

A Passion For Flowers



John Wedgwood (1766-1844)

This year sees the 200th anniversary of the founding of what is now known as the Royal Horticultural Society. It is perhaps a little known fact that the eldest son of Josiah Wedgwood I and his wife Sarah, was one of the original founders of this illustrious institution.

John Wedgwood had worked at the Etruria factory from as early as 1781, becoming a partner between 1790–93, and again from 1800-1812. He had a full grasp of the technical side of ceramic production, but his lack of business interest was a blow to his father. Josiah I had actually anticipated John's propensity to horticulture saying in a letter of 19th December 1779, written to his partner Thomas Bentley that— "...we will suppose that Jack [John] is to be settled as a gentleman farmer in some desirable situation, with as many acres for himself, & his tenants to improve as I can spare him."

In 1794 John married Louisa Jane ('Jennie') Allen, younger sister of his brother Josiah's wife, Bessie. In the same year the older Josiah bought his son a share in a newly-formed banking house, Alexander Davison & Co—but in 1816 the bank, which had absorbed most of John's considerable fortune, failed, and Messrs. Coutts took over the assets and debts. John was saved by a subscription of £12,000 raised by his brother Josiah, his sisters Kitty and Sarah, and his brother-in-law Robert Waring Darwin.

For a period of 12 years between 1800 and 1812 he rejoined the firm as a partner, but spent much of his time travelling between Westbury-on-Trym near Bristol, where he lived, and Etruria. Eventually in 1804 he moved to Seabridge, near Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire in order to be nearer to the factory. It was around this time that his horticultural tendencies began to influence the production of the factory.

John had, as early as 1801, suggested to William Forsyth, the King's gardener at St. James's and Kensington, the founding of a horticultural society. This suggestion came to fruition in 1804, with the founding of the Society of which John became the first Treasurer. John actually chaired the inaugural meeting which was held at Hatchards, Piccadilly (London). His interest in botany and horticulture soon became apparent with the introduction of floral patterns and designs on Wedgwood ware.

Amongst the early patterns produced can be included the celebrated 'Water Lily' (sometimes erroneously known as the "Darwin" 'Water Lily'), also 'Peony' and 'Hibiscus'. These underglaze blue-printed botanical patterns portray a high technical expertise, and resulted in Thomas Byerley (the first Josiah's nephew) to write to Josiah II—"Your brother is extremely active and intelligent, and is fast paving the way for a radical form, and will greatly benefit the concern [i.e. factory]."

Sadly John withdrew from the Wedgwood partnership in 1812, but continued to live in Staffordshire until 1820. After this date John and his family led an itinerant existence, often travelling abroad and never settling for long in any one place. At the age of 54 he wrote to his brother Josiah II—"I will thank you to advance me my October allowance..." (September 30th 1820), a sad indictment that his earlier financial crises had affected the remainder of his, and his family's life.

Following the death of his wife in April 1836, John's own health declined. His eyesight failed, and he could no longer continue his gardening—the one pursuit he truly enjoyed. He was not to know that he would be honoured—especially in this bicentenary year—as the Founder of the Royal Horticultural Society. He had also, during the years of his partnership with the Etruria factory, helped to influence ceramic production, and pioneer new developments.

He spent the last year of his life with his unmarried daughter in Tenby, succumbing to an attack of bronchitis on January 24th 1844. He is buried in the Parish churchyard of Tenby. His sister-in-law, Fanny Allen, summarised the sentiments of those individuals who had known him best. She wrote

"...a kinder, gentler nature never left life."

With his death the direct connection with the Wedgwood factory, in his line of the family, was severed. The issue of his children also became extinct in the male line. Nevertheless, his name is revered by ceramic historians and horticulturalists worldwide, and his fine achievements will continue to be belatedly appreciated.