

Staffordshire Chimney Sweep Figure

Lured by nothing more noble than curiosity, I bought this pearlware figure of a Chimney Sweep for his unusual character, and for his emotional charge. He is at once dark and faintly sinister, appealingly defenceless and young.



He is surprising in being so different in nature and appearance to other Staffordshire figures. And right away, as so often with ceramics, the questions came crowding, one leading to another, and none really answering the chief question: Why?

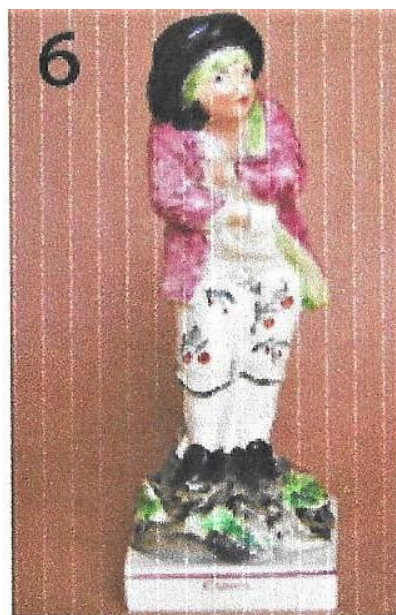
Most square-based, English, pearlware figures with overglaze enamel painting are decorative and pleasantly coloured. As a group they have a romantic slant; even the workers are prettified in pink trousers or flowered jackets. Perhaps it is my Sweep's realism that is so startling in a range where there are gods and goddesses, Biblical figures, sportsmen and sportswomen, and vendors (why do some of the latter have cherub wings poking out of the back of their shirts?); where there are animals, literary figures, politicians, heroes, scientists, Seasons, and Elements. Many subjects are influenced by the earlier, elaborate porcelain figures of the 18th century. Almost all of them have something of the idyllic about them.

In the early 19th century, one would have been able to make a statement about one's beliefs and interests through the inhabitants of one's mantelpiece, and that led me to a second question: who bought these figures? What strata of society were they designed for? I had previously thought they were for a wide social range, but realise now that their purchasers in the early 19th c. must have been comfortably off and above all educated, though the prices were not high. Later in the century the mantelpiece figures became increasingly simpler, more patriotic and contemporary.

First of all, I discovered my Sweep, had an interesting, even elevated, pedigree. His origin is a figure of 'Winter' in *terre de pipe*, a kind of unglazed *faience fine*, by a Belgian sculptor, Paul-Louis Cyfflé (1724-1806) who is an interesting artist of elaborate groups in the white.



The model was later used, in colours, by Ralph Wood named on the square base 'Clown' and it was also made with a small bocage and labelled 'Sloth'.



Titel: 'Clown', Impressted S. Courtesy: Auhia Carter.

So why make a figure of a Chimney Sweep to stand out among the gentle colours and educated allusions on the mantelpiece? I am still not sure, but it can have been for one of a number of reasons. The profession is an ancient one, which expanded in Europe as the population increased and houses became larger. It was also, though menial, important; as an unswept chimney was a serious fire hazard. The occupation of Chimney Sweep, therefore, was a respected one. Mayhew says that they were considered to be more intelligent than those in other 'street' jobs like the dustmen and scavengers. And just possibly it might have been for luck, with which Sweeps seem to have been associated. It was thought lucky to meet a Sweep, more so to shake hands with one, and particularly to have one at your wedding.

Somewhat fantastically, I hypothesize that Sweeps had connotations of taking darkness and danger upon themselves – not exactly the same as a scapegoat, but protective through averting fire. Or maybe they were feared, and the fear disabled by making them into the opposite. I doubt any of these ideas were overt.

I have tried to envisage my Sweep as one of a pair of figures of unglamorous but worthy occupations, but have never seen an appropriate companion; and I have considered him as a proselytising figure to encourage improvement in Sweeps' lives, but can find no evidence.

Culturally, Sweeps appear early in street ballads and pantomime, not always favourably; though Hans Christian Andersen wrote a fairy tale, "The Shepherdess and the Sweep" in 1845 about two china figures, in which the Sweep is the chivalrous hero. There are legends about a Sweep saving one of the Kings of England – either William I or George II - in danger from a runaway carriage. There are child Sweeps in Charles Kingsley's "The Water-Babies", that complicated Victorian moral tale, and a cheery Sweep in modern form in P.L.Travers' "Mary Poppins". It is tempting to stretch the analogy to include the dark man bringing coal among other things to a Scottish first footing.

My Sweep is from an earlier, darker time. In Victorian London young 'climbing boys' were used to clean the chimneys from inside, a dirty, dangerous, and exploited life for children which continued till a law in 1840 forbade anyone under 21 to sweep chimneys. A successive number of chimney-cleaning inventions made using children unnecessary, and now the Sweep turns up in a white overall and with white dustsheets and an enormous vacuum cleaner removes every particle from my chimney.



With grateful thanks to Pat Halfpenny and to my daughters for helpful suggestions

also to:

London Labour and the London Poor – Henry Mayhew

English Earthenware Figures 1740-1840 – Pat Halfpenny

<https://www.mystaffordshirefigures.com/blog>

and, wide-ranging rambling on the internet

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