



Fig. 1: *famille verte* dish, PEP89.

# Eighteenth century Chinese export porcelain from three London sites

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THIS STUDY of some of the Chinese porcelain which flooded into 18th-century London is based on material from three sites excavated by the DUA and the DGLA in 1989 and now held by MOLAS<sup>1</sup>. The sites represent three rather different social and economic environments and were selected for this reason. The first site was part of a large warehouse complex in the City on property owned by Trinity House, site code PEP89<sup>2</sup>. The second site is in Clerkenwell, where a mansion house was built on former

Crown property in St. John's Square, site code JON89<sup>3</sup>. The third is a multiple site at Limehouse in the docklands of East London, incorporating domestic and commercial use of the area, site code LLK89<sup>4</sup>, divided as LLK 26, LLK 12 and LLK 18.

Chinese porcelain from the sites is fairly typical of the ware made at Jingdezhen and exported to Europe during the late Kangxi, Yongzheng and mid Qianlong reigns of the Qing dynasty, dating

*application for public grant*. MOLAS archive report (1992).

1. Described more fully in an MA report (UCL) by the author.
2. D. Sankey *PEP89 assessment report*. Preliminary computer print-out of MOLAS archive report (1993).
3. B. Sloane (ed) *The Priory of St. John of Jerusalem, Clerkenwell, London EC1. An assessment of archaeological investigations and*

4. C. Phillpotts MOLAS archive reports: *Limehouse Link documentary survey* (1989); *Limehouse Link project, site narrative* LLK 26 (1992); *Limehouse Link project, site narrative* LLK 12, LLK 18 (1993).

from about 1700 to 1780<sup>5</sup>. It is generally difficult to give precise dates for export ware and “only exceptionally will it be possible to date a piece of porcelain absolutely”<sup>6</sup>, as for example an armorial plate from LLK 26 dated to about 1750. The assemblages are dominated by underglaze blue ware but also present are overglaze enamel, Chinese Imari, brown glaze, Chinese soft paste, armorial ware and Amsterdam *bont* or ‘clobbered’ ware.

The presence of Chinese porcelain at 124 out of 924 DUA and DGLA sites reflects the extent of English trade with the Orient and a desire for something more worthy to use at the table than pewter, earthenware and wood. By the beginning of the 18th century porcelain prices were such that all but the very poor could afford it. For example an East India Company sales catalogue for 1704 included 5600 blue and white cups valued at 2d each<sup>7</sup>. At the same time it would buy a gallon of beer, the nation’s staple drink.

### The sites

#### Colchester House, site code PEP89

Colchester House was built in 1958 on a bombed site belonging to Trinity House and was part of a large complex of several buildings bounded by Coopers Row, Pepys Street and Savage Gardens. Trinity House owned the site from the 1790s to 1989 and, when demolished for redevelopment, MOLAS excavations revealed a slice of London’s history from its Roman foundations to post-World War II reconstruction.

From the mid-17th century onwards, warehouses had occupied the site and some were improved or substantially rebuilt to keep abreast of London’s rapidly expanding trade. The location was well placed for commerce as it was less than a quarter of a mile from Customs House and the long-established Legal Quays between London Bridge and the Tower.

Chinese ceramic was found in a late-17th-century cone-shaped brick-lined icehouse which measured 2.64m deep by 2.03m wide (8ft 8in by 6ft 8in). Originally it would have been about 5m by nearly 3m (16ft by 10ft), the top having been truncated by the basement of Colchester House. Context 17, which contained the Chinese porcelain, is spotted to about 1720-1745<sup>8</sup>.

5. D. Howard and J. Ayers *China for the West*. London and New York: Sotheby Parke Bernet (1978); C. J. A. Jorg *Porcelain and the Dutch china trade*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff (1982).

