

# Multi-color printing on ceramics – its earlier than you think

By Pat Halfpenny

Polychrome printing has always been discussed as a product dating from 1845. However, recent research into archaeological discoveries can place its introduction as early as the mid-1830s. This article will first present the evidence and then go on to discuss a group of extant wares that exhibit the characteristics of this early polychrome printed ware.

## Archaeological evidence

It goes without saying that the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, has amazing ceramic collections. It is the combination of archaeological discoveries and surviving pieces that provide new insights into the development of polychrome printed pottery.

In 1998 there was an excavation on the site of the old covered market in Burslem in the heart of the Potteries. The building had been demolished in 1957 and the surface laid out as a small public garden leaving the ground beneath undisturbed. The site had originally been purchased for the covered market in 1834, and on December 1, 1835, Enoch Wood laid the cornerstone in a great ceremony. Everything beneath the cornerstone and foundations had to have been deposited before construction began, probably between 1834 and November, 1835.

Enoch Wood was a noted antiquarian and left caches of his own pottery for future generations to find: there are deposits of his ware under the cornerstones and foundations of most of the important civic sites of early to mid-19th century Burslem. Inevitably, the dig on the site of the covered market revealed quantities of Enoch Wood pottery. Many of the pieces were marked, including a quantity of earthenware underglaze printed in single colors including blue, pink, purple, brown, and black, and some pieces were printed in a combination of those colors. But most importantly, the fragments



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

include what is currently the earliest known evidence of polychrome printed ware; it can be made no later than 1835 by which time it was buried and the market was subsequently built above.

There are fragments of plate and saucer rims (**Figure 1**) decorated with a previously unrecorded bi-color border design. Parts of the centers of one plate and the saucer survive and are polychrome printed with a floral design using three separately engraved copper plates, one for each of the colors blue, green, and pink (**Figure 2**). A close examination suggests the colors were applied in that order. The smaller saucer seems to have been printed more accurately than the plate which shows some misalignment of the separately applied color prints. However, the Romantic ethereal flower sprays are very forgiving and still have a charm even when the colors are not precisely overlaid.

A few more fragmentary pieces were recovered from the site; (**Figure 3**) the top of a small jug with a print similar to the florals on the plate and saucer, and an even more fragmentary jug with blue floral wreaths at the neck and with traces of a polychrome landscape printed beneath. A more complete polychrome printed landscape is seen on a section of a cup (**Figure 4**) which has a single-color brown print on the inside rim, in a design known as Butterfly Border. This border design is associated with Enoch Wood, as it appears on marked pieces including pieces with polychrome printed landscapes, but this excavated cup is evidence of an earlier dating than previously considered.

So, by 1835 at the latest, polychrome printing with multiple plates was underway, albeit in a modest form. The print subjects include floral designs and romantic landscapes, the print colors do not necessarily reflect nature, and technically are not always perfect as the lack of registration dots sometimes led



**Figure 3.**



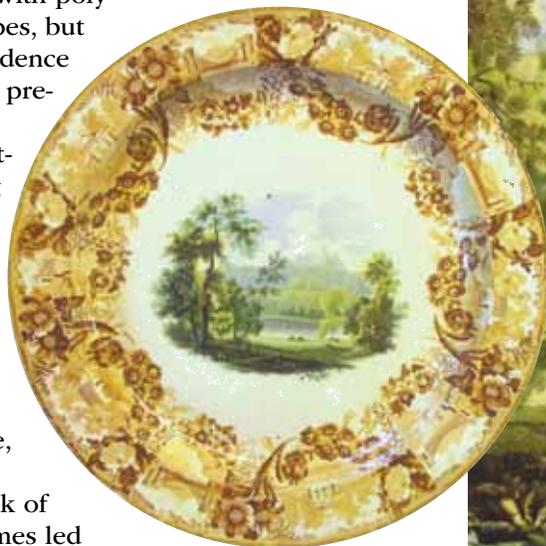
**Figure 4.**

to colors being misaligned – but that said, attractive full color printing was underway.

#### **Extant pieces**

Using the excavated evidence, one can begin to re-assess the production dates of poly-chrome printing, the earliest of which appear to have been in the mid-1830s. A group of

these wares is in the collection of The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery Stoke-on-Trent. The largest example is a charger sized dish with a back-stamp of a floral swag cartouche with the words *FESTOON BORDER* and *E. WOOD & SONS* (**Figure 5**). The rim pattern is printed in two shades of brown and is pieced together from pulls from a copper plate engraved



**Figure 5.**



**Figure 6.**



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

for a dish of a smaller size. This suggests that such large dishes were not a normal part of production for this printed pattern, as it would have been an expensive proposition to engrave a copper plate with a border design this large to meet an occasional demand.

*Festoon Border* pattern is a standard Enoch Wood border that appears with a series of central prints. Examples had previously been recorded in the *TCC Pattern and Source Print Database* where they are printed in a single color or a bi-color design with contrasting border and center colors. This example has a polychrome central landscape design in four colors, blue, yellow, green, and brown; however the colors were not accurately superimposed, the green is a little up and to the left of where it should be. (Figure 6) Later, more advanced polychrome printing included registration dots engraved in the same place on each of the coppers so that the colors could be laid exactly one on top of the other, but the earlier wares do not appear to have the benefit of such a useful guideline. Two smaller plates (Figure 7) with *Festoon Border* in pink are also known with a polychrome printed landscape. Again, a close look shows slight differences in appearance of the color of the scene with the plate on the left having a misaligned yellow print.

Two other plates can also be associated with Enoch Wood (Figure 8). Their rim pattern is *Acanthus Scrolls Border* previously associated with Copeland who used a similar border for their *Byron Views Series*. However the central print of these two examples is polychrome printed with a landscape which is also found on a plate with the *Butterfly Border*,<sup>1</sup> examples with this border are recorded with the impressed mark *Wood*, and fragments of this border with polychrome decoration were recovered from the Burslem covered market site.

A final plate can be less certainly attributed to Enoch Wood (Figure 9). It is a charming pink, blue and brown creation, completely unlike the others, and as far as I know, is completely unrecorded: I could find no other examples of the border design or central scene.

In addition to the pieces in The Potteries Museum, there has been a recent exciting find on ebay. It is the only recorded hollow-ware piece among these early polychrome printed earthenwares and is a puzzle jug with a polychrome print identical to one appearing on one of the *Acanthus Scroll Border*. (Figure 10)

There must be other hollow ware pieces out there; if you know one please let us know.

(Endnotes)

1. *The Transferware Collectors Club Pattern and Source Print Database* Butterfly Border #04

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Figures 1-9 courtesy of the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent

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*The Transferware Collectors Club Pattern and Source Print Database*

The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent