

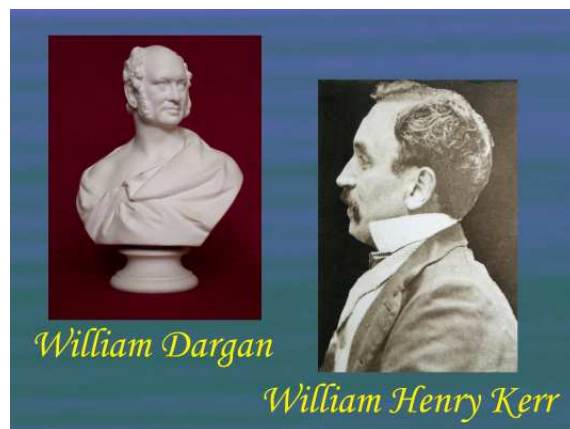
# *The Dublin and Worcester Connection*

## *William Henry Kerr, William Dargan and the Development of the Belleek Pottery.*

*By Chris Marvell*

### **Introduction**

**This article is an attempt to put the foundation and development of the Belleek Pottery into its proper historical context. In particular it describes the efforts of two Irishmen, William Henry Kerr and William Dargan.**



Belleek Pottery was not an accidental creation, although parts of its story concerning fortuitous events have been over-emphasised by some previous accounts of its foundation – chance meetings and lucky finds have been said to play the prominent parts in its history before the Pottery actually started production. This article's main proposition is that Belleek Pottery was conceived, founded and developed due to a tremendous amount of hard and dedicated work by a highly motivated and determined group of Irish entrepreneurs. The principal in all this was Robert Williams Armstrong. He was funded almost entirely by David McBirney, who was the owner and only shareholder in the company, and the venture was located in Belleek because John Caldwell Bloomfield gave his land, moral support and resources from his estate. These three are the main players in the story, but there is no doubt that the contributions of others were important, even vital, in making it all happen. So, as well as these three, other prominent Irishmen (Kerr and Dargan among them) worked and planned toward the success of the venture over a long period of time. At the earliest stages of the “Belleek Project”, as I shall call it, the contributions of William Henry Kerr were essential and the famous engineer and philanthropist, William Dargan, helped the project and maintained a long term interest in it, giving moral support, exercising influence in high places and even providing financial assistance.

The Belleek Pottery was a wholly Irish project, indeed one might go as far as saying that the foremost reason for its creation was the Honour of Ireland. The secondary reason was to achieve artistic recognition for its creations; third came the employment and education of the inhabitants of Belleek Town and coming in a distant fourth was the motivation of commercial success – making money for the founders and shareholders was (although fervently desired) emphatically *not* the reason the pottery was created. Even McBirney, who one might suspect had the most reason to complain about the lack of commercial success, since he essentially funded the whole thing, could glory in the artistic and patriotic success of the venture.

So this article sets out the events and circumstances that led to the conception, foundation and development of the Belleek Pottery, with emphasis given to the previously largely unrecognised contributions of William Henry Kerr and William Dargan. The artistic, commercial and historical background, the groundswell of Irish pride and the technical developments that came together to make Belleek Pottery a realistic proposition are discussed. Finally, the article attempts to put a more complete and historically accurate Belleek Story together although many gaps in this account still remain.

The article is titled “The Worcester and Dublin Connection” because all of the principals involved either lived, worked or otherwise had a significant connection with the two Cities. Important meetings took place there. Dublin was the site of the pivotal 1853 Great Exhibition and perhaps even more than today (after Irish independence and partition) the centre in Ireland for artistic and commercial endeavour. Worcester was crucially the site of the famous Porcelain Works which, under William Henry Kerr's control, concentrated together the Irish talent in the decade before Belleek was founded.

*The article is in three parts:*

- 1. The Roots of Belleek – Dublin and Worcester Connections before the Foundation of the Pottery.**
- 2. The Foundation of Belleek Pottery – Fact and Fiction.**
- 3. W.H. Kerr and Belleek Pottery 1862-1883 - Success and Fulfilment of the “Grand Plan” but Decline and Death for the Founders.**

## Part 1. The Roots of Belleek

### Dublin and Worcester Connections before the Foundation of the Pottery

#### W.H. Kerr – his early life in Dublin

Let's begin with one of the unsung heroes of the Belleek Story. William Henry Kerr was born in Dublin in 1823, the eldest son of James Kerr. The Kerr family traced its origins to County Tyrone.

James Kerr had a brother, Joseph and it was Joseph who had opened a china shop at 110 Capel Street in Dublin in 1819. James Kerr joined his brother in business at the china shop in 1820. When Joseph Kerr died in 1823, the year of William Henry's birth, James Kerr became the sole owner of the business.

In 1840 William Henry Kerr, at the age of 17, joined his father at the china retailers at 110 and 111 Capel Street, which then traded as James Kerr and Son.



William Henry Kerr 1823-1879

James Kerr and his son William Henry prospered. In 1844, as freemen of Dublin, both James and William Henry, then aged 21 are listed as eligible for jury duty as follows:

The special jury panel for 1844 as delivered by David Charles LATOUCHE, Esq, AB High Sheriff of Dublin this evening, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1844.

334	KERR James, 110 and 111 Capel street, china dealer
337	KERR Wm Hen, 110 and 111 Capel street, china dealer

Just after this date, the shop moved to new, much larger premises, just along the road, at 114-115 Capel Street. By now James Kerr and Son were the major representative in Ireland of the Worcester Porcelain Company then owned and operated by Walter Chamberlain. In the 1850 issue of Shaw's Directory of Dublin (right), it was reported:

*Kerr, James and Sons, 114-115 Capel St and 5-6 Anglesea Row (china, glass, lamp and oil merchants)*

*Kerr, James, 114-115 Capel St and Larch Hill, Santry (merchant)*

*Kerr, James, 4 Anglesea Row (china stores)*

*Kerr, W.H., 114-115 Capel St and 9 Windsor terrace, Kingstown (occup not listed)*

**JAMES KERR & SON,**  
**LAMP & OIL MERCHANTS**  
TO  
**His Excellency the EARL OF CLARENDON,**  
Begs to draw the attention of the public to their extensive Stock of the following Oils, which are of the purest and best qualities, and which they are enabled to sell to large purchasers for cash, at a very small profit, being cash purchasers themselves, viz. :—

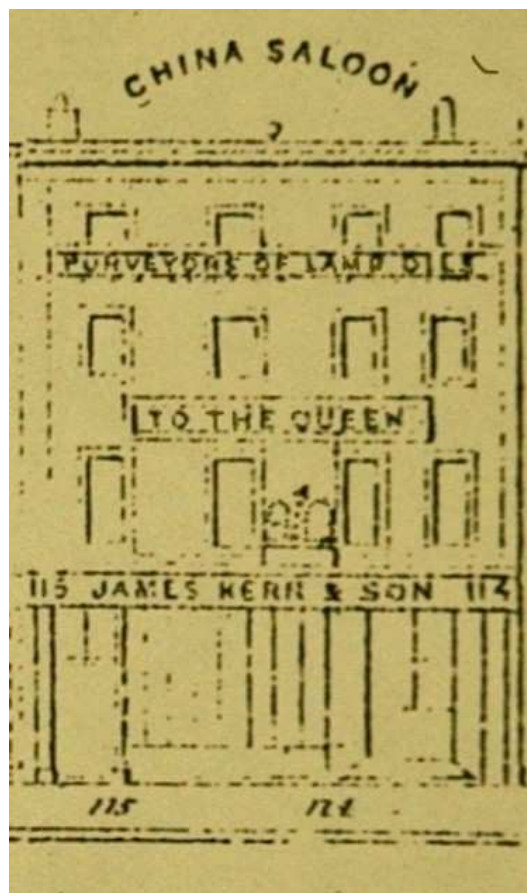
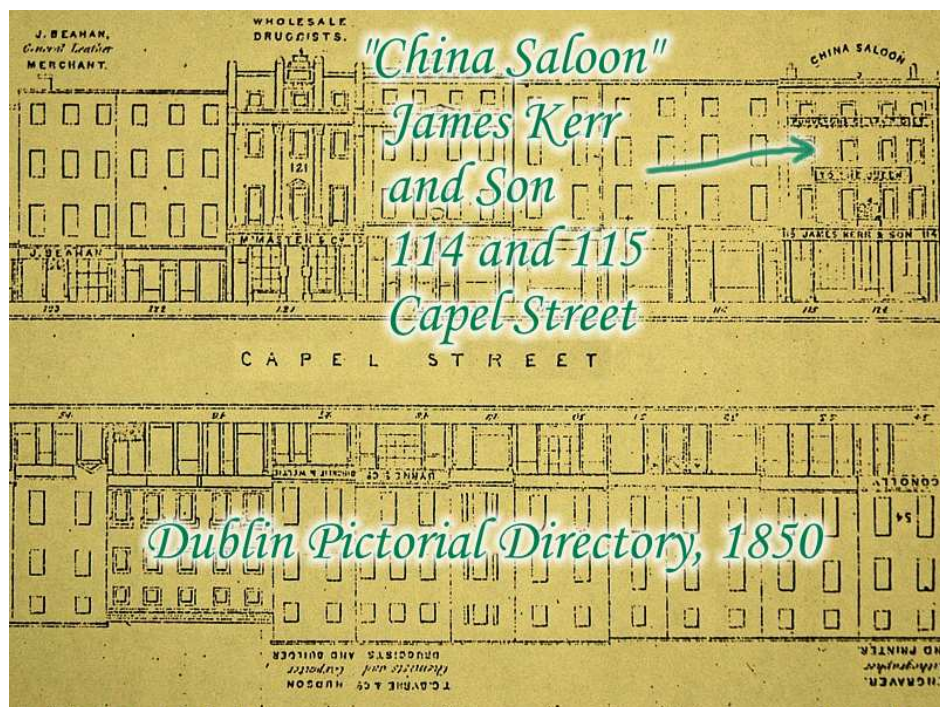
SPERM	PALE SEAL
OLIVE	SOUTH SEA
PATENT SOLAR	REFINED DO.
ARGAND	PALE REFINED RAPE. GROUND
LARD	NUT, and REFINED OILS.

OFFICE—114 and 115, CAPEL-STREET, and STORES—5 and 6, ANGLESEA-ROW, DUBLIN  
N.B.—Railways and other Companies supplied on Liberal Terms.

So, in this 1850 directory (above), William Henry Kerr was still listed as living in a suburb of Dublin (9 Windsor Terrace, Kingstown), although his occupation was not listed. His father, James, had been highly successful, and by now owned a number of businesses in Dublin. By 1850, the china retailing business had expanded to include other merchandise and retailing now took place from at least these three Dublin locations.

This advertisement (left) shows that china retailing was not the only venture that Kerr and Son undertook.





The extract from the 1850 Dublin Pictorial Directory (above left) shows the shop of James Kerr and Son on Capel Street (in the top right corner of the picture). This is the then so-called "China Saloon"; note that the shop is depicted with a Royal crown and the words "Purveyors of Lamp Oils to the Queen" (detail, left). The present day picture (above right) shows evidence that the shop has been considerably modified in much later Victorian style as it now shows three stories rather than four and five windows rather than four, the windows are also much larger and of Victorian sash-window style rather than Georgian. The building is also now a little taller than the buildings on the left of it.

In discussion with the present tenant, it was discovered that the present day building includes 116 Capel Street as well as the original 114 and 115 that comprised James Kerr's shop in 1850. It seems highly probable that these changes resulted from Kerr's programme of improvement and enlargement that he carried out in 1871. This is described in more detail in the final part of this article. Note that the adjoining buildings, Numbers 117 and 118 Capel Street, still remain substantially as they were in 1850: Georgian four-storied buildings with the ground floor shop-fronts.

Below left we have a picture of the house at 9, Windsor Terrace, Dun Laoghaire (Kingstown). It is the one currently for sale. The house is located on the sea front within easy walking distance of the railway station, which is (as it was then) the line to central Dublin. The house may well have been significantly remodelled in later Victorian times.

## The significance of the Kingstown address – Dargan, Kerr and McBirney

To understand some of the importance of Dublin as a centre of business and Irish life, and to introduce two more of the important characters in this story, it is worth looking at the geographical factors of Dublin in the 1840's.

Kerr's address is given as **Kingstown**. Kingstown, originally called Dunleary, was at one time a fishing village. But the mouth of the River Liffey became choked with sandbanks that made the approach to Dublin very difficult for vessels of any size. Therefore a harbour was built by the engineer Rennie, who began work in 1816, and the place was renamed Kingstown when George IV visited Ireland in 1821.



