

The ABCs of Alphabet Wares

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*I wished I lived in a caravan,
With a horse to drive like a pedlar-man,
Where he comes from nobody knows,
Or where he goes to, but on he goes!*

*Chairs to mend and delf to sell!
He clashes the basins like a bell;
Tea-trays, baskets ranged in order;
Plates with the alphabet round
the border!*

Excerpt from "The Pedlar's Caravan" by William Brighty Rands (1823-1882)¹

Victorian writer William Brighty Rands skillfully captured the peripatetic world of the peddler, moving about the English countryside in his caravan filled with colorful merchandise designed to entice country folk to part with their hard-earned cash. Among the wares sure to capture the eyes and imaginations of his youngest customers were earthenware plates and mugs decorated with child-friendly scenes and alphabets. When this poem was published in 1868, Staffordshire potters were manufacturing these pots in hundreds of patterns, exporting them to the United States and British colonies worldwide. British alphabet wares have turned up in archaeological excavations throughout the continental United States, as well as in New Zealand, Australia and Newfoundland.*

Alphabet wares, also called ABC wares, are tableware characterized by the inclusion of the alphabet as a component of their decoration (Figure 1). First manufactured in the Staffordshire District of England in the late eighteenth century, these wares continue in production to the present and appear to have been created as educational tools, primarily for children. The earliest known alphabet plate is a

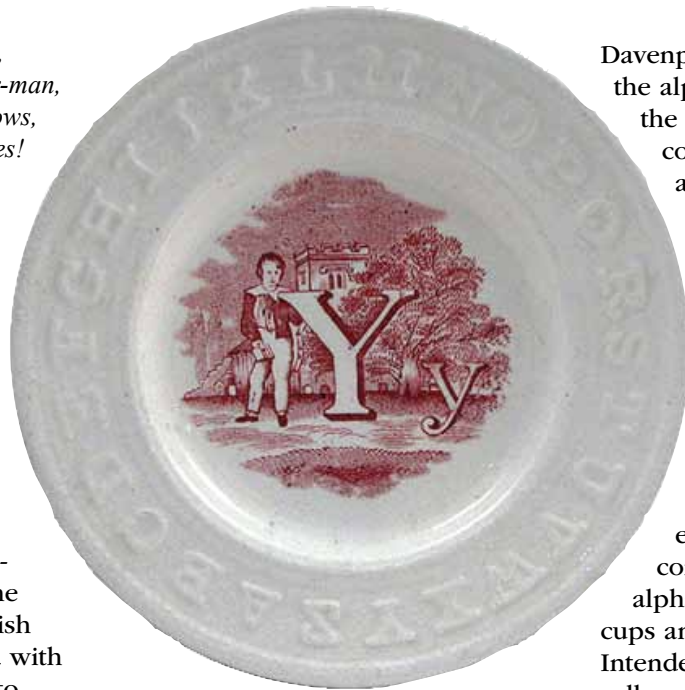


Figure 1. Unmarked plate with molded alphabet rim and central scene underglaze printed in red. Private collection.



Figure 2. J. G. Meakin (established 1851) plate with molded alphabet and pastoral scene printed in black and enameled in green, red and yellow. Private collection.

Davenport shell-edged example with the alphabet printed in a block in the plate's central well. Long-time collectors and experts Mildred and Joseph Chalala date the manufacture of this plate between 1793 and 1810.²

While alphabet wares have also been produced in glass, metal and plastic, the focus here will be on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ceramic items of British and American manufacture. Plates and mugs in white-bodied earthenware were the most commonly produced forms for alphabet wares, although bowls, cups and saucers were also made. Intended for children, they are typically small; plates generally range in diameter from 4 to 8½"; in a sample of 445 plates containing manufacturer's marks, 74% fell between 6 and 8". Mugs usually range from 2.5 to 3" tall.