6. C. J. A. Jorg *ibid* 152.

7. IOR/H/MISC/10, 23 (IOR = India Office Records, British

The icehouse was contemporary with a warehouse which subsequently was replaced or remodelled in the mid-18th century. Decayed wood fibre sieved from context 17 is consistent with material from a late-17th-century building which, together with other finds, indicates that a high quality warehouse was replaced by a similar building of equal if not greater merit. The icehouse was filled with rubbish and demolition material when the new warehouse was erected, suggesting that cold storage was no longer necessary and perhaps trade was shifting from local perishable goods to foreign imports.

Exceptionally fine glassware and Chinese porcelain found in the icehouse may reflect this change. For example the magnificent *famille verte* dish (Fig. 1) is similar to two dishes on display in English museums; the Salting bequest dish no. C1339/1910 in the Victoria and Albert, dated to the Kangxi period (1662-1722), and the Sayce bequest dish, no. X5315, in the Ashmolean. Other finds in the three contemporary contexts provide further evidence of overseas contact<sup>9</sup>.

#### St. John’s Square, site code JON89

The site stands within the inner precinct of the 12th-century Knights Hospitaller Priory of St. John of Jerusalem. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries the Priory was only partly destroyed and many of the buildings awarded to the nobility by Henry VIII. Several belonged to the Earl of Aylesbury, including Aylesbury House which stood at the site in 1661 but was sold soon afterwards. Notwithstanding the westerly trend in the development of London, as the nobility followed the Court towards St James, the Square was dominated by large mansions for over two hundred years and was an affluent area well into the 18th century.

Excavations revealed the sub-basement of a building fronting onto the Square, erected about 1700 but demolished probably before 1750. A large wood-lined pit in the sub-basement contained domestic rubbish, including Chinese porcelain, and was back-filled soon after demolition of the building. Associated finds indicate that the assemblage belonged to a wealthy household and includes a wine glass dated between 1750-1770.

#### Limehouse Link, site code LLK89

The area was developed in the 18th century when much of London’s dockland was expanded to re-

Library).

8. R. Goffin *Post Roman pottery from excavations at Colchester House (PEP89)* MOLAS archive report (1993) 2.

9. R. Goffin *ibid*; F. Pritchard *Colchester House, Pepys Street (PEP89) Assessment of the accessioned finds*. MOLAS archive report (1993) 2.

lieve congestion at the Legal Quays. Ship building and repairing at Limehouse spawned local endeavours, such as rope and sailcloth making, and residential development grew accordingly. Docklands regeneration in the 1980s allowed for a series of excavations in the area and out of a total of eighteen sites Chinese porcelain was found at three: LLK 26, LLK 12, LLK 18.

### LLK 26

Excavations at Duke Shore Wharf showed that an 18th-century industrial group of warehouses and tenements had been built on a late-16th-century dock. Chinese porcelain was found in a standard 18th century arched brick drain and the fill, context 6009, also contained glass, coins and other ceramics including Bow and Limehouse ware. The context is dated to about 1750 by a Chinese porcelain plate enamelled with the Marten and Bidwell family arms.

This site is pertinent to the study of 18th-century English ceramic because it identified the exact location of the Limehouse pottery site<sup>10</sup>. Earliest experiments in the manufacture of English porcelain were undertaken by Joseph Wilson who had lived here between 1745 and 1748.

### LLK 12

Situated at the northeast corner of the intersection of the Highway and Spert Street, the site revealed houses, gardens and backyards dating from the 17th to 19th centuries. It may have had some commercial use as well. Excavation trenches straddled a large boundary ditch, possibly part of a land drainage system, which was replaced by a brick culvert in the mid-18th century. The culvert was one of twelve structures containing Chinese porcelain and contexts date from the late-17th to late-18th centuries; some spot-dated by clay pipes.

### LLK 18

The site is two streets east of LLK 12 on the Highway, comprising at least three phases of a substantial 18th-century house with brick flooring and a late-17th-century sub-basement. Chinese porcelain was found in two backyard circular pits, one being a drain made from several barrels stacked vertically. In the late-18th century both pits were cut at the top edge by two sterile brick-lined pits.