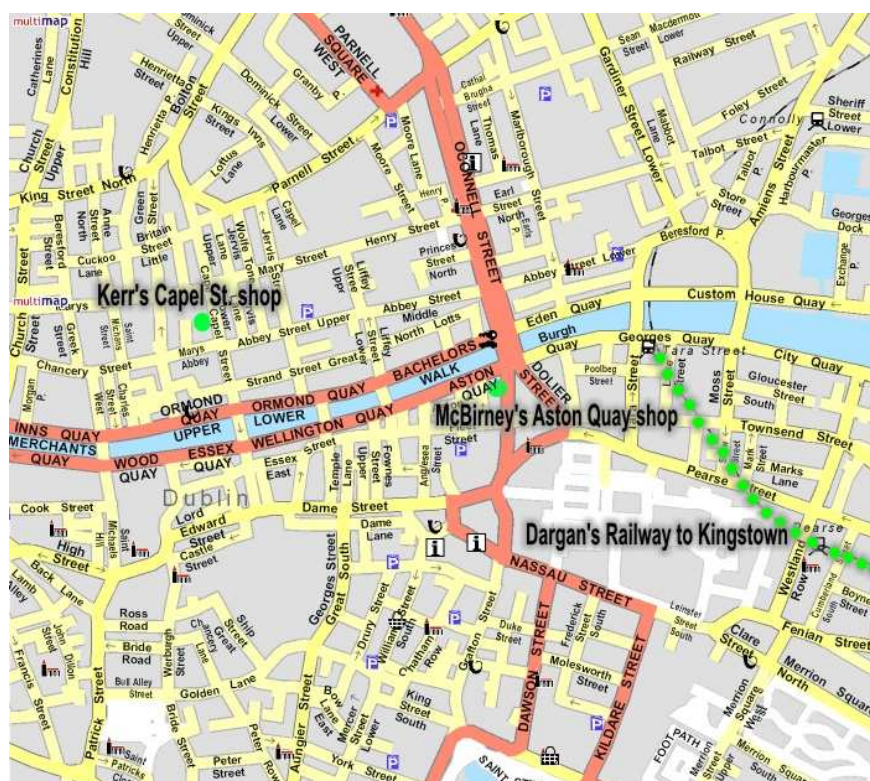




So Kingstown is the old name for Dun Laoghaire and was from 1821 (as it is now) one of Dublin's ports and a major commercial district. Nine Windsor Terrace, where W.H. Kerr lived, still exists (although it may have been remodelled in later Victorian times): it is a large town house in a prominent position on the sea front. Kingstown was also the destination of Ireland's first railway (from central Dublin), designed and constructed by the great Irish engineer, William Dargan, and opened in 1834. William Dargan is another neglected hero in the Belleek Story, we will hear a great deal more of him later.

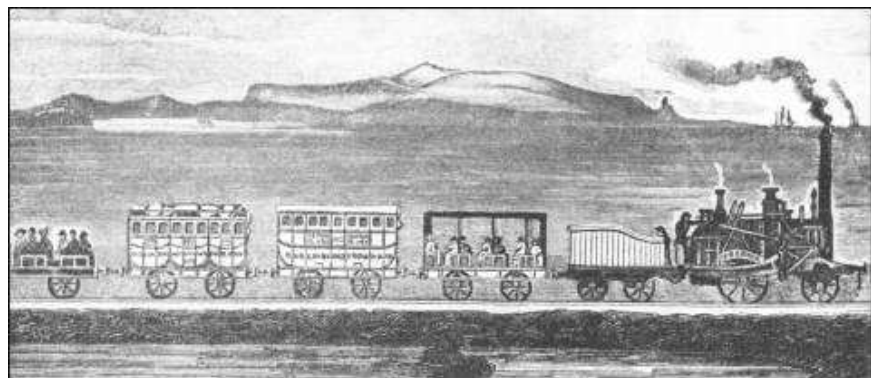
The coming of the railway to Dublin facilitated the development of merchants and businesses in the area. Crucially, it made it possible for the new, increasingly wealthy class of businessmen to live in comfort in the new Victorian suburbs of Dublin and have their place of work in central Dublin. It was the start of the "commuter age"! So Kerr could live in Kingstown and work in Dublin at his father's businesses courtesy of Dargan's new railway.

Less than two miles South East of Kerr's house, in the district of Dalkey, David McBirney (1804-1882) had his home. Dalkey in Victorian times became a high class residential district which it remains today. McBirney lived on Glenageary Road, also close to Dargan's Railway. His main retailing business was on Aston Quay (McBirney and Collis, on the South bank of the Liffey in Central Dublin, the large shop still exists but is now a "Super Valu supermarket", having also been a Virgin Megastore in recent years).



#### Shaw's Dublin city directory 1850

**McBirney, Collis and Co.,** 25 Christchurch place and ...Collis, 16 and 17 Aston's quay (silk mercers, and general drapers)



*Pictures on this page:* Map of Dublin showing Kingstown and Dalkey. Detailed map of Central Dublin. The first train on the Dublin-Kingstown Railway in 1834. The name that still remains above the entrance of McBirney's former shop at Aston Quay (courtesy of Brian Russell).



As well as this venture, McBirney had other interests including a directorship of the Dublin-Kingstown-Dalkey railway – William Dargan was, not surprisingly also a director of this concern. By all accounts, McBirney was a highly successful businessman., but he wasn't quite in William Dargan's league.

Dargan was more like an Irish version of Brunel! The extension to Dalkey of the Dublin to Kingstown line had been accomplished by Dargan's novel "Atmospheric Railway", this was completed in 1843 - so McBirney too was able to live in this new high class Victorian suburb and commute to his work in central Dublin.



**William Dargan also contributed to Belleek Pottery's founding although mostly in an indirect way. He did more than anyone to set the scene that would allow others to flourish This gives some of his background.**

The engineer, entrepreneur and philanthropist William Dargan (1799-1867) became a national character: the "prompt, sagacious and far-seeing man" was held in high esteem by all. He was nicknamed 'The work-man's friend', and was sought out by royalty and highly respected by the newly developing class of businessmen, Kerr and McBirney among them. Another appellation for him was: 'The man with his hand in his pocket'. The first nickname he well merited by the "justice and wise liberality of his dealings with the artisan class;" the second, while it originated in E.J. Jones' celebrated statue (in which he is represented in that attitude) and perpetuated by a not infelicitous poem, is indicative of his readiness to spend his money freely when his judgment or his patriotism suggested it.

Dargan, having made his name initially working with Thomas Telford on the construction of the London to Holyhead road (which included Telford's famous bridge across the Menai Straits), was a famous and wealthy man by the mid 1840's and (as we will see later) was single-handedly responsible for promoting, organising and funding the 1853 Dublin Exhibition. He was a great patron of the arts and later also founded and provided money for the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin – the Gallery taking Dargan's personal art collection as the basis of the Irish national collection – the statue of him stands outside the National Gallery of Ireland to this day.

Dargan's house, Mount Anville, which he had built in 1849 in a similar Italianate style to Prince Albert's Osborne House, was where Queen Victoria and Prince Albert arrived to see him in 1853 during their official visit to his Great Dublin Exhibition. Mount Anville is to the South of Dublin, West of Kingstown. It still exists today and has, since 1866, been the Dublin Sacred Heart Convent.



#### WORCESTER

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A Kerr & Binns, Worcester Dessert Plate  
1852-1862

finely painted in the centre with a view of Mount Anville, near Dublin, within a pierced turquoise ground border richly gilt and reserved with panels of instruments and three grisaille portraits titled 'Sarsfield', 'Moore' and 'Brian Boroihue', printed circle mark, puce painted title 'Mount Anville near Dublin. The residence of Wm<sup>th</sup> Dargan Esq.', 23.75cm; 9 1/2 in, very minor stress cracks to rim, with a leather covered case, distressed (2)

W.H.Kerr of Dublin was taken into the ailing Worcester company as a partner in 1850 and in 1852 he formed a new company in partnership with Richard W.Binns. The company exhibited at the Dublin exhibition in 1853, and numerous sales of high quality ware resulted. Kerr returned to Ireland in 1862 and the company was subsequently re-named the Royal Worcester Porcelain Co., a firm which continues today. £300-400

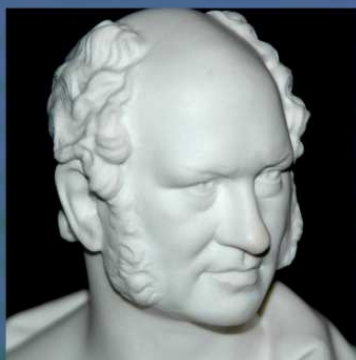
Above: a very high quality Kerr and Binns plate illustrating William Dargan's house, Mount Anville in Dundrum, South Dublin. Sold in Sotheby's Irish Sale 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1997 for £747.

This plate was probably part of a service given to Dargan by Kerr in recognition of Dargan's efforts in setting up the 1853 Exhibition.

Above left is the detail from the plate showing Mount Anville, as it was circa 1853 at the time of Queen Victoria's visit.

A picture of the house as it is today is shown on the left. It appears substantially unchanged apart from the addition of a large new wing (shown to the right of the main house) – this being part of the present day Convent.

My grateful thanks to Mr Paddy Molony at the Convent for permission to take this and other pictures and for his help in tracing the History of William Dargan.



## William Dargan and the new Dargan Bridge on the Dublin Tram System



Detail of the Parian bust of Dargan made by W.H. Kerr and Co., from the sculpture by E.J. Jones.

The futuristic new William Dargan Bridge on the Dublin Luas Tram system ("Luas" being the Irish for "speed"). Part of this system is indeed highly appropriate to Dargan as it uses part of the original railway line which he built and that subsequently fell into disuse. This line, which re-opened in June 2004, runs from Stillorgan to St. Stephen's Green in central Dublin and passes through Dundrum which was the station that some say Dargan built for his own use!

Dundrum station, situated near to Dargan's estate at Mount Anville, was better designed and more comfortable than the other stations on the line. In the years following, Dargan was a regular commuter from the station! The new bridge is a landmark for the Dundrum area. It is a cable-stayed bridge with a main span of 108.5 m, and the pylon height is around 50 metres. The award-winning Luas bridge at Taney Junction was named "The William Dargan Bridge" on Monday July 19th by Father Daniel Dargan, a Jesuit priest and direct descendent of William Dargan, in the presence of the Minister for Transport, Mr. Seamus Brennan T.D.

Below left, another view of Mount Anville as it is today, clearly showing the Italianate tower. It remains a magnificent building.

Below right, William Dargan's own personal Saloon carriage.



So, William Dargan is a link, by his railway directorships to David McBirney. Dargan is also a link (by the 1853 Dublin Exhibition) to Kerr - to commemorate this, Kerr at Worcester even produced a parian bust of him, Modelled by Dargan's friend, the sculptor E.J. Jones and made the fine plate (illustrated previously) as part of a gift and tribute to him.

To bring in another of the Belleek Pottery principals: John Caldwell Bloomfield, the landowner of the Castle Caldwell Estate at Belleek, also knew Dargan well, although it is not known when they first met. Bloomfield later wrote that he considered Dargan to be his good friend (this is expanded on later in this article).

Two highly important issues to the Belleek Pottery would later involve William Dargan: the first of these was the crucial issue of finding the finance for the Pottery in the first place - it was in fact *Dargan* who Bloomfield had originally approached for financial help when the Belleek Pottery project was mooted in the mid 1850's, well before David McBirney agreed to provide all the necessary capital. The second issue involved getting the rail link to Belleek - again it was Dargan who Bloomfield and McBirney had to call upon to step in and rescue the construction of the vital (to Belleek Pottery) Enniskillen - Belleek - Bundoran - Sligo railway. Dargan agreed to this request, providing money from his own personal fortune, when it had seemed likely that the vital line would not be completed in spite of Bloomfield and McBirney's own considerable investments and strenuous efforts. The line finally opened (as far as Bundoran) in June 1866.

So, Bloomfield considered Dargan to be a good friend - see Bloomfield's quotation later in this article - and Dargan was held up as an example of a great Irish patriot and philanthropist that Bloomfield, McBirney and Kerr clearly each aspired to emulate, although perhaps in different ways. At the time of the 1853 Exhibition, William Dargan was hailed as Ireland's "Railway King" and as one of the foremost personalities in the whole British Isles, not just Ireland.

This is jumping ahead: we have now introduced most of the main characters of the Belleek Story, but back in 1846, Kerr had an important new element to his life in addition to working at his father's china retailing business in Dublin. By 1846 he was spending time in Worcester as well as Dublin because (as we will see) he was now involved with and doing work for the Chamberlains Worcester Company, over and above acting as their Irish retail distributor.



