CREAMWARE

BY

DONALD TOWNER

FABER AND FABER
London & Boston

1978

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Creamware, known in the eighteenth century as cream-coloured earthenware or cream-colour, was the direct descendant of the lead-glazed wares of the Middle Ages. English pottery, through the ages, had become successively more refined, more technically perfect and more artistically excellent until it reached its climax in the creamware of the eighteenth century with its fine form, thin body, clean and brilliant glaze which formed a perfect background for the ingenious, harmonious and free painting of the earthenware enamellers of that time. It was the prototype of the white-glazed earthenware that is manufactured today. At its best it did not seek to imitate porcelain either in colour, form or decoration, but remained essentially true to its English earthenware tradition. Even when the creamware potters sought inspiration from the work of the silversmith, the metal forms were freely adapted to form a more plastic idiom suitable to the clay medium. So traditional was the creamware that it would be truer to say that it evolved from the main stream of English pottery than that it was invented at any particular time.

Earthenware that was cream in colour was made from the beginning of the eighteenth century. At first the potters coated a darker body with a cream-coloured slip, but by the importation of clays from Dorset and Devonshire, together with the introduction of calcined flint, the manufacture of creamware was made possible.[1] These materials when fired to a temperature high enough to form a stoneware produced the white salt-glazed ware or 'white stoneware' as it used to be called. Salt, which was thrown into the kiln during the process of firing, volatilized and formed a vitreous silicate on the surface of the ware. The same materials, however, when fired to a lower temperature and glazed with lead, formed the cream-coloured earthenware. This was first produced some time before 1740. At this time the lead powder or galena, mixed with a certain amount of ground flint, was dusted on the ware, which was then given its one and only firing. This process produced an extremely brilliant

[1] It has been stated that John Astbury first introduced calcined flint into the body of the ware in). Its use, however, is recorded by John Dwight in one of his notebooks (British M n) as y as 1698.

transparent glaze of a rich cream colour. Small stamped motifs similar to those found on saltglaze and redware were sometimes applied to the cream-colour of this time.[1] Dry crystals of metallic oxides such as copper, iron and manganese, were frequently dusted on, probably with the tip of a brush. These dissolved during the firing and mixing with the lead ran in a charming, but somewhat uncontrolled manner, to form touches of coloured decoration (Plates 3A and 4). This form of decoration led directly to the 'tortoiseshell' and other wares with coloured glazes. The method employed at this time of producing the cream-coloured ware was found to be unsatisfactory as the lead powder produced poisoning among the potters, and the grinding of the flint stones a disease known as potter's rot. Patents were therefore taken out by Thomas Benson between 1726 and 1732 for grinding the flint stones in water, and about 1740 a fluid glaze was invented, probably by Enoch Booth of Tunstall, Staffordshire, in which the lead and flint were both mixed and ground in water. The method was adopted of first firing the ware to a biscuit, and then glazing and re-firing it. The date usually given for this invention is 1750, but in actual fact it must have taken place about ten years earlier (see page 23). Having described the chief developments which resulted in the double-fired creamware coated with a fluid glaze, I must point out that this did not immediately displace the previous types. Thus creamware with small applied reliefs touched in with underglaze colours was made at least as late as 1761, the year of the marriage of King George III, which event was sometimes depicted on this type of ware. Tortoiseshell and other wares with coloured glazes as well as salt-glazed stoneware continued to be made in quantity till late in the century.

Great developments were made in the creamware about the middle of the century and by 1760 the ware was already being enamelled and had a rapidly increasing market which during the next few years was to spread to the Continent as well. At this time much of the creamware was being made by the saltglaze potters, and painted by the saltglaze enamellers. It therefore bore a strong resemblance to the saltglaze ware both in form and decoration. Teapots were globular in shape with crabstock handles and spouts (Plate 7A); coffee-pots were pear-shaped with magnificent rococo handles and spouts (Plates 4 and 5). The colour was a deep cream almost amounting to buff and was derived not only from the body but also from the glaze, the latter usually being either a deep yellow, a soft brown or a bright lemon-yellow with a tinge of green, though one of the earliest glazes on creamware was of a bluish tint. As would be expected, it was during this early period of the ware that the greatest vigour, freedom and originality were shown, while the full possibilities of the material were as yet undiscovered. Foremost of the pioneers in Staffordshire who availed themselves of Enoch Booth's invention was Thomas Whieldon.

[1] Some small creamware teapots decorated with coffee-coloured applied stamped ornaments similar in pattern to those found on some early salt-glazed stoneware, may perhaps be attributable to this period. Examples of this type of creamware are at the Castle Museum, Norwich.

Creamware was not, however, confined to Staffordshire; in fact it has become evident that saltglaze potters were working in a number of large potting centres outside Staffordshire such as Derbyshire, Liverpool, Yorkshire and Swansea, and wherever this was so, the manufacture of creamware was developed to the eventual exclusion of the salt-glazed stoneware.

By 1751 an improved creamware is stated to have been made by the Warburtons. Ten years later Josiah Wedgwood was directing all his efforts towards its development and by 1763 he was producing a considerably refined ware of a much paler colour. By 1768 he had transformed the creamware into virtually a new substance of great beauty, which combined lightness with strength and was capable of the greatest delicacy of workmanship. There were, no doubt, many contributing factors towards this great change in creamware, but first and foremost was the introduction of china-clay and china-stone from Cornwall into the body and glaze. The glaze used by Wedgwood at this time was a yellowish-green colour which may be seen in crevices where it lies more thickly. By 1770 other Staffordshire potters were producing the light-coloured creamware to which Wedgwood had given the name 'Queen's ware'. Elsewhere potters continued to make the deeper-coloured creamware for some years afterwards, usually till about 1775. A letter from Wedgwood on page 44 shows that the creamware potteries, at this time at any rate, made either the deep or pale creamware, but were unable for practical reasons to make both simultaneously.

Only a few minor changes in the development of creamware were made after this. Of importance, however, was a considerable increase about 1780 in the production of creamware, the glaze of which was tinged with blue. This glaze when applied to a somewhat modified creamware body produced a ware that was slightly greyish in appearance and is usually referred to as pearlware. In this type of ware the bluish glaze was somewhat at variance with the warm-coloured body and although much of it was extremely pleasing, on the whole it was less satisfactory aesthetically than the true creamware with its greenish or yellowish glazes.

The attribution of pieces of creamware to a particular factory has always been a difficulty, as virtually no creamware was marked prior to Josiah Wedgwood's manufacture of it in Burslem. In 1772, however, Wedgwood wrote to Thomas Bentley proposing that all his ware should be marked, but even after that date a considerable quantity of his ware seems to have missed being stamped. Other factories were for the most part content to leave their wares unmarked, largely due, no doubt, to the practice of supplying each other with wares to supplement exhausted stocks. The difficulty of attribution is further increased by the similarity of both body and glaze of the creamware made by a number of potteries as well as by the interchange and copying of ideas. Nor can we be helped to any great extent by the enamelled decoration, as with but a few exceptions factories sent their creamware to outside enamellers for decoration so that one enameller might decorate the ware of a number of potters. The

practice of enamelling creamware at the factory itself was only gradually adopted. It follows therefore, that there is a great deal in the present subject that awaits confirmation and further discovery. It must be pointed out, however, that little progress can be made unless the whole field of creamware manufacture is kept in view.