### London in the 18th century

Improvements in agriculture provided cheaper food for the growing population and relative prosperity stretched beyond the landowning class so that even the position of working people had

improved by the first half of the century. Commercial life flourished and trade in the Port of London tripled in volume between 1720 and 1800, resulting in a shortage of berths at the overcrowded Legal Quays. Some ships moored down river at Limehouse, Deptford or Blackwall where cargo was transferred onto barges for delivery to the City. Warehouses belonging to the East India Company were clustered in and around the Royal Exchange and many were rebuilt or enlarged during the 1720s in response to this growth in trade.

Contemporary improvements to transport provided quicker access to commercial centres as well as answering the quest for more comfortable and speedier connections along the social circuit. A broader range of pleasures was available to Londoners who were spending more time at dances, spas and public gardens and indulging a taste for exotica, including coffee, chocolate and tea.

Tax on tea was notoriously high but as the standard of living improved so these exotic hot drinks became more widely available. Unknown before the Civil War, chocolate and coffee-houses quickly became a popular feature of London life so that by 1702 there were over five hundred of them; by the middle of the century a cup of coffee in a coffee-house cost only a penny farthing. Thousands upon thousands of cups, together with other types of porcelain, were packed with sago into chests at Guangzhou (Canton) and shipped to London by the East India Company, along with the more valuable cargoes of tea and textiles. Dealers or 'chinamen' sold porcelain and other oriental luxuries from shops in the City, the Strand and Holborn and inevitably Chinese porcelain found its way into London's archaeological strata.

Cargoes were advertised in printed catalogues listing goods and expected auction prices. Names of buyers and eventual payments were scribbled against most lots and scrutiny of the more legible annotations reveals that the same buyers were bidding time and again for porcelain<sup>11</sup>. Several of the frequent, large scale buyers might have been the merchants responsible for distribution within Britain and overseas, London being an entrepot for re-exportation to Europe, Jamaica and North America.

### The trade with Guangzhou

Before 1680 British trade with China was a haphazard enterprise handled by local freighters from Bantam in Java. However the Kangxi Emperor, recognizing China's advantageous position in world

10. D. Drakard (ed) *Limehouse ware revealed*. Beckenham: English Ceramic Circle (1993) 26.

11. IOR/H/MISC/II, 14.

trade, established greater cooperation between East and West. Thus when direct contact between London and Guangzhou was permitted, East India Company ships undertook the entire voyage and "by 1715 the intercourse with Canton had assumed somewhat of a regular trade"<sup>12</sup>. However, European merchants were subject to the very unpopular 'Canton System' whereby a small cartel of Chinese merchants who, under orders from the Emperor's administrators, monopolized trade with the foreigners giving Chinese officials every advantage.

The Company employed chief trade negotiators called supercargoes who were responsible overseas for buying and selling cargoes, of which porcelain

was but a minor share. Reports to London are peppered with complaints against the system<sup>13</sup> but despite restrictions trade was highly profitable. Supercargoes travelled back and forth with their ships but after 1770 were allowed to remain in Guangzhou, living in the Company warehouse known as the 'factory'. Conveniently on site for important tea negotiations, supercargoes could also supervise private trade orders permitted by the Company in some commodities, including porcelain. Exclusively decorated enamelled ware, particularly armorial vessels, were increasingly requested as the century progressed and some of this demand was more swiftly met by Guangzhou

12. IOR/G/12, 24.

13. IOR/R/10 vol. 2, 121.



Fig. 2: underglaze blue bowls, JONG9 (top), LLK 26 (below).

potters who overglazed blank wares sent down from Jingdezhen.

### Porcelain from the three London sites

MOLAS assemblages are typical of mass produced popular ware made at Jingdezhen during this period and the high quality of much of it supports the view that "it is not easy to distinguish between the better export wares and those that were made for domestic consumption, particularly as regards material quality"<sup>14</sup>. Chinese taste in decoration predominates but some vessels do reflect European preferences for form, examples demonstrating a range of compromises between the two cultures from the typically Chinese to the totally Western.