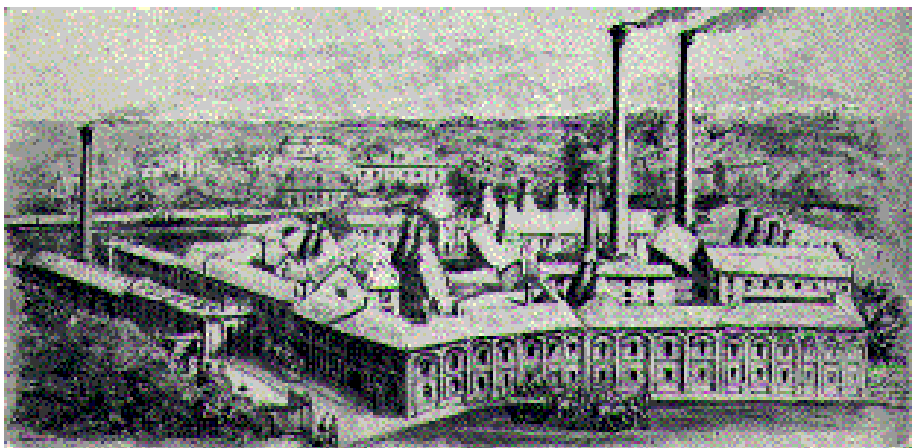


## Kerr's association with Chamberlain's of Worcester

Returning to Kerr: after ten successful years with the family business, in 1850, William Henry Kerr finally left his father's firm to live in Worcester and work full time at the Worcester Porcelain Company, then controlled by Walter Chamberlain.

The reasons behind this important move are simple. Kerr had a ready-made route into the Chamberlain Company not only because of his family firm's success as Chamberlain's Irish representatives, but also because he had, four years previously on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1846, married Caroline Louisa Stone, daughter of Caroline

Sarah Chamberlain and John Stone. Caroline Sarah was Walter Chamberlain's sister.



The Chamberlains Severn Street Factory, Worcester, in the late 1840's – Interestingly this shows the new showroom, designed by R.W. Armstrong which was built before Kerr took control of the company.

It is clear that being married to Walter Chamberlain's niece was only one reason why Kerr quickly rose to prominence at Chamberlains: his expertise in the china retailing business was highly valued and he had already been heavily involved with Chamberlains on behalf of James Kerr and Son, who were (as already mentioned) the principal retailers of Worcester porcelain in Ireland. Kerr had impressive contacts from working in Dublin, he was young and enthusiastic whereas Walter Chamberlain was old, in poor health and it seems basically unable to cope with the demands of running a modern porcelain manufacturing business.

Registration District Worcester								
1846. Marriage solemnized at the Parish Church								
in the Parish of St Peter the Great in the County of Worcester								
No.	(1) When married	(2) Name and Surname	(3) Age	(4) Condition	(5) Rank or profession	(6) Residence at the time of marriage	(7) Father's name and surname	(8) Rank or profession of father
302	September 7 <sup>th</sup>	William Henry Kerr	Full age	Bachelor	Merchant	Kingstown County of Dublin Both Row	James Kerr	Merchant
		Caroline Louisa Stone	Full age	Spinster	—	—	John Stone	Maltster
Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church by me								
This marriage was solemnized between us, William Henry Kerr			in the presence of us, John Stone		Thos Walker			
Caroline Louisa Stone			George James Alexander Walker, F. J. Lilly, Emily Walker, H.A. Jessop, Agnes Chamberlain		off Min			

Copy of William Henry and Caroline Louisa Kerr's Marriage Certificate – they were married in Worcester on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1846.

As background, we need to understand some of the previous history of porcelain manufacture in Worcester. From 1840 until 1850, Walter Chamberlain had been in control of the Chamberlains Worcester Porcelain Factory along with a partner, John Lilly. William Henry Kerr officially became part of the Chamberlains company in 1850 when John Lilly retired and Walter Chamberlain and Frederick Lilly, John Lilly's son, invited him to enter a partnership with them. For a short period, the business operated as "Chamberlain, Lilly and Kerr", but within a year the works came under William Henry Kerr's sole control when he was appointed Managing Director. Soon after his appointment, in 1851, Kerr asked another Irishman, born in Dublin, then living in England, Richard William Binns (1819-1900), to join him at the firm as Art Director. Binns arrived at the Worcester factory in 1851. In 1850, the most important Belleek founder, Robert Williams Armstrong, a good friend of Kerr's was also on hand – he was then already working for Kerr and had designed the first new building for the Severn Street Factory.

So, by 1851, William Henry Kerr was married, living in Worcester and was Managing Director of an Important Porcelain Manufacturer. The 1851 Census records his address as "Elm Villa" in the Red Hill district of Worcester (Parish of St. Peter's). He lived there with his wife, Caroline Louisa and two servants. He now gave his profession as "China Manufacturer". It appears that he had arrived at this happy state by hard work, excellent connections, intelligence, enthusiasm and luck – the World now lay at his feet... we shall now discover what he did next.

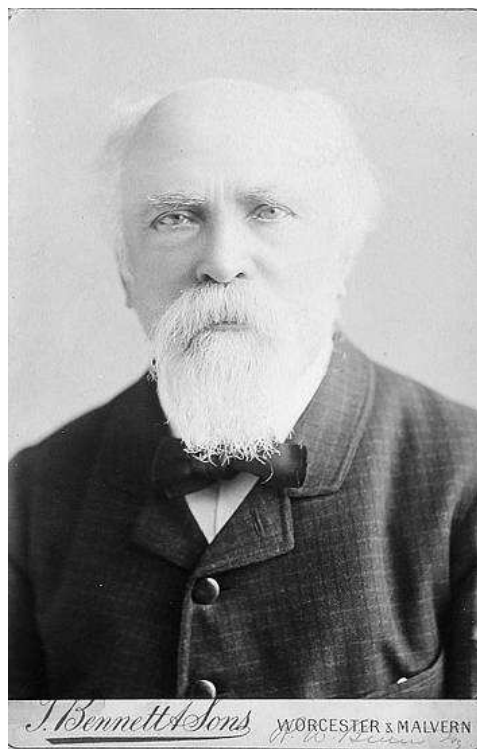
## The Poor State of the Chamberlains Company in 1851

**Now I would like to give some more details of the plight of the Royal Porcelain Manufactory in Worcester which faced Kerr when he was first given responsibility there.**

In 1850, when Kerr became Managing Director, the business of the Chamberlain Company was not healthy, the Severn Street Factory was in the slow process of reconstruction following a serious fire; furthermore, there was a legacy at Chamberlains at that time of a lack of new innovative designs and declining sales. Chamberlains, although they had been a highly successful company for a long time, had become somewhat guilty of complacency and had been living on their reputation for fine china of the "old style" since well before their merger with Flight, Barr and Barr in 1840. It was clearly important to Kerr that the fortunes of the Worcester Company were revived. Kerr represented an injection of "new blood" when he became M.D., he was, after all, only 27 years old. The failing health of Walter Chamberlain was also an issue. In a very real sense, the action of putting Kerr in control was a determined attempt to rescue the failing company: Kerr was the right man at the right time

## The Great Exhibition of 1851 – a disaster for Worcester

In the first year after Kerr took control of the Chamberlain Company, if anything, the situation got worse. This was 1851 and the year of the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. Although Kerr and Binns had been experimenting with new china bodies and shapes, this had not yet been successful and no new ware was available in 1851. Chamberlains therefore exhibited largely "traditional china" which was similar to ware that the company had been making since well before the Flight, Barr and Barr merger – very fine quality but totally lacking in innovation: the jury at the Great Exhibition was *"barely complimentary about any of their products and offered only slight praise for their reticulated porcelain which was not at all original."* This was the final straw for Walter Chamberlain and he retired from the company shortly after the Exhibition. Their major rivals at the time, Minton and Copeland both exhibited highly innovative ware: Parian! William Taylor Copeland and Herbert Minton had been chosen by their fellow potters to represent the whole pottery industry at the meetings called by Prince Albert to organise the Great Exhibition, so they had a huge political advantage over Kerr and the Chamberlains Company. At the Exhibition (much to William Taylor (Alderman) Copeland's chagrin) Minton's were awarded the highest honour for their Parian ware. Both Minton and Copeland, however, received very favourable publicity from the 1851 exhibition, especially because Queen Victoria herself (with Prince Albert's knowledgeable guidance) particularly liked the new ware. The Queen had been escorted to view the ceramics exhibits by Herbert Minton. The Queen had admired and immediately ordered several Minton Parian-based services and other decorative items which of course Minton's company was only too happy to supply. Copeland also did very well at the Exhibition, the Queen returning with several examples of their new Parian ware too.



## The Kerr and Binns Worcester Porcelain Company

Following Walter Chamberlain's bowing out, in 1852 the old Chamberlains firm was bought outright by Kerr and was then operated as W.H. Kerr and Co. As we shall see, this feat of financing may not have been as prodigious as might at first be thought, as the old Chamberlains company was by then in dire straits. It also seems that John Stone, Kerr's father in law, retained ownership of much of the land and buildings comprising the Worcester Porcelain Works. Within a year, the company became generally known as "Kerr and Binns", Kerr having made Binns a full partner in the venture, although the official company name remained W.H. Kerr and Co..

On gaining full control of the company, in 1852, Kerr expanded his programme of rebuilding and expansion, he also bought completely new machinery and thoroughly modernised the production process at the old Chamberlains Severn Street factory. As a matter of pride and indeed sound business sense, Kerr now *had* to innovate, or he would be left further behind by his rivals. Parian was the fashion of the day, so Parian was what he had to have! To succeed in this aim, Kerr intended to rely on the talents of his new partner, Richard Binns. It is clear that Kerr's own skills were those of an organiser and facilitator, he was excellent at pulling strings and making important contacts. He also had the great quality of recognising talent in others and gathering together the people he needed to make things work. Armstrong and Binns were two of these people.

A much later photograph of Richard William Binns, probably c. 1890



## Kerr and Binns Worcester Marks

The period of Worcester Manufacture that we refer to as “Kerr and Binns” is woefully undocumented for such an important period in Worcester Porcelain’s history: the items they produced and even the system of marks they used are relatively obscure. Over the entire period 1852-1862, Kerr and Binns used the “standard” Worcester mark, which is four curly “W’s” interlaced in a circle with the Worcester crescent and 51 (for 1751, the year Dr John Wall founded the original Worcester Porcelain Company). This “W’s” mark was used for most “standard” production, useful ware and for most of the ware still in production from Chamberlain’s days. Two other marks were regularly used by Kerr and Binns. The first is the “K&B” shield mark: the gothic script letters “K & B” in a shield with a banner diagonally across it; the word “Worcester” is written on the banner and a date year is usually included across the middle of the shield (e.g. 1862 in this case). Added to this mark, for special artist decorated ware, the initials of the artist may also be included in the bottom left quadrant of the shield (e.g. T.B. for Thomas Bott). The K&B Shield mark seems to have come into use from 1857, but may well have been used as early as 1855. The second “special” mark is the W.H. Kerr mark: this is the upper case print: “W.H. KERR & Co.” and “WORCESTER” written in a circle; this is outlined by an outer and inner circle, within the inner circle is a Royal Crown: this mark was used from the start of the 1852-1862 period. By no means all Kerr and Binns Parian figures are marked, but if marked, the W.H. Kerr and Co. mark usually seems to have been used in preference to the K & B shield. The “W.H. Kerr and Co.” mark reflects that this is the proper name of the business, the K&B Shield may have been brought in to reflect Richard Binn’s valuable contributions as Art Director. Other marks were used for specific new ware introduced by Kerr and Binns like this “Royal Vitrified China”.



W.H. Kerr and Co./ Kerr and Binns marks 1852-1862

## Kerr and Binns, or just Kerr?

A good deal of misinformation seems to exist in the printed literature regarding the use of these marks. One author states that the K&B shield mark was only used after 1857 – this possibly incorrect: in the author’s experience it exists on at least one example from 1855. Although the W.H. Kerr & Co. mark predates the K&B Shield, it seems that both marks were used in parallel over a good proportion of the 1852-1862 period. The “Four W’s” mark was certainly used over the whole period. Even in 1862, in Cassell’s “Illustrated Exhibitor” which described that year’s London International Exhibition, a list of prizewinners has the Worcester Company described as “W.H. Kerr and Co”, even though this was right at the end of the period of the Kerr and Binns partnership.

## Retailer’s, Decorator’s or Manufacturer’s Mark?

We should not confuse the “W.H. Kerr and Co. Worcester” mark with the “James Kerr, Dublin”, “James Kerr and Son, Dublin”, or “Kerr, Dublin and Worcester” marks, as these are *retailer’s* marks used by the Kerr family china business in Dublin and do not signify the manufacturer of the ware at all – it may or may not be Worcester. Before the mid 1840’s, retailers held powerful sway over the manufacturers they represented and (perhaps in an attempt to protect their sources) even actively deterred manufacturers from marking their own wares – it was common practice for *only* the retailer’s mark to be used – if the manufacturer included any mark at all, it was likely to be in a coded form. As an example, before 1851 Minton used an “Ermine Mark” or crossed L’s (a facsimile of the Sevres mark) with a small “m”, rather than the clear name “Minton”; sometimes only a pattern number was used.



