

## Boulton's Lustre Wares of the 1930s

Enoch Boulton's lustre ware designs are one of the major product lines upon which the latter Crown Devon reputation is built. During the 1930s, Boulton and Carlton Ware designer, Violet Elmer, played leading roles in a grand contest between Fielding's and Wiltshaw and Robertson for supremacy in the populist lustre ware market. This intense rivalry between the two companies resulted in a truly remarkable output of Art Deco shapes and designs, and the period 1930 – 39 represents perhaps one of the highest points in terms of design and quality for both companies. While Fieldings had previously occupied a dominant position in the middle class Vellum market, Wiltshaw & Robinson had never seen the likes before of its popularity in the 1930s.

Lustre ware with its characteristically iridescent sheen is believed to have originated in the near East in the late 9th century. It reached Spain at the time of the Moorish conquests in the 12th century and then extended to Italy and the rest of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. The evidence shows that John Hancock was the first to introduce lustre into the English decorative tradition at the Spode factory at Stoke in 1789. Although Josiah Wedgwood was experimenting with gold to achieve a lustre effect in the 1770s, it wasn't until 1792 that he produced a gold lustre that met his expectations, putting paid to any claims that Wedgwood was first. By the early 1800s a number of potteries including Wedgwood, Spode and Minton had commercialised lustre.



Small pink lustre jug circa 1820 probably by Sunderland

Lustering gave pottery a very distinctive patina and there were five different approaches to its application. One was to apply the lustre over the entire glaze. Another was 'relief lustre', where parts of the relief were highlighted. A further practice was to apply lustre designs on a lighter ground, and, in some pieces, bands of lustre were combined with painted or transfer patterns. A style popular until around 1840 was that of 'resist' lustre. It entailed applying a varnish or wax solution over decorative or painted areas to 'resist' the lustre. This permitted the lustre to adhere only to the untreated parts. The object was re-fired and cleaned to remove any remnants of the solution.



Royal Lancastrian Lustre Vase by Richard Joyce

Copper oxide, giving off a gold effect, was frequently the lustering metal of choice. Bismuth sub-nitrate was used to create a bright iridescence. The more expensive metals such as silver nitrate, producing a straw colour lustre; platinum oxide, producing a silvery sheen when it covered the entire piece, and gold chloride, creating a luxuriantly yellowish-purple-red to a deep glowing copper lustre, were used for higher-end wares. Platinum based lustre, became known as 'poor man's silver' in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The art of lustering ceramics is analogous to alchemy. The lustre colour and effect were achieved by the reaction of a metallic 'film' to intense heat in a kiln. After normal glazing and firing, the ware was immersed in a chemical solution, usually a specified metal oxide dissolved in an acid and mixed with a medium. When a film of this solution dried on the object it was then

re-fired, leaving a deposit of the metal on the surface. The thinner the film of dried solution, the more iridescent the lustre.

Throughout the nineteenth century, numerous improvements were made to the oxidation process, and lustering chemicals were refined and purified. In the later 1800s lustre went out of fashion, but experienced a revival at the turn of the century. A number of potteries resurrected it for Art Nouveau tiles and hollow ware. In 1897, Pilkington, manufacturing under the trade name 'Royal Lancastrian', was among the first to take the process into its next evolutionary phase, that of producing modern works of high artistic merit, reflecting and indeed inspiring the tastes of the time. The company produced a series of ornamental lustre ware featuring patterns and shapes created by contemporary artists and designers.

Another innovative force in the manufacture of lustre wares was that of William de Morgan, a designer and manufacturer of decorative earthenwares at Chelsea and Fulham from 1872 to 1907. He was famous for decorations in the 'Persian' colours of turquoise, blue and green.

In the second decade of the 1900s, Wedgwood released a range of lustre ware that included Butterfly, Chinese and the Fairyland patterns. Fairyland Lustre, was an enthralling and magnificent flight of the creative imagination of designer Daisy Makeig-Jones. First appearing in 1915, with humorous and highly detailed scenes of elves, water and forest nymphs, fairies and gnomes, the extensive handwork and multiple firings necessary to create such superb pieces made Fairyland Lustre expensive to produce and buy.



Wedgwood Fairyland Lustre

## Enter Crown Devon

Crown Devon, Carlton Ware, Royal Worcester, Grimwades and others followed Wedgwood's example, and it's believed that Fairyland Lustre was the inspiration for the production of Lustrine by Crown Devon. Certainly, fairytale and fantastical themes also appeared in some of the earliest examples of Crown Devon Lustrine.



Crown Devon Queen of the Fairies Lustrine Bowl

Fieldings perceived clearly the post-WW1 disposition for new and interesting decorative styles in home wares and, along with other potteries in Stoke on Trent, saw a market opportunity for quality lustre wares at prices more competitive than the luxury Wedgwood product. The company developed the Lustrine concept in 1917 and launched the Crown Devon range at the British Industries Fair in February 1918.

