



Cookworthy Bristol Coffee Pot

**William Cookworthy** was born 12<sup>th</sup> April 1705 and died 21<sup>st</sup> October 1780.

This Paper suggests Cookworthy's first factory was in Bristol.

In 1765 Cookworthy was aged 60, which finds him probably at his best. When he sold his interest in the Bristol porcelain factory to Richard Champion in 1774, he was aged 74, well into his twilight years.

He trained as a pharmacist in London and established his own business in Plymouth in 1726 (age 21) called 'Bevans & Cookworthy.'

An important feature of the history concerning William Cookworthy was that he was a very active Quaker, travelling over the South of England and London. He preached at Meetings throughout the South West and he frequently visited Bristol, and made friends with other Quakers. He was invited to their homes and discussed mutual interests. Thus he met fellow Quakers Dr Hingston from Penryn and Richard Champion and others who were later to help finance his new ceramic venture.

He was the first to succeed in England in the manufacture of Cobalt Blue direct from the ore, which he found in Cornwall. He wrote to the Governor of North Carolina about this in detail showing his American connections.

The pottery industry rapidly developed from early 1720 due to tea so that, by 1765, Josiah Wedgwood had built up considerable exports of ware to Europe and North America. A great demand had arisen for something better than

pewter or rough earthenware, the latter having poor heat resistance to hot liquids.

After many years of experiment, Cookworthy took out a patent and started his Plymouth factory in 1768, pursuant to the patent granted to him dated 17<sup>th</sup> March 1768.

But where were Cookworthy's first products produced?



Cookworthy Plymouth Sauceboat

He decided to visit other potteries to find out how they were going about the firing of their ware. He was hampered by the fact that no true hard paste porcelain was being produced in England at the time. After Worcester, Cookworthy is said to have gone to Bow as well. It may well have been at this time that he met Nicholas Crisp who had just started his porcelain works at Vauxhall. This had significance later when Nicholas Crisp moved to nearby Bovey Tracey, having brought many of his moulds with him.

Although not a potter, Cookworthy nevertheless had considerable knowledge of the physical and chemical changes which take place when substances are brought to very high temperatures and this was the key to his success.

This produced china with a degree of transparency and hardness characteristic of true porcelain.

Cookworthy found that if the glaze was chemically and physically similar to the body it covered, it would react to intense heat with the same degree of expansion and contraction. Thus he solved the problem that had defeated all other British potters.

Cookworthy's search for china clay started as early as 1745 when he corresponded with his friend, Dr Richard Hingston of Penryn, informing him that the stone and clay had been found in Virginia, America and that it could be transported to England for £13 per ton. It has been suggested (by Pountney in 1920) that Cookworthy had been experimenting at Redcliffe Glasshouse in Bristol with American clay by about 1745 where he would have had a kiln for that purpose. There is also evidence that Cookworthy had a works at Bristol from October to December 1765.

At about the same time, a Bristol merchant, Edward Heylyn, and Thomas Frye had in 1744 had taken out a patent for employing workmen at Bow to manufacture china. The patent stated that the earth used to make this new 'material' was the produce of the Cherokee nation in America and was called 'Unaker.' We also know that a cargo of twenty tons was imported into London from Carolina in 1743-44.

Richard Champion (who had no financial involvement with Cookworthy until 1768) had a relative (brother in law) in South Carolina called Caleb Lloyd. In July 1765 he asked Champion to have made 'a few pieces of china' from material he had sent over from Carolina. In November 1765, he wrote back and said-

*'A new work just established ... This new work is from a Clay and Stone discovered in Cornwall, which answers the description of the Chinese. But in burning there is a deficiency; though the body is perfectly white within, but not without, which is always smokey.'* This was most probably Cookworthy's first works at Bristol operating in the later part of 1765.

It was shortly after Cookworthy's examination of the samples brought from America in 1745 that he found the coveted materials in Cornwall. This probably was as a result of his own observations of some bell founders in Fowey. He noticed that the heat of the molten metal had fused some of the stones used to line the mould.

