

# Staffordshire Portrait Figures

A description of the Pugh Collection of Victorian Staffordshire Figures in the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery

(N.B. This collection is not currently on display but is held in the reserve collections)

Until the early 20th century this type of figure, popularly known as the flatback, created little interest amongst collectors and connoisseurs. Sir Herbert Read's *Staffordshire Pottery Figures of 1929* first stimulated interest, followed by the works of authors such as Thomas Balston, Bryan Latham and Reginald Haggard. Later Admiral Pugh's book *Staffordshire Portrait Figures and Allied Subjects of the Victorian Era* became the standard work on the subject. He collected with taste and discernment, taking care to acquire not only the figures themselves, but the illustrations which were often their inspiration.

Surgeon Rear Admiral P.D. Gordon Pugh O.B.E. was born in Carshalton, Surrey and educated at Lancing College and Jesus College Cambridge before pursuing a career as an orthopaedic surgeon in the Royal Navy. He was attracted to Staffordshire portrait figures by the brilliant blue on a figure of Robert Burns, which became his first acquisition. Next came a *Death of Nelson* and a figure of Florence Nightingale. Admiral Pugh's interest was stimulated further by the publication of two books, *Victorian Staffordshire Portrait Figures* by Bryan Latham and *Staffordshire Portrait Figures of the Victorian Age* by Thomas Balston.

Although Admiral Pugh began collecting during the late 1940s the bulk of his collection was formed between 1960 and 1970, whilst he was preparing the standard reference work on the subject, *Staffordshire Portrait Figures and Allied Subjects of the Victorian Era*. At this time, his collection exceeded 1500 pieces, many bought to be photographed with other figures. With his two helpers, Mr & Mrs Denys Bowns, Admiral Pugh travelled many hundreds of miles over a period of four years compiling photographs for the book. This research led to the identification of previously unknown pairs and series. For this reason it was equestrian figures which interested Admiral Pugh most, because with these it was often possible to forecast the existence of a hitherto unrecorded pair. Admiral Pugh felt that perhaps his main contribution to the study of this type of figure was establishing the various series of figures now known to exist.

The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery's association with the Pugh Collection dates from 1972. Admiral Pugh was considering selling his collection when he moved house and could not continue to store such a large number of figures. However, a chance discussion with the then Director of the Museum, Arnold Mountford, led to the collection being loaned to the museum. This arrangement continued until 1980 when Admiral Pugh moved to South Africa and offered to sell the collection to the museum. With the aid of grants, donations and an appeal fund the collection was purchased for £54,000, and became known as *The Pugh Collection of Victorian Staffordshire Figures*.

## TECHNICAL AND STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENTS

The distinctive design of the Staffordshire flatback began to emerge during the late 1830s and 1840s. They are the products of over one hundred individual manufacturers working throughout the Staffordshire Potteries, although only 23% of the figures in the Pugh Collection can be ascribed to a particular maker. This type of figure can be seen primarily as a result of the need to cut production costs and increase output in line with heightened demand. Whereas the figure production of earlier Staffordshire potters such as Walton, Salt and Sherratt had comprised complex pieces which required time and skill to produce, the flatback manufacturers used simple three part plaster of Paris moulds.

Flatback figures were usually made by press moulding. The potter chose his subject and produced a master model. From this master, working moulds in plaster of Paris were made. The principal parts of the press mould were the front and back of the figure. A sheet of clay was pressed by hand into each part of the mould. Slip (liquid clay) was used to 'glue' the two parts together and a roll of clay was forced along the inside of the joint around the figure. The third part of the mould was the concave base. As the clay dried inside the mould it would shrink allowing the mould to be removed from the model. The seam around the figure was smoothed by fettling (scraping) and sponging. earthenware clay was used for this press moulding technique.

Another making method is the use of slip or liquid clay in plaster of Paris moulds, known as slip casting. The slip is poured into the mould and water is quickly absorbed by the mould leaving a thin solid layer of

clay inside. The extra slip is poured off allowing the slip cast form to dry and shrink. The mould is removed from the model and fettling and sponging is needed. Both earthenware and bone china clay may be slip cast.

The figures were fired in bottle ovens, the fuel being coal. The first, or biscuit, firing changed the soft clay into a brittle, absorbent body with a rough surface. Glaze gives the smooth, shiny surface to pots. Figures were dipped by hand into baths of glaze and fired again - known as the glaze or glost firing. More firings were necessary to fix the decoration to the glazed surface.

Colours for pottery decoration are made from metals each producing a different colour. Much of the decoration on these figures is painted by hand on to the shiny glaze. Gold is added last. A feature of many flatback figures is a brilliant blue.

Early flatback figures are small. They are shaped and decorated all round. By the mid 1850s the figures were much bigger and the back left unmodelled and undecorated, hence the name flatback. This type of figure is also called a Chimney Ornament. It would stand well against a chimney breast because of its flat back.

