

Spode's Blue Room: History, Repatriation and Restoration

by Richard Halliday



Four words that are synonymous with transferware; Spode, Blue Room. Simple.

The Spode Blue Room collection is arguably one of the finest and most complete collections of Spode underglaze, blue-printed wares anywhere in the world. There are examples of almost every single pattern that Spode produced from 1784 to 1833, and beyond. There are dazzling assemblages of *Indian Sporting*, *Greek*, *Caramanian*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Botanical*, *British Flowers*, *Floral*, and amazing rarities such as "Chinese of Rank," "Old Peacock," and "Musicians." Within the collection there are also 18th century Chinese Export porcelain examples of patterns that inspired Spode: "Broseley," "Marble," "Parasol Figure," "Mandarin" and more. While it is easy to deal exclusively in superlatives, the collection is something really special and

I, along with my fellow Trustees, feel extremely proud to be involved in its preservation.

The Blue Room was established in 1958. It was housed in a large



room with vaulted ceiling, beams and windows with bullseye roundels. The ceramics were displayed

on period dressers, tables and even on the windows sills to give it that historic 'feel.' The Blue Room could be viewed by members of the public and was part of the "Connoisseur" tour. The whole collection was on "open display": it was not stored in locked glass cabinets that are common in most museums. To make sure all remained untouched, the tour was escorted. I think the open display added to the experience and gave a real sense of privilege to all who were lucky enough to visit.

The Spode Museum Trust was established in 1987 to protect and preserve a huge collection that is not only important on a National scale, but a world scale too. The collection contains over 40,000 ceramic items, over 25,000 hand-engraved copper plates and 250,000 paper documents, including pattern books of over 70,000 patterns that

Spode produced. The collection also includes tools, furniture, paintings, moulds and many other important artefacts from over two-hundred years of potting history.

Such was the importance and influence of the term “Spode Blue Room,” in that Spode’s Managing Director Paul Wood decided to re-introduce the original patterns in early 1990s. Not only was this a masterstroke for generating revenue, but it also saved the engraving department, which at that time was almost out of work, except for the occasional repair of cooper plates. Among the re-introduced patterns were *Indian Sporting*, *Caramanian*, *Aesop’s Fables*, *Willow*, *Net*, *Lucano*, *Castle*, *Milkmaid*, and *Girl at the Well*. These “new collectibles” were extremely well received and sales were brisk. This is evidenced today by the sheer number of examples still on eBay, at shows, fairs and markets and on websites. The Blue Room lives on!

When the Spode factory close in 2009, the collection was packed up and removed to secure storage within the city of Stoke-on-Trent. All of the pieces were carefully wrapped and packed by a band of volunteers and a professional removal company. Time was short and it needed the precision of a military operation. It was a very nerve-racking time: would any of these wonderful pieces every come back to Spode again?

The “Spode Works Visitor Centre” opened in 2012 with the aid of a small grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This was the start of the journey; attaining a presence back on the rightful home of Spode and getting some of the wonderful archival material and pots on display for people to see once again. Over a three week period in 2013, the entire Blue Room collection was, for the first time, painstakingly unwrapped, photographed, measured, described and assessed for condition by Trustee Janis Rodwell, volunteer Rosie Cooke and your author. Finally, the Trust had an accurate assessment of the collection and its condition. It was an opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with the wonderful pieces that had been



The Spode Blue Room – As it Was.



so missed since the factory’s closure. While it was hard work, we had a wonderful, not to mention rewarding experience. We knew then just how important it was to get these pieces back to the Spode site and on display for all to see once again.

In early 2016, the whole Visitor Centre had a total refresh and every single exhibition and display was changed. It was decided that one of the jewels in the crown of the Spode Museum Trust’s collection was the Blue Room and that it was vitally im-

portant to get this back on the Spode site for visitors, researchers, collectors alike to enjoy once again. Not only was it important for the world to see this again, but it was also important for us, the Trustees, to feel that we were fulfilling our mission statement and moving very firmly in the right direction.

In late April 2016, Chairman Paul Wood and his wife Maureen and Trustee Bev Booth started to clear an area above the visitor centre. This area had received somewhat of a



The Spode Blue Room – As it Looks Now.



clearing by volunteers a year or two earlier, but it was in a real state. Windows were repaired, furniture moved out and furniture moved in. A beautifully preserved carpet was discovered below that partially damaged wood laminate floor and it only needed a vacuuming. Bev, Paul and Maureen painted the whole area in preparation for receiving the Blue Room furniture.

The current space now is far bigger and longer than the original Blue Room, so it was decided to divide the room into two sections. One would re-house the famed Blue Room collection in its entirety and the other would be used as a conference suite. This section will be available to lease out on a daily basis and provide a unique setting for lectures, talks and meetings.

One of the real attractions of the new Blue Room area is how closely it resembles the original. Not only is it light and airy, it also has the high, vaulted-ceiling and certainly retains the original “feel” of the Blue Room. The original Blue Room furniture was taken from storage, repaired as necessary, and placed in the new space.

The next step required that the hundreds of Spode transferware pieces be safely brought back to the site and installed on the furniture. The boxes were huge, and both too heavy and too degraded to carry safely. So the pieces all had to be transferred to smaller plastic containers so they could be ferried to the new space. Eventually, and that is a big “eventually,” the whole of the Blue Room collection was repatriated and the sense of achievement was palpable! Huge thanks must go to the following people for making this possible: Paul and Maureen Wood, Bev Booth, Paul and Kath Holdway, Janis and Peter Rodwell and Rosie Cooke.

It was wonderful to see this truly amazing collection out for display again and should one be so inclined, it was a tear-jerking moment – the Blue Room is back and open for business...

The restoration of this wonderful World-heritage attraction was funded by donations received from the “American Friends of the Spode Museum.”