Towards the end of the 1840’s, with the artistic value of manufacturers’ products being recognised, and with the strong encouragement of leaders of the artistic establishment such as Henry Cole, most manufacturers started marking their ware clearly, with the retailer’s mark being added by the manufacturer at the retailer’s request (such as Robinson and Cleaver - Belfast, Thomas Goode & Co. South Audley St. London or indeed James Kerr and Son - Dublin). Another mark, very seldom seen is “W.H. Kerr, Dublin” which is found on ware *decorated* in Dublin under Kerr’s control in the 1870’s: in this case the blanks used were usually made by Royal Worcester.

Examples of Retailer’s marks (with and without the maker’s mark):  
**Derby** plate sold by Richard Briggs (left), two **Minton** items, sold by W.P. & G. Phillips and Thomas Goode & Co. (centre) – note the Phillips piece, from the 1840’s does not even mention Minton - and the **Belleek** sold by Robinson and Cleaver (right), finally a Spode plate from the 1840’s retailed by James Kerr and Son – again no mention of the manufacturer, Spode!

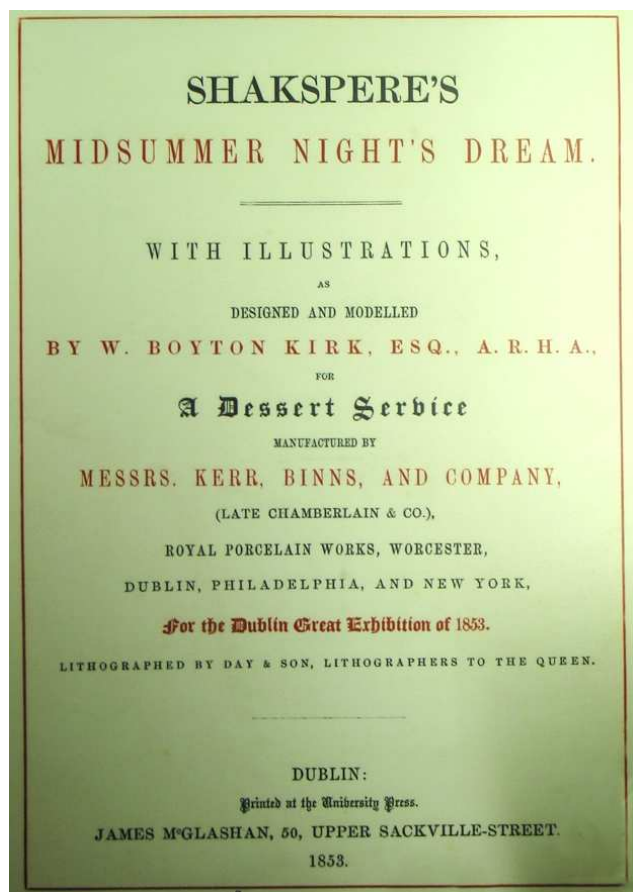
## William Boyton Kirk and the “Dublin” Shakespeare Service

One more person of significance to the Belleek story now comes onto the scene. In 1853, Kerr and Binns commissioned another Irishman, William Boyton Kirk (1824-1900) to design and model the figures for a complete dessert service based on Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In 1845 Kirk had been made an associate member of the Royal Hibernian Academy and had come to prominence by winning a prize at the Royal Society of Arts in London.

William Boyton Kirk arrived in Worcester around 1850, at about the same time that Kerr moved there permanently. The reason for his presence in Worcester was that Kerr had intended to update Chamberlain's production in time to exhibit new figural pieces in the 1851 London Great Exhibition. Unfortunately, as we have seen, these efforts were in vain and Chamberlains ended up with virtually nothing new to show at the 1851 Exhibition.



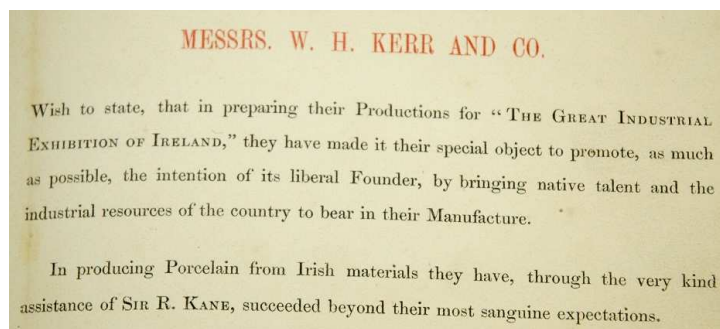
Gilded Parian Candelabra (base) from the 1853 Kerr and Binns Worcester Shakespeare Service (above)– Note the Celtic style decoration in gilt around the base. The front page of a contemporary description of the service is pictured on the left.



Kirk was then employed at Kerr and Binns from its inception in 1852, forming, with Charles Toft, Edward Locke and James Hadley the core of Worcester's newly formed figure modelling department – before this time, Chamberlains had no history of figure production at all. The “Shakespeare Service” was envisaged by Kerr and Binns as an expression of Irish art and design, the *Midsummer Night's Dream* theme appears to have been chosen by collaboration between Kirk and Binns. It used parian for the figures (and figural parts of other pieces) and white bone china for other items (plates, compot tops etc.).

The Service represented the first commercial use of the new Worcester parian body (also called “Irish Statuary China”). A book was prepared by R.W. Binns (illustrated on the next page), published in 1853, containing the text of Shakespeare's play, to illustrate the service. The astonishing and elaborate Victorian dessert service, composed of carefully modelled figures from the play and a magnificent tiered centrepiece, was a unique production, and was made especially for the Great Exhibition in Dublin in 1853.

A copy of Binns' book was presented to each member of the Great Industrial Exhibition Committee; inserted into the book is a halfsheet from Kerr & Co. (shown here on the right) stating:-



*"Messrs. W.H. Kerr and Co. wish to state, that in preparing their Productions for "The Great Industrial Exhibition of Ireland", they have made it their special object to promote, as much as possible, the intention of its liberal Founder, by bringing native talent and the industrial resources of the country to bear in their Manufacture. In producing Porcelain from Irish materials they have, through the very kind assistance of Sir R. Kane, succeeded beyond their most sanguine expectations".*



The "Porcelain from Irish Materials" is highly significant from the point of view of the development of the Belleek Pottery, although, as we will see later, Kerr may or may **not** have used any material from the vicinity of Belleek in making the Service.

The reference to "Sir R. Kane" is to Professor Sir Robert Kane (1809-1890), another Dubliner, who, amongst other things was founder and Director of the Museum of Irish Industry, head of the Royal Agricultural Improvement Society of Ireland, and an avid supporter of Dargan's 1853 Exhibition. Kane was also the author of the 1844 book "The Industrial Resources of Ireland" which includes a geological survey and descriptions of areas of the country where feldspar and clay suitable for porcelain manufacture could be found. The "liberal Founder" is ambiguous: it probably refers to William Dargan himself, but it is possible to read this as referring to Kerr, who most certainly was a strong adherent to Dargan's views and philosophy regarding the industrial, economic and social development of Ireland.

The designer of the figures in the service, William Boyton Kirk, is an interesting figure, himself tied into the later development of Belleek Pottery by his creation of "Erin" and other figures. His father was the eminent Irish sculptor, Thomas Kirk.

W.B. Kirk was born on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1824, as a boy showed a marked talent for sculpture and was sent to the Dublin Society School (now the RDS) in 1839. He also worked at his father's studio in Jervis Street, Dublin. In 1845 he entered Trinity College, having made his first appearance as an exhibitor in the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1844. He left Trinity College without taking his degree and was already in 1845 expressing his intention of becoming a clergyman. Regardless of this on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1850 he was made an associate of the Royal Hibernian Academy. For most of the period 1848-1857 he lived in England and during this time accomplished the designs for the Shakespeare Service and many other designs for parian figures produced by W.H. Kerr and Co.



Strickland's Dictionary of Irish Artists lists some of his important work and among these works are designs for Belleek Pottery:

"Figure of Erin", "Summer", "Winter" etc.

Erin is well known but there is no record whatsoever of Belleek ever producing a "Summer" or "Winter"!

Left: W.B.Kirk, after his ordination.

Above: Binns' Midsummer Night's Dream Book.

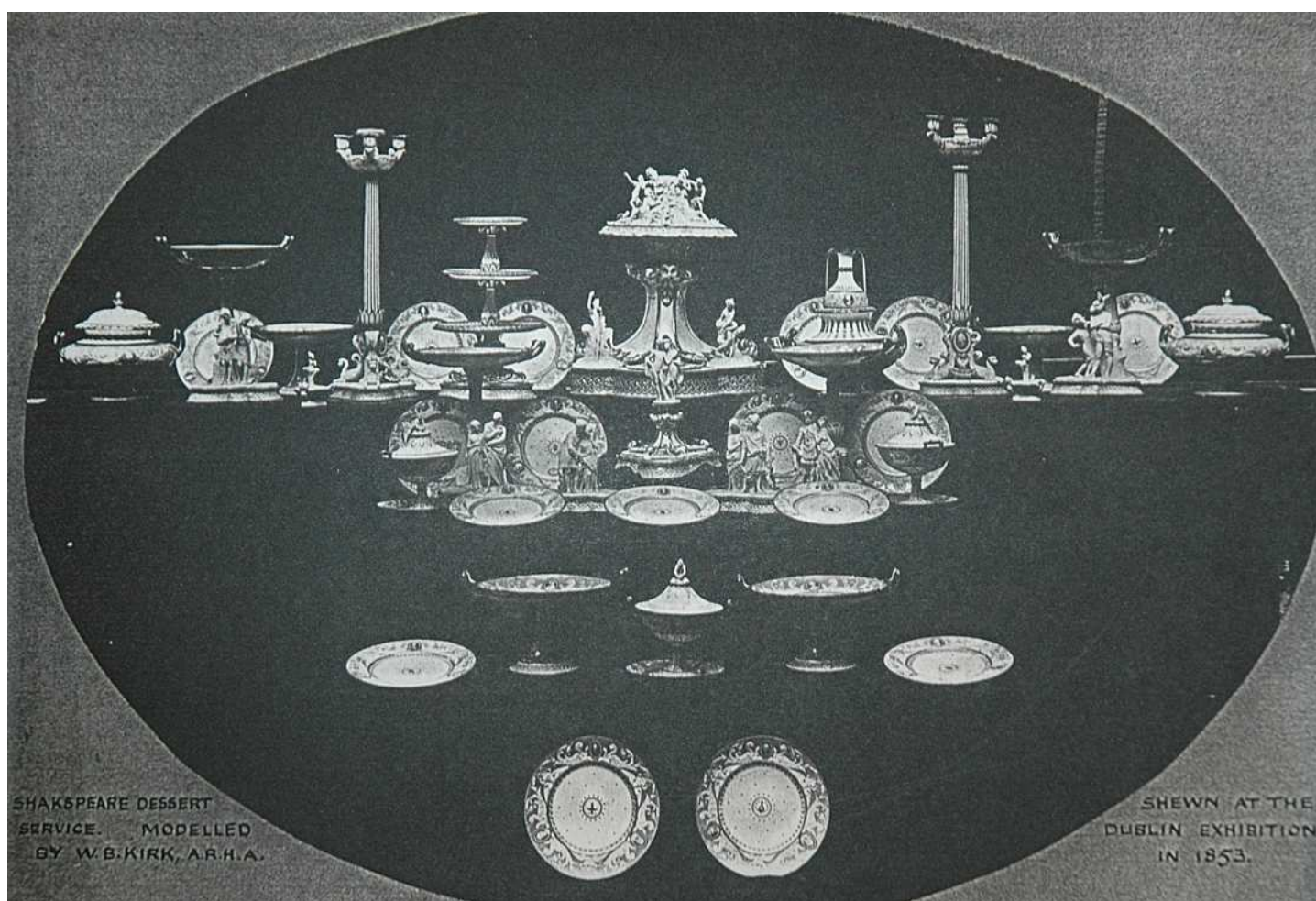


As Strickland puts it: "In 1860 he [Kirk] carried out his long-cherished design of entering the Church; he took orders and held various cures in England; was for some time vicar of Holy Trinity, Birkenhead, and afterwards of St. Peter's Ashton-under-Lyne. He resigned his Associateship of the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1873, and on 11<sup>th</sup> October of that year was made an Honorary Member. After his ordination he occasionally did some busts, including "Lord James Butler"..."

Kirk died at Ashton-under-Lyne on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1900.