#### a) Underglaze blue ware

Decoration is typically Chinese featuring many popular elements which appealed to both Chinese and European markets. Fine cups and bowls of Chinese form and decoration include examples from JON89 and LLK 26 (Fig. 2). The teapot stand from JON89 shows a pleasing alliance between Chi-

14. D. Howard and J. Ayers *op cit* fn 5, 62.



Fig. 3: underglaze blue teapot stand, JON89.

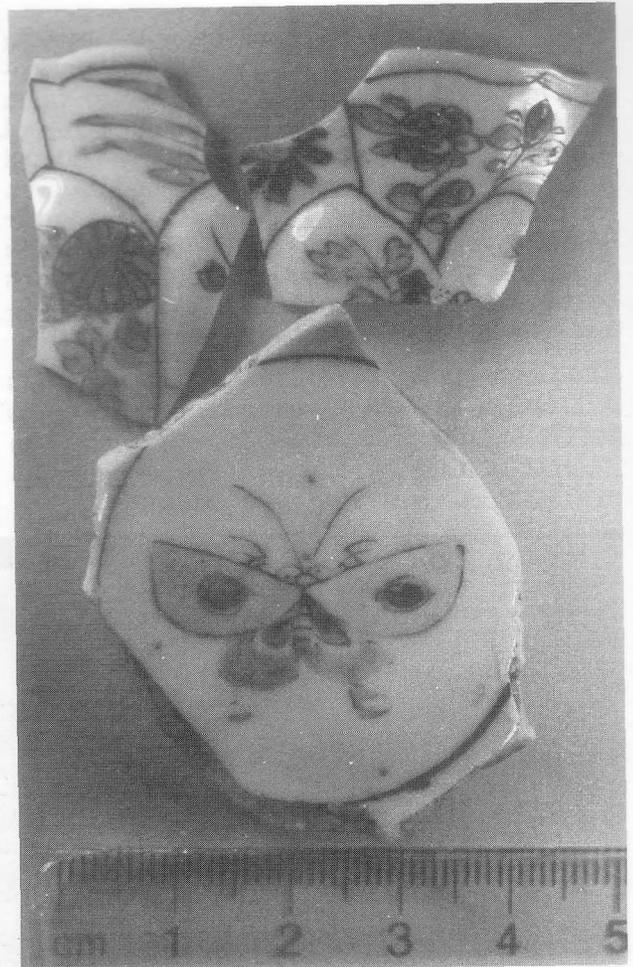


Fig. 4: *famille verte* cup, PEP89.

nese decoration and English vessel form (Fig. 3). On the other hand some dinner plates from LLK 26 display an uneasy hybrid between the cultures in both form and decoration, for instance the inclusion of scholars' scrolls and Daoist emblems on overcrowded bracket rims.

Some pieces are less refined, as would be expected from the multiplicity of factories at Jingdezhen, for example the coarser bodied and more sketchily decorated mugs and chocolate cups from JON89. Such ware was bought in huge quantities by the East India Company, probably destined for commercial use in coffee houses.

#### b) Overglaze enamelled ware

Degradation of enamels on many examples blurs the distinction between *famille verte* and *famille rose* palettes but transparent enamels on vessels from PEP89 (Figs. 1, 4) indicate the former. Characteristic opaque enamels of the latter are evident on a few vessels including a very fine chocolate cup from LLK 12. Transparent shades of green are typi-

cal of *famille verte* decoration but sometimes were combined with *famille rose* adding to the difficulty of using these criteria as a basis for classification. Cultural symbiosis is effectively captured on a sherd from LLK 26 enamelled with youthful mandarins holding a vessel which looks remarkably like a Derbyshire creamware coffee pot (Fig. 5). Two examples from LLK 12 are decorated with European legends, the 'Judgement of Paris' and possibly Diana the huntress. These two dishes, together with the octagonal armorial plate from LLK 26, mark the Westernisation of both form and decoration; unfortunately all three are heavily degraded.

