

Chapter IX — The Pottery in 1862.

In 1862 the Government of the day sent a Royal Commission to report on the Employment of children in trades and manufactures not regulated by law. The Commission's first report was published in 1863 and concerns the pottery trade as well as several others (62). The pottery trade was investigated by a Francis Davy Longe who was a barrister at law and the work was done from April 1862 onwards. He first studied reports from the Staffordshire pottery area made by several interested parties but he went on to question owners, managers and workers from Staffordshire, then from Glasgow and areas in England other than Staffordshire. Of the Glasgow potteries investigated Bell's gets most space in the Report, including a long interview with Matthew Perston Bell himself, but Annfield Pottery, Victoria Pottery and Britannia Pottery all get some attention too.

Before going on to discuss the content of the Report, it is needful to remember that it investigated only certain areas of a pottery's activities. Amongst children the investigators were particularly interested in jigger- turners and mould-runners. Jigger turners are children who turn the machine on which the potter is making his plates, etc.; mould-runners carry the moulded article, still in its mould, from the cold moulding room to the extremely hot stove room and then bring moulds back to the potter. Temperatures in the stove room were recorded in 1862 as high as 148 degrees F and the children were going from this to an unheated room many times a day. It was calculated that mould-runners walked about 7 miles 1200 yards every day and carry 3,840 lb. in that time. For most children this was a slight, but only a slight, exaggeration since it was based on six twelve hour days. This was the reality for some but most worked a little less than this and some worked a great deal more. Mould runners could be as young as eight years old and one girl was interviewed as a mould runner still at nineteen.

The initial reports from Staffordshire had been very gloomy claiming for instance that potters were becoming smaller and less robust over the generations. Dr. J. T. Atledge, Senior Physician to the North Staffordshire Infirmary claimed in his report that potters were "stunted in growth, ill-shaped, and frequently ill-formed in the chest; they become prematurely old, and are certainly short-lived; they are phlegmatic and bloodless, and exhibit their debility of constitution by obstinate attacks of dyspepsia, and disorders of the liver and kidneys, and by rheumatism. But of all diseases they are especially prone to chest diseases, pneumonia, phthisis, bronchitis, and asthma. One form would appear peculiar to them, and is known as potter's asthma or potter's consumption.

"Scrofula, attacking the glands, or bones, or other parts of the body, Is a disease of two-thirds or more of the potters.

"The men are more subject to chest diseases than the women. The latter, employed in 'dipping' and in 'printing' suffer most. Those engaged in painting, burnishing, and in the ware rooms least. The most sickly men are hollow-ware pressers, firemen and dippers.

"That the degenerescence of the population of this district is not even greater than it is, is due to the constant recruitment from the adjacent country and to intermarriage with more healthy races."

It was obvious that there was much to be investigated and improved but what is very bewildering in the report is the differences of opinion amongst the workers about whether or not the job is unhealthy. The adult workers In Bell's all stress that very few people have any illness attributable to the trade, while at Annfield Pottery both adults interviewed reckon that potters are all dead by 40 years of age. Most dippers are of the opinion that they come to no harm if they wash their hands when they go home at night; but one man in Copeland's feels that it is necessary to drink 10 or 11 drops of sulphuric acid each morning to counteract the lead.

It is possible that one of the principal factors in the incidence of disease amongst pottery workers was the design of the building itself and that premises which were adequately ventilated were less apt to cause disease. One potter points out that sweeping the floors at night instead of in the morning makes a big difference since the dust can settle before the potters start work.

The age at which children are employed is almost unbelievable to the modern mind. 8 and 9 year old children working 12 or 13, or even 14 hour days seems incredibly cruel to us but was the norm for the time; though this commission was eventually to put a stop to it. In one Staffordshire pottery children are expected sometimes to work all night and then carry on the next day. It is as well, however, to bear in mind that technically the children were employed by the potter they worked for and not by the pottery.

The working hours in Bell's were from 6 o'clock a.m. until 6.30 p.m. One hour was allowed for breakfast from 9 till 10 and one hour for dinner from 2 till 3. On Saturdays the works stopped at 2 p.m. and on Fridays at 6 p.m. This gives a 59 hour week which is very nearly the shortest of the working hours for British potteries which can be gleaned from the Report. The only shorter week is for those working in Cockson & Harding's Pottery in Staffordshire but the week they describe can be so short as to leave one wondering if they are telling the truth. A start at 7 a.m. they claim is frequently followed by a closure at 2 p.m. (or 3 or 4 - they seem unsure) Another feature of Bell's is that the one hour breaks really do happen; in some other potteries it is pointed out that the breaks are usually cut. The longest hours in the Glasgow potteries seem to have been worked by the children at Britannia Pottery where they had to come in at 5.30 to clear up before the machinery was turned on at 6 a.m. and had to remain till 6.30 after the machinery had been switched off at 6 p.m., so that they worked longer hours than the adults.

