

A RARE AND UNUSUAL MARTINWARE MUG – and the unusual man who commissioned it

Gabriel Newfield

Some years ago I acquired a large stoneware salt-glazed mug made by the Martin Brothers in 1897.(1) Later I discovered they had made six mugs like mine. It has areas of shiny, stylised, symmetrical, floral and armorial decoration, in light brown, standing out against a sombre satin-black background.



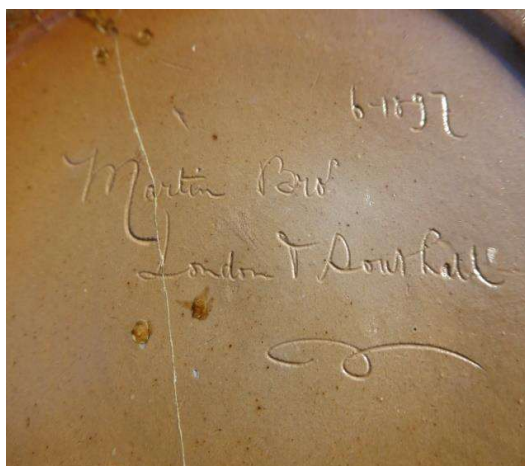
On one side is a coat of arms above a motto, *AEQUAM SERVARE MENTEM* (2); on the opposite side, as a crest, the image of a stork (see photograph on page 4).



At the front (opposite the handle), just above the middle, in a panel under a fleur de lys, is the incised date: 1897 . Lower down, a small panel is inscribed: .V.R.I. , an attenuated version of the imperial cypher and an abbreviation of Victoria Regina Imperatrix (Victoria Queen Empress).



The base is inscribed: 6-1897 [June 1897] *Martin Bros London & Southall.*



The mug is 13 cm (5 1/8 in) high. Its diameter is 9 cm (3 1/2 in) at the top and 12 cm (4 3/4 in) at the bottom. It has a very long, very fine, firing crack, clearly visible on the light-coloured bottom but hard to see elsewhere.

At first sight this is a mug made in 1897 to mark the Queen's diamond jubilee, and perhaps of some slight interest in that the Martin Brothers are thought to have made relatively few commemorative or armorial pots.(3) Further reflection raises some questions. Since the arms, which I found were

associated with the Rivers family, have nothing to do with Queen Victoria, why are they there, if this was indeed a mug made for her diamond jubilee? And why, if the mug had actually been made for this special occasion, was it marked so modestly, with just '1897' and 'VRI'? So what may have seemed an example of run-of-the-mill Martinware, unusual only in its ordinariness – no exotic birds, no grotesque faces, but entirely characteristic colours – is actually an enigma. An unsurprising feature is the generous display, often found on the Brothers' pots, of precisely-executed stylised decoration, chiefly scrolling foliage.

Later I found references to two other mugs made by the Brothers that were otherwise similar to mine but made no mention of Queen Victoria. One came up in a Dreweatts auction at Newbury on 17 September 2008 (lot 426), with the date 10-1896 (October 1896) inscribed on the base. The other was in a Louis Taylor auction in the Potteries on 7 December 2009 (lot 395) with the date 8-1895 (August 1895) on the base. The description of these mugs in the auction catalogues indicate that they probably bore the same armorial features as mine. So the Brothers had made mugs to this pattern before 1897, but with no hint of any connection with the Queen or the exceptional length of her reign. I also found details of another mug, dated June 1897, sold by

Bonhams at an auction in Bath on 26 February 2007 (lot 210). It has the same jubilee markings as mine, the same incised date, looks much the same and is similarly cracked, but with one important difference: where the crest on my mug bears the image of a stork, its crest shows a fox standing on a crown (more on this below).

I discovered that the Brothers had earlier made a pair of stoneware jugs for a Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers. Pitt-Rivers was an inveterate collector who, in 1880, in his early 50s, suddenly became enormously rich. (For more about Pitt-Rivers – his background, his good luck and his ambition – see the Appendix.) Ordered from the Brothers by Pitt-Rivers in 1892, they had been delivered in October 1894. They were similar to my mug: the same sombre palette, similar surface decoration and the same coat of arms, arms borne by Pitt-Rivers from 1880. About 24 cm (9 ½ in) high, they had been specially made for him and cost him six guineas, £6.30 in decimal notation. (In 2008 a present-day equivalent of about £3,000 was suggested.) One jug had got broken, and in 1895 Pitt-Rivers had ordered two more, probably to replace the broken one. They are well documented in the archives of the Pitt Rivers Museum – see Alison Petch's articles.(5)

The absence of any reference to the Queen on the jugs and the pre-1897 mugs suggests that when they were made neither the Brothers nor Pitt-Rivers were contemplating the possibility of associating her with them in any way.