The type of decoration added to the figures also changed as the years went by. The detailed multicolour of the mid 19th century gave way to very sparse colouring during the last twenty years. The flesh on the face and hands was coloured realistically as was hair. Footwear was painted black. Other decoration was in gold, often in abstract motifs unrelated to the subject of the figure.

The identity of some of the ceramic portraits is unclear, especially among the smaller, early figures. Close likenesses became possible from the 1840s when good quality illustrations such as *The Illustrated London News*, sheet music, playbills, 'Penny Plain, Tuppence Coloured' prints, could be used as sources by the manufacturers. Titles were added to figures but sometimes the identities are confusing and the spelling eccentric.

## **ROYALTY**

For much of the 19th century, the Royal family was by far the most popular subject for Staffordshire portrait figures. The Pugh Collection has a selection of these which span the period from the early figures of Queen Victoria as a young woman, probably made to commemorate her accession to the throne in 1837, to those marking her death in 1901.

After the initial excitement created by the coronation, the first of what Pugh describes as a 'shoal' of royal subjects was made to celebrate the marriage of Victoria and Albert in February 1840. Early figures made between 1840 and 1845 show the young Queen, her husband Albert and their first two children, Princess Victoria (born 1840) and the Prince of Wales (born 1841), who eventually became King Edward VII.

Foreign royalty was not neglected by the Staffordshire potters. Figures in the Pugh Collection commemorate personalities such as Louis-Philippe, King of France. He was known as the 'Citizen King', who was forced to abdicate and flee to England under the pseudonym 'Mr Smith' in 1848.

The outbreak of the Crimean War in March 1854 resulted in immense popular demand for figures of the royal household and foreign monarchs who were allies of the crown, such as Napoleon III of France, his wife the Empress Eugenie, the Sultan of Turkey and the King of Sardinia, all of whom are featured in the Pugh Collection. The alliance between England, Turkey and France was not to last long. In 1860 Napoleon III annexed Savoy and Nice, arousing suspicions as to his intentions. The jingoistic atmosphere is demonstrated in the Pugh Collection by the figure of a French officer, presumed to be Napoleon III, underneath the British lion.

## **STATESMEN AND POLITICIANS**

Many important statesmen and politicians of the Victorian period were recorded by the Staffordshire potter. Within this group in the Pugh Collection are figures from home and abroad including Sir Robert Peel, Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, the chartist radical, and Daniel O'Connell the Irish republican politician. The great political protagonists of the second half of the 19th century, Gladstone and Disraeli, are commemorated along with Mrs Catherine Gladstone, the only politician's wife to be portrayed.

A very popular statesman with the Staffordshire potters was the Duke of Wellington. Apart from being a national hero due to his exploits as a soldier, in later life he led a distinguished career as a politician, which lasted well into the reign of Queen Victoria. The potter depicted the Duke at many stages in his life. One of the most interesting in the Pugh Collection perhaps, is that entitled *Up Guards and At Them*. The title is derived from Wellington's famous battle cry at Waterloo, recorded by his biographer, Sir Herbert Maxwell as *Stand Up, Guards*. He is shown seated on his favourite charger Copenhagen, which, unlike later versions, is correctly depicted as a chestnut.

## **NAVAL, MILITARY AND EXPLORATION**

This is by far the largest category in the Pugh Collection emphasising both that portraits of naval and military heroes formed a large part of portrait figure production and that it was this type of figure which most interested Admiral Pugh. He was particularly keen on equestrian pairs because...."so often it was possible to forecast the existence of a hitherto unrecorded pair."

The earliest readily available datable pieces in this category are an equestrian pair of Sir Robert Sale and his wife. Sir Robert was in charge of the British retreat from Kabul in 1842 and the figures probably date from that year. The increased production of naval and military figures was stimulated, not surprisingly perhaps, by war. Portrait figures of explorers were produced, most notably those of Sir John and Lady Franklin. Sir John sailed in search of the North-West Passage in 1845 and disappeared - his wife fitted out five ships at her own expense in an attempt to find him.

The greatest output of naval and military figures was that during the Crimean period (1845-56). As well as figures of the British royal family and their foreign allies, portraits of leading members of the navy and the military were produced. Figures of four English admirals and ten English commanders are known, along with those of four French commanders. There are four models of Florence Nightingale.

As wars, skirmishes and uprisings punctuated Victoria's reign so the Staffordshire potter produced portraits to commemorate them. An interesting example of a later piece is that of General Gordon seated on a camel. Its source is the statue by Onslow Ford RA unveiled in 1890, which stands outside the Brompton Barracks, School of Military Engineering in Chatham. Designed to commemorate Gordon's death at Khartoum in 1885, it depicts Gordon in the "dress of honour" given to him by the Khedive. The production of this figure reflects the enormous interest and sympathy the British public held for Gordon five years after his death.

## **RELIGION**

Staffordshire during the 19th century was a centre of non-conformist religious activity. The non-conformity is reflected in the range of portraits produced. Whereas notable Methodists and Baptists such as John Wesley and Charles Hadden Spurgeon have many models after them, there are very few known portraits of Church of England preachers.

