August 1749 Lind had made specimens of porcelain resistant to thermal shock, 'far superior to the Bow, and more like the Chinese'. But if these trials are the surviving 'A' Marked wares, it is curious that in April 1749 Lind had written disparagingly to the Duke's associate, Lord Milton, that Bow China must have improved since the last specimens he had seen of it, which were 'of the same kind made at St. Cloud but not near so good', ie a glassy soft paste²¹. If the wasters of 'A' Marked ware that have now been excavated at the Bow site had been made in association with Lind and the Duke of Argyll, these two need not have gone snooping around the Bow factory for information. We can surely now exclude the possibility that 'A' stands for Argyll.

A third and perhaps more plausible explanation suggested by Pat Daniels is that 'A' stands for 'Athnor'²². *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* describes this as 'a digesting furnace used by the alchemists, in which a constant heat was maintained by means of a self-feeding apparatus'. A porcelain like the 'A' Marked would have required firing in a kiln capable of temperatures higher than those for soft paste. It may have seemed worth recording this fact on pieces so fired, perhaps less as a marketing ploy than as an instruction to decorators concerning the pigments and firing temperatures required to enamel and gild on this porcelain body and glaze. Cromwell Mortimer, who was both Secretary to the Royal Society, where Briand demonstrated his porcelain in 1743, and the man's personal physician, himself used an Athnor in his experiments for measuring heat. It would, however, be rash to assume Mortimer had a special interest in porcelain much before 1743, or that the Royal Society was more than a group of individual scientists unlikely to be capable of pursuing long-term research policies.

Many unanswered questions about 'A' Marked porcelain remain, and cool heads will be required to resolve them. That should not deter us from enjoying the ware for the beauty of its material and its decoration.

Particular thanks are due to Roger Massey and Anton Gabszewicz for useful suggestions in my attempt to summarise the current state of knowledge concerning 'A' Marked porcelain.

Notes

1. Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle, Vol2 No7 1939 p83
2. Arthur Lane, 'Unidentified Italian or English Porcelains: The A Marked Group', *Keramikfreunde der Schweiz, Mitteilungsblatt* 43, July 1958, pp15–18
3. RJ Charleston and JVG Mallet, 'A Problematical Group of Eighteenth-Century Porcelains', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol8, Pt1, pp 80–121
4. WHR Ramsay, Anton Gabszewicz and EG Ramsay, "'Unaker" or Cherokee Clay and its Relationship to the "Bow" Porcelain Manufactory', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol17 Pt3 2001 pp 474–99. Duché had long interested historians of ceramics, eg Graham Hood, 'The Career of Andrew Duché', *The Art Quarterly*, VolXXXI No2 1968 pp168–84.
5. Ian C Freestone, 'A-Marked Porcelain: Some Recent Scientific Work', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol16 Pt1 1996 pp76–84; WHR Ramsay, Anton Gabszewicz and EG Ramsay, 'The Chemistry of 'A'-Marked Porcelain and its Relation to the Heylyn and Frye Patent of 1744', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol18 Pt2 2003 pp264–83; WHR Ramsay, Judith A Hansen and EG Ramsay, 'An "A-Marked" Covered Porcelain Bowl, Cherokee Clay and Colonial America's Contribution to the English Porcelain Industry', *Ceramics in America*, University Press of New England, 2004 pp60–77; WRH Ramsay, Frank A Davenport and EG Ramsay, 'The 1744 Ceramic Patent of Heylyn and Frye: "'Unworkable Unaker Formula" or Landmark Document in the History of English Ceramics?', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 119 No1 2006 pp1–68
6. WHR Ramsay, GR Hill and EG Ramsay, 'Re-Creation of the 1744 Heylyn and Frye Ceramic Patent Wares Using Cherokee Clay: Implications for Raw Materials, Kiln Conditions, and the Earliest English Porcelain Production', *Geoarchaeology*, Vol19 No7 2004 pp635–55
7. J Victor Owen and Nicholas G Panes, 'Bow and 'A'-Marked Porcelain: a Tangible Link from the Stratford (East London) Factory Site', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol23 2012 pp153–162. Fragments of fluted cups, also of 'A' Marked shape, were also found at the site and tested with similar results.
8. Angela Bridge and Nicholas Bundock, 'A Newly Found Reference to Porcelain Making in the Early 1740s', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol26 2015 pp69–81
9. Arnold Mountford, 'Thomas Briand – a Stranger', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol7 Pt2 1969, especially p91
10. Bridge and Bundock, loc. cit. p76
11. Pat Daniels, *Bow Porcelain, 1730-1747*, Oxford, 2007 Ch3 pp53–68. The letter is printed in full on pp57–59.
12. WRH Ramsay, Ken Sutton and EG Ramsay, 'Bow Porcelain Glaze Compositions Associated with the Phosphatic Wares – 1742–1774', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* 123 (2) 2011 pp16171
13. Anon, 'Account of Thomas Frye' quoted as republished from *European Magazine* 1788, in *Walker's Hibernian Magazine or Compendium of Entertaining Knowledge*, January 1789 pp19–21
14. In a private collection, illustrated on Dr Ross Ramsay's website, <https://www.bowporcelain.net/>, 'Gallery, Bow Porcelain', Coffee Cup, Bow. I have not seen this interesting piece.
15. Anton Gabszewicz, 'Bow Porcelain: the Incised 'R' Marked Group and Associated Wares', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol17 Pt2 2000 pp 275–94; WHR Ramsay, Anton Gabszewicz and EG Ramsay, 'The Chemistry of 'A' Marked Porcelain and its Relationship to the Heylyn and Frye Patent of 1744', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol18 Pt2 2003 pp 264–283
16. EG Ramsay and WHR Ramsay, 'An 'A' Marked Porcelain Tea Canister', *World of Antiques & Art*, 69, August 2005–February 2006 pp76–79; Pat Daniels, 2007 op. cit. pp236–39
17. Bridge and Bundock, loc. cit.
18. Pat Daniels, 2007 op. cit. pp270–82; Pat Daniels, EG Ramsay and WHR Ramsay, *The George II Porcelain Busts and Historic Wall-Brackets*, 2013
19. Roger Massey, 'Vauxhall Porcelain Figures', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol25 2014 p20 and for *Britannia*, p2 Fig2
20. Nancy Valpy, 'A'-Marked Porcelain: 'A' for Argyll?', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, Vol13 Pt1 1987 p98
21. RJ Charleston and JVG Mallet, 1971 pp113–15
22. Pat Daniels, 2007 op. cit. Ch12, 'A' for Athanor', pp153–69

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