

Robin Hildyard: 'Pratt' (but which one?)

It is not unknown for collectors and researchers to spend years pursuing their prey along parallel paths that never converge or offer the chance to share information of mutual benefit. Such was perhaps the case in 1998 when Diana Edwards and Rodney Hampson commented in *English Dry-Bodied Stoneware: Wedgwood and Contemporary Manufacturers 1774-1830*, that 'Pratt stoneware seems confined to one or two shapes of marked drab-grey smear glazed stoneware, probably intended for burning incense or containing potpourri, which would appear by form and function to date to the early nineteenth century'. Below the radar, however, one or two specialist collectors were already teasing out further examples by carefully isolating and comparing the idiosyncratic potting characteristics shared by the handful of marked pieces.

Essentially, the diagnostic features of Pratt stonewares comprise a greyish non-feldspathic stoneware body with thin glaze, apparently produced by coating the inside of the saggar with raw glaze ingredients which would vapourise at high temperature during the firing to give a light overall smear glaze. Applied decoration is limited to a small range of borrowed late 18C Wedgwood sprigs, inky dark or sometimes pale lavender blue, placed on the greyish ground usually prepared with pebble rouletting (produced by pressing a tool with rotary head, indented with rows of small dots or chevrons, against the leather-hard pot mounted on the lathe). Besides giving a contrasting surface, this no doubt also provided a better key when the sprigs, with their backs moistened and lightly held on the tip of a sharp knife, were dextrously laid onto the pot. The absence of any *engine-turned* embellishment – a refinement that produced a basket-weave effect, first used by Josiah Wedgwood in 1763 but by 1800 an essential piece of equipment for any enterprising factory making ornamental wares – does strongly suggest a small pottery experimenting with a tiny range of decorative stonewares added to its staple utilitarian products: whatever these may have been. One might speculate that if William Pratt's old pottery at Fenton already had high-firing stoneware kilns, it may have been making white and scratch blue salt-glazed stoneware for which the demand lingered until the very end of the 18C, particularly for the export market. No doubt various types of lead-glazed creamwares were also made, perhaps utilising the factory's competent in-house gilding capability. But the fact that several surviving Pratt stonewares have leaned slightly in the firing does suggest difficulties with controlling kiln-temperature.

As a closely-related group, it is fair to say that these greyish Pratt stonewares do show subtle differences from the mainstream sprigged stonewares produced in Staffordshire in the early 19C. Firstly, the rather austere sentimental neo-Classical sprigs were distinctly old-fashioned by this date and did not include the popular Turner sprig of Venus in her giant shell being towed by

dolphins, or light-hearted depictions of chariots pulled by lions and tigers with winged amorette flying above, or indeed any of the domestic genre of mothers with children. Secondly, the choice of applying blue sprigs to a white background was a reversal of the current fashion for white sprigs on a background of glossy blue slip, exemplified by Chetham & Woolley feldspathic stonewares and the stylish but decidedly export quality lead-glazed earthenwares of Enoch Wood. This preference might be due to technical difficulties, since one of the only two recorded



(1) Stoneware potpourri vases c1800–10 attributed to Pratt. The blue ground example together with its original lid is 5" high. The figure on the central vase is *Peace* and that on the right vase is referred to in the text as *Mourning*

Pratt pieces with white sprigs on a thin matt blue background (1 **centre**) has lost several vine leaves in the firing due to poor adhesion. Lastly, it seems unlikely that the dense opaque Pratt stoneware body would have been commercially viable for major production of ornamental wares: it was neither like the contemporary slightly creamy dry-bodied stonewares of Adams, Neale and Turner, nor the progressively whiter bodies used by Hackwood, Davenport and others. And it was completely overshadowed by the feldspathic Pearl body launched by Chetham & Woolley in 1795 which had set a new standard for white stoneware. Even this pioneering material, with its merger of stoneware and porcelain ingredients, was eventually equalled around 1810 when Wedgwood & Byerley adapted Josiah Wedgwood's 'white bisque porcelain' – originally intended for intaglios – to produce jugs with blue edges, with alternative smear-glazed versions offered by 1815.