Plates, almost without exception, contained the full alphabet, usually molded or printed clockwise around the rim (Figure 2). Child-friendly scenes, printed under the glaze or, beginning in the 1890s, on lithographic decals, decorated plate centers. These scenes fell into a number of decorative themes, including household pets, barnyard animals, children's activities, Aesop's Fables, proverbs of Benjamin Franklin, the months, Bible stories, and riddles. While mugs sometimes depicted the entire alphabet, it was more common for them to include only one or two (sometimes up to four) letters, used in conjunction with a related scene.

Ceramic alphabet wares were produced in England, the United States and Germany. The earliest wares were the product of Staffordshire potters and generally featured designs print-

ed under the glaze. United States production began in the late nineteenth century, centered in West Virginia and East Liverpool, Ohio; German production (not discussed here) was initiated around the turn of the twentieth century.³

While a number of books have been published on alphabet wares, these wares evade easy analysis in terms of accurate dating. Many alphabet wares were unmarked and, like other ceramics without manufacturer's or registry marks, it is difficult to date their manufacture with certainty. Lindsay and Lindsay (1998) suggest that about 700 different British patterns exist;⁴ research for this article recorded 328 different British patterns with manufacturer's marks; this number is less than half of the patterns produced by the Lindsay's estimate. Many patterns either appear to have gone unmarked or no marked examples have survived. Even when a printed or decal design can be attributed to a maker, it is no guarantee that an unmarked item in the same pattern can be assigned to the same maker. Engraved plates used to produce the printed designs were passed down when firms changed names or sometimes sold to other firms when potteries closed their doors.

Another factor that makes it difficult to isolate the makers of these wares is their absence in potters' and merchants' records. Alphabet wares rarely appear as a separate category in period advertising, making it difficult to track their export by Staffordshire manufacturers. In a rare exception, H. Aynsley and Company advertised ABC muffins in 1895.⁵

In order to gain a better under-

standing of alphabet wares, a database was created of 438 marked British and American alphabet plates, using published sources and items for sale on commercial websites.⁶ Examples whose production could be placed securely within a 50-year time span, using either manufacturer's marks or pottery firm operation dates were recorded in the database.⁷ This analysis allowed conclusions to be drawn about design and production elements of these plates and may allow more informed conclusions to be drawn about non-marked items.⁸

Plates were recorded from 32 British firms and 12 American firms. Table 1 lists six British and two American firms that accounted for large

quantities of plates in the database. The British firms accounted for 368 of the pieces, with 70 recorded from the American firms. Plates were analyzed for design elements and other details that could serve as dating indicators. If the examples in the database with marks dating to a span of 25 years or less (242 examples) provide a representative sample, they suggest that British alphabet wares had their greatest period of production in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with a mean beginning and end production date span of 1875 to 1890. On the whole, British alphabet plates date earlier than American examples, with American wares (57 examples with marks dating to a 30 year or less period) showing a mean beginning and end production span of 1904 to 1925.⁹

British manufacturers produced both molded and printed alphabets on their wares, although molded alphabets were present in quantities



Figure 3. Brownhills Pottery Company (1872-1896) Titmouse pattern printed in brown on an ivory-bodied earthenware. This ABC plate, as many produced by Brownhills Pottery Company, displays design elements typical of the Aesthetic movement.

Table 1. Common British and American Manufacturers

Manufacturer	Country	Number of Recorded Patterns	Dates of Operation
Charles Allerton & Sons	Great Britain	49	1859-1942
Brownhills Pottery Company	Great Britain	67	1872-1896
Edge, Malkin & Company	Great Britain	36	1871-1903
Elsmore & Forster	Great Britain	23	1853-1871
Elsmore & Son	Great Britain	27	1872-1887
J & G Meakin	Great Britain	56	1851-2000
Harker Pottery Company	America	24	1890-1931
D. E. McNicol, Ohio & WVa	America	20	1892-1954

Table 2. Dating Details for Alphabets on British Alphabet Plates

Method of Production	Placement of Alphabet	# of Items	Mean Beginning Production Date	Mean End Production Date
Molded Alphabet	Encircling Rim	142	1869	1887
Printed Alphabet	Encircling Rim	53	1883	1895
Printed Alphabet	Along sides or top of plate (influenced by Aesthetic Movement)	45	1884	1895

five times greater than printed alphabets in the database sample. While molded rim alphabets continued to be made throughout the entire span of British production, they began production earlier than printed rim alphabets. Mean beginning and end production dates for British molded alphabets was 1869 to 1887, while rim printed alphabets had mean beginning and end dates of 1883 to 1895 (Table 2).

