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Brother Armstrong and the Freemasons: Belleek's Masonic Tableware

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Abstract

The Belleek pottery was established in County Fermanagh in 1857. The pottery designed and produced utilitarian stoneware and earthenware but is best known for its Parian porcelain production. The *Irish Times* describes the pottery:

One wonders whether in any other modern works the same quietness and peace could be found...the skilled workers seem to be too deeply engrossed in their delicate hand-work to indulge very much in conversation... Each of the rooms is as well lighted as an artist's study, and most of the windows look upon the river, whose friendly voice can be heard all the time in that quiet pottery.

(11 July 1930)

The writer de-contextualises and romanticises Belleek, thus ignoring much of what makes its design and brand fascinating. Other written sources, such as collector's manuals, often trivialise Belleek's early design and production further fuelling the reader's assumptions and nostalgia for the pottery. Such romantic approaches to Belleek have consistently mystified and obscured the context of the pottery's design and its position within the ceramics industry.

This paper utilises a range of archival sources to examine a previously unexplored aspect of the pottery's production history. Belleek had an established relationship with a single organised body of consumers, the Freemason Brotherhood. This network was conducted through Robert William Armstrong, Belleek's manager and art director (1857-1884) who joined the Freemasons in 1848. Belleek designed and produced specifically commissioned tableware for a number of Freemason lodges in Ireland and England from 1878. This ware never appeared in trade catalogues but several pieces survive in the collection at The Grand Lodge of Ireland. With the absence of written and material sources in the pottery's own archive, the archival holdings of The Grand Lodge of Ireland including the Registry of Freemason Members and the recorded minutes from various lodges have been vital to my research. Robert William Armstrong's volumes of personal memoranda including the designer's personal notes and photograph album, (copies of which are contained within the Arts and Industry Archive in The National Museum of Ireland) were also key sources.

Specific commissions from consumers like the Masons provide examples of how Belleek designed, produced and conducted its business in the years following its establishment. By examining the personal writings of the designer and engaging in a thorough analysis of the objects themselves, I will offer new insights into this important aspect of Belleek's mislaid history.



Introduction

In his 1993 publication, *The Belleek Pottery: a Complete Collector's Guide and Illustrated Reference*, Richard K. Degenhardt, prefaces his account with the following autobiographical reflection:

I have a lifelong love affair with Ireland, the Irish, and things Irish.... Among the things Irish I most appreciate is the exquisite work of The Belleek Pottery. Such words as *Leprechaun* and *magic* come to mind when viewing the results of Belleek craftsmanship. The creamy texture, the gossamer appearance, and the translucent quality of the ware conspire to suggest mirage rather than fact.

(Degenhardt 1993, xi)

Here we see a prime example of the fabricated and mythical image of the Belleek Pottery and its production. Degenhardt de-contextualises and romanticises Belleek, ignoring much of what makes its design and brand fascinating. Accounts such as this have led to various assumptions about Belleek design. Degenhardt's account of the pottery and its production is limited by his reliance on such mythic associations. His writing is characteristic of many romantically inclined texts published in collector and connoisseur guides on Belleek to date. Mairead Dunlevy discusses the mythology of Belleek ware in her 1984 article 'Early Belleek Designs', citing a passage from the 1926 Donn Byrne novel *Hangman's House*, which refers to 'the ancient Belleek China' (1984, 24). The pottery, which was established 65 years prior to the publication of the novel hardly deserves its 'ancient' status, yet it imbues the pottery with a mysterious and relic-like quality. Dunlevy states that 'local pride gave birth to many colourful exaggerations, if not myths, about the early workings of the pottery' (1984, 24). These myths often tie in with issues of authenticity. Origin and provenance were of prime importance to the Belleek brand, continually assuring its products authenticity in the market. Belleek has often been radically de-contextualised, perpetuating the myth that the pottery was established and developed in virtual isolation, without any outside influence, and that it is this imagined autonomy which made Belleek's output 'authentic'.

