

Chapter XXIV — Decline of the Glasgow Pottery.

On November 28, 1907 almost 3000 square yards of land from the west side of the Pottery were sold to the Caledonian Railway Company for the sum of £12,200. (134) The Railway Company was in the process of extending the Buchanan St. Goods Station again and completely obliterating Pulteney St. in order to build a potato shed and depot with an additional area for banana distribution. They had been buying up parcels of the land since 1891 and had already as we have seen, bought and closed the North British Pottery from A, Balfour & Company on 24 August 1904. The sum paid to Bell's seems to bear out Fleming's remark that the Railway Company had treated Bell's rather shabbily. It may be remembered that Balfour had received £18,500 for a much smaller pottery and that Bell's was being greatly damaged in its ability to produce pottery of quality on the scale it had been used to.

The purchase was compulsory and had been permitted by an Act of Parliament some years before in 1896-7 which had covered the whole area which was needed for the expansion. This took away one of the Pottery's kiln houses, removing at least one third of their kilns and may have given the Company the excuse it needed to cease operating in view of the foreign competition described in the article in the Glasgow News on April 6, 1885.

In this article the unnamed author described the flooding of the market in Scotland with foreign pottery of unknown origin, though he was fairly confident that it came from the Continent rather than from Staffordshire. This ware was sold for what it could get, at prices with which the British industry could not compete. Potters in Holland (and presumably elsewhere on the Continent) were, it was stated, paid 47% to 50% less than potters in Scotland and this enabled the dumping of wares at uncommercial prices. Combined with this were the lack of a tax on exported Kentish flint and Cornish clay and other materials and a 60% tax on pottery imported into the United States. This last was to protect the native pottery industry which also relied on raw materials from Cornwall and Kent.

It may be that these difficulties, coupled with the debt still owed to the Trustees of Duncan Turner for the purpose of buying James Murdoch's extra shares (which he had never received) and the retiral of James Murdoch made it simply not worth while carrying on the business. The retiral of James Murdoch must have been an enormous blow and probably resulted in the change in the Company's emphasis to sanitary wares, On November 12, 1907 the debt to Turner's trustees was finally paid in full, (135)

But in 1910 the following notice appeared in the Edinburgh Gazette(136):

'In the matter of J.& M.P.Bell & Company, Limited

At an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Members of the above-named Company, duly convened and held within the Religious Institution Rooms, 200 Buchanan St., Glasgow on the Twenty-eighth day of February, Nineteen hundred and ten, the following SPECIAL RESOLUTIONS were duly passed; and at a subsequent Extraordinary General Meeting of the Members of the said Company, also duly convened and held at the same place on the Sixteenth day of March Nineteen hundred and ten, the following SPECIAL RESOLUTIONS were duly confirmed, viz.

(1) "That J.& M.P.Bell & Company, Limited, be wound up voluntarily."

(2) "That Charles Dairymple Gairdner, Chartered Accountant in Glasgow, be and is hereby appointed the Liquidator to conduct the winding up."

Nicol Paton Brown

Chairman

Glasgow 16 March 1910

Registered 22 Mar 1910'

The potteries which survived this period mainly did so on the strength of the very high quality of their wares or on the fact that they had cornered some market which kept them going. Even the redoubtable J. Arnold Fleming found it expedient to sell Britannia Pottery in 1923.

The design of the wares made by Scottish potteries, too, had failed in the 1890s to keep up with the changes in popular taste. Few of them produced much pottery which could be described as in the Art nouveau style and it is not till the advent of the Britannia Pottery Company Limited in 1923 that any art deco is produced in the Scottish pottery industry and that, while bold, colourful and attractive, is not exactly at the peak of the style it embraces. Heron's Fife Pottery in Kirkcaldy had some success with its famous Wemyss Ware and the Victoria Pottery, Pollokshaws produced wares that were more and more patriotic with thistles etc.

That the creditors of the Glasgow Pottery were paid in full is attested by a notice which appeared in the Pottery Gazette for May 2, 1910 on page 586. Signed by C.D Gairdner, it points out that the stock of material on hand is worth £13.983. 5s. 3d. while the book debts amount only to £6,531. 7s. 2d. and the liabilities to the public to £2,320. 16s. 4d. "It appears, therefore, that the creditors will all be paid in full." The Pottery Gazette issue for March 1 1912 talks of an older pottery narrowing production and being unable to find a buyer. It seems likely that this is Bells' Pottery and we may take it that 1912 is the last year when anything was made.

In about 1912 also however, something was to happen that kept the Glasgow Pottery in the public eye for a few more years.