Some alphabet plates produced during the 1870s to the 1890s followed design elements of the Aesthetic Movement. In wares influenced by this movement, the primary decorative design was enclosed in a frame or box, either located centrally or placed asymmetrically to one side of the plate. The printed alphabet would be arranged across the top, sides and bottom of the box or along one side of the plate (Figure 3). They were often printed in brown on ivory-dyed ceramic bodies. This design style in alphabet wares was used almost exclusively by the Staffordshire firm of Brownhills Pottery Company, in business between

1872 and 1896.¹⁰ Mean beginning and end production dates for these asymmetrically placed alphabets were 1884 to 1895.¹¹ Many Brownhills Pottery Company plates were produced in series like “Nations of the World”, “Wild Animals” and “Bible Pictures”.

Almost without exception, American-made plates depicted printed alphabets – of 69 American examples, only two, produced by Smith Phillips China Company (1901-1931) of East Liverpool, Ohio, contained molded alphabets.

Production and Design of Central Motifs

There were two primary methods of producing central designs: underglaze printing and lithographic decals. Printed designs were generally produced in one color under the glaze, with many designs printed in black.¹² In the author’s database sample,** central scenes

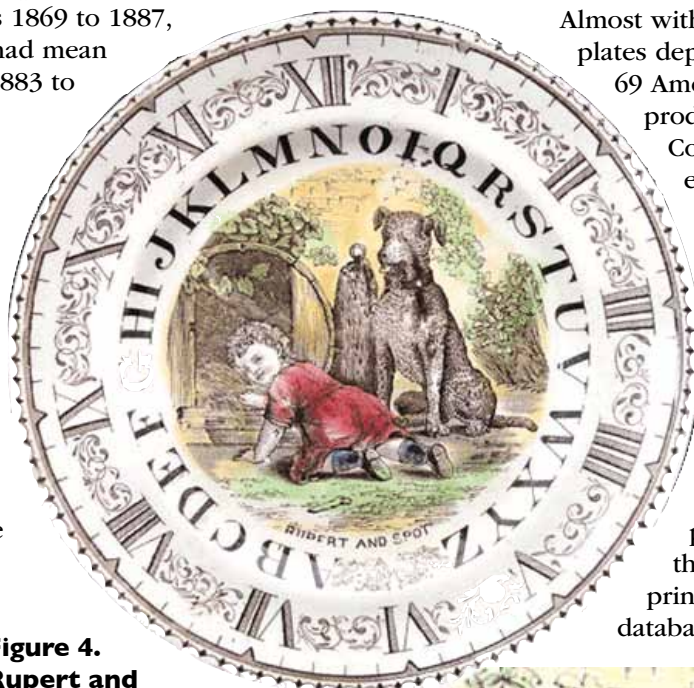


Figure 4. Rupert and Spot pattern in the Children’s Clock series by Brownhills Pottery Company. This series also includes a clock face in Roman numerals along the rim. Private collection.



Figure 5. Detail of Rupert and Spot plate, showing careful application of enameling.

Table 3. Central Designs on American and British Plates

Country	Central Scene	Total
America	airbrush	1
	decal	68
American Total		69
Great Britain	decal	7
	printed	349
British Total		356
Grand Total		425

on British pieces were almost always underglaze printed (Table 3).

Lithographic decals, introduced in the 1890s, replaced underglaze printed designs by around 1905.¹³ While decals allowed the production of more detailed designs in a greater range of colors, they were prone to cutlery damage. Almost without exception, American manufacturers used decals to create central scenes.¹⁴ This difference between British and American central design production techniques can largely be accounted for by the time frame in which the two manufacturing locales were producing alphabet plates. The use of lithographic decals began in the 1890s, when British production of alphabet wares was winding down. American manufacturers, concentrated in New Jersey, Ohio and West Virginia, began producing alphabet wares right about the time decals became available.