From 1918 and beyond, the waters become muddled in respect to the copying of patterns, themes and designs between Crown Devon, Carlton Ware, Royal Worcester, Grimwades and others, but it's fair to say that Makeig-



Rare Lizard Pattern Potpourri Jar L4

Jones was singularly and spectacularly original. Her lustre 'Willow' range can be traced back as the source of inspiration for the popular Boulton Crown Devon Pagoda and Carlton Ware China Land and Mikado patterns, for example.

Crown Devon Lustrine was highly iridescent in finish, reflecting a myriad of colours when viewing the items at different angles to the light. The effects are customarily described as similar to that of observing petrol or oil floating on water.

The grounds of original Lustrine included Ruby, Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Pink, and Pearl, known as 'Pearline'. The firing temperature of Lustrine was considerably lower than that of the Wedgwood product, thus enabling it to be produced more cheaply, however a lower firing temperature meant that the thin layer of metallic glaze and underglaze colouring used to produce the original, iridescent Lustrine finish were not as durable as anticipated. The combination of unstable glazing techniques and lower firing resulted in the Lustrine product wearing after extended handling. Consequently, mint examples of early Lustrine fetch premium prices.

The failure of Lustrine to withstand wear and tear challenged Fielding's self-proclaimed mantra of 'quality at affordable prices' and created consternation within the senior ranks of the company. A team led by works manager Frederick Turner laboured over the problem and a progressive change to a more resilient lustrous finish was noted in the latter half of the 1920's and continued when Enoch Boulton joined the company. Lustrine gradually diminished in iridescence with the progression to a harder finish and ultimately led to the highly glazed patina that is generally called Lustre.

## The 1930s

In 1929, Boulton, newly appointed as Design and Decorating manager, oversaw the fullest and boldest exploitation of lustre as a decorative medium.

Many of Fielding's lustre ware designs of the 1920s were obsolete by the time Enoch Boulton joined the company. Boulton discontinued most of them apart from those he believed could be upgraded or modernised to meet contemporary tastes. The designs he did not retire were Royal George; the predecessors of the later Pagoda patterns; Sylvan and other butterfly concepts, Dragonflies, Dragons, Tropical and other minor patterns. He reserved these designs for a typical Boulton makeover.



Example of highly iridescent Crown Devon Lustrine



Rare L57 Pagoda Lustrine Octagonal Bowl



Pattern 2979 Art Deco Vase



Exquisitely enamelled 1930s Art Deco Swallows Lustre Bowl





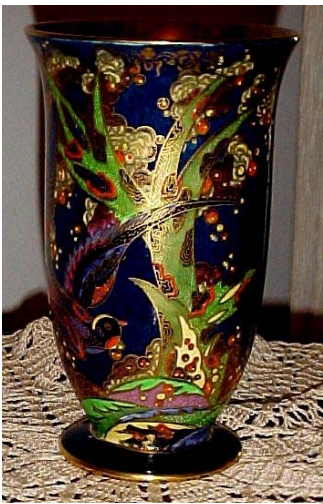
Pattern 2214 Art Deco  
Lustre Parrot Vase



Magnificent Art Deco  
Pattern 3212 Vase



Pattern 2131 Ewer



Pattern 2250 Swallows Vase

Boulton placed emphasis on high quality underglaze colouring, exquisite surface decoration and gold overprint to create a new look for Crown Devon lustre wares. He also designed a variety of new shapes upon which to place his designs to cater for the somewhat belated but nonetheless enthusiastic British interest in Art Deco design. He worked in partnership with works manager and glazing specialist, Frederick Turner, to create better, stronger and more interesting glazes.

A significant difference between Crown Devon Lustre and the lustre ware of the 1930s was that of the widespread use of overglaze enamelling. Decorative overglaze enamels were made by adding metallic oxide to molten glass and reducing the cooled mixture, which, when combined with an oily medium, was painted over the glaze and then refired.

Many of the Crown Devon lustre patterns of the 30s to the 60s were enamelled exquisitely, however the wares manufactured before WW2 are more labour-intensive, showing finer detail and a more delicate touch. While many of the post war lustre pieces are beautifully decorated and highly collectable, aficionados of Crown Devon insist that they are of a lower quality than pieces of the 1920s and 30s.

Boulton also introduced a specific range of sybaritic deco lustre wares to appeal to the Art Deco taste. The designs were of typical Art Deco extravagance and drew on Fieldings in-house expertise in underglaze colouring, lithographic techniques and gilding, to which Boulton added rich enamelling to provide stunning pattern definition. These lustre Art Deco pieces are often the most sought-after by collectors.