Left: St. Peter's Church, Ashton-under-Lyne

Below: The Shakespeare Service



Let's leave a final comment to one of the most famous ceramic artists of Victorian times: Louis Solon, of Minton *pâte sur pâte* fame and also a highly distinguished historian of ceramics, later wrote concerning the Shakespeare Service:

"[Mr. Binns]... himself made the general arrangement, and designed the forms and decorations of this desert service, remarkable on many accounts. Made for the Dublin exhibition, it claimed to have been manufactured from materials chiefly found in Ireland; an Irish sculptor of great talent had been entrusted with the execution of the models. The lithographic plates, reproducing the groups and figures which entered into the composition, do not give enough credit to the work of Boyton Kirk, as one may judge from the few examples preserved in the Worcester Museum. Porcelains, like books, obey their destiny. The service, having been sold after the exhibition, was soon lost sight of. All traces of it were gone when, many years afterwards, Mr. Binns chanced to come across a few of the pieces, badly damaged, but probably the only remnant of what had been one of the most creditable and costly productions of the Royal Porcelain Works. They were immediately acquired and deposited in the museum, where they stand as an excellent illustration of the revival of ceramic art in England".



## William Dargan's Successful 1853 Exhibition in Dublin

Next we have one of the most important single events leading to Belleek Pottery's foundation: the 1853 Dublin Exhibition.

The Great Irish Exhibition Building measured 265,000 square feet (illustrated next page), one third the size of the London Crystal Palace of 1851. The Irish Industrial Exhibition Building housed the entire fair. It was located in the centre of Dublin on the lawn of the Royal Dublin Society.

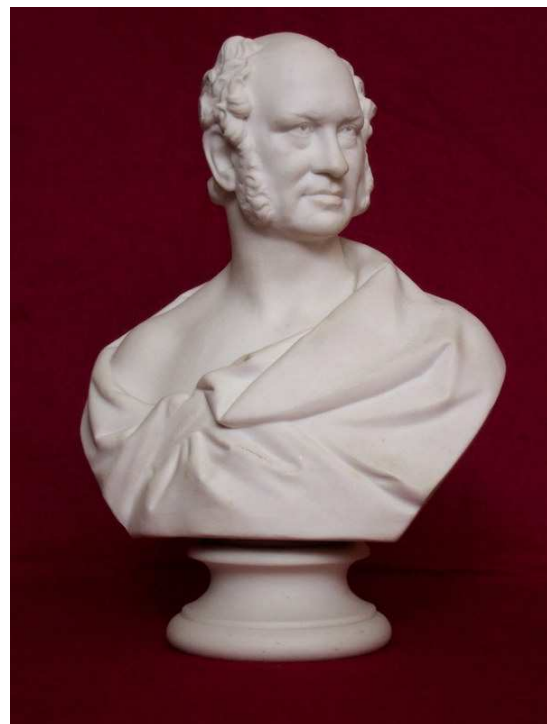
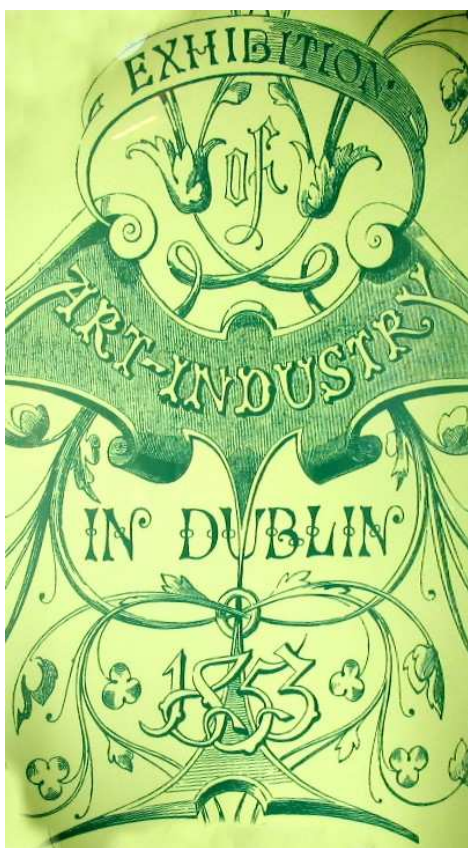
It lasted from the 12th of May to the 31st of October. Queen Victoria, accompanied by the Prince Consort and the Prince of Wales, then a lad of twelve, paid an official visit on the 29th of August. The Royal Party had, on the previous day, given Dargan the unprecedented honour by dropping in, unannounced at his home – unfortunately the great man wasn't in! Later Dargan and his wife officially received the Queen and Prince Consort at Mount Anville where the Queen offered Dargan a Baronetcy, which he declined: seemingly his modesty and attitude to the "common man" made the idea of "Lord William Dargan" unacceptable to him!

The Exhibition owed its conception, organisation and funding *entirely* to William Dargan who had originally planned to donate £25,000 to the effort, but ended up putting in £100,000 of his own personal fortune to the Exhibition. Dargan was ultimately forced into this position because the Corporation of Dublin refused to contribute any money at all to the venture.

Overall attendance at the Exhibition was 1,156,232. When final accounts were completed, Dargan had sustained an overall personal financial loss of approximately £9,000 (some sources put his personal loss as high as £20,000).

As a backdrop to the Exhibition and to gain some understanding of the conditions and the motivations of the then "leaders of society", it is helpful to review the state of Ireland itself. The social conditions in Ireland in 1853 were dramatic. In spite of the famine, the country was overcrowded with large unemployment. According to *The Illustrated Dublin Exhibition Catalogue (1853)*:

*"[Ireland]...with so many natural helps to Manufacture, has hitherto availed herself of few or none of them; with coal and iron and limestone in abundance, her mines have been but very partially worked; with waterpower running from every great lake in sufficiency to turn all the spindles that derive their impulse from steam in Manchester, It runs idly, and to waste, into bays and harbours that are estuaries of the Atlantic; with a surplus in population craving employment, its people have been without occupation; their labour "at home" has barely sufficed to procure the means of a miserable existence. Ireland has been emphatically termed "a land of raw materials," and he who develops its resources, calls it latent energies into actions, and enables man to derive comforts and luxuries from the wealth of nature, may be indeed described not only as a Patriot to his country, but as Benefactor to the World."*



Above, W.H. Kerr's (Kerr and Binns) Parian bust of William Dargan, Sculpted by E.J. Jones.

Above left, drawing of William Dargan (source unknown)

Left, part of the title page from the 1853 Exhibition Catalogue

## So, did Kerr keep his promise to use Irish Materials?

The Shakespeare Service was a crucial exhibit at Dargan's "Great Industrial Exhibition". The element in this that most interests us, is Kerr's claim that china clay and feldspar (or at least some of the materials to make the "porcelain") for the service came from Ireland - one possible location in Ireland, which interest us vitally, being John Caldwell Bloomfield's Estate, Castle Caldwell, near Belleek in County Fermanagh. This is not, however, the only possible source - another possible location being Killiney Hill, just South of Dalkey near Dublin, this source having been documented in Robert Kane's "The Industrial Resources of Ireland" in 1844 and strongly proposed as the true source of the material by Kevin Curry, a recent researcher. If you take Kerr's words literally "*...kind assistance of R.Kane...*" (see earlier quotation) then the Killiney Hill source seems most likely, since Kane states clearly that Felspar located near Dublin is suitable for the manufacture of porcelain: "*The granite in the vicinity of Dublin is distinguished for the whiteness of its felspar and the complete absence of hornblende...*", whereas he only vaguely states that similar rock outcrops occur "*... in Tyrone, in Sligo, Fermanagh, Mayo and Cavan...*" clearly having (in 1845 at any rate) no specific knowledge of the Castle Caldwell source.

The timing of the exhibition is also critical in determining which of these sources is the actual one, as the discovery of the Belleek raw materials only pre-dated the start of the Exhibition (12<sup>th</sup> May 1853) by a short time, having been discovered (depending on whose story you believe!) some time in 1852 - this is covered in detail in part 2 of this article. Was there sufficient time for Kerr to have the original experiments performed, for Kerr and Binns to have perfected their own Parian recipe and for Binns and Kirk to have designed and produced the service? This is altogether a quite considerable undertaking! Actually, the design and modelling of the service had been done earlier, only the final production had to wait the availability of the Irish raw materials - this is absolutely amazing in itself, as it shows the extraordinary leap of faith that Kerr had made in promising Dargan that a service made from Irish materials would be available for the exhibition - Kerr could have had no certainty when making the promise that it would actually be possible! These were exciting times and the principals were swept along on an optimistic tide of patriotic fervour...



The interior of the Exhibition Hall of the 1853 Dublin Exhibition - it was intended to rival the Crystal Palace in it's design and scope.

Strangely, following the Exhibition, the building was dismantled and then seems to have disappeared without trace!

So, it is clear that Kerr and Binns intended the Shakespeare Service as a demonstration firstly that: "Ireland can match England for industrial production" and secondly of: "What patriotic Irishmen could do" and the use of the Irish materials and Irish designers (Binns and Kirk) were therefore highly important - in fact absolutely crucial - in this scheme. As the exhibition catalogue said: "*...he who develops [Ireland's] resource... may be indeed described not only as a Patriot to his country, but as Benefactor to the World.*" This text was intended as praise for Dargan but Kerr and Binns saw themselves in the same light. Kerr, Binns and Kirk were successful in achieving this objective: the following notice was printed in the (Dublin) Morning Post of 1<sup>st</sup> November 1853:

*"The Shakespeare Service claims a high place in the observation and admiration of the Irish people on many and most substantial grounds. It has been set before the public as a product, in its novel, beautiful, and truly chaste design, of Irish Art; in its elegant and correct execution, of Irish enterprise and industrial resources; and in its material, being principally Irish earth."*

The gist of this is extremely clear - **Ireland** had something to be proud of! This contemporary article (above) is somewhat over-effusive and is clearly not wholly correct as the service was made, not in Ireland (as it implies) but used the "industrial resource" of Worcester (and Irish raw materials). It is not always possible to take even apparently clearly written evidence as absolute proof - in telling stories; Irishmen also excel!

Even though the Exhibition was highly successful and the Irish press hailed it as an illustration of Irish industrial and artistic prowess, it was abundantly clear to the impartial observer that there was a "complete paucity" of industrial products actually **made** in Ireland. This lack was certainly one of the elements that spurred on patriotic Irish businessmen such as Kerr and McBirney, designers such as Kirk and Armstrong and philanthropists such as Dargan and Bloomfield, to strive for truly Irish products to be made.

**In 1853, as the Exhibition closed, the foundation of Belleek Pottery was still four years in the future. The Exhibition had been a strong impetus towards true Irish industrial production - the seeds of the Belleek Pottery had been sown.**



## Part 2. The Foundation of Belleek Pottery

### Fact and Fiction

#### Important Connections

To consider some other Irish connections leading to the foundation of Belleek Pottery, we need to look at events in Ireland that pre-dated the production of the Shakespeare Service. We return to the proprietor of the Royal Porcelain Works, Worcester: William Henry Kerr. True to his patriotic Irish form, the architect that Kerr had employed to look after his major rebuilding plans at Worcester in 1851 and 1852, was another young Irishman, Robert Williams Armstrong. It appears that while Armstrong was working as Kerr's employee, both Kerr and Armstrong made trips to Ireland to see if suitable Irish raw materials could be found for what amounted to a "pet" project of both Kerr and Binns – no less than the demonstration of Irish mastery of the ceramic art – which, as we have seen, led to the production of the Shakespeare Service and the development of Kerr's Irish Statuary Porcelain.

#### Robert Williams Armstrong's association with W.H. Kerr

Francis Armstrong was a County Longford man who had settled in Dublin, working as an architect and builder. His son, Robert Williams Armstrong, was born in 1824. As a young man, he had shown interest in potting and pottery but he followed in his father's footsteps and trained to be an architect and civil engineer. He married Annie Nairn in 1848 and moved to England around 1850 to work as an architect and civil engineer with his practice based in London. *For full details of Armstrong's family tree, please refer to Brian Russell's excellent research on the subject (Newsletter 26/1, March 2005).*

It is possible that this move to England was instigated by Kerr, who had also finally moved to Worcester himself around 1850. Armstrong worked extensively with Kerr at Worcester but his services were also contracted by other English potteries in Stoke on Trent, amongst them Minton. In spite of most of his employment apparently coming from Worcester or North Staffordshire, Armstrong had his architects practice based in the City Road, London.



Robert Williams Armstrong  
1824 - 1884



Left:

Advertisement produced by W.H.Kerr and Co. (Kerr and Binns) in 1858 showing the interior of the Showroom.