In the early part of the 1880s John Weir had joined the Company as a clerk. He was born in Ochiltree on 25 July 1861, so had come to work for Bell's in his early twenties. Sometime on or after 1910 he and Joseph Turner took over part of the site with two or three kilns and set up as pottery salesmen. Joseph Turner had succeeded as Secretary to the Company when James Murdoch retired and had already bought several hundred shares. (138) He had become quite a wealthy man by investment and owned land in Barrhead and elsewhere as well as two farms on Mull, (137)

It is almost certain that the new Company made no pottery but simply bought in wares from Staffordshire and Czechoslovakia for resale. It is certain that Bell's showroom remained open in this period and was filled with such wares for sale. The two partners seem to have traded under the name of J. & M.P. Bell & Co. Glasgow Pottery (without the Limited) to distinguish them from the liquidated Company. The Secretary was called Mae Wordie.

Joseph Turner, on the death of his brother, was left alone in the world and developed a philanthropic streak. In 1912 he donated a collection of 75 pieces of pottery to Paisley Museum (138), many of them pieces by Bells' Pottery which had been shown at the 1851 Exhibition but also other pieces decorated also for exhibitions. There is much parian ware in the collection of a sort which is seldom to be seen elsewhere. There are also important pieces of Wedgwood and other English potteries in the collection. He also donated a collection of other wares to the John Hastie Museum in Strathaven in Lanarkshire. This includes a fair amount of Wedgwood Fairyland Lustre.

On 28 January 1929 Joseph Turner died and John Weir took over the running of the Company completely. Turner appointed John Weir, residing at Glenside, Buchlyvle, as one of his executors in his will but Weir seems to have refused to act. Turner's estate was valued at £38,756. Most of his bequests were to charitable foundations, particularly to various presbyterian churches and hospitals in Glasgow and Paisley. (139)

In 1932 the Post Office Directory shows for the first time at 20 Stafford St. the Vitreous Company which made milk bottles and supplied dairy equipment to farmers. This Company operated from Argyle St and subsequently from premises at 3, Elmbank St. John Weir delivered the bottles personally, helped by his daughter Joanna Donald. It is possible that the milk bottles were printed at the Glasgow Pottery but it should be emphasised that the two companies were totally separate.

The liquidation process for J. & M. P. Bell & Co.Ld. took a very long time to reach completion. It was not till 1923 that the following notice appeared In the Edinburgh Gazette (140):

Return of final winding up meeting J.& M. P. sBell & Company, Limited

To

The registrar of joint stock companies,

I have to inform you that a meeting of the J.& M.P.Bell & Company, Limited was duly held on the Twenty—fourth day of July 1923 for the purpose of having an account laid before them showing the manner in which the winding-up of the Company has been conducted, & the Property of the Company disposed of, and that the same was done accordingly.

C.D.Gairdner CA.

Liquidator

At some time between 1912 and 1923 some of its copper pattern plates are said to have been sold to the Links Pottery in Kirkcaldy who continued to produce these patterns without even changing the mark on them. (141) With the wear occurring on the plates this would account for the distinctly second rate specimens of ‘Bracelet’ and ‘Louise’ and other patterns that are sometimes found in a state which is completely uncharacteristic of the usual products allowed to issue from the Glasgow Pottery. It has to be said of Bell’s Pottery that their quality control was always good. This sale would also account for the famous specimen of ‘Louise’ on which the pattern name is given as ‘Lousie’.

Some of the ground at the site was sold to the Bergius Launch and Engine Co. Ltd. of 284 Dobbie’s Loan, Glasgow, in 1921 (142) by the Liquidator and they remained on the site until 1995; some was sold in the same year to Robert J.Jebb & Sons, Paper Stock Merchants, 71 James St., Bridgeton, Glasgow. (143)

John Weir died on the 19th February 1947 at the home of his daughter Joanna in Kersland St Glasgow. She was his sole heir and executor. His will shows that he had spent a considerable part of his savings in sustaining J. & M.P.Bell & Co., Glasgow Pottery until he could afford it no longer. There are maximal borrowings on his insurance policies (144). The Vitreous Company appears subsequently in the hands of T.M. Donald.

The entries for the Pottery business in the Post Office Directory continue until 1941: presumably kept up by John Weir and these enigmatic entries are the last that we hear of the Glasgow Pottery. It had been for many years a source of pride to Glasgow’s people and the main supplier of wedding china for the West of Scotland; its products had travelled around the world in great quantities and are still treasured by many in countries far from their place of origin.