Since the decoration on my mug and on the jugs is similar, it is natural to wonder whether Pitt-Rivers had perhaps commissioned the Martin Brothers to make some mugs for him, to go with his jugs. This was indeed the case: in April 1895 Pitt-Rivers had placed an order with the Brothers for six mugs. I initially – and mistakenly – assumed that the Brothers had made these mugs for Pitt-Rivers in 1895, and had then, in 1897, adapting the design to mark the Jubilee, had produced more for general sale. This was consistent with the well-known fact that towards the end of the 1890s the pottery was in financial difficulty, which would have given the Brothers an incentive to act opportunistically by recycling an existing design.

The true history of the mugs is more complicated (6) and highlights three key factors: just how long it could take the Brothers to make pots that were to their own and their clients' satisfaction, the major investment of skill and working time that could be involved, and the great potential wastage stemming from the Brothers' inability to control the infrequent firings of their kiln. (In one entire year in the late 1880s there had been only two firings.) These factors show how unlikely it is that the Brothers ever had long production runs: that they seldom or never made more than a relatively small number of copies of any given design.

Having ordered six mugs in April 1895, Pitt-Rivers subsequently informed the Brothers of his wishes concerning their colour, shape and decoration. In May 1895, the Brothers, referring to the two versions of the crest (stork or fox), asked him 'please let us know if we can put one of the crests on three of the mugs & the other on the other three'. In December 1895 the Brothers told him that the mugs had not yet been fired. In April 1896 the mugs, dated 1895, were sent to Pitt-Rivers and he did not like them. One reason was that he had expected a sharper contrast, as with his jugs, between the decorated areas and the black background. The Brothers agreed to take them back, intending to sell them to other customers. In July 1896 the Brothers agreed to work on a second batch, to be dated 1896. In October 1896 they informed Pitt-Rivers that 'we are about to make the six mugs again', but it was not until June 1897 that they sent him a single mug as an example, with a letter in which they said, with obvious regret,

that 'they fired so much like those you returned'. Anticipating that he would not like them, they informed him that they were already – their third attempt -- making them again. In the same letter they suggested that, as it was by then the Queen's diamond jubilee year, the mugs be dated 1897 and 'some slight reference' to the jubilee added. In deciding that the second batch, dated 1896, would not be acceptable to their client, they were again left with six mugs to try to sell to other customers. Finally, in December 1897, almost at the end of jubilee year, the Brothers sent Pitt-Rivers three mugs, saying that 'the coloring [sic] this time we think is more like what you wanted', but that 'the other three came out of the kiln cracked', though they were 'the same in color [sic]' as the ones they had sent. It will be noted that after firing the black areas resembled dyed leather, and it is on record that this was as the Brothers' intended.

I do not know whether Pitt-Rivers took possession of the three cracked mugs, nor whether he accepted the Brothers' offer to make them again. It is apparent that my mug and the one sold by Bonhams in 2007 are two of the three cracked ones. Given that the incised date on the base of both is June, and that the uncracked mugs from this batch were not sent to Pitt-Rivers till December, it is natural to ask why six months elapsed between the base being incised and their being fired, assuming that, after firing, the good ones were at once sent to Pitt-Rivers.

Here the occasion of a lecture by Rosemary Pemberton in January 2018 was invaluable (7), as it offered a rare opportunity to compare mugs made in different years: an 1896 one, the possession of another collector, and my own 1897 one. Comparing them, and a re-examination of the picture in the auction catalogue of Bonhams 2007 sale, confirmed that much of the decorated surface was incised by hand, and also revealed numerous small differences between the patterns, most of them unrelated to the need in the 1897 batch to make space for a version of the imperial cypher. This strongly suggests that no two mugs were exactly the same, and provides further evidence that the process of making and decorating them was highly labour-intensive. So while for part of the time the six mugs may have been in a queue in the pottery awaiting surface decoration, and then in another queue awaiting firing of the kiln, the time taken to decorate them may itself have been significant.



Why did Pitt-Rivers want two versions of the crest? Both are examples of a rebus (visual pun) on a family name. The Lane Fox family's heraldic image of a fox is an obvious choice, while the image of a stork, a wading bird at home in a river, had been in use by the Rivers family for a long time. Given his elaborate – four part, two families – post-1880 surname, his adoption of two crests is perhaps not all that surprising. It is not known whether his action was approved by the College of Arms. Since the Brothers had proposed that the first (1895) batch of mugs should be made half fox and half stork, and we know that the 1897 batch included both versions, it is reasonable to suspect that all three batches were likewise half and half.

