William Cookworthy - Pioneer of porcelain

A Presentation by Angela Taylor and Liz Hext to the KEU3A Local History Group at Dodbrooke Church Hall on 15th March 2017

This year will see the arrival of the Cookworthy porcelain in Kingsbridge, its home while the Plymouth Museum is being refurbished. We therefore decided to explore the history of William Cookworthy and his times, which proved to be fascinating.

Starting life in Kingsbridge, the son of a Quaker weaver, he became apprenticed to Sylvanus Bevan, an apothecary based in London, and while working as an apprentice took the opportunity to study – learning several languages, alongside the sciences.

His master was so impressed with William’s aptitude that, after 5 years in London, he sent him to set up business in Plymouth, a naval town then as now.

Based in Notte Street, Bevan and Cookworthy served the local doctors and the Royal Navy, and William spent much time travelling in Devon and Cornwall, delivering medicines and preaching in country towns.

By this time he had become interested in porcelain, which he may have first encountered when his brother Philip returned from the far East, and he used his West country trips to explore for the clays needed to make it. These he found first near Helston, and then closer still at St Austell. He had now found his life’s mission – to make the hard paste porcelain much sought after by the wealthy. After much experimentation, he succeeded and set up a factory in Coxside, Plymouth. He had in effect re-invented porcelain.

He continued to supply the local doctors and also played a hand in provisioning Cook’s ship, the Endeavour, with stores to keep the sailors healthy on their long voyage to the Pacific in search of the Great Southern Continent.

In the Quaker tradition William was a very hospitable man, and James Cook was just one of many famous people who dined at Notte Street.
Another visitor was Smeaton, FRS, civil engineer and designer of the 3rd Eddystone lighthouse. They worked together on this project and Cookworthy was actually responsible for formulating cement which would set underwater, and give a firm foundation to the light.

Other guests of William included Sir Joseph Banks, the botanist who travelled with Cook on Endeavour; Sir Joshua Reynolds RA, whose paintings include one of Banks; Dr Samuel Johnson, the lexicographer, and Peter Pindar, the satirist. He was friendly with all the local families including the Eliots and the Mt Edgcumbes, the Parkers of Saltram and the Bastards of Flete.

Later in life, William became fascinated by the work of Emanuel Swedenborg, a brilliant thinker and inventor who wrote at length about his visions and dreams and especially about Heaven and Hell and the after-life. William then translated his entire works from Latin into English – quite an accomplishment for a boy who left Kingsbridge at 15, with very little education.

Close to the end of his life Cookworthy was painted by John Opie, known as the Cornish Wonder, later Royal Academician.

Slides

1-3 Intro and historical Context
4-7 Fuller Historical context, plus K/b in the 1800s
8 Quakers
9-10 Family
11-13 Cookworthy the apothecary
14-17 Cookworthy in Plymouth – home and clients
18-22 Porcelain and experimentation
23 Wheal Martyn – present day clay-pit
24-32 Illustrious visitors
33 Swedenborg
34-36 closing slides

Angela and Liz