

# Preface

This book represents the culmination of almost fifty years of the appreciation of and research into the products of the two Welsh porcelain factories at Swansea and Nantgarw, which started in the early nineteenth century and existed for only about ten years intermittently before their closure in the early 1820s. During this short time, they produced some of the finest porcelain ever seen, superbly decorated and gilded, and set the gold standard for ceramic art for many years to come. The brainchild of the enterprise was the enigmatic and restlessly energetic William Billingsley, who started his apprenticeship at the Derby China Works in 1774, thence moving to Pinxton, Mansfield, Brampton-in-Torksey, Worcester, Nantgarw, Swansea, and Nantgarw again and finally Coalport. His ambition was the creation of the most highly translucent and beautiful soft-paste porcelain through empirical experimentation which could act as the perfect vehicle for displaying his enamelling and decorative artistry. He was eventually successful in his venture, but this could be achieved only at the expense of exceptionally high kiln losses and resulting economic non-viability in a highly competitive arena despite an almost insatiable desirability for its ownership by Regency society and aristocratic patrons.

Born in Skewen, near Swansea, his maternal birthplace and with a paternal birthplace in Pontypridd near the Nantgarw China Works site, the author became interested in these local ceramics from an early age, and in later life, his analytical scientific expertise applied to cultural heritage problems fuelled a desire to examine further the literature and science which existed on the Swansea and Nantgarw porcelains. The earliest dedicated record of the history of these factories appeared in a book researched by William Turner in the 1880s and published in 1897, which contained much important information gleaned from people who had actually worked at the two factories. This was followed by the seminal works of E. Morton Nance and Dr. William John which appeared in the 1940s and 1950s; these later studies highlighted several incongruities and misinterpretations that had been made seemingly through the acceptance of erroneous assumptions and the dismissal of critical evidence for apparently superfluous reasons. Later works by Elis Jenkins and by Sir Leslie Joseph and Jimmy Jones in the 1970s and 1980s aimed

at correcting some of these for the Swansea China Works, but it was clear that a timely scientific reappraisal on holistic grounds was now needed for both factories. This would necessitate a survey being undertaken of the growth and development of the factories at Swansea and Nantgarw, the identification of the artistic and commercial personalities involved, who by the very nature of their employment in the ceramics industry were peripatetic, and in particular an historical study of the key figure, William Billingsley, and his associates and family members during this time. A reassessment of the scientific analytical conclusions on Swansea and Nantgarw porcelain paste composition was published in diverse papers and journals from the earliest by Herbert Eccles and Bernard Rackham undertaken on specimens in the Victoria & Albert Museum Collection in 1922 up to the latest of Victor Owen and colleagues in 1999 was also reviewed as part of this process. Because of the itinerant nature of ceramic artists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this survey could obviously not be conducted in isolation from relevant information pertaining to other contemporary and competitive China factories, especially those at Derby, Worcester and Coalport.

A novel aspect of this book is the research and identification into the so-called named porcelain services from Swansea and Nantgarw to facilitate their correct attribution and chronological placement: a task that has always been difficult because of the absence of factory pattern books at both Swansea and Nantgarw China Works and the availability of only limited work notes of experimental paste compositions and diary entries made by Lewis Weston Dillwyn in particular at Swansea. A novel protocol proposed here for the identification of unknown or suspected Welsh porcelains from the application of analytical scientific criteria is tested for nine different cases and is seen to be a useful screening process for the potential attribution of unknown porcelains to either Swansea or Nantgarw. Research into the chemical origins of the translucency of Swansea and Nantgarw porcelains and that of the iridescence observed on London decorated and fired Nantgarw porcelain are also described, both of which assist in the identification of genuine Swansea and Nantgarw porcelain pieces. The discovery of a long-lost Nantgarw service and research into an early Swansea glassy porcelain tea service with William Billingsley's handwritten descriptors are also described in detail—the former was derived from the use of historical information, and the latter from a graphological analysis demonstrate the necessity of adoption of the holistic approach that underlies the theme of this book.

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