

The Ceramics of George Skey

by Peter Edden

The Staffordshire wares of George Skey are briefly mentioned in works on English ceramics but no account of them has appeared since Jewitt visited the factory in the mid Victorian period. In consequence — by reason of the preponderance of unmarked productions — many of Skey's ceramics may be un-

recognised today. Skey was an entrepreneur rather than an inspired and innovative designer and very much a man of the Samuel Smiles school of self help. His production, Rustic Ware, is not however out of place in the homes, gardens and conservatories of the late 20th century.

George Skey was born at Bewdley in 1819. He was a member of a well established and prosperous Quaker family. By 1860 he was a minor landowner in Staffordshire and Warwickshire and a Justice in both counties, living near Tamworth.

In the 1861 Census he describes



Plate 1. Skey Rustic Ware mignonette, diameter 13in.



Plate 2. Skey Rustic Ware dessert shells, height 9in.

himself as a coal owner. The two mines he owned lay on either side of Roman Watling Street at Twogates, Wilnecote, Tamworth. When an excellent seam of clay was disclosed by the workings, Skey decided to exploit it for ceramics on an ambitious scale. On site were good communications by road, rail and canal and production was started by 1860.

The Wilnecote Company was formed, shortly afterwards changing to George

Skey and Company. London agents were appointed to promote the wares which were largely utilitarian — drainage pipes, tiles and chimney pots and architectural terracotta work.

At what stage it was decided to introduce the production of ornamental wares is uncertain but probably right from the start. In the 1870s, when Llewellyn Jewitt visited the factory such work was well established. Not that any of George Skey's products were merely

ornamental; all had to conform to useful adornment — however vestigial — in the Victorian villa, conservatory or garden.

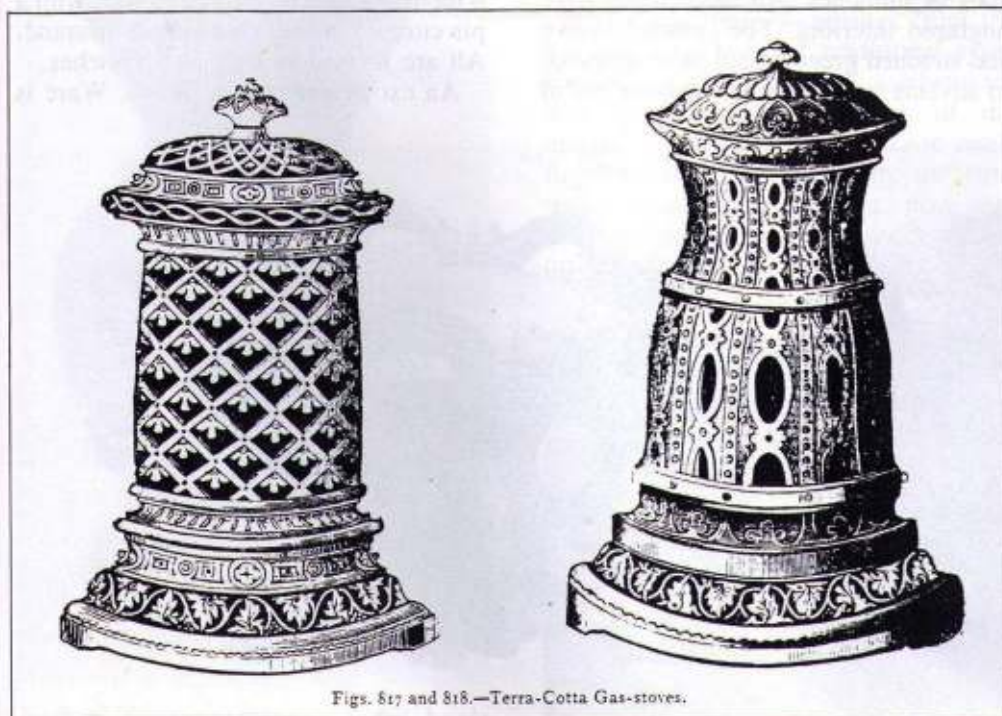
Among the range of ornamental terracotta wares Jewitt recorded game pie dishes, fountains, vases, tazze, brackets, pedestals, suspenders (a kind of hanging jardinière), mignonette boxes and fern stands. He particularly liked Skey's gas stoves, two examples of which he illustrated, noting that they were extensively made with perforations and patterns in high relief (figure 1).

The firm's terracotta has a dense ochre body more often than red. Objects were moulded in the first place and then hand finished at the leather hard stage. An unusual — if macabre — example is the memorial to one of the journeyman potters, Fred Fitch, at Wilnecote Church (figure 2). The profile medallion and lettering are hand cut, the baroque pediment is both moulded and cut.

Skey's terracotta ware which can be found today includes garden urns, tazze, balustrading and finials. Marks — cited below — when they appear at all, should be sought on the inside of garden and conservatory wares.