Despite the anti-Catholic feeling which flared at times the Staffordshire potter was not averse to producing figures of leading Catholic churchmen such as Pope Pius IX or Father Theobald Mathew. Equally when disturbances occurred, such as in 1851, when the decision by Pope Pius IX to grant territorial rights to bishops led to violent 'No popery' agitation, the Staffordshire potter reacted quickly. One potter, for example, produced a series of five figures on an anti Roman Catholic theme including that depicting Bishops Ridley and Latimer being burnt at the stake in 1555 for refusing to convert to Roman Catholicism.

The figures in the religious section of the Pugh Collection do not merely represent individual religious persons however. The temperance and teetotal societies which developed during the mid-19th century seem to have enjoyed great popularity with the Staffordshire potters. The group depicting the Independent Order of Good Templars, for instance, was probably made about 1868 to mark the introduction of this society of abstainers into Great Britain. The order had been founded in Utica, near New York in 1851, with the aim of the world-wide total abolition of alcohol.

## **AUTHORS, POETS, COMPOSERS**

One of the most interesting aspects of this category is the fact that the Staffordshire potters chose not to portray certain subjects. Charles Dickens for instance, who was perhaps the most widely read of Victorian

novelists, was not depicted, although many of his characters were represented. Indeed, most of the writers who were modelled were not contemporary personalities. Figures of Shakespeare, Milton, Byron and Chaucer were modelled, whilst perhaps the earliest contemporary Victorian individual to be produced was Sir Walter Scott whose novels enjoyed great popularity, particularly during the early Victorian period.

Many of the authors and poets represented, although widely read during the 19th century, have now fallen into obscurity. Such is the case with Eliza Cook. Born the daughter of a London tradesman, she produced poetical works throughout her long and productive career (she died in 1889 aged 71), the best known being *Lays of a Wild Harp* (1835) and *Eliza Cook's Journal* (published between 1849 and 1854). She also bears the unusual distinction of being the only strictly contemporary poet to be recorded as a Staffordshire figure.

## **THEATRE, OPERA, BALLET AND CIRCUS**

One of the main forms of entertainment in Victorian England was a visit to the theatre or circus. This is reflected in the number of theatrical and circus subjects portrayed by potters. Most of the figures in this category can be attributed directly to either a character or known actor, in many cases both. This is probably because the Staffordshire potter used as his source the readily available lithographic music fronts and Penny plain, tuppence coloured' prints which were circulated and which had illustrations of the main characters in theatre productions or the circus.

## **CRIME**

It may seem strange to us today that criminals, even murderers, were popular subjects for mantelpiece ornaments but, during the 19th century, tales of crime aroused public interest and important trials were reported at length by the popular press. The figures in the Pugh Collection which fall into this category range from the legendary highwaymen Dick Turpin and Tom King (probably the most prolifically produced subjects) to contemporary criminals such as William Collier and Frederick Manning.

Two figures on display are those of James Blomfield Rush and his mistress Emily Sandford. Rush, a tenant farmer in Norfolk, had attempted to defraud Isaac Jermy, Recorder of Norwich, with whom he had a mortgage of £5000. When Jermy gave notice of foreclosure, Rush went to Jermy's home, Stanfield Hall, about a mile away and shot dead Jermy and his son, wounding Jermy's daughter-in-law and their housemaid, Eliza Chastney, in the process. In sentencing him to death the judge commented ... I tell you, that you must quit this world by an ignominious death, an object of unmitigated abhorrence to everyone. Rush was hanged on the bridge over the moat at Norwich Castle on 21 April 1849 and was buried within the prison walls.

This is a good example of the Staffordshire potter telling a story through portrait figures. Portraits were produced of the main characters - Rush, Sandford and (it is believed) Eliza Chastney. In addition, models of the houses involved in the murder were produced - Potash Farm, Stanfield Hall and Norwich Castle. Hence the purchaser could obtain all or part of a series which built up into an account of the Rush murders.

## **SPORT**

Sporting topics may not have been popular with Victorians since very few figures have been recorded by Pugh. The range of sports depicted is narrow, the majority showing characters from cricket, boxing and horse racing. The potters also portrayed the most famous greyhounds in Victorian England - Master McGrath and Pretender.

An unusual and bizarre sport caught the attention of the public resulting in a clay version known as The Grapplers. The figure is based on a sculpture in bronze zinc by J.P. Molin which appeared at the International Exhibition of 1862 and attracted great interest. The potter probably took the design from an engraving which appeared in *The Illustrated London News* of 1st November 1862. The sculpture depicts an ancient form of Scandinavian duelling known as Baeltespaennare. The naked fighters were bound with a belt round the waist. They fought to the death with short-bladed knives. The sculpture stands in front of the National Museum in Stockholm.

## **COLLECTION DETAILS**

A selection of figures from the Pugh Collection is on permanent display in the Ceramics Gallery on the first floor.

## **FURTHER READING**

PUGH, P.D. Gordon Staffordshire portrait figures and allied subjects of the Victorian era (including the definitive catalogue). New edition. Antique Collectors' Club 1987