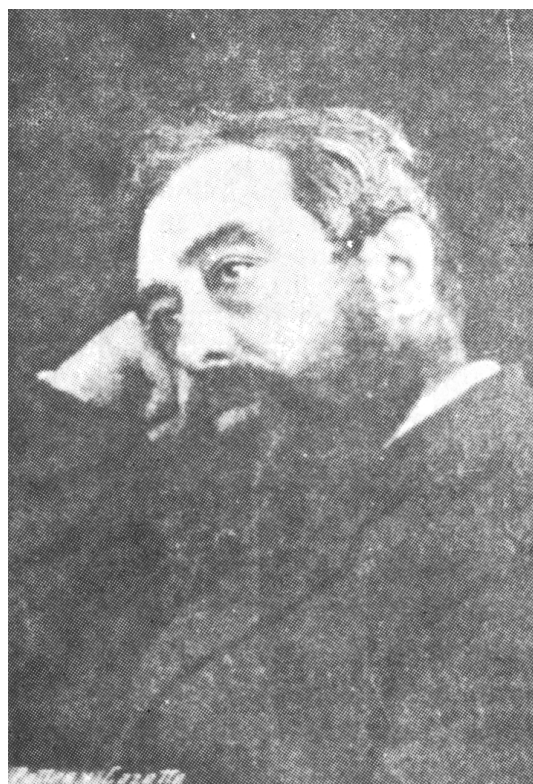
(This Showroom was designed by Armstrong in 1850 or 1851 when the Chamberlain family still owned and managed the Royal Porcelain Works).





Above: Front page of a promotional Guide to the Porcelain Works published in 1853, showing the front of the Showroom.

Below: a later photo of Armstrong, published in the 1906 Pottery Gazette.



Armstrong's Showroom as it appears today – essentially unchanged since it was built in 1851, but now used as the Visitor Centre's café

Kerr's plans for the reconstruction and redevelopment of the old Severn Street Chamberlains Works relied on modernisation and rebuilding. Kerr had to have good working conditions and modern buildings to allow his team of young designers to flourish at Worcester, he also needed modern production to replace the old fashioned and outdated processes which were the legacy form the old Chamberlains Company.

The picture painted in the last days of the Chamberlain Company is one of lack of investment in design, plant and buildings and of production methods which had remained essentially unchanged since well before the merger with Flight, Barr and Barr in 1840. Having a well qualified architect was clearly essential to Kerr and Armstrong possesses one quality that made him highly suitable in Kerr's eyes: he was Irish and he also shared Kerr's views on the need to bring Irish design and industry into prominence.

It appears that as soon as Kerr was given responsibility as Managing Director of the Chamberlains Company (in 1850), he employed Armstrong to design a prestigious showroom for the Company. This building still stands today (It is the Royal Worcester Café) and it featured heavily in W.H. Kerr and Co. advertisements from the Kerr and Binns period. The building actually predates the Kerr and Binns period and illustrates that Kerr wasted no time in his redevelopment plans as soon as he was given the responsibility for this.

Armstrong had had some experience of the pottery production process as he had taken an interest in this from an early age, but his training and profession was that of an architect. It is clear that Armstrong was able to gain more experience of modern pottery production methods by working with Kerr and Binns amongst others. Armstrong's reputation as an architect in the pottery industry combined with his knowledge of porcelain and pottery production along with his Irish origins, would have made him (in Kerr's eyes at least) the ideal candidate to design, build and operate the Belleek Pottery.



It is not known exactly when Kerr first met Armstrong although their business interests and backgrounds in Dublin would almost certainly have brought them into contact with each other well before 1850. This is certainly an earlier date than the first meeting of Armstrong and Bloomfield – whichever story of that meeting is accepted (this is described later in this part of the article).

## David McBirney's association with W.H. Kerr

Kerr's position in the Dublin business community probably also meant that he knew David McBirney before either Armstrong or Bloomfield met him, but this cannot be absolutely proved without additional evidence being found. Other circumstantial evidence comes from the strong associations both had with William Dargan and the coincidence that both McBirney and Kerr lived in (or near) Kingstown and (before 1850) both had business interests in central Dublin (as has been described in the first part of this article).

Writing later, in notes relating to Belleek Pottery's exhibits in the 1865 Dublin Exhibition, McBirney gives specific acknowledgement to Kerr: "[Belleek Pottery was]... wholeheartedly assisted by W.H. Kerr in his research on the commercial possibilities of the pottery."

I have found no original documentary evidence but the accepted belief is that McBirney was finally persuaded to fund the Belleek Pottery venture after a meeting in Worcester between McBirney, Kerr and Armstrong during which Kerr outlined the business possibilities of the potential venture and Armstrong proposed the actual buildings that would be required. Kerr was apparently able to illustrate the success that he had had at Worcester using the Belleek materials in his own manufacture of his Irish Statuary Porcelain (Parian) figures. The precise date of this meeting is not known but must have been between 1853 and 1857.

## The most important Irish connection? The Stories and the Reality of the "Irish Earth"

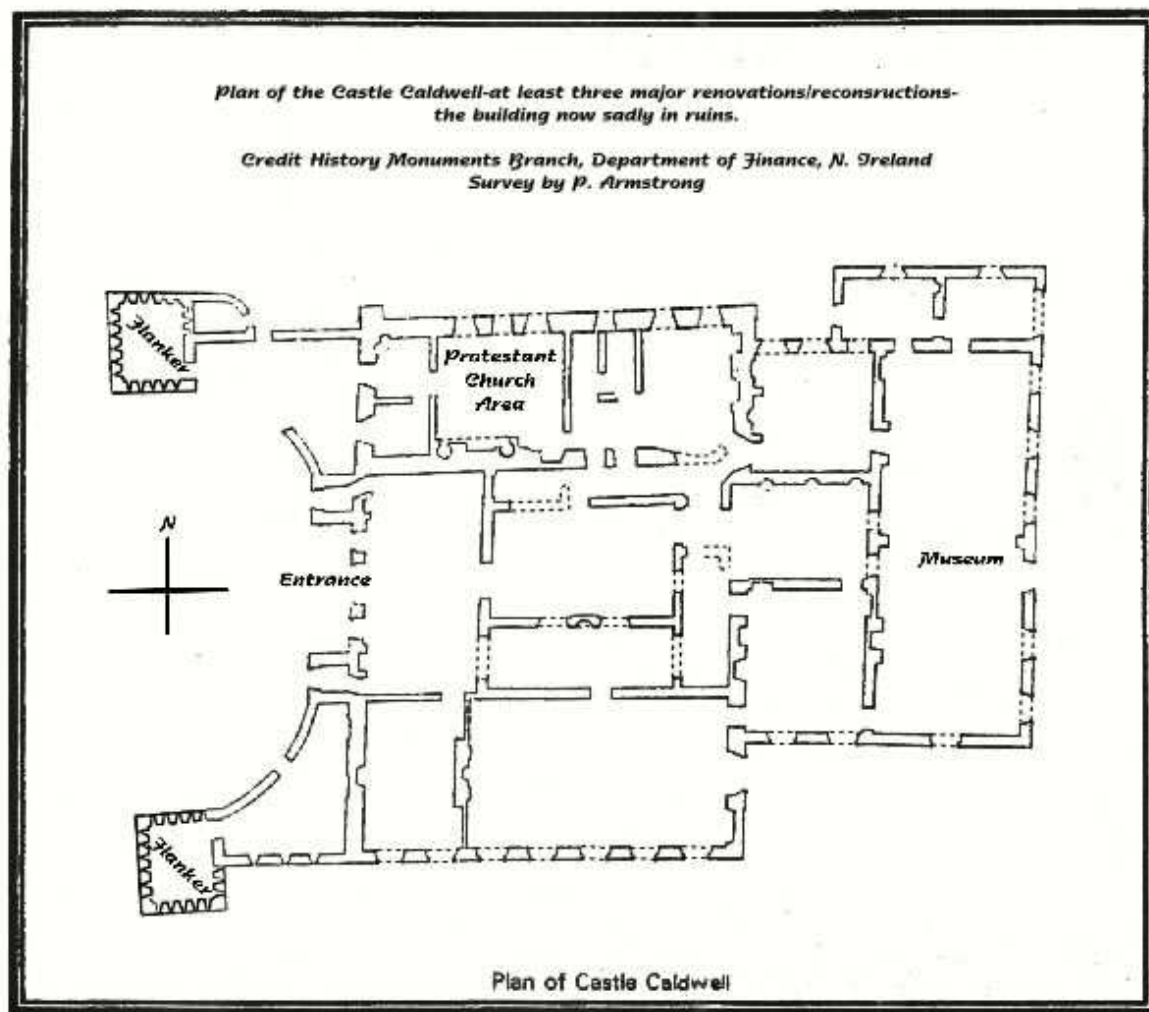
So, what about the wonderful new Irish "clay", so praised in the Shakespeare service? Kevin Curry categorically states that Kerr used feldspar from Killiney Hill, south of Dublin, but other authors (Sandon, Langham et al.) state that Belleek materials were used in making the Shakespeare Service. Whether or not Kerr used Belleek materials in 1853, it is certain that he used them later and the raw materials became important in themselves to the British porcelain industry. We have all heard the story that comes from John Caldwell Bloomfield himself, telling how *he* found the Belleek clay:

*"Bloomfield was amazed on one of his walks through the [Castle Caldwell] estate by the brilliance of the whitewash on a tenant's cottage; he inquired further and was taken to a clay bed where he found the kaolin and feldspar."*



John Caldwell Bloomfield 1823-1897 (above).

His house, Castle Caldwell, photographed when the house was already in a very sorry state (around 1900) (left).



The floor plan of Castle Caldwell is shown (left).

Note the house contained a Protestant Church and a Museum.

Below, the remains of the ruined house as it is today, (top) from the front (East) and (bottom) from the North side.

*On the discovery of the Belleek raw materials, we have a second view:* this is the “official” version – this from many Belleek Pottery sources (Example Website: [http://www.theirishgiftshop.com/en-us/dept\\_2.html](http://www.theirishgiftshop.com/en-us/dept_2.html))

*“In 1849 John Caldwell Bloomfield inherited the Castle Caldwell estate, which encompassed the village of Belleek, from his father. Mindful of the plight of his tenants in the aftermath of the potato famine he sought to provide some form of worthwhile employment. An amateur mineralogist, he ordered a geological survey of his land. To his delight it revealed the necessary raw materials to make Pottery - feldspar, kaolin, flint, clay and shale.”*

A **third version**, a slightly different view of this “discovery” comes from Sir Charles Alexander Cameron (born 1830), later an important Dublin luminary, writing in his memoirs in 1912 (Published in 1913) – this is also documented by Richard Degenhardt in both editions of his “Belleek Collector’s Guide”:







*"In the 'fifties I spent several of my Christmas holidays with the late Mr. John Caldwell Bloomfield, D.L., and his first wife, at Castle Caldwell, on Lough Erne, County of Fermanagh. One day, when out shooting along with my host, I noticed a white patch of clay, and took a portion of it to the Castle. I heated it to redness, and on removing it from the fire and allowing it to cool, I found that it had not lost its white colour: this showed the absence of iron oxide. I then said to John Bloomfield that I believed he had a good porcelain clay on his estate."*

*"I subsequently made an analysis of it. At that time the late Rev. Joseph Galbraith, F.T.C.D., was interested in mineralogy, and he doubted the existence of a real china clay in the County of Fermanagh, and addressed a letter to that effect to the editor of "Saunders' NewsLetter," a daily paper since extinct. I, of course, replied, and others joined in the discussion, which continued for many days, and was spoken of as the "china war."*

*"That I was right was, however, proved by a factory being started to work the clay [Belleek Pottery trading as David McBirney and Co.]. I have the first article made from it - a saucer, manufactured from a small quantity of the clay sent to Kerr's Porcelain Factory, Worcester. In process of time the clay was exhausted, but feldspar replaced it."*



Above, two pictures of Sir Charles Alexander Cameron (1830-1913?)

Cameron's mention of Kerr here is significant. Cameron lived in Dublin and had in 1852 been appointed as Professor of Chemistry at the Dublin Chemical Society that had its premises in a building on Capel Street, Dublin. James Kerr's China Shop was a large building also on Capel Street. Cameron does not actually say that it was he who took or sent the kaolin to Kerr, he just says: "...clay sent to Kerr's Porcelain Factory...". Clearly the actual date of Cameron's visit to Castle Caldwell when he discovered the clay is absolutely vital in determining what really happened! If this account is true and Kerr did use Belleek clay in making the Shakespeare Service, it must have been well before May 1853 when, as we have already heard, Kerr was able to exhibit the Service in the Dublin Exhibition, made principally from "Irish earth".

In spite of the later published views that Belleek materials were used in making the Shakespeare Service – it seems just as likely that Kerr actually used the Dublin Killiney Hill feldspar for the service. This is the view strongly put forward by Kevin Curry. It is however highly likely that Kerr used Castle Caldwell materials for later "Irish Statuary Porcelain" production once it was proven to be of better quality than the Killiney Hill material.



Killiney Hill, just South of Kingstown and Dalkey. Dargan's railway follows the coast from Blackrock to Bray, past Killiney hill.