The wages paid to jigger boys in Bells' are 3 shillings a week but by their 13th birthday they should be earning 5 or 6 shillings. The adults are, of course, paid piecework and no report is given on average earnings. Girls were invariably paid less than boys at this period but their wages at Bell's are not mentioned. Wages were paid fortnightly on a Friday which Matthew felt cut down on the men's drinking habits. There was a sick club which cost the men 13s. a year. Unused money seems to have been returned as a dividend; in most years the workers got 9 shillings back. £3 was paid out on the death of a worker, Matthew is ambiguous on whether the Pottery runs the sick society itself or leaves it to the men. There seems sometimes to have been some difficulty in potters getting themselves accepted as members of general sick societies.

The two children interviewed from the Glasgow Pottery started work at the age of 11 or 12, so it is possible that the Bell Brothers belonged to the small group of employers who refused to employ very young children. One of the two came to Bell's from a glasshouse where, one said, he had had inflammation on the lungs. He had never been to school and it might be well here to point out that from the point of view of education the Scottish children in this Report compare badly with their English counterparts. Very few of the Scots can read or write with any facility whereas a high proportion of the English can.

Of the six adult workers, one came to the Pottery from Cobridge, one from Greenock and one from some other place not specified; no one claims to have worked in Bell's all their life, The dipper's name, Richard Fotheringham, could indicate an English origin. This gives some indication of the mobility of potters. One of the men interviewed from the Victoria Pottery in Pollokshaws, just outside Glasgow, Andrew Shaw, a slipman, claims to have been at Bo'ness Pottery for 24 of his 33 years.

Both the Glasgow Pottery and Britannia Pottery made use of steam power and in fact the point is made in the Report that the Scottish potteries and those in northern England were making more use of steam power than the Staffordshire works. This was possibly because so many of the

Staffordshire works were very old and quite unsuitably designed for steam. Bell's had only just installed steam power for turning platemakers' jiggers. This is their only use of "machinery" except for making jelly cans, though they had experimented earlier with using it to make cups and bowls, but abandoned the experiment. The use of steam power meant that jigger turners were no longer needed but was often opposed by platemakers since the management tried to deduct what would have been the jigger turners wages from the potter's wage.

Pottery owners seem to have been very antagonistic towards the introduction of part-time working for children. Almost every employer interviewed has some spurious reason for being against it. Matthew Perston Bell's reason is better than most in that he points out that when the children get to 13 or 14 the Pottery would have to dismiss many more than they do now and that these would have to start making their way in some other trade and be back to beginners wages again. There is some doubt as to whether they could get double the number of boys to work the shift system and in areas where there was iron working or shipbuilding this seems to have been a real difficulty since higher wages were paid in these trades. One Staffordshire owner actually wants the shift system so that he can employ a team to work all night! On the other hand Annfield Pottery seems to have had enough work to occupy the workers only three days a week.

Annfield's manager, Thomas Blackburn, has been at the Pottery for fifteen years as manager and has kept a record of deaths during that time. Seventeen potters are recorded as having died at an early age due to work-related illnesses like consumption or asthma. Their ages vary from 23 to 50. Others we are told had died from cholera or typhus, recalling the epidemics that swept over Britain from the 1850s onwards.

The general picture we get is of a population totally devoted to work which, even in the hands of the best employers takes up most of the lives of ordinary workers. Having worked a twelve hour day, the average worker did not have a lot of time to enjoy his life. The Sundays were, of course, days of rest but they were in Scotland so restricted that Saturday must have been the only time when social intercourse or exercise were possible. If overtime was called for this must have meant the death of any leisure, especially as most works did not pay any extra for overtime, not even in one Staffordshire works for overnight working. The haste in so many families to put their children to work, even before they could read or write, the incredible overcrowding found in potters' houses, with lodgers being taken in by families living in a 'single end', i.e. a one-roomed house, show that the struggle to get enough money to live on must have been hard. The potteries certainly did not provide luxurious and easy living for the ordinary worker whatever they may have done for the owner.