Sean Mc Crum's 1989 article 'The Belleek Industry' pioneered the idea of the Belleek 'brand'. He offered an innovative approach by referring to the tactical movements of the pottery and examining the history of the business during its early period of production (1989, 17-21). 'Like Paul Henry's landscapes of the west of Ireland, Belleek pottery has become part of 'Irishry', a phenomenon which has created a very limited view of what the pottery actually achieved. The factory did not spring into existence magically formed... It developed as a commercial concern'. (Mc Crum 1989, 17).

Adrian Forty writes of the relevance of business to studies of design history:



It is commonly assumed that design would somehow be soiled if it were associated too closely with commerce, a misconceived attempt at intellectual hygiene that has done no good at all. It has obscured the fact that design came into being at a particular stage in the history of capitalism and played a vital part in the creation of industrial wealth. Limiting it to purely artistic activity has made it seem trivial and relegated it to the status of little more than a cultural appendix.

(Forty 1986, 6)

This essay will analyse a previously unexplored aspect of Belleek's business history by examining a relationship between the pottery and an organised body of consumers, the Freemasons, which commissioned ware from Belleek. Belleek's consumers have not been previously investigated in any detailed study and few documentary sources regarding sales or orders have survived. By researching the Freemason's commissions a discernible example of how the pottery designed and produced its output and conducted its business can be established. For this research the records held at the Grand Lodge of Ireland and Freemason Museum, Molesworth Street, Dublin and the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, London, were imperative. The minutes of meetings, lodge registry, and some surviving examples of Belleek's Masonic ware all contribute to a coherent image of the consumer base, providing new insights into the pottery's mislaid history. These sources facilitate a detailed examination of an important aspect of Belleek's industrial endeavours, all too often glossed over or even ignored in previous studies. In this essay I hope to dispel some of the myths that have obscured the context of the pottery's design at this period.

*

Mc Birney & Co. Belleek Pottery was established in 1857 in Co. Fermanagh after a local landowner John Caldwell Bloomfield discovered feldspar (an essential ingredient for hard paste porcelain) on his land. Bloomfield became acquainted with the Longford-born architect Robert William Armstrong who was working under the Irishman W. H. Kerr at the Royal Porcelain Works Worcester at that time (Mc Crum 1987, 17). Robert W. Armstrong became the first manager and art director of the pottery and held this position until his death in 1884. The pottery was backed financially at this time by David Mc Birney, a Dublin merchant and retailer with large retail premises at Aston Quay Dublin (Cunningham 1992, 11-12). It is widely assumed that Armstrong gained his broad knowledge of ceramic processes and glaze chemistry while working at Worcester. However, his volumes of personal memoranda reveal that he developed his knowledge and skill with ceramics during his time as manager of Belleek pottery.¹ These memoranda 'commenced Belleek, Enniskillen 1860', and note recipes for glazes, the origin of clay

¹ Facsimile copies of these memoranda (vols. 1-6 and vol. 8) are contained in the Art and Industry archive at The National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks, with the exception of volume 7 which was too fragile to be copied.



bodies and the results of trials (1860: Vol. 8, 1). They provide a rare insight into Armstrong's aspirations for the pottery's production. They also frequently reference his personal contacts with individuals in the potteries of Staffordshire and Worcester. Records of firing trials in the volumes suggest Armstrong's reliance on the kilns at the Royal Porcelain Works Worcester in Belleek's early years.² The trials at Worcester were extensive, testing Parian porcelain, stoneware and glaze recipes, and continued until about 1863. A record of trials in volume 8 states 'Parian trials sent to the Potteries (Mr Brownfield, Chatterley House, Hanley) and Worcester February 10th 1861' (1861: vol. 8 120). This confirms that Armstrong had regular links with potteries in Hanley, Staffordshire and Worcester, and that these links were personally managed by him. This also ensured that Belleek retained an awareness of developments and advancements in the Staffordshire hub.