To bring matters up to date, the known repertoire of Pratt stoneware shapes is as follows: potpourri vases (twelve examples), by far the most common shape. Sizes with lids approximate to five inch, six inch and seven inch. The same two sprigs occur on almost all: a robed female figure of *Peace* clutching an urn, with discarded arrows, spear and shield on the ground (1 **centre**) and a mourning figure with left arm draped around an urn backed by an obelisk (1 **right**), hereafter referred to as *Mourning*, though possibly representing Andromache mourning over the ashes of Hector. This type comprises: an example in the V&A impressed 'Pratt' (nominal six inch, Museum Number 2545 & A-1901, a rare specimen transferred from the Museum of Practical Geology to the South Kensington Museum in 1901); another piece impressed 'Pratt' in the Fitzwilliam Museum with sprig of the harp-playing Terpsichore (C.11 & A-1983, acquired from that collectors' paradise, Gabor Cossa across the road in Trumpington Street); two nominal seven inch without lids (one with gilded edges 1 **left**) and a complete five inch with *white sprigs on a blue ground border* (private collection, ex-Colin Wyman Collection, 1 **centre**); a pair without lids, nominal five inch, one impressed 'Pratt' (sold Bonhams 20/3/2012, whereabouts unknown); a garniture of two seven inch and one five inch (sold Phillips 3/5/2000, whereabouts unknown); an impressed 'Pratt' five inch with a sprig of the harp-playing muse Terpsichore and an unmarked



(2) Stoneware Potpourri vase impressed 'Pratt' c1800–10 depicting three robed women and a dog

seven inch with gilded edges in Harold Blakey Collection (illustrated Edwards & Hampson 1998 Colour Plate 56, sold Peter Wilson 16/9/2015, whereabouts unknown).

Potpourri vase with stand (one example) a squatter type, with a stand but missing lid, impressed 'Pratt': the sprigs, probably after Wedgwood, depict the Three Graces, and three robed women, one of whom is placing a wreath on a Herm, ie a bust on pedestal (Hiscock & Shepherd Antiques, sold c2018, whereabouts unknown **2**). Two of these stands also survive (private collection).

Spill vase, cylindrical (one example) impressed 'Pratt', with vine scroll border, *Peace*



(3) Stoneware impressed 'Pratt' (left) and attributed to Pratt (centre and right) *Peace* on the left-hand vase and *Mourning* on the right-hand vase c1800–10

and *Mourning*. Height 14cm (private collection, **3 left**) Small neo-classical vase (one example), perhaps originally part of a garniture: sprigs of woman with garland, perhaps *Ceres* or *Summer*, and woman with staff holding Phrygian cap, making a sacrifice to either Liberty or Peace. Height 164mm (private collection, **3, middle**)

Vase or spill vase (one example), with vine scroll border, *Peace* and *Mourning*. Height 118mm (private collection, **3 right**).

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(4) Stoneware attributed to Pratt with the rare blue ground c1800–10

Waisted spill vase (one example) with *Peace* and *Mourning* and a vine scroll border of *white sprigs on a blue ground*. Height 110mm (private collection in America, **4**)

Cream jug (one example), impressed 'Pratt', sprigged with daisy chain border and stars, the lower half pebble rouletted Height 70mm. (private collection, **5 left**)

Box and cover (one example), perhaps a sugar box, with daisy chain border. Height 98mm (private collection, **5 middle**)



(5) Stoneware impressed 'Pratt' H70mm (left) and attributed to Pratt (centre and right) c1800–10

Bow-handled potpourri basket, (one example) missing lid, sprigged with daisy chain border and stars. Height 110mm (private collection, **5 right**)



