Chapter II — The Founding of the Pottery.

At this point John Bell seems set for a career, rewarding if unspectacular, as a lawyer and a petty dealer in goods and property. He is working as his mother’s representative and as his aunt Ocella’s and seems settling down to leading a comfortable, quiet life but his ambition would not allow this to be. At some point towards the end of 1840 or more likely the beginning of 1841 he and Matthew formed a partnership trading as J.& M. P. Bell, Earthenware manufacturers. (21) Quite quickly afterwards this became J.& M. P. Bell & Co. The reason for the change was the acquisition of a third partner and indeed the third partner may have been the precipitating factor in the formation of the Company. The man in question was Robert Clough (sometimes spelt Cleugh) who was the son of a weaver from Ripon in Yorkshire and who had come to Glasgow in 1820 with his wife and two daughters and possibly a nephew William, had worked for a time at the Anderston Pottery, then had run the Woodside Pottery on his own account from 1824. After a few years he left this and returned to Anderston where he lived in Lancefield Cottage and managed the Anderston Pottery of Geddes, Kidston & Co. again. When this pottery had gone bankrupt; he had been engaged as manager of the Glasgow Pottery. (22) That he was a partner, however junior, and not just an employee is attested by himself and by John Bell in a law suit of 1847 (see infra). His nephew William lived with him and had himself been brought up in the pottery trade. There was also another nephew named Robert who is found in the Censuses of 1841 and 1851 but whose subsequent career is as yet unknown.

J. Arnold Fleming in his book “Scottish Pottery” published in 1923 was of the opinion that the Bells had started by making sanitary ware etc. ‘early in the nineteenth century’. There is no evidence for this but what may have led him astray was the presence of a John Bell in Barrack St. off the Gallowgate. He made bricks and similar articles until 1826 but in view of the number of John Bells in Glasgow and even Britain at this period it would be rash to assume that this was John Bell, Senior. (23) Both brothers appear in the Glasgow Voters’ Roll for 1840-41, which would be made up in 1840, as ‘earthenware manufacturers’ with a pottery variously described as on the canal bank and at the corner of Stafford St and Pulteney St. The site of the Pottery is clearly marked out on a map of 1839, though it is not named as such. It is possible, therefore, that plans for the works were made even earlier than the Post Office directory would indicate. (24)

The Bell brothers bought land from William Stuart Stirling Crawfurd of Milton from the part of the estate of Milton known as Broomhill and premises were built on a large scale in what is now Stafford Street but which at that time was only projected. (25) More land was bought than was needed for the Pottery and subsequently land was added to this both from Crawfurd of Milton and from the Edinburgh & Glasgow Railway Company for John’s foresight was great and he had plans for the whole area. A tunnel of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway ran under the land and the Company’s permission had to be sought to build on it. The area was just beginning the process of development when the brothers took sasine and when they built they built from scratch. An estate map of 1801 shows the owner as Mrs. Margaret Rae Crawfurd of Milton and the land as totally undeveloped. The area later bought for the Pottery is called the High Broomhill Park.
(26) A map of 1839 shows the area of the future Pottery quite clearly marked out as if already destined for feu. But it stands in the middle of a wilderness of empty streets and projected streets.
The railway tunnel is clearly marked and depths are given for its distance from the surface of the soil. (27) The land was bought in 1842 but the agreement must have been reached beforehand since sasine was taken after the letter below had been sent out and though the sale was not completed until 1844 the Pottery must have been erected very fast because near the beginning of 1842 it was already in production. 1841 and 1842 were years of recession and it seems odd to found a large firm at that time but several pointers exist that suggest that the firm was founded mainly to export its wares.

Subsequently tenements were built in Kyle St. which were occupied largely by pottery workers. In January 1842 John Bell sold off some property in the West Parson’s Croft for £1200; the money was no doubt needed for the remarkably quick and efficient start of the business. (28)

The organisation and financing involved in setting up the Glasgow Pottery with the speed and efficiency shown speak loudly for the abilities of the Bell Brothers. Judging by the signatures on documents, it was John who was the moving spirit in the enterprise; Matthew’s appearances are sparse.

On Saturday, 12 February 1842 the Glasgow Courier ran the following advertisement:

TO PURCHASERS OF EARTHENWARE

The Subscribers beg respectfully to inform Shippers and Purchasers of Earthenware, generally, that they have commenced Manufacturing cream-coloured, dipped, painted and Printed Earthenware, for Home Sale and Exportation, at their Works, recently erected on the Banks of the Cut of Junction Canal, between Port Dundas and St. Rollox. At the same time the Subscribers may be allowed to express the hope that, from the extent of their Works, the quality of their materials, and the advantage they enjoy in having the Manufacturing Department conducted under the immediate superintendence of their Mr. Clough, whose knowledge and experience as a Potter are well known to the Trade, they shall be able to give every satisfaction to those who may favour them with a share of their patronage.

They may add, that they have been at pains to select the newest and best shapes, and patterns for Tea, Toilette, and Table Services.