He stated that he found large quantities in Cornwall at Tregonning Hill.



Cookworthy Plymouth Mug

He must have experimented at his own laboratory at Plymouth. His experiments were in a wood burning kiln originally designed for firing brown stoneware and were conducted for 20 years before he took out his patent in March 1768.

The experimentation at Plymouth was not successful and for the production of actual porcelain, however, a real working pottery was necessary and here the evidence points to Bristol as the venue of the first attempts and seemed to have taken place at different times between 1745 and 1767. Cookworthy probably had also experimented at Bristol on some of the materials which had been transported from America.

The factory production at Plymouth moved completely to Castle Green, Bristol, taking its craftsmen, its moulds (which had originated in Vauxhall and taken to Plymouth by Nicolas Crisp) and stock with it, and Cookworthy retained a controlling interest in the business until 1774 when Richard Champion took over from him. The question is whether Cookworthy moved from Plymouth back to his previously established works in Bristol.

He first of all made domestic ware, decorated in underglaze blue imitating imported blue and white. It was obviously still experimental as the blue varied

from inky blue-black to pale blue grey and was often smudged and blurred, shapes were distorted, there were firing cracks and the pieces were smoke stained or peppered with grits and flecks of wood ash. The colour of the paste itself varied, the later whiter body being due to clay found at St. Stephens. Soon he was experimenting with enamel colours put on over the glaze, his earliest decoration being copied from the Oriental chrysanthemum flower sprays in light red, yellow and green. This was probably in Bristol in 1765.

Many of the technical problems that Cookworthy encountered are evident in the ware itself, and the raw materials imposed certain restrictions on the type of ceramic created. This is, for instance, a shortage of broad flat pieces such as saucers and plates as it proved very difficult to throw and fire these articles without their sinking in the centre. Subsidence is evident too in many other objects, figures often appear to lean or sag and cups and vases to be lop sided. The Coxside site at Plymouth was not a success even though there were apparently up to sixty persons employed there just before the move to Bristol in 1770 (this information was forthcoming from an individual asked his recollections 60 years later!).

There was apparently an export trade, the blue and white ware being popular in America.

It is of course most unlikely that the establishment of suitable premises with a kiln at Bristol happened overnight so that the probability is that Cookworthy had already established works in Bristol, including a kiln more to his liking. Research by others, such as Severne Mackenna, concludes that Cookworthy had a works in Bristol in 1765. It is to be noted that, in 1975, Severne Mackenna published another volume 3 on Plymouth and Bristol Porcelain substantially revising what he had written in his 1947 work. He also delivered a lecture to the ECC on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 1980 correcting his 'previous errors'.

Josiah Wedgwood was concerned with the involvement of the production in America of wares to compete with his own, particularly from new pot works in South Carolina, having mentioned in a letter an insolvent master potter to conduct production. The insolvent potter mentioned in Wedgwood's letter was a Quaker named Bartlem who was settled in Camden, South Carolina in 1768 and 'established the Plymouth China Works there.' It is also asserted in the same letter that Richard Champion 'planned to do the same.' It is suggested that this assertion (repeated by Severne Mackenna) should not be accepted without

further supporting facts and corroboration, especially as to the differences in dates.

Can we now identify any 1765 Bristol pieces made in 1765? They would be speckled with smoke staining and possibly misshapen.

By the time of the Patent of 1768, Cookworthy had apparently perfected his method of production.

There are many smoke stained pieces attributed to Plymouth but were some of these produced at the 1765 Bristol factory.....



Cookworthy Plymouth Small Bowl

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William Cookworthy and the Plymouth Factory: An Updating

A paper read by Dr. F. Severne Mackenna at the Courtauld Institute of Art,  
Portman Square on the 18th October, 1980

Bristol Porcelain bicentenary exhibition 1990 by Arnold Wilson, Director.



Cookworthy Teapot c1770

*C. John Robson December 2020*