John Caldwell Bloomfield gives the following, again slightly different and more detailed version of the **first** account, in his article "Belleek Pottery" which he read to the Society of Arts in 1883: this is basically the "official version". Again, it was written long after the actual events happened, so inaccuracies may have crept in and embellishments may have been made with the benefit of hindsight, as is also of course possible in Cameron's account (above):

*"Returning home from China, I found the property I inherited, from isolation and continued absenteeism of my immediate ancestors, not in a satisfactory condition. Gifted with some energy and a wish to improve, I immediately commenced to examine into the resources of the estate, and in the course of geological and mineralogical researches, I found kaolin and feldspar in the gneiss formation.*

*The day on which this took place, I decided that, if spared, the water power I had already thoroughly appreciated in Belleek should turn the wheel of a porcelain factory. Travelling like a miller's commercial agent, with a pocketful of kaolin, running after my late friend William Dargan, and every one possessed of a patriotic spirit, I chanced to fall upon Mr. Robert Williams Armstrong, the present partner and manager at Belleek, and he, with the late Mr. David McBirney, who found the capital, set to work, and the result has been that I have lived to see a wretched hamlet, inhabited by squalid occupiers of hovels unfit for human life, their only science the use of the tongue and fist, their extent of art a mud pie, grown into a town, with some £60,000 to £70,000 expended in and about it. But this was not affected without the personal labour and loss which must ever attend the exertions of every philanthropist."*

Yet a **fourth view** is just about conceivable, but highly unlikely. It is recorded that Kerr and Armstrong made at least one trip to Ireland to conduct "geological surveys", apparently as early as 1851, for suitable raw materials. They used the book and maps by Robert Kane describing the "Industrial Resources of Ireland", published in 1844, as their guide. They may have found the Fermanagh deposits themselves! In reality, this view is extremely unlikely as they would have depended on good local knowledge of an area to narrow their investigations, neither Kerr (a businessman) nor Armstrong (an architect) really had the basic expertise to carry out such surveys, so their trips were most likely to have been to check-out or confirm good "leads", basically coming from Kane. It is slightly more likely (but not recorded) that Kerr was so impressed by the "sample" Cameron sent to him, that he decided to make a trip (with Armstrong) to Fermanagh to see for himself. Unfortunately, this is supposition, as we have no record of the exact date when Cameron says the material was sent to Kerr in Worcester, or if **this** was a motivation for Kerr and/or Armstrong to visit Fermanagh.

So which story do we believe? Did Bloomfield just stumble across the "magical" white feldspar or did he methodically search for it? Was it the trained chemist, Cameron who found it? Perhaps Kerr or Armstrong found the deposits themselves by their own "geological survey". There is certainly no specific mention of the Castle Caldwell materials in Kane's 1844 "Industrial Resources of Ireland". The truth is probably somewhere between Bloomfield's and Cameron's versions. Both their accounts were written long after the actual event (Bloomfield's account in 1883 and Cameron's in 1912) so the reality of the situation must have become somewhat clouded both by the passing of time and the tendency to embellish in order to make a good story! The common thread here, is that at least two of the parties involved, Bloomfield and Kerr, strongly held a similar point of view: Bloomfield's phrase "...running after my late friend William Dargan..." is highly significant here. Dargan was the "Great Irish Philanthropist" of that age and it is clear that both Bloomfield and Kerr aspired to his noble aims – to follow in his footsteps is what they desired to do. This was (in the author's opinion) by far the strongest influence leading to the foundation of the Belleek Pottery: commercial aims were subordinated to the glory of Irish achievement and personal motivation to do "good works".

To sum up: whichever way you look at it, the Belleek "clay" was vitally important and clearly the most necessary of all the conditions leading to Belleek Pottery's founding. The availability of the raw materials was necessary but certainly not sufficient in the Pottery's foundation: many other factors were also required. That Kerr was involved with the raw materials is clear, and (as we have said) Armstrong, as Kerr's employee and friend, was also involved. The motivation for Armstrong and Kerr to make "survey trips" to Ireland was to discover (or to confirm) sources of **Irish** raw material for the Kerr and Binns Worcester Company. It is highly unlikely that the original objective of these trips was the foundation of an Irish Porcelain company! In the story of the foundation of Belleek Pottery, the vital sequence of events was: the discovery of the raw materials; the enthusiastic backing of John Caldwell Bloomfield; the meeting of Bloomfield and Armstrong and the promise of finance from the successful merchant David McBirney of Dalkey, probably brokered by William Dargan. While this was progressing, W.H. Kerr was at Worcester working with the overriding agenda of producing items with the predominant involvement of Irish talent and Irish materials. Kerr was vitally interested in the success of the Belleek Project and he provided technical help, business and moral support and played a vital role in introducing and persuading the parties involved.



Another pivotal story in the series of events leading to Belleek Pottery's foundation is the first meeting of Bloomfield and Armstrong. Bloomfield himself (quoted above) writing in 1883, fully thirty years after the event took place says he "...chanced to fall upon Mr. Robert Williams Armstrong, the present partner and manager at Belleek..." when he was "...travelling like a miller's commercial agent, with a pocketful of kaolin..." It is highly unlikely that this can be taken literally as this phrase is taken from a speech in which Bloomfield uses poetic descriptions of other events. Other accounts have Bloomfield chancing upon Armstrong in a shop in Dublin (Kerr's shop on Capel Steet?) – again, this may well have happened but it was clear that Kerr already knew of Bloomfield's material and Kerr employed Armstrong. If not the direct link between the two, it is inevitable that Armstrong would have come to know of Bloomfield in his conversations with Kerr.

So the wonderful raw material had been found. It was almost immediately in demand in England: William Pare, writing in the Ballyshannon Herald, reports on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1860:

*"The feldspar will be brought from a neighbouring hill...here it will be calcinated, ground and triburated, and when made into clay will be dried and forwarded in blocks...to Staffordshire and Worcestershire Potteries, for its conversion into china. It is to be hoped that ere long the china itself will be made in this country."*

The following two extracts are other accounts of the Irish feldspar and kaolin (please note that there are many spelling mistakes, assumptions and factual errors which have been left uncorrected: for example, the Shakespeare Service was not a "dinner service" and the location of County Fermanagh is given incorrectly!). Both extracts are from ABCIR, the Antique British Ceramics Information Resource (<http://www.abcir.org>):

*"In the early 1850s, following the Great Exhibition of 1851, William Henry Kerr, owner of the factory that we now know as Royal Worcester, received a shipment of Felspar and China clay from an estate in County Fermanagh. Southern Ireland. He was asked to analyse this and decide upon its suitability for porcelain manufacture. At this time Parian Statuary figures, in imitation of the Greek and Roman marbles, had just been introduced by the likes of Copeland and Minton and were the height of fashion throughout the western world. The Fermanagh shipments were the purest samples of Felspar that had ever been seen and Kerr was very exited with them. He went into almost immediate production and in the Dublin exhibition of 1853 won the gold award for what he called 'Irish Statuary porcelain' with a full dinner service depicting scenes from 'A Midsummer Nights Dream'*

*Kerr, and the other manufactures based further north in the potteries, had used English deposits of Felspar to produce their Parian but the iron silicates always present in the ore lead to a grey tone in the finished articles which not everyone found pleasant. A whiter body was achievable by using cleaner deposits found in Sweden but even these were no match for the new Irish Felspar products. The estate owners were swamped with demands for supplies to be shipped to all the major manufacturers."*

*"It is difficult to overstate the importance of Parian to the potting industry at this time. As an example, When the Kerr and Binns factory in Worcester was reformed into the Worcester Royal Porcelain Company in 1862 a new system of numbering their products was introduced. The ornamental ware was split into ten different classes and the first two of these were for Statuary Parian. Class one being for busts and small figures and class two for larger figures. Its inportance long outlived its original purpose of copying classical works and when these became less fashionable figures were produced depicting other themes. The world was opening up and there was a huge interest in other cultures. James Hadley in particular, while working at the Royal Worcester factory produced a wide range of 'water carriers' representing several of the middle eastern countries.*

*The constituents for this Parian were 40 percent feldspar, 36 percent China clay and 24 percent frit. All of the Parian produced during these very early years had an ivory tone that was almost grey but factory recipes varied slightly and some were greyer than others. Minton, for instance, was much lighter than Copeland while that from the Royal Worcester factory was marginally darker. This grey, or ivory, tone was caused by iron silicate deposits in the feldspar.*

*By the early 1850s a cleaner source of felspar had been found in Sweden which removed the 'grey' tone and many factories started producing a much whiter Parian. Wedgwood's version was known as Carrera and they produced many figure groups in this formula but the name didn't really catch on and it is still mostly known as Parian.. **Royal Worcester aquired a source of pure feldspar in Ireland and started producing their 'Irish Parian'** This looked purer because of its whiteness and most of the other companies in Britain started clamouring for access to the same supply but it lacked the same degree of translucence and many figures continued to be made to the original recipe."*

The Irish material that was used to make the Worcester Shakespeare Service was undoubtedly *either* of inferior quality, *or else* the Worcester potters were then inexperienced in the art of Parian production. Later accounts of the Service (Wendy Cooke and others) tell us that very few of the pieces were perfect even as originally exhibited in 1853 and that the body of the service was fragile and unstable – it basically fell apart!

As Louis Solon commented (see part 1 of this article), the present day Royal Worcester Company has examples of pieces from the Shakespeare Service in their excellent museum and they are extremely fine, both in their modelling and decoration. There is now however a great deal of damage and restoration to the remaining pieces (perhaps this would be expected, given Solon's description of their history!) and this is most probably due to the unsound material used in their making as well as unfamiliarity with the Parian "recipe". The Killiney Hill materials, if they were used to make the Service, were of inferior quality and would certainly have caused difficulty in the production.

That the Shakespeare Service was highly successful when exhibited was recorded in great detail by R.W. Binns – although his "official" account of the making of this service was written by him much later (in 1897) when Binns had retired from Royal Worcester – again we have a possible example of someone looking back with "rose coloured glasses".

At the time, in 1853, it was vital for Kerr and Binns to be seen to be successful and it is obvious that a good deal of what we would today call "spin" was attached to their eulogies on the Service. That Queen Victoria could not be persuaded to buy the service at the Dublin exhibition, in spite of taking great interest in Kerr's exhibits, is perhaps telling: the service looked splendid, was of fabulous design but was somewhat lacking in its implementation. Once the Belleek materials were available, it is clear that Kerr wasted no time in using them and then produced very high quality Parian figures and other items made from this Belleek material during his time at Worcester. At present the detailed research required to determine which British companies actually used the Fermanagh raw materials has not been done.

Regardless of the doubts and controversy that surround the original Castle Caldwell "find", Kerr now finally had his answer to the "Parian" of Minton, the "Statuary Porcelain" of Copeland, and the "Carrara" of Wedgwood. Worcester could now produce an effective Parian body and Kerr and Binns (and Binns alone after 1862) made many extremely fine products using this Parian or derivatives of it. Kerr and Binns called the ware "**Irish** Statuary Porcelain" when sold in a figural form.

## The Dublin 1853 Exhibition and the foundation of Belleek Pottery

In the formation of Belleek Pottery, it is highly probable that the 1853 Dublin "Great Industrial Exhibition" played an important part. Kerr was an important exhibitor, Degenhardt states that Bloomfield attended the exhibition, McBirney was influential and living in Dublin at the time, as an associate of Dargan's he would almost certainly have attended. Cameron and Kane, as representatives of the Dublin scientific community were also certain to have been invited. Kerr acknowledges Kane in the special book Binns produced for the Exhibition committee members. Armstrong had his architects practice in London at the time of the Exhibition but would surely have attended because of his association with Kerr. It is entirely speculation but it is possible that all the parties vital to Belleek Pottery's foundation could have met in Dublin because of the Exhibition. This may not have been the case, but it was certainly true that the power of the Exhibition was to motivate and energise these Irishmen, to galvanise them into action to rectify the deficiencies of Irish Manufacturing at the time. Marion Langham states:

*"Shortly after the 1853 Dublin Exhibition, Bloomfield and Armstrong met. With so much in common, they soon agreed to work together to build the Pottery. Bloomfield would provide the land at a nominal rent whilst Armstrong would design, build, and manage it. A financial backer was all that was needed and Bloomfield felt he knew the right man - David McBirney. Bloomfield and Armstrong's enthusiasm was such that McBirney was intrigued and travelled to the Worcester Porcelain Factory and then to Belleek. Soon afterwards he agreed to finance the venture. The pottery would be known as "D. McBirney & Co."*

It is perhaps hard to believe that Bloomfield did not already know Armstrong by the end of 1853, especially given the Bloomfield-Cameron-Kerr connection in the discovery of the china clay and feldspar at Castle Caldwell (discussed earlier in this article). It is clear that considerable discussion *did* take place around this time concerning the formation of an Irish Company to produce fine porcelain using Bloomfield's materials. What is unclear is the extent to which Kerr was involved. Kerr had just produced the Shakespeare Service using Irish materials although it is questionable whether Bloomfield's feldspar had been available in time. Kerr had produced at least one sample item using Bloomfield's materials at Worcester around this time, but I have found no direct evidence that Kerr's involvement at the time went



further than making samples and providing business advice and encouragement. Kerr had the knowledge, the resources and the ability to make the "Belleek Project" happen. His actions point to his wanting to be involved, but in late 1853, Kerr, although (in R.W. Binn's words) equipped with "the enthusiastic patriotism of Irishmen", probably had his work almost completely cut out in looking after the regeneration of the still-ailing but now recovering Worcester Factory.