European overglazing of Chinese underglaze blue or plain white porcelain was initially carried out as a cottage industry and unsympathetic gilding on two saucers from JON89 is an example of this work, known as Amsterdam *bont* or clobbering. However, as the century progressed so did European skills at enamelling.



Fig. 5: overglaze detail, LLK 26.

### c) Chinese Imari

Japanese porcelain, exported from Imari, captured overseas markets during the turmoil years in China when the Manchus were overthrown and the Qing dynasty established. This success did not go unnoticed by Chinese merchants when production at Jingdezhen recommenced in 1683. Chinese versions were being exported by the early 18th century and Japanese prices rapidly became uncompetitive.

Bowls and saucers are the most common forms in the MOLAS assemblages with average quality body material, some rather thicker than others. Finer examples include a carefully decorated custard cup from JON89 and a saucer from LLK 26 enamelled with unusual additions of *famille rose* opaque yellow and pink. Gold and some iron-red are degraded on many of the pieces and some sherds from LLK 12 suggest that degradation causes the red to turn brown and the gold to yellow.

### d) Brown glazed ware

Brown glazed 'Batavian' ware is a well recognised export type and refers to the Javanese port, now Jakarta, through which much of this type of ware was originally trans-shipped. An exceptionally fine pale brown bowl and a darker saucer decorated with waves were excavated at LLK 18.

### e) Chinese soft paste

This type of ware, sometimes incorrectly called 'steatite', is lighter, and more porous, brittle and opaque than porcelain but, notwithstanding its name, is very hard. It is characterized by carefully drawn underglaze blue decoration (Fig. 6) and was twice as costly as normal blue and white ware.

### Conclusion

The material illustrates a wide range in the quality and types of Chinese export porcelain of the period. However, any social differences between upper middle class St. John's Square and East End docklands is not obviously reflected in the assemblages. Porcelain which came into Europe was valued, certainly at the height of the Oriental craze, for its ethnicity and was only incidentally made for export before direct instructions from Europe affected production. It is significant that later on in the century "the vast bulk of the export porcelain handled by the Dutch East India Company was decorated with Chinese motifs. A small part of it was painted with subjects in the European manner"<sup>15</sup>, an observation that applies equally well to the MOLAS assemblages.

Uncertainty over the intended destination of the ware is high-lighted by the opinion of recent visi-

15. C. J. A. Jorg *op cit* fn 5, 154.



Fig. 6: Chinese soft paste bowl, LLK 26.

tors from the Archaeological Institute of China. When visiting the Colchester House site they remarked on the high quality of the *famille verte* dish (Fig. 1) and said it displayed a “type of decoration which was usually sold to markets internally within China and therefore it was not produced for export”<sup>16</sup>. It is open to question whether or not vessels such as this were made for local or foreign markets, nevertheless they do signify a style popular both in China and overseas.

This type of ware is considered by the Chinese to be exclusively theirs, yet was evidently not uncommon in England. Could the reverse also be true? Chinese Imari and brown glazed ware are invariably classed as exports, possibly because Qing dynasty domestic sites are rarely excavated, making it difficult to know if such wares were favoured in China during this period. The often quoted view that second-rate porcelain was destined for igno-

16. R. Goffin *op cit* fn 8, 3.

site code	PEP89	JON89	LLK 26	LLK 12	LLK 18	total
underglaze blue	1	42	35	46	13	137
overglaze enamel	5	5	10	30	8	58
Chinese Imari	0	2	3	15	1	21
brown glaze	1	1	0	2	2	6
Chinese soft paste	0	0	2	0	0	2
<b>total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>224</b>

Table: approximate numbers of vessels. Quantities for the first two categories are based on estimates of both maximum and minimum vessel counts.

rant barbarians beyond the western ocean perhaps originated with exports being compared with Official ware rather than with porcelain bought in China by ordinary people, equivalent to those who had lived in 18th century Clerkenwell and Limehouse.

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