It is not uncommon for Crown Devon lustre ware to be mistaken for Carltonware and vice versa and the reason for this is clear. Enoch Boulton had extensive experience and success at Wiltshaw & Robinson in creating magnificent lustre wares such as New Flies, Persian, Kingfisher, Chinaland and, of course, the Tutankhamen designs. Having created design history for W & R, he then contributed to a fresh and exciting new page in the Crown Devon design story.

There is curious and somewhat uninformed snobbery occasionally expressed by Carlton Ware collectors and sometimes reciprocated by Crown Devon devotees in respect to the superiority of one factory's lustre wares over the other's. It is more accurate, however, to state that both Carlton and Crown Devon produced lustre and other wares of such matching quality, brilliance and beauty that it is churlish to enter into games of one-upmanship. There has been some ill-informed comment in books written about Carlton Ware that state Carlton Ware slip mouldings are sharper, lighter and better decorated than their Crown Devon counterparts. This type of boorish chauvinism can, in best light, be seen as an extension of the long tradition of rivalry between the two companies, or, in worst light, as ill-informed, self-serving and indeed technically naïve.

Also, claims have been made that it was Enoch Boulton who brought the idea of ruby and cobalt blue stippled grounds for lustre wares over from Carlton Ware. This is patent nonsense, as history shows that Fieldings had been developing its lustre technology for more than twelve years before Boulton arrived. W & R did not invent stippling, and aerograph and brush techniques for the creation of interesting and novel grounds were well established in British ceramics.

Ray Barker, surveying Crown Devon's output during the 1920s and 1930s in the Crown Devon Collectors Handbook quotes expert, Pat Watson, "*Few firms in the potteries could equal Crown Devon in its heyday with the range and quality of its wares*", and the contemporary trade press often lavished praise on the Devon factory for the quality and superiority of its lustre wares. In terms of quality of manufacture, both companies used very similar methods, exactitudes and approaches to production, so much so, that, today, even museum experts cannot make a call of primacy of one factory over another.

The truth of the matter is that Fieldings and W & R traded blow for blow in bringing fresh designs, glazes and shapes to market. Each company had its design triumphs and both competed robustly for the middle to higher-end lustre ware market with finely finished enamelled work that featured an impressive selection of lavish designs. What is also fact is that both companies produced a 'best of the best' range of exotic, colourful and decoratively important designs and shapes that were manufactured to the highest quality.

For Carlton Ware, patterns such as Tutankhamun, Zigzag, Jazz, Babylon, Wagon Wheel, Star Flower, Egyptian Fan, Flower and Falling Leaf, Mephistopheles and some of the geometric florals constitute the best of the best and most collectible of its range. The most decoratively important and collectible Crown Devon patterns include Fairy Castle, Parrot, Spider Web (Copied by Carlton Ware) Fantazia (More decoratively balanced than Carlton's Fantasia),



Pattern 2078 Art Deco Vase



Pattern 2073 Vase



Pattern 2551 Vase



Pattern 3040 Floral Vase



Swallows, Coral Trees, Dragonfly, Dragon and some of the later geometric floral patterns. More often than not Boulton opted for sybaritic Art Deco design for his lustre wares, while Carlton Ware in many instances chose to follow the path of modernism.

The production of lustre wares was complicated, labour intensive and often requiring up to eight trips to the kiln.

Fieldings were largely earthenware manufacturers. Earthenware is a non-vitrified type of pottery that is opaque, porous and coarser than porcelain. All Crown Devon lustre wares were made from earthenware, either as thrown pots or slipware for the more detailed and complicated shapes.

While the original potters of Staffordshire relied on local clays to manufacture their wares, almost all of the quality output from the region in the twentieth century was made from materials imported from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Ball clay, far superior to the coarse red local clays was brought in from Devon and Dorset. It was mixed with China Clay and China Stone from Cornwall and high grade processed Flint from East Anglia to whiten and add more durability to finished pieces.

Fieldings made moulds of many of their shapes. A modeller would work from Boulton drawings and create the desired shape from clay, after which it was fired. To ensure that the numerous copies of the original shape remained sharp, a master block of the shape was produced, from which a primary mould was created. Production moulds would then be made from the primary mould. This enabled plaster moulds to be constantly replaced to ensure that the shapes did not lose their 'edge' and detail.

The moulds were made in sections to enable a finished shape to be removed without damage. Slip, a liquid combination of Ball Clay, China Clay, China Stone and Flint, was poured into the assembled mould. The excess moisture was absorbed by the high porosity of the plaster mould, and within a couple of hours, during which any surplus slip was drawn from the mould, the shape was removed and let stand to dry.

The next part of the process was biscuit firing for two to three days at a temperature above 1100 degrees centigrade to harden the shape and eliminate any moisture. The dried shape (biscuit) then underwent fettling, or smoothing, of the raised marks made by the mould joins. When the shape was smooth and sharp it went to the decorating shop for an application of underglaze colour or 'ground'.

