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The Earliest Transfer-Printing in England Birmingham and Battersea



Fig. 1 An enamel plaque for the Free British Fishery Society, probably transfer-printed in Birmingham about 1751. There is some additional hand-painting in the foreground and at the sides. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

The development of transfer-printing in England appears to have been quite independent of the earlier, commercially unsuccessful, essays in Italy. The person most associated with this early history of ceramic printing is the Irish engraver John Brooks. He petitioned three times for a patent to be granted to him for his process but without success.

His first application was on the 10 September 1751: *The humble petition of John Brooks of Birmingham engraver Sheweth that the petitioner has found out a method of printing, impressing and reversing upon enamel and china from engraved, etched and mezzotinto plates and from cuttings on wood and mettle.* In this context, enamel refers to a material that was used to make small boxes and other decorative objects. It comprised a copper base coated with a layer of white glass.

Brooks's next two applications were made from Battersea in London. In that of 1754, the claims were extended to cover glass, whilst in that of 1755 delftware was also mentioned.

The question of where the process was first put to commercial use is debatable but it seems likely that it was in Birmingham, which was a center of the metal trade, including enamels. An enamel plaque bearing an overglaze print entitled *Success to the British Fisheries* is an early piece, likely to

have been made in Birmingham around the time of the first patent application [1]. The plaque commemorates the founding by royal charter of the Free British Fishery Society on the 22 October 1750. The printing is somewhat powdery and uncertain and some over-painting has been employed to correct deficiencies in the transfer print.

Other enamel plaques likely to have been produced in Birmingham show the two famous Gunning sisters who arrived in London from Ireland in 1750 and who took the town by storm with their beauty. By the spring of 1752 they had both married aristocrats and a date of 1751 or 1752 seems likely for the plaques showing the two young ladies [2].

Brooks subsequently moved to London to become a partner in the short lived Battersea factory, which operated from 1753-56. The traditional idea that this factory confined its output to small enamel wares decorated with prints, such as bottle tickets, snuff boxes, medallions etc, has had to be modified as a result of recent excavations on the site [1]. For example, fragments of delftware tiles were found, one of which was printed in red with *La Souffleuse de Savon* after Boucher. Although no examples of tiles of this type seem to have survived, the same print is known on white salt glaze stoneware plates [3]. It is significant, therefore, that stone plates are one of the items included in the bankruptcy sale of the Battersea factory.

Also found during the excavations at the Battersea factory, was part of a Chinese porcelain plate decorated with another print after Boucher, *Le Marchand d'Oiseaux*. This print is also known on white saltglaze plates. So the archaeological evidence strongly suggests that the Battersea factory was involved not only in applying transfer prints to small enamel objects but also to delftware tiles of unknown origin, imported Chinese porcelain and Staffordshire white saltglaze stoneware plates. The range of prints known on these stoneware plates is extensive.



Fig. 2 Two enamel plaques with transfer-printed portraits of the Gunning sisters. These were probably printed in Birmingham about 1751. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London



Fig. 3 A Staffordshire white saltgl transfer printed at Battersea c175

Reference

1. Judith Crouch, *English Ceramic Circle Transactions* **19** (1) 29-45 (2005)