To add color, British underglaze printed designs were often in-filled with colored enamels in pink, green, yellow, red, orange, brown and blue hand-applied over the final lead glazing (Figures 4 and 5.). Individual items usually contained enameling in three or four colors, with color choice and quality of painting varying by individual enameller.¹⁵ There was no dating difference in whether or not enameling was used (Table 4), and individual firms often made both enameled and non-enameled alphabet wares. A decorative characteristic typical of two British firms – J. & G. Meakin (in

business 1851-2004) and Edge, Malkin and Company (1871-1903) – was a semi-circular swipe or line of green enameling following the edge of the central well, usually at the bottom of the plate (Figure 6). Enameling was not used on any of the American-made pieces recorded in the database.

Central designs fell into a number of categories, but three predominated in the author's database: children's activities, animals and adult activities. The category of children's activities included scenes of children engaged in play, work or sports. No adults are present in these scenes. Scenes in the adult activities category focus on adult activities such as sports, work, farming or the military. The animal category depicts scenes that contain only animals, with no human figures present. Looking at the marked British items in the database, the children's activities category disappears in popularity over a decade earlier than adult activity scenes (Table 5). Animal-themed designs were produced primarily in the 1880s and early 1890s.

Several other categories are worthy of note. Religious themes were most commonly produced between 1882 and 1891. Brownhills Pottery Company produced several series of alphabet plates based on fictional characters, such as Robinson Crusoe and Red Riding Hood, as well as a Nursery Tales series.

American-made plates depicted scenes in only three categories: children's activities, animals and stories and rhymes. Sample sizes were very limited, but children's activities, as well as animal designs, showed a mean beginning and end production span of 1900 to 1924. Characters or scenes from fictional stories or nursery rhymes showed a range from 1918 to 1928.

Continued on next page



Figure 6. This underglaze printed and enameled plate by Edge Malkin and Company (1871-1903) shows the swipe of green enamel characteristic of this company and that of J. & G. Meakin (established 1851). Photo from Transferware Collector's Club website.

Table 4. Enameling on Printed British ABC Plates

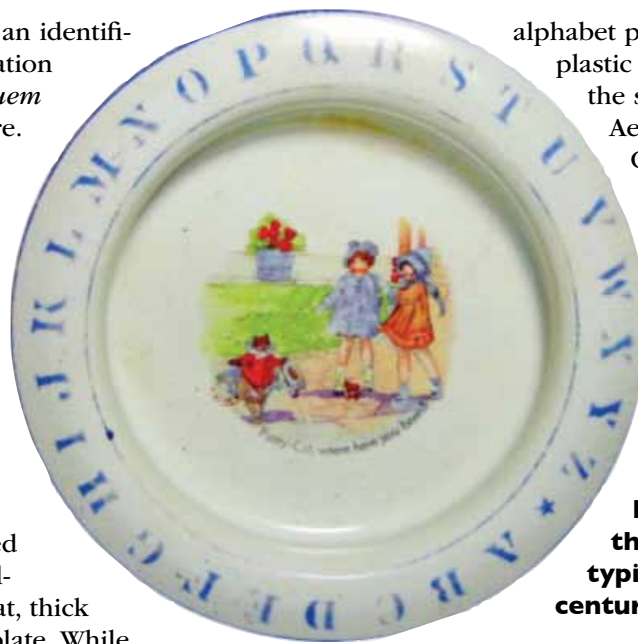
Enameling Present	# of Items	Mean Beginning Production Date	Mean End Production Date
Yes	140	1874	1889
No	100	1875	1890

Table 5. British Central Designs

Design	# of Patterns	Mean Beginning Production Date	Mean End Production Date
Children's activities	66	1864	1879
Family life	8	1870	1884
Adult activities	45	1868	1893
Animals	28	1879	1893
Religious themes	12	1882	1891
Fictional characters or nursery rhymes	32	1882	1893