Usually the ground was applied using a technique known today as airbrushing. The superb mottling and marbling effects of Crown Devon lusterwares were achieved by highly skilled operators using



Pattern 2580 Vase



Pattern 2979 Spider's Web Vase



Pattern 2072 Pagoda Vase



Pattern 2674 Dragonfly Vase



Art Deco Tropical Pattern

different nozzles to create effects from fine mists to smatterings of colour, and no two Crown Devon grounds were exactly alike. A second, gentle firing assured a synthesis of ground and biscuit and made the shape ready for underglaze colouring.

A transfer of the pattern to adorn the shape was applied to what was still a relatively permeable surface, after which underglaze enamels were applied to form the colour base of the pattern. A further gentle firing followed in order to set the enamels.

The fourth time the shape visited the oven was for Glost firing. Glost firing involved dipping the still porous shape into a liquefied glaze. The shape absorbed some of the glaze and the remainder set as a film on the surface of the pot. The glaze usually contained a number of the constituents of glass such as lead oxide, silica and alumina and was mixed with liquefied clay. When the glaze dried the shape was fired at a temperature of around 1100 centigrade in the Glost oven, giving the partially decorated shape a hard, shiny, impermeable surface.



Pattern 2296, after Sylvan, Geometric Bowl

Most Crown Devon lustre wares had a Pearline interior and this was applied first and fired in a moufflé, or muffle, kiln that had an inner protective shell that separated the wares from the direct heat of the kiln fire. Then, a thin layer of lustre was applied to the outside of the pot. In a number of the 1930s pieces however, the external surface did not appear to be lustred, providing a bright glossy contrast to the pearline lustre on the interior of the piece. The absence of the external lustre allowed greater pattern depth and visibility.



Pattern 2551 Floral Trinket Box

After lustering, the shape was ready for gilding and overprinting in gold. Usually the lacelike overprint around borders and friezes was applied first. Then followed a complicated process where the pattern outline was oiled and gold dust was applied over the oiled outline to give the pattern definition. A light firing was required to eliminate any oil residue and set the gold. Finally, a mixture of gold and mercury was applied to the rims, handles and base of the shape and another firing vaporised the mercury and stabilised the hand gilded parts of the piece.



Pattern 2004 Lustre Star Bowl

The eighth and final visit to the kiln was preceded by the delicate application of a range of coloured enamels that were made, as mentioned earlier, using special oxides mixed with molten glass and oil. Overglaze enamelling was a high art form amongst Ming Dynasty Chinese ceramic artists. It developed over a period of two centuries and the enamelling techniques that evolved during

the reign of reign of Chenghua (1465-87) were never eclipsed in China, or possibly elsewhere. Enamel decoration of the highest quality was also popularised during the Edo period in Japan (1615-1868) by famous artists such as Kenzan, Kakiemon and Ninsei.

Fieldings overglaze enamelling, often in contrasting colours that matched the underglaze tones, was applied with delicate camel hair brushes to add highlights and texture to the pattern. The near-finished piece then underwent firing at a lower temperature to harden the enamel. Thus the shape had come full cycle, from an idea in Boulton's mind to an exquisite realisation of a decorative masterpiece. It is not only the process, but also the intercession of countless talented artisans, that makes Boulton's lusterwares of the 1930s such highly desirable objects. Only the most expensive contemporary pieces and the majestic Benjarong enamelled porcelain of Thailand can match or surpass these wares today.

During the Boulton watch, a surge of brilliant designs appeared in the lustre register, some of which lasted three decades until nineteen sixty. The Lustre range included exotic birds, a riot of florals including the Coral Trees and Garden Rockery patterns, spider's webs with dragonflies, butterflies, fairy castles, stylistic dragons and the highly collectable Pagoda patterns. Both the quality and the high standards of decoration of Crown Devon Lustre of the 1930s attracted the attention and admiration of both the trade and popular press.

The period 1930-39 represents a creative zenith of the Crown Devon factory. It was during this period that Fieldings made vast improvements in both the design and quality of surface decoration on its wares. Having overcome foreign competition in the early 1930s, it was yet to weather the post-war storm of cheap, inferior Japanese and European product that impacted on England's capacity to produce finely crafted, labour intensive wares at competitive prices, and which, ultimately, led to the demise of many Staffordshire potteries.

It was a final demonstration of the wisdom of Abraham Fielding to recruit George Barker and Enoch Boulton from the Carlton factory to partially fill his shoes when he decided to semi retire in 1929. Fielding died in 1932 and his grandson Reginald, Boulton and George Barker became close friends and creative partners

Quality, artistry and innovation are bywords that come easily when describing the 1930 - 1939 lustre output of the Crown Devon factory. It certainly lived up to, and indeed exceeded, the guiding vision of Abraham Fielding: that of producing best quality at most affordable prices.