

# Portraiture through ten reigns



Victoria



Edward VII



George V



Edward VIII



George VI



Elizabeth II



In applying the portrait to its base, the ornamenteer must take great care not to slightly mar any detailed feature and it also requires keen precision to place the portrait in the centre of the base. The traditional hand-pressing technique is used for the very large portraits because these would be impossible to handle by the normal methods because of their sheer size. In this process, a piece of clay which may weigh several pounds, is pressed into the mould by hand and the surplus cut away; then the hand-made base of the plaque (some have been known to weigh up to twenty four pounds) is pressed over the back of the portrait mould and left for about three hours to allow the clay partially to dry so that it can be readily released from the mould.

Most of the average size oval shape portrait medallions are finished with a decorative clay border around the edge, inscribed on the reverse with the name of the subject and where, necessary, further inscribed to commemorate a special occasion (these inscriptions may be incised into the clay or printed after the biscuit firing).

The first record of portrait medallions is published in the Wedgwood and Bentley ornamental ware catalogue of 1773. This lists 285 cameos and intaglios, medallions and tablets, 23 busts and statues, and 609 portrait

The figuremaking and ornamenting of a portrait medallion of English author and lexicographer Samuel Johnson to be issued in a limited edition of 200, commissioned by Wedgwood retailer Salloways of Lichfield, the town where Johnson was born. The Jasper medallions will be introduced in 1984 to mark the bicentenary of his lifetime (1709-1784).

medallions, which include 254 popes and the first of the so-called 'heads of illustrious moderns' – from Roman emperors to Greek mythological figures, to Kings of England and famous statesmen, scientists, authors and military leaders.

About four years later the firm's catalogue announced more 'heads of illustrious moderns' and by 1788 the number of portrait subjects had been increased to about 860 of which about 230 were of 'illustrious moderns'.

Some of the earliest portrait medallions were made in Black Basalt and later in a white biscuit stoneware which could be polished. After perfecting Jasper ware in 1774, Josiah Wedgwood found this to be the best ceramic medium for the production of his series of portraits.

Wedgwood portraiture has been a notable feature of the company's product range over the last two centuries and has remained unrivalled in the ceramic world. Medallions continue to be much sought after by collectors at home and overseas and the range of subjects has been keenly researched, closely studied and extensively written about – particularly by Robin Reilly, whose book 'Wedgwood: The Portrait Medallions' covers the subject comprehensively.

The portrait gallery continues steadily to increase – recent additions have been models of the Prince and Princess of Wales and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – and the entire collection has become the largest and most interesting ever to be produced in ceramics or in any other medium for that matter.



Alexander



English actress, Sarah Siddons



Unitarian minister, William Willet



Etruria bricklayer, Edward Bourne



English admiral, Lord Nelson



Unidentified - ?