From 1864 to 1869 the factory made huge advances in terms of size, production and branding with the help of imported skilled workers again aligned to the potteries of Staffordshire and Worcester. The factory's workforce had more than doubled during this period, and from 1865 Belleek Parian and earthenware was increasingly included in displays at international exhibitions (Mc Crum 1969, 15). This period of the pottery's output is documented in Armstrong's personal photograph album, which features a selection of designs in production at Belleek around 1870. This album represents the firm's most complex designs in Parian porcelain, including pieces made for high profile commissions and international exhibitions representing the pinnacle of the pottery's artistic output. Photographs of Belleek's most finely crafted earthenware dinnerware were also included in the album (1870, AI/115/001/2).

From the mid-eighteenth to the late-nineteenth century, large quantities of Masonic ware were produced by various potteries. These were commissioned by Lodges or Grand Lodges, by wealthy individuals, or manufactured for sale on the open market. From the 1870s Mc Birney & Co. Belleek Pottery also designed, patented and produced Masonic tableware. This ware did not appear in the firm's trade catalogues, nor was it recorded in the popular Belleek collector's manuals. This ware was part of Belleek's quality earthenware production, which helped to generate finance for its more experimental Parian porcelain production, which in turn established the company's name and brand.

The Masonic connection most likely originated with Armstrong, who was personally involved with the brotherhood. Armstrong is recorded in the Dublin Registry of Freemason Members (1760-1860) as having joined Lodge number 891 in 1848 aged 24. This lodge then met and continues to meet in Enniskillen, Fermanagh. However, throughout much of the 1850s Armstrong was based in London, where he worked on several

The original volumes are in the collection at the library of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney Australia.

² Armstrong's earliest trials to test feldspar bodies for dry pressing at Worcester began in Oct 1860 (1860, vol. 8 261)



architectural projects and exhibited at the Royal Academy.³ Records held by the United Grand Lodge of England confirm that Armstrong was a member of the Phoenix Lodge in London during the 1850s.⁴ Petri Mirala, in his 2007 publication 'Freemasonry in Ulster', describes the attributes necessary when joining the Masons. He states:

Aside from being “free from bondage, of mature age, upright body and limbs and endured with the necessary senses of a man” a reasonable income was necessary in order to defray the costs of membership.” Even the humblest of Lodges required that the candidate was recommended by members.

(Mirala 2007, 41)

When Armstrong returned to Ireland he was one of the founding members of Lodge 129 in the town of Belleek, which was registered on 17 June 1858. He was clearly an important member of the Masons, as a less respected or established Mason would not have been granted permission by the Grand Lodge to establish a new meeting in Belleek. Lodge 129 is recorded in the minutes of the Grand Lodge board of general proceedings as the 'Lodge of Industry' (Lodge 129 1858, 17 June). This is an interesting title considering that the construction of the factory at Belleek had only just begun in 1858. The first stone was laid in January 1859, so this lodge may have been named in anticipation of the pottery's first industrial endeavours (Irish Architects Index I.A.A).

Examples of the Belleek designs, which were specially commissioned by the Masons, are in the collection at Freemason's Hall, Dublin. The collection consists of earthenware tableware, which is decorated with various transfer printed Masonic motifs. Tableware was an obvious choice for a Belleek commission, as the Mason's would have used this for their regular post-meeting dinners and for special events (Murray, 08/01/07 Freemason Hall). There are two different styles of this tableware in the Grand Lodge collection: the first design is white, cobalt blue and turquoise coloured dinner plates typically associated with Craft Freemasonry – the first level of the Freemason hierarchy. The surround of these plates is covered with various Masonic motifs printed from an engraving plate. These motifs are quite general symbols associated with the Mason's, including the compass (the tool which circumscribes the passions and keeps them within bounds), the theorem of Pythagoras (geometry being the science integral to architecture and therefore to Masonry), and the triangle (the symbol of deity) (Murray, 08/01/07, Freemason Hall). The life rope represents relief and charity, an important aspect of Masonic tradition. Freemason charities included the Masonic orphan schools founded in 1792 (Bowden 1992, 9). Other symbols associated with friendship and justice have also been included (Mac Nulty 2006, 156-157). This original engraving plate is now in the Belleek Museum collection, Fermanagh. Interestingly there is also a small harp on the bottom surround of each

³ The biographical index of The Irish Architecture Archive states that Armstrong exhibited at the Royal Academy with London addresses, Calthorpe Street from 1851-1855 and Essex Street, The Strand in 1857.

⁴ Lodge no. 202 also known as Phoenix Lodge (now 173) in London.



plate, which is very similar to the harp form used by Belleek for an additional mark from the first period.⁵ The harp has no connotations to Freemason symbols or motifs and may have only been applied as this design was specifically for sale through Irish Masonic lodges (Collections registry – Freemason Museum).

These plates were designed by Brother Armstrong, and according to the diamond registration marks printed on the underside, patented on the 13 April 1878. This design must have been valuable to the pottery, as not all of the designs from this period were registered. The collection at the Freemason Museum has two examples of these dinner plates. Both plates are identical in colour and decoration, but one bears a black number, representing a lodge painted on it. The number 211 suggests the plate was originally owned by a member of that lodge, which was established in Magherafelt, Derry in 1866, and is still an active lodge today (Murray, 30/05/07, Freemason Hall).⁶ This confirms that these plates were distributed and bought by lodges outside of Fermanagh.

⁵ This mark has also been impressed on the underside of the plates. According to Degenhardt, who references the Armstrong memoranda, this mark was used to designate the composition and quality of earthenware bodies of Armstrong's time and does not reflect a separate trademark era (Degenhardt 1993, 71).

⁶ This number sits on top of the glaze applied to the plate and was therefore not enamel fired at the time of production, but was most likely painted on at a later stage by the owner.



[Fig. 1] Belleek earthenware dinner plate for Freemason Lodges of Ireland, designed by R. W. Armstrong, registered on 13 April 1878. Freemason Museum, Freemason Hall, Molesworth St. Dublin, (photographed with the kind permission of R. Hayes, curator of Freemason Museum).

An order for these plates survives in volume 2 of Armstrong's personal memoranda.⁷ It was sent on a receipt or invoice form from Mc Birney and Co., Belleek pottery on 13 October 1879 to Mr. Vincent Cox of 20-21 William St., Dublin and states: '6 Masonic dinner plates enclosed in a package to Mr. Percival Jones, Westmoreland St.

⁷ This is the only surviving invoice contained in the Art and Industry archive. It is significant that it was contained within Armstrong's personal memoranda.



Dublin' (1879, Vol. 2).⁸ Mr Jones and Mr Cox were both members of Hiram Lodge number 120 in Dublin. Mr Jones was a founding member of that lodge in 1861 and therefore, one can assume an established and respected member (Dublin Database Registry of Freemason Members 1760-1860). Percival Jones was also the proprietor of a China and Glass Establishment at 15 Westmoreland St. Dublin (Grand Centenary Celebration Official Catalogue 1892, 72). While he appears to have been a retailer of Belleek's Masonic wares, he also traded in the pottery's Parian ware. An advert for his store appears in the Grand Centenary Official Catalogue of 1892. It states 'A large and handsome assortment always on view at Moderate prices. Belleek China same price as at Works.' This implies that Percival Jones had an agreement with the pottery to sell its wares in his central Dublin city store at factory prices; an arrangement that may well have been first established through Robert W. Armstrong, a Mason of similar status. This memo provides further evidence of the success of this design for Belleek. Its popular sale through Masonic lodges and Masonic businesses across Ireland, demonstrates Belleek's achievement in producing specially altered designs for commissions which, in turn would have financed other production.

The second style of earthen tableware produced for the Masons by Belleek was much grander - the example included in the collection at Freemason's Hall consists of a large tureen and stand. This item, again in the blue hues of Craft Freemasonry, has much more detailed crests and symbols transfer printed as decoration. Gold lustre has also been added to the handles, making this a more costly commission. The design was produced as part of a dinner service for the District Grand Lodge of Cambridgeshire – a United Grand Lodge of England, and was again patented by Armstrong on 13 April 1878. The Masonic motifs employed on this tureen are specific to the Grand Lodge of Cambridgeshire. The design reveals the pottery's approach to earthenware commissions at this time. A piece was chosen from an existing range and adapted by designing and executing a range of specific motifs for decoration. This design, without the Masonic motifs, appears in the Armstrong photograph album of 1870.⁹ The application of enamel, gilding, or other details would have also added to the original price considerably (Price scales 1870, A&IA). Belleek must have been well regarded and well connected at this point to receive such a commission, and it is likely that this connection came through Armstrong, a respected and well regarded Mason. Belleek would have faced significant competition from English potteries for such a commission.