(6) Stoneware jug attributed to Pratt c1800–10

Ale jug (2 examples, 1 possible) the neck with a vine scroll border, the body sprigged with three robed women with a dog, and Cybel with upturned cornucopia paired with *Force of Love*. Height 160mm. (private collection, **6**). Another jug, sprigged with Bacchanalian boys pulling a goat, and pulling a lion, had survived with two of its original matching porter mugs (see below), in a private collection (**7 left**). Yet another possible candidate, with the well-known frieze of hunting figures known as *The Kill*, whereabouts unknown but illustrated by RK Henrywood *An Illustrated Guide to British Jugs* (1997) Plate 279, exhibits the correct shape (though handle details barely visible), a rouletted pebble ground and rouletted footrim.

Porter mug (one example), cylindrical with a vine scroll band below the rim, a rounded profile at the base and three body sprigs, including putto on an eagle combined with Venus rising from the sea, and Endymion resting on the Rock Latmos. Height unknown (private collection, **7 right**, shown with its matching jug; the mug's pair, impressed 'Pratt', is now lost)

Large vase (one example) with cupids embracing and holding a wreath, and maiden at sacrifice with cupid armed with bow climbing through a curtain. The scale of this piece is exceptional and the sprigs



(7) Stoneware jug and mug attributed to Pratt c1800–10 with a putto riding on a lion (left) and Endymion resting on a rock (right)

appear slightly later than those typically found on Pratt stonewares, but it does have many of the hallmarks of Pratt workmanship and quirky design. The distinctive shape is not in the 'rectangle-pad-marked' pattern book of the Ridgways at Cauldon Place, who did use a rather similar stoneware body with blue sprigs. Height 270mm (private collection **8**).



(8) Stoneware vase attributed to Pratt c1810 with cupids embracing and holding a wreath H27cm

The question of which member of the talented Pratt family of potters could have made this small group is a difficult one, and largely dependent on their exact date of manufacture. Many of the sprigs were already in use by bigger factories such as Neale & Co as early as the 1780s–90s, but it is worth noting that the paired *Peace* and *Mourning* sprigs are to be seen on a marked Herculaneum brown-ground coffee pot (Liverpool Museum) datable to c1805. Similarly the rather angular Pratt potpourri vases may be compared with shapes used by other small factories making caneware, basalt and white stoneware: notably William Baddeley of Eastwood, Hanley, established in 1802, and William Hackwood, also of Eastwood, established in 1807. The production of beer jugs with matching cylindrical porter mugs is also consistent with an early 19C date, supplying the new fashion for domestic consumption of bottled beer.

Thus we may plausibly narrow the date of Pratt's stoneware down to a short period within the timespan c1800–10. This in turn rules out William Pratt, master potter of Lane Delph, who died in 1799, and who is generally considered as having been responsible for moulded jugs marked 'PRATT', of a type which first appeared in the 1790s. This class of attractive earthenware, gaudily painted with underglaze high-temperature colours, had the advantage of needing only a single firing and was soon mass-produced in Staffordshire and elsewhere, acquiring in 1909 the misleading collectors' term Prattware. In this context, it is interesting to look at the very broad range of wares made at the Herculaneum factory from 1796, with marked pieces including fine lathe-turned stoneware, creamwares and quite coarsely moulded and decorated Prattware. After William Pratt's death, his pottery at Fenton was continued by his widow Ellen, presumably with her sons John and Felix until 1806 when she handed over the business to Felix, who worked it first with a partner William Coomer until 1809, and then on his own, moving to Fenton Culvert in 1816. Meanwhile in 1807 Felix's younger brother John had left the family pottery to start up another at Fenton Culvert which he worked until 1817.

So, assuming that these few closely-related Pratt stonewares were made in the very early years of the 19C, it would appear that they were made at William Pratt's old pottery at Lane Delph, worked during the period 1799–1806 by his widow Ellen and her two sons Felix and John. If we extend the period to 1816, then either Felix or John Pratt, working separately, could have been responsible. Unless archaeological evidence or some chance discovery comes to our rescue, this intriguing conundrum seems likely to remain.