If the central motif was taken from an identifiable printed source, the source publication date can be used as a *terminus post quem* for the production of the alphabet ware. Children's books published in the second half of the nineteenth century appear to have been most often used as source materials for designs. Davida and Irving Shipkowitz's *The ABCs of ABC Ware* (2002) is a good reference book for identifying and dating printed sources used in ABC wares.¹⁶

Alphabet plates of the first several decades of the twentieth century changed in shape. They became sturdier and thicker in cross-section, and looked more like shallow, straight-sided bowls than typical plates (Figure 7). Alphabets would be printed along the flat, thick rim or along the exterior side of the plate. While



alphabet plates remain popular today, plastic and paper have replaced the sturdy earthenware and Aesop's fables and Robinson Crusoe have yielded to characters from Dr. Seuss and Sesame Street.

Figure 7. Alphabet plate by D. E. McNicol (1892-1929) of East Liverpool, Ohio, showing the sturdier new shape typical of the twentieth century. Private collection.

Endnotes

1. "The Pedlar's Caravan", taken from *Lilliput Levee: Poems of Childhood, Child-fancy, and Child-like Moods*, by William Brighty Rand (Wynkoop and Sherwood, New York, 1868), 164-165.

2. Mildred Chalala and Joseph Chalala, *A Collector's Guide to ABC Plates, Mugs and Things* (Pridemark Press, Lancaster, PA, 1980), 142.

3. Helaine Fendelman and Joe Rosson, "Treasures. The ABCs of Alphabet Plates", *Deseret News*, 2010. <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700018853/Treasures-The-ABCs-of-alphabet-plates.html>. Accessed February 4, 2011; Irene Lindsay and Ralph Lindsay. "ABC Plates", *Old and Sold; Antiques Auction & Marketplace*, n.d. <http://www.oldandsold.com/articles/article018.shtml>. Page accessed February 4, 2011.

4. Irene Lindsay and Ralph Lindsay, *ABC Plates and Mugs; Identification and Value Guide* (Collector Books, Paducah, KY, 1998), 5.

5. Davida Shipkowitz and Irving Shipkowitz, *The ABC's of ABC Ware*, (Schiffer Books, Atglen, PA, 2002), 115.

6. Published sources included Chalala and Chalala (1980), Lindsay and Lindsay (1998), Noel Riley, *Gifts for Good Children; The History of Children's China, Part I 1790-1890*, (Richard Dennis, Ilminster, Somerset, England, 1991) and Shipkowitz and Shipkowitz (2002). Commercial websites accessed during April 2011 included Ebay (www.ebay.com) and Ruby Lane (www.rubylane.com).

7. Geoffrey A Godden, *Encyclopaedia of British Pottery and Porcelain Marks*, (Barrie & Jenkins, London, 1964) Page 111. Lois Lehner, *Lehner's Encyclopedia of U.S. Marks on Pottery, Porcelain & Clay* (Collector Books, Paducah, KY, 1988).

8. Dating is further complicated for archaeologists, since they often find only a molded or printed rim fragment, without any evidence of the more temporally diagnostic central motif.

9. To arrive at the date ranges presented below, data was collected on marked pieces with known manufacturing ranges of 25 to 30 years. The beginning and end production dates, or mark dates, were listed for each item (Godden 1964; Lehner 1988). The sum of all beginning production dates in each identification criteria category was totaled and divided by the number of examples to arrive at a mean beginning date. The same was done with the end production dates, thus providing a date span for a period of peak production.

10. Godden (1964), 111.

11. Many of the pieces contained registration numbers that narrowed down the production date ranges, thus accounting for the short duration of the production span of this type of printed alphabet.

12. One-color underglaze printed designs were also seen in blue, brown, green, purple and red.

13. Charles L. Venable, Ellen P. Denker, Katherine C. Grier and Stephen G. Harrison, *China and Glass in America 1880-1980; From Tabletop to TV Tray*, (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 2000), 120.

14. The one exception to lithographed decals recorded in the American made examples was a plate decorated with airbrush stenciling.

15. Different combinations of enamel coloring have been recorded on plates bearing the same pattern.

16. Shipkowitz and Shipkowitz (2002).

* *Editor's Note: Alphabet wares have also turned up in Latin America, as well.*

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