J. & M. P. Bell & Co.
Glasgow Pottery
Glasgow, 11th February 1842.

A similar message was sent to every retail dealer in Glasgow and perhaps in Scotland on a flier. The main difference is that Matthew’s commercial address of 103, Hutcheson Street is given as a receiving address for orders on the flier. A transcript of this was published in 1967 by John Weyers in the Scottish Field.

It will be noticed that although Matthew’s business as a zebra manufacturer has disappeared from the Post Office Directory he still occupies the premises and presumably still continues in some sort of business independent of the Pottery.

The description of their wares is most interesting. It is noticeable that only earthenware is mentioned. They are not making china nor fireclay. The earthenware is described as cream-coloured but this is not to be taken as meaning that they were producing what we would now call creamware. The description ‘cream-coloured’ was quite often applied to ordinary earthenware at this period, before the introduction of so many ‘improved’ bodies in the following decades. Exactly the same description is seen in advertisements of the period from other areas such as Sunderland. Curiously exactly the opposite is found in a speech made by Robert Cochran in 1877 at the celebration of the centenary of Verreville Works. (29) In it he describes Queen’s ware as white. Potters notoriously have private languages for their goods. In a few years as we shall see Bells are describing virtually the same ‘cream-coloured earthenware’ products as ‘stone-ware’.
Their description of their methods of decoration -‘dipped, painted and printed’ is fairly comprehensive, though it should be noted that they are not including sponge-printed earthenware. This was a new technique in earthenware decoration and from this letter it is safe to say that the origins of the technique cannot be attributed to Bell’s Pottery. (30) Apart from this we know very little of what was being produced at this early period though in view of later evidence it is possible to speculate. What is quite clear is that the only body being used is earthenware — neither stoneware nor china is being manufactured nor yet fireclay. The clerk to the Company at this time was John Pollock Paterson. (31).

By a happy accident we have two books preserved from this period, both of which belonged to John Bell. They have descended through the Murdoch family and were recently generously gifted to the author by Mrs. Sylvia Murdoch.

The first, published in 1843 is signed and initialled by John Bell and dated 8 August 1845 in his handwriting. It is titled “Tables of Weights and Measures required in using Potters’ Material in the Slop and Dry State” and is by G. R. Booth, Hanley, Staffordshire and published by Tite & Bogue of Fleet Street, London. Mr. Booth seems to have worked for Wedgwood.

The slim volume contains numerous tables relating to weights and capacities as well as to money. Besides this there are discussions of temperature and other useful subjects.

The second book is called “The Complete Practical Potter” and is by the late John Taylor, potter. It was published in 1847 by Wm. White, Hope-street, Shelton for the benefit of the author’s widow. It is a book of recipes for bodies, glazes, colours, dips etc, both for china and earthenware. Two of the recipes have pencil marks as if they had been of particular interest; some other have paper place markers but these, of course, may have been moved at any time over the years. Several glazes are of foreign origin, e.g. from France or less expectedly from Mexico.
59. Blue Clay is the principal ingredient used in making all kinds of earthenware, and contains but a small proportion of flint. Its contraction is much less than that of Black Clay: this last clay, therefore, contains still less flint than the former, and consequently more alumina.

60. The mode of proportioning these Clays with flint and Cornwall stone, &c., is much varied. The rule regulating such compounds is made more to suit the heat to be applied, than the nature of the articles; thus making the heat the standard, and the articles to conform to it. A composition that would be fired up at one manufactory, would be over-fired at another. This plan of proceeding is founded in error, since there are certain degrees of heat, at which alone most materials are at their best state of whiteness,—a quality most desirable.
in earthenware, and which all compounds should tend to ensure. Thus it is that many great improvements are not brought forward, by not applying a heat suited to the nature of the materials.

61. Our object in noticing here the degree of heat required in firing biscuit, (we might almost say the same thing of glost ware,) is to draw the attention of manufacturers to the necessity of having some certain standard measure for ascertaining the heat of their ovens, at all times, and in its various parts. This should be graduated to a scale ascending with accuracy and precision. The late Mr. Wedgwood made such a discovery for us, by his Pyrometer. Nevertheless, it is decried by many in this neighbourhood. This is a great pity. The plan has been countenanced by many very practical and scientific men, both of his time and of the present day, and is well calculated for our use in potting. When compared with the present scheme of firing, the merit of the Pyrometer as far exceeds it, as the most scientific acquirements excel the rudest beginnings in any science. The utility of this Pyrometer will ultimately commend itself to the attention of every manufacturer, when it is properly understood, and the good practical advantages of it are known. The saving in coals, by regulating the fire with a measured heat, is far greater than a manufacturer would at first give credence to. This should cause antipathies against the plan to be laid aside. We know that, since the death of Mr. Wedgwood, there has been an
obstacle in obtaining the pyrometer-bits with the same and the proper contraction as at first instituted by that eminent gentleman; but we are happy to state that, by a series of experiments undertaken by ourselves, we have been enabled to manufacture the bits, with the quality so essential to their proper use,—that is, that they shall contract with regularity and precision through the whole scale. We may truly say, we have re-discovered the plan originated by Mr. Wedgwood; and can supply the bits, at a few shillings per thousand. We feel pleasure in recording this circumstance, for the benefit of science in general, and trust the merits of the re-discovery will plead an excuse for our complacency upon this subject.

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