Moving to domestic ceramics, George Skey's chief innovation was what he called Rustic Ware. Jewitt's description is a good guide to the potential collector today, 'A fine buff terra cotta glazed with a rich brown glaze and sometimes heightened with a green tinge, just sufficient to give it a pleasing effect.'

The marked mignonette box (plate 1)



Figs. 817 and 818.—Terra-Cotta Gas-stoves.

Figure 1. Skey's terracotta gas stoves, woodblock from Jewitt's Ceramic History.



Figure 3. Skey Rustic Ware jardinière, height 14in.

Figure 2. Terracotta monument, Wilnecote, height 4ft. 9in.

a conservatory filled with plants and flowers but must have looked rather funereal by gaslight.

Among table wares may be found the pair of shells in plate 2 whose design derives from Wedgwood lustre dessert comports of an earlier period. The interiors are mottled green, the exteriors are of the brown rustic glaze, the mouths of the cowrie shells supporting are tin glazed. Presumably the shells were intended as ice containers though they may have housed ice plants, the kind of table decoration favoured by Mrs. Beeton.

Smaller Rustic Ware household objects, useful and ornamental, grouped in figure 6 include a watch stand combined with a pin cushion, a spill vase and an inkstand. All are formed of logs and branches.

An exotic example of Rustic Ware is

is a good example. Moulded with the bark of spruce it has a wreath of intertwined pine cones, branches and leaves, heightened with green, encircling the base. A matching jardinière is fluted with upright spruce staves, slightly flared at the rim and has a similar circlet (figure 3).

Another plant holder is formed as a section of an oak log and is decorated

with green splashes to resemble moss (figure 4). Figure 5 is an example of a Rustic Ware 'suspender'. The pierced undulating rim allows the chains to be attached for suspension. It is formed as an arrangement of mossy twigs and the ends of branches. All these items have unglazed interiors. The caramel brown and subdued green would have appeared to advantage in the bright atmosphere of



Figure 4. Skey Rustic Ware plant holder, diameter 13in.

Figure 5. Skey Rustic Ware 'suspender', diameter 9in.



Figure 6. Skey Rustic Wares, left to right, spill vase, watch stand (height 3½in.), inkstand.



Figure 7. Stoneware money-box 1896, height 9in.

the special presentation piece made for Mr. Herbert Ward prior to his emigration to South Africa in the late 1870s (plate 3). The majolica effect has been obtained by dipping it in tin glaze and then deploying overglaze enamels with enjoyable exuberance. The body is terracotta.

Already imitated, Skey's lions are perhaps the best known of his productions. Usually they are finished with the caramel glaze of the Rustic Ware only. An exceptional example, circa 1880 (plate 4), has a bright malachite green platform, the ball streaked with lilac lustre. He is now, alas, toothless and formerly had a bright red tongue. A single lion is attractive but ideally they should be sought in pairs. Their naïvety lends them attraction. Their pedigree — via classical times — springs from the Staffordshire lions of traditional type. Reproductions are potted in earthenware and lack the sheepish look of the originals, and their weight. Lion mask furniture rests also made by the firm make attractive book ends, now that their original purpose of elevating furniture from damp floors is obsolete.

Marks identifying Skey's ceramics



Figure 8. Impressed mark c.1862-1892.

were erratically applied. Hollow ware is often marked on the inside rather than the base. All marks were impressed. Of the earliest period, the Wilnecote Company, no marks are known. Rustic Ware of the period 1862-1890 if marked at all will be impressed 'George Skey and Co Wilnecote Works Nr. Tamworth' within an oval cartouche. A variant found inside terracotta garden wares appears in a rectangle (figure 8). Later marks employed in the period post 1900 include an impressed S conjoined with a key and a revived oval mark omitting the



Figure 9. Mark on stoneware containers c.1890-1900.



Figure 10. Mark on later Skey wares, post 1900.



Plate 3. (Left). Skey presentation piece, height 14in.

Plate 4. (Above). Skey Lion, length 14in.



George from Skey and Co. These are the marks found on later glazed stoneware storage and chemical vessels, but have nothing to do with George Skey himself.

Designers' names were unknown, though George Skey's wife, née Catherine Shipton, may not have been without influence. Ornamental wares ceased production in 1892 and in that year George Skey retired to his native Worcestershire.

Despite the founder's retirement, the firm continued, and its history must be briefly told. In 1892 Doulton's Lambeth potters were employed, skilled in the manufacture of stoneware, and a new era of prosperity began with government contracts being won for sanitary and chemical wares. About this time the old moulds for ornamental wares must have been destroyed for extensive local enquiries have yielded no tradition whatsoever of them. However, small ornamental items like the stoneware money-box (figure 7) made by Richard Jackson, continued to be made by individual workmen until the factory and site were acquired by Doultons in 1935.

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