

Having it both ways – a Lowestoft pattern mystery

The Lowestoft painted underglaze blue *Island House* or *Long Fence* pattern is a common one to the collectors of that factory. However, the fact that the pattern occurs in two versions, with the foreground motif reversed on many pieces, poses questions as to its design origin and the working practices in the factory production. This paper does not present new research as such, but singles out the pattern for discussion, bringing together comparisons that should add interest to the study of typical underglaze blue chinoiserie decoration on 18th-century English porcelain. As the building, or house, is the striking feature in this foreground motif and with regard to the orientation of the landscape, this pattern will be referred to as the *Island House* pattern hereinafter.

Examples of the *Island House* pattern are fairly numerous and vary in painting style and minor details, but the overall landscape design is simple and distinctive with strong echoes of its probable Chinese origin. (1)



1. Two examples of Lowestoft underglaze blue painted *Island House* pattern teabowls and saucers with the standard motif, c.1770-80. Lefthand duo unmarked, righthand duo marks unknown. © Moorabool Antique Galleries and Rowley, Newmarket respectively.

The *Island House* pattern on Lowestoft porcelain, exclusively on tea wares, dates to c.1770-1780¹. Smith states 'this pattern ... occurs both with the house to the right of the design and in reverse', rather surprisingly suggesting that the position of the house to the right is the common version. These two forms of the motif are evident on the cream jug and teabowl shown below. (2) The reversal however only occurs in the house-fence motif in the foreground of the pattern. The distant pagoda-like structure, trees and rocks group is not reversed. This suggests that the two elements or motifs making up the decorative design may have been copied onto the porcelain from different pictorial sources. There are minor differences in the painting of course, which is to be expected in such freely painted decoration.



2. Three views of a Lowestoft cream jug and teabowl in the *Island House* pattern, standard and reversed foreground motifs, c.1770-80. The jug marked with indistinct underglaze blue '5', the teabowl with '6' both in the inside foot rim. Private collection.

Another example of the two pattern versions can be found on a cup and saucer in the V&A Museum collection.(3) In that collection, there are also two teapots both having the version of the pattern with the house to the right.(4, 5) Before discussing possible explanations for the reversed motifs on Lowestoft porcelains, the origin of the pattern needs some consideration.



3. Lowestoft underglaze painted Island House pattern cup and saucer with the standard motif on the saucer and the reversed motif on the cup. ©Victoria and Albert Museum Museum, London (C.494&A-1924).



4. Lowestoft teapot, underglaze painted *Island House* pattern with the reversed motif. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London (C.924&A-1924)



5. Lowestoft teapot, underglaze painted *Island House* pattern with the reversed motif. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London (C.547&A-1924)

Goss² claims that the *Island House* pattern, or the *Long Fence* pattern as he refers to it, was copied from the Liverpool factory of William Reid. As the William Reid pattern dates to c.1756-60³ and thus predates the adoption of this pattern by Lowestoft by more than ten years, this is certainly possible, though the possibility of there being a Far-Eastern origin, from which this pattern fed into English porcelain decoration, cannot be discounted. Two examples of William Reid wares shown here are in the house-to-

the-left version.(6, 7), as is the example shown in Goss.(8) The author has not been able to find an example from the Reid factory where the foreground motif has the house to the right as on the Lowestoft examples.



6. William Reid saucer. ©Scottish Antiques.



7. William Reid saucer. ©Juno Antiques.



8. William Reid saucer, c.1756-60.⁴ ©Steven Goss

To return to the question of how the Lowestoft versions of the *Island House* pattern included one with a reversed motif, one may speculate about the painting process on the factory floor; but we shall probably never know for certain how this came about. What this investigation does reveal is that the pattern was most probably put together in the decorators' workroom from separate elements – the foreground motif as one, and the more distant pagoda-style building, trees, rocks and fence motif as another. The reversed motif may have been designed purposefully, or this variant merely resulted from the painter or painters using copy references that had been flipped resulting in the reversed version. The pattern was certainly freely painted by both factories, but we are unable to be certain as to the control over detailed content of the decoration. In fact, the looseness of these early underglaze blue painted

patterns give them a particular charm even today, when we have become used to precise mechanized decoration on ceramics as the norm.

Discussion of this common and popular pattern of its day has provided us with a hazy window into the practices and inspirations of porcelain decoration in England in the second half of the 18th century. Furthermore, in the case of the *Island House* or *Long Fence* pattern on Lowestoft tea wares, we certainly have it both ways – with the island house to the left of the fence and also to its right. Although we may speculate on how this dichotomy came about, the matter is likely to remain a mystery.

Patrick Hagglund, January 2021

Notes

¹ Smith, Sheenah, *Lowestoft porcelain in Norwich Castle Museum Volume 1 Blue and White* (Great Yarmouth: Galliard Printers Limited, 1975), cat.109, pp.106-7.

² Goss, Steven, *British blue and white porcelain saucers 1745-1795* (Privately published, 2018), cat.357, p.189.

³ Goss, *British blue and white* (2018), cat.215, p.117.

⁴ Ibid.