⁸ Mr Cox was a new member of the Masons having only joined in January 1878 (Irish Index Registry of Freemason Members 1875-1995).

⁹ Sean Mc Crum discusses these grades of decoration: "In many cases, pieces could be ordered from three categories: - undecorated, apart from the body glaze; decorated in overglaze colours; and decorated with gilding, with or without overglaze colouring. The type with gilding and overglaze decoration was obviously the most expensive e.g. a post-1900 catalogue has for a thistle design, 2/9, 3/6 and 4/6 for each category" (Mc Crum 1969, 11).



[Fig. 2] Belleek earthenware tureen, with printed Masonic motifs, part of the dinner service commissioned by the District Grand Lodge of Cambridgeshire, designed by R.W. Armstrong, registered 13 April 1878, Freemason Museum, Freemason Hall, Molesworth St Dublin, (photographed with the kind permission of R. Hayes, curator of Freemason Museum).

Examples of a third style of Masonic tableware can be found in the United Grand Lodge of England's Collection and the Belleek Pottery Museum. A teacup is decorated with an engraved design of the Red Cross of Constantine that represents one of the Masonic side orders practiced under the English Constitution and established formally in England in 1865 (Royle, Museum of Freemasonry London, 08/07/09). Although the cup bears the Belleek mark, it does not bear the patent mark, and so it may have been manufactured after 1883 when such marks ceased to be used (Royle, Museum of Freemasonry London, 10/07/09). It was acquired by the Grand Lodge some time prior to 1938. A teacup, a dinner plate and a small bowl decorated with the same motifs, most likely commissioned by the same Masonic order, appear in the Belleek Museum.



The Mason's charitable organisations, referred to previously, provide an insight into the Freemason's involvement with the arts and their position within the broader cultural context. The Masonic bazaars were large exhibitions of art, craft and general curiosities, organised by members, which helped to raise funds for the Masonic charities. The first major Masonic Bazaar was held in 1882, followed a decade later by the Grand Centenary Exhibition of 1892 held to celebrate the Masonic Orphan Schools centenary. Both events were held in the grounds and buildings of the Royal Dublin Society. The archives in the Grand Lodge of Ireland hold a detailed account of the organisation of these exhibitions, including the establishment of a dedicated exhibition committee. The minutes of the committee's meetings provide a valuable insight into the allocation of the stalls and the selection of wares and curiosities chosen for display. The preliminary notice published by the executive committee on 28 June 1881 states:

It was resolved that the Hon. Secretaries Committee with the Secretaries of the Dublin Lodges announcing that the committee are prepared to make arrangements for giving space for a fancy goods stall to any lodge that wish to have one under the superintendence of the wife of a member of the lodge.

(1881, 13)

Wives of the Masons again held this important role in the 1892 Bazaar. The first meeting of the exhibition committee for the 1892 Centenary Exhibition was held in February 1891. At this meeting it was announced that the Grand Master, the Duke of Abercorn and his wife the Duchess, had been informed and had written with their support for the cause (M.F.O.S 1891, 2). The Duchess of Abercorn became a central figure in the organisation of the exhibition and she presided over the Grand Master's stall. Her efforts were specially noted in the committee's minute book of 7 May 1891:

Her Grace the Duchess of Abercorn has given a great deal of trouble and attention to the project. She has personally asked patronage of a large number of distinguished persons and has received promises of patronage from His Royal Highness and Prince and Princess of Wales....