We now come to some obvious questions, How were the mugs made? How in particular were they decorated: how was the pattern, in all its complexity, created upon the surface? Which was put there first, the black background or the decoration? No illuminating documentary sources have been found, so it has been necessary to try to find answers through direct physical examination, supported by some familiarity with ceramic skills and techniques and some knowledge of the state of technology in the late 19th century. In doing this I have been helped by several established artist potters who have examined my mug, The suggested account here is, however, entirely mine and I am wholly responsible for any errors. While, as I hope, it may be broadly correct, it will of course be changed if evidence becomes available throwing fresh light on how the desired effects were achieved. So comments and corrections are welcomed and will be gratefully received. Six stages are suggested, all requiring considerable skill, and for the final stage, firing, the Brothers, given their recurring problems, will also have needed luck on their side:

- (1) First, the entire pattern will have been drawn to scale on paper.
- (2) Then the outline and main features of each section of the pattern will have been transferred from the drawing to the (unfired) ceramic surface. There are many ways this could have been done, and one can only guess what techniques were employed. Some could not have been used because they had not yet been invented, such as techniques requiring use of computers or lasers. Others are unlikely to have been used, owing to their being prohibitively expensive when so few mugs were to be made, such as transfer-printing from an engraved copper plate. But several possibilities remain, including stencilling, 'Prick and Pounce', and the use of paper cutouts or tracing paper.
- (3) The details of each section – furrows and lines, letters and numbers, etc – will have been added by hand, involving much intricate incising and carving.
- (4) A thick layer of black slip will have been applied by brush to the gaps between sections of the pattern. The same slip will have been placed in the incised/carved features of the various sections, probably by smearing on a layer and then wiping off the excess.
- (5) Further minor adjustments will almost certainly have been made, by hand, including tidying up the boundary between the decorated areas and the black background, and perhaps also involving some sgraffito work.
- (6) Finally, the mugs will have received a single salt-glaze firing. If this has gone as intended, the entire surface will then be covered with a strong thin transparent glaze giving the decorated areas their distinctive light brown colour.

It is reasonable to assume that, apart from stage 4, the only part of the surface covered with slip will be the narrow smooth and shiny bands just below the top rim and just above the base, which may have received a suitable slip to inhibit the formation of the orange peel effect characteristic of salt-glazed pots. This effect is most marked on the decorated areas, their surface being covered with a myriad of tiny irregular hills, craters and valleys.

Notes

(1) The four brothers established their first pottery in 1873 and their last firing was in 1914. They are best known for their exotic bird sculptures and their grotesque face jugs. A subdued palette of browns and blacks and blues and greys and greens is typical of their work.

(2) The motto is from Horace. It has been variously translated as 'To preserve a calm mind', 'To keep an unruffled mind' and 'To maintain an even temper'.

(3) The Brothers had produced a specially designed mug in 1887 to mark the Queen's golden jubilee whereas, as I show, mine became modestly commemorative in 1897 only as an unintended result of protracted delays in producing pots that met their client's requirements.

(4) Another apparent difference between my mug and the Bonhams mug is that, according to the sale catalogue, the inscription on their mug's base says that the Brothers' work was based in London and Vauxhall. This is incorrect and must be a misreading of 'London & Southall'.

(5) Alison Petch, a senior member of the research staff of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, is the author of a number of articles, beginning in the early 1990s, on topics relating to Pitt-Rivers and the Museum, including some issued online by the Museum under the generic title 'Rethinking Pitt-Rivers – analysing the activities of a nineteenth-century collector'. Anyone familiar with her work will see at once how heavily I have drawn on her writings, both in the main text and in the Appendix. I am most grateful to her for permitting me to do this, and am happy to acknowledge my great debt to her. All errors are of course mine.

(6) The story of the making of the mugs is revealed in correspondence between the Brothers and Pitt-Rivers, available since August 2011 in the 'Rethinking Pitt-Rivers' series, again thanks to the work of Alison Petch. (See online: *Pitt-Rivers and Martin Brothers – University of Oxford*)

(7) Many thanks to Rosemary Pemberton for prompting me to resume my investigation into the mugs, steering me in a fruitful direction, and helping me to recognise some of my earlier mistakes. She presented the outcome of her own work in a lecture to the English Ceramic Circle in London in January 2018, on 'General Pitt-Rivers: ceramic collection, curation and commission', later published in the Circle's *Transactions*, Vol 28 (2017) : 202-226. (Though dated 2017, this volume of *Transactions* was not published until July 2018.)

IMPORTANT NOTICE This draft is being made available online to members of the London Ceramic Circle at Morley College, under the scheme notified to LCC members on 23 July 2020, as if it had been read as a short paper at one of the Circle's meetings.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to a number of people who have helped me in the course of my investigation. To Alison Petch (see Notes 5 and 6 above), to Rosemary Pemberton (see Note 7 above), to Charles Dawson, who drew my attention to the significance of the arms when I was trying to find out more about the background to the making of my mug, to the artist potters who gave me their views on how the mug may have been decorated (including enabling me to rule out some possibilities), and to one well-known potter in particular (she knows who she is). The photograph of Pitt-Rivers below is the copyright of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

© Gabriel Newfield 2014

Revised July 2020

Appendix

This Appendix is a much altered and much condensed version of Alison Petch's biographical article in the "Rethinking Pitt-Rivers" series, originally published in 2009 and later updated (see Note 5 above). The url of her article is: web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/index.php/pitt-rivers-life/10-biography-of-general-pitt-rivers/. All errors in this version are of course mine.



Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers, DCL, FRS, FSA

Pitt-Rivers (1827-1900) was born Augustus Henry into the Lane Fox family, based at Bramham near Wetherby in Yorkshire, a family regarded by some as landed gentry and by others as aristocracy, his mother's brother being the 17th holder of an ancient Scottish earldom. As the younger son of a younger son Augustus had more status than wealth. As for many in that position at that time, the army was seen as offering an attractive career, the more so as promotion could still be purchased up to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, a facility from which he benefited.

Although Augustus was comfortably off, he was not rich, especially later on when he had a large family to support, and his expectations were limited until, at the age of 52, his circumstances changed dramatically. This was the result of a slightly complicated chain of events. In 1802 George Pitt, who already held the barony of Rivers in the peerage of Great Britain, became first holder of a newly created Rivers barony in the peerage of the United Kingdom. (The Rivers barony was created four times in all, starting in 1299.)

General Pitt-Rivers, after 1880 (circa 1890) Copyright Pitt-Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (1998.271.66)
A relevant feature of this final creation was that it made provision for *special remainder*, the arrangement whereby a peerage can be inherited by a person or persons other than the usual

‘heirs male of [the] body’ of the previous holder, it being laid down precisely by whom and in what circumstances such non-standard inheritance can occur.

When George Pitt died in 1803 he was succeeded in the baronies by his son, also called George Pitt, who was great-uncle to Augustus and his elder brother William. It was through a will made in 1823 by this great-uncle that Augustus eventually benefited. When the great-uncle died in 1828 the Great Britain barony became extinct and the UK barony passed, by special remainder, to William Horace Beckford, whose mother was a daughter of its first holder. At the same time Beckford, now 3rd Lord Rivers, assumed by Royal licence the surname Pitt-Rivers. Then, in 1852, his brother William died, aged only 34, greatly improving Augustus’s prospects and enabling him to get married, his bride-to-be’s titled parents withdrawing their previous opposition to the union. Later, on the death without issue on 31 March 1880 of his second cousin, Horace Pitt-Rivers (6th Lord Rivers), Augustus, his sole heir, under the terms of the 1823 will, inherited the huge Rivers estate.

The landed part of the estate consisted of over 27,000 acres, chiefly at Cranborne Chase in Dorset. It yielded a net annual income of about £23,000, equivalent to several million pounds today. It is said that at a stroke Augustus became, for the last twenty years of his life, one of the richest untitled men in the whole of Great Britain. It was a condition of his inheriting the estate that he assume, within a year, the arms of his great-uncle and the surname Pitt-Rivers, either alone or in addition to his existing surname. (Until 1880 he had been known as A H Lane Fox or as A H L Fox: both forms had been used.) The *London Gazette* of 6 June 1880 confirmed that the condition had been met, the Queen having allowed him to add Pitt-Rivers to his existing surname, and to bear ‘the arms of Pitt quarterly in the first quarter with those of Fox’, subject to some formalities involving the College of Arms. Augustus would have liked also to inherit the title, but in this he was disappointed: he lodged a petition in support of his claim, but was deemed to fall outside the terms of the special remainder. In fact no living person fell within the defined terms and the UK barony became extinct.

In 1876, four years before his change of fortune, Augustus had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. Two years after the change, by then a major-general, he formally retired from the army and was promoted to the honorary rank of lieutenant-general. He acquired several more prestigious honorary positions, and became first holder of the new post of Inspector of Ancient Monuments. Having been a zealous collector all his life, he was now able to add to his collection at a much faster rate. It is ironic that while as a young man he had possessed more status than wealth, in his later years, when he possessed great wealth, he became more concerned about his status. Lacking a peerage, or even a knighthood, he was commonly referred to simply as ‘the General’. He is now remembered as an important figure in the development of archaeology and ethnography in Great Britain. It was through his initiative that the Oxford museum bearing his name came into being. It is now a department of the University of Oxford and cares for the University’s collection of archaeological and ethnographic objects.

Note on tone Pitt-Rivers is an easy target for pity or criticism, being arguably over-ambitious, excessively acquisitive and unduly status-conscious. I am aware, however, that a more sympathetic and more charitable case could be presented in his defence. With this in mind, I have tried, in the main text and in the Appendix, to avoid direct criticism while not suppressing relevant facts.