(1891, 30)

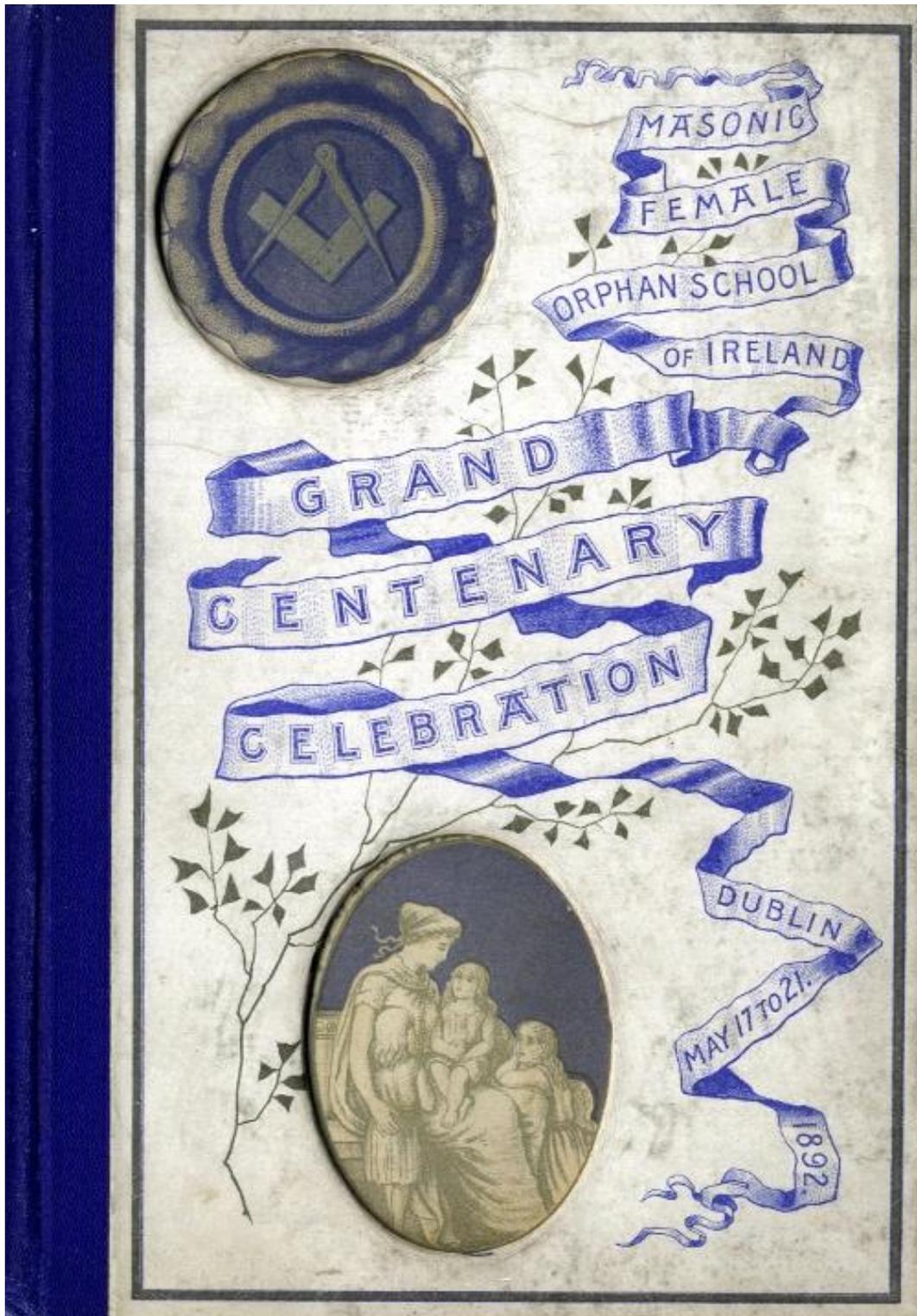
Various other Dukes, Duchesses, Marquis, Viscounts, Earls, Countesses and Lady's were listed as confirmed patrons (1891, 30). On 1 May 1891, a conference was held at Freemason's Hall in Dublin. At this meeting an invitation was issued to both Dublin and provincial lodges to tender applications for stalls at the exhibition (M.F.O.S Centenary Exhibition 1892: 29). Some lodges had already applied for stalls, and these successful lodges were announced at this meeting (M.F.O.S Centenary Exhibition 1892, 29). The executive committee also published a report at this time that stated '[the] stalls will be erected, decorated and fitted up by the general committee so as to render them appropriate, and to secure uniformity of general design. But the president or committee of each stall will be expected to furnish and stock it.' (M.F.O.S Centenary Exhibition 1892, 30)



During the Centenary Exhibition's five-day run, no less than 96,000 people passed through the turnstiles (Bowden 1992, 68-70). Details of the preparations, the opening ceremony, the stalls, the daily attractions and visitors' experiences, were extensively reported by the *Irish Times*. The following is a description of the Grand Masters stall, featured in the 18 May edition. It was referred to as 'undoubtedly the leading stall':

It occupies the most conspicuous position in the central hall... the benefit of which to the stall is incalculable. The decorations and drapery are of the most exquisitely pretty character and give evidence of the highest taste and most skilful treatment. The articles for sale are the choicest kind, and are displayed in such an advantageous manner that their actual value is greatly enhanced. They consist of fancy works of every kind, Belleek ceramic ware, rare glass and curios.

(Irish Times, 18 May 1892)



[Fig. 3] Grand Centenary Celebration Official Catalogue, 1892, Freemason Archive, Freemason Hall, Molesworth St Dublin, (reproduced with the kind permission of R. Hayes, curator of Freemason Museum).



The description continues in the Centenary Exhibitions Official Catalogue 'The lodges included in the Masonic province of Tyrone and Fermanagh have given most valuable aid to the [Grand Masters] stall, and have forwarded specimens of local manufacture to increase its attractions and revenue.' (1892, 155) The inclusion of Belleek's pottery (specimens of local manufacture of the Masonic province of Fermanagh) on the Grand Master's stall, provides evidence of a well-established link between the pottery and the Masons, a link that has its roots in Armstrong's personal networks.

By examining networks like these, which impacted directly on Belleek's designs and business practices, the pottery can be formally analysed and its position within the industry contextualised. Using the original material and sources, the myths surrounding Belleek's production can be deconstructed and explored. The competitiveness of this well-established industry was the driving force behind much of Belleek's design. Belleek's business practices, following its establishment, overwhelmingly illustrate the pottery's determination to succeed in a competitive industry. Belleek was keenly aware of demand from different markets and produced a variety of wares to meet these needs. Armstrong depended on his strong personal links with the Worcester and Staffordshire potteries to ensure a plentiful supply of recipes and practical advice, which allowed Belleek to remain competitive. The commissions of the Masons' reveal how Belleek designed, produced and conducted its industry in its early period of production. They also show the value of personal networks to the factory during its early years. It was upon such networks that the factory laid the foundations for its industrial future.

In the conclusion of his 1993 publication Richard Degenhardt states: 'Belleek has given something to the world beyond a product for market or profit' (1993, 85). While this is valid, Degenhardt ignores the pottery's business history, its consumers and its markets. These were the essential considerations for the pottery and vitally important aspects of the business' history. Although Belleek's designs were not always innovative, they continually reflected an astute awareness of market demands.



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Interviews

Murray, Ciara, (08/01/07) and (30/05/07) Interview with Rebecca Hayes, curator of the collections at Freemasons Hall and Museum, Molesworth Street, Dublin



Murray, Ciara, (10/07/09) Interview with Alison Royle, Collections Officer at The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, Great Queen's Street, London.

Archival Material

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2. Facsimile copies of diaries and memoranda of Robert William Armstrong, Vols. 2-8, 1860- 1881, Art and Industry Archive, Collins Barracks, Dublin AI/112/ 001 Box 112. Original diaries in the collection at the Museum of Arts and Sciences, Sydney Australia
3. Printed pamphlet of price scales for white and ivory earthenware, Belleek Pottery, (January 1870). Art and Industry Archive, Collins Barracks, Dublin AI/115/003 Box 115
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5. M.F.O.S 1891, Freemasonry Archive, Freemasons Hall, 17 Molesworth Street, Dublin 2
6. M.F.O.S Centenary Exhibition 1892, Freemasonry Archive, Freemasons Hall, 17 Molesworth Street, Dublin 2
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