## The Events leading to the Formation of Belleek Pottery

Richard Degenhardt, in his second edition of "The Complete Collector's Guide and illustrated Reference" states:

*"... Cameron of Dublin, sent samples of the Irish [Castle Caldwell] clay and feldspar to the Royal Porcelain Works, Worcester, England to be tested. The English firm was then owned by the partners, Kerr and Binns. W.H. Kerr, a native of County Tyrone only 20 miles from Belleek, had used Irish materials to produce a dessert service, "The Midsummer Night's Dream", which Bloomfield had seen on display in Dublin in 1851." (sic)*

This date Degenhardt gives here is of course incorrect: the Shakespeare Service was not exhibited until May 1853 and although Bloomfield almost certainly *did* see it in Dublin then, he was much more likely to have gone to the Dublin Exhibition at the behest of Kerr or Cameron or even at the invitation of his friend William Dargan. Kerr was also probably the catalyst in introducing his friend and architect, Armstrong, to Bloomfield. McBirney was an associate of William Dargan's. Dargan and Kerr between them knew all three of the Belleek principals. It is a nice theory that they discussed the formation of the Belleek Pottery when they all met at the 1853 Dublin Exhibition – unfortunately this has not been verified!

S. McCrum writing in his book "The Belleek Pottery" states:

*"A number of trial pieces were submitted to him [to McBirney, by Kerr]. After a visit to Castle Caldwell and a careful examination of the possible site and the deposits of raw materials, McBirney offered to supply the entire capital necessary for building the factory and starting and running the business, which was to trade as "McBirney and Company" with Armstrong as art director"*

McBirney seems to have been finally persuaded as to the viability of the Belleek Pottery venture and hence committed to give it his (considerable) financial backing after travelling with Armstrong to meet Kerr at Worcester. It is not clear if McBirney was brought in at a late stage, to be used as the source of finance, or was involved with the project from its earliest days. The evidence from Cunningham is that William Dargan, perhaps because he had the highest profile of anyone in Ireland as an entrepreneur and philanthropist, but also because both Bloomfield and Kerr both counted him as their friend, was asked by Bloomfield to contribute the capital well *before* David McBirney was approached. It was only when Dargan declined, having already dissipated a good part of his personal fortune on speculative ventures in the 1850's following his financial loss at the 1853 Exhibition and other commercially unsuccessful ventures, that McBirney was approached. It may even have been Dargan who suggested McBirney as an alternative candidate to supply the finance when he was unable to comply himself. We cannot date these events precisely but they must have taken place between 1853 and 1857.

The main reasons why Dargan may not have been able to contribute more to the Belleek project were several: as Tomás O'Riordan relates in a short biography of Dargan:

*"His next project was the establishment of a great thread factory at Chapelizod, near Dublin, where he purchased and expanded large mill premises. This undertaking was another financial disaster. After several more financial misadventures, Dargan returned to railways. He became chairman of the Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford Railway, in which he invested nearly all his fortune. In connection with this line he spent large sums on the improvement of Bray, Co. Wicklow. He built the Turkish baths at the cost of £8,000 and provided first-class hotel accommodation in the town. This expense, though large, would not have damaged him financially had the railway proved as successful as he had hoped. However, the depression in railway property, which had begun at this time, so lowered the value of all his investments that for a time they were of little value."*

So, with the finance and raw materials in place, the Belleek Pottery foundation stone was laid in 1857 and production of earthenware is thought to have started within the next three years. The "Belleek Project" had been successfully started but the Project's main objective of gaining recognition in influential circles for artistic production was by no means yet achieved. At this point in 1860, we return to the Worcester side of the story.

## The Roles played at Worcester by W.H. Kerr and R.W. Binns



Kerr and Binns "Queen Victoria Service" plate in the "Worcester Enamel" style painted in 1861 by Thomas Bott (above) and its extraordinary mark - one of the most elaborate backstamps ever (right) designed by Digby Wyatt.

Back in Worcester, it is important to see how the two Irishmen, Kerr and Binns were working together at the start of the 1860's. Over his years in control of the Worcester Factory, Kerr had been responsible for the overall management and financing of the company, as well as using his contacts and shop in Ireland to aid the marketing of the ware. The "Art Director" R.W. Binns was in charge of the design and production of the merchandise and the supervision of the various talented designers and artists that he had (by then) employed.



W.H. Kerr and Co. Parian busts of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria – made in "Irish Statuary Porcelain"

Perhaps because the "official history" was later written by Binns, it is *he* who is credited with the major achievements of the Kerr and Binns Worcester Company. Kerr does however gain some credit for his efforts in rebuilding the Severn Street Factory, installing new equipment and making improvements to working conditions there. Binns rightly gets credit for employing talented artists and designers such as James Hadley (in 1852), Josiah Rushton (in 1853) and George Owen (in 1859). Other artists, Thomas Bott and William Boyton Kirk were employed at Kerr and Binns in 1852. That the Kerr and Binns factory truly rose to prominence was highlighted at the Paris Exhibition of 1855 where "Limoges Enamel" style work by Thomas Bott, and Parianware decorated in the Italian Renaissance style (according to Binns) received great acclaim. Finally in 1859, after Prince Albert had been shown examples of Thomas Bott's enamel work, Queen Victoria ordered a dessert service from them decorated in the "Worcester



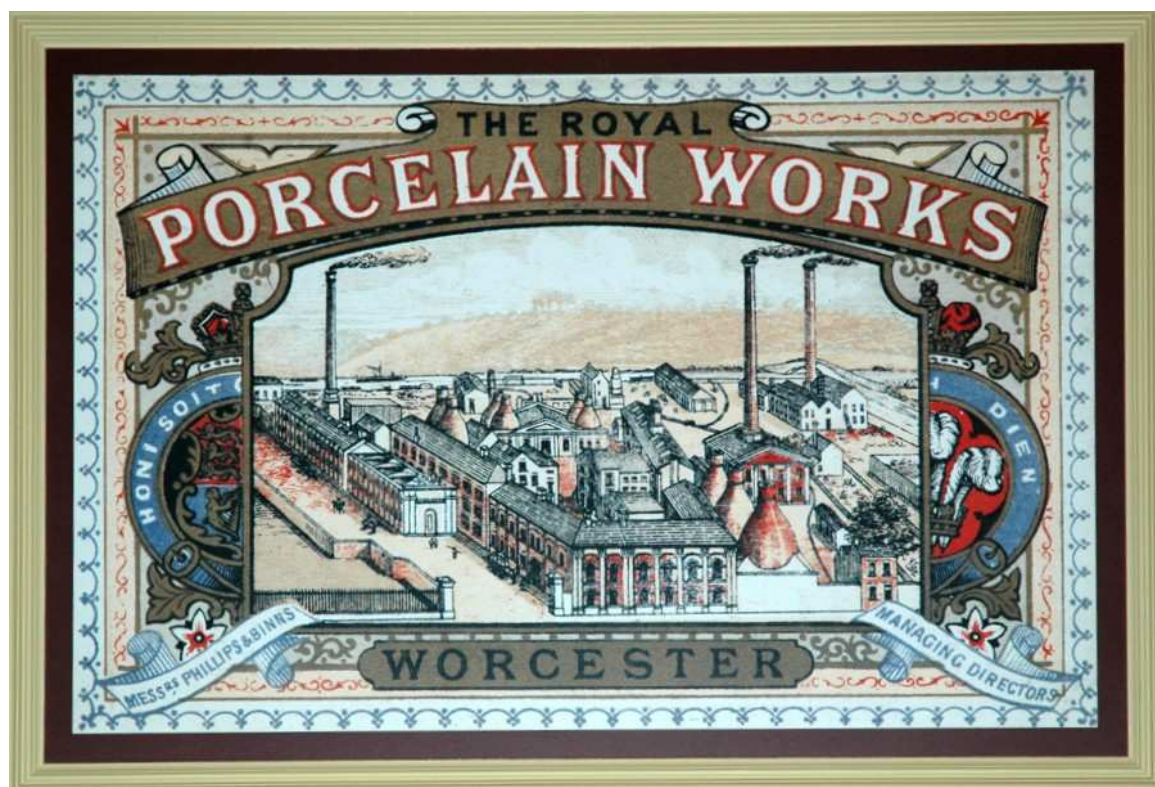
Enamel" style (by Thomas Bott) – see the picture on the previous page. This service is said to have finally: *"Re-established the reputation of Worcester Royal Porcelain Works after many troubled years."* – again these are R.W. Binns's words. This service was exhibited at the 1862 London Exhibition. With all this artistic success, and recognition, the next event to happen is wholly unexpected – in 1862, Kerr left the company!

## Kerr's "retirement"

In March 1862, William Henry Kerr "retired" from his position at Worcester, leaving control of the company to R.W. Binns and Edward Phillips who then became joint Managing Directors. Previously, in 1860, William Boyton Kirk had also retired both from Sculpting and from Kerr and Binns: Kirk entered the Church three years later and is recorded as occupying parishes in Birkenhead and Ashton Under Lyme in his later years. Following Kerr's departure, Binns retained control of artistic direction and Phillips took on the role of works superintendent. The company name was changed to the "Worcester Royal Porcelain Company". Since Kerr had been the sole owner and by far the largest shareholder of the Worcester factory, one would normally think that the sale of his interests should have benefited him financially, so that on his return to Dublin, he would have had a considerable fortune at his disposal. This was not really the case. Although Kerr later received over £10,000 from the sale of his interests, the company in 1862 was not in a healthy financial position and he therefore returned to Ireland with money, but not a fortune.

Kerr was only 39 years old. His real reasons for leaving Worcester are not immediately obvious. Hugh Gibson (writing in 1993 but using evidence from 1862) writes: *"In 1862... at the old Diglis China Works in Worcester the partnership of Kerr and Binns had floundered. The ten year partnership had been one of great technical and artistic innovation and there had been a good deal of building and renovation at the works. Binns took credit for the artistic success: Kerr took the blame for the commercial failure, for the financial performance was miserable, and he returned whence he came to Ireland."*

There is a strong feeling of premonition here – Kerr at Worcester seems to have been in a similar position to McBirney at Belleek twenty years later – there was great artistic success but "miserable" commercial failure! What we *do* know for sure is that in 1862 Kerr returned to Dublin to manage the family china business (James Kerr and Son) still based at 114-115 Capel Street, where he continued to act as Royal Worcester's main dealer in Ireland and that he was able to take on other responsibilities and projects. By 1862, Belleek Pottery was in operation but was almost certainly producing only earthenware. Belleek had therefore not yet achieved any of the artistic recognition that full Parian production would bring. Many problems remained to be solved at Belleek.



In April 1862, it is significant to note, Kerr was free from his Worcester responsibilities and was therefore available to provide assistance and support to his friend Robert Williams Armstrong.

After April 1862, as shown in this picture from the Worcester Porcelain Museum, the new joint managing directors of the Royal Porcelain Works were Messrs. Phillips and Binns.

## Part 3. W.H. Kerr and Belleek Pottery 1862-1883

### Success and Fulfilment of the “Grand Plan” but Decline and Death for the Founders.

#### Kerr's involvement with Belleek Pottery following his return to Ireland



William Henry Kerr officially retired and the firm of W.H. Kerr and Co. ceased to trade at the end of March 1862. There followed protracted negotiations between Kerr and the new Managing Directors at Worcester, Richard Binns and Edward Phillips, over the settlement that Kerr was due.

In the meantime, Kerr returned to his family business in Dublin, which continued to be the Irish distributor for Worcester ware. Soon after Kerr's return, James Kerr and Son was appointed by Belleek Pottery to export the Pottery's products to foreign markets. I can find no documented connection and it may simply be a coincidence, but Kerr's return to Ireland also occurs at about the same time that the Belleek Pottery first began its successful production of Parian (this is generally considered to be some time in 1863). Whether this connection is significant or not, Kerr, on his return from Worcester appears to have intensified his involvement with the Belleek Pottery.

The real reasons for Kerr's exit from the Worcester Porcelain Works are clouded in mystery. Some information relating to his "retirement" has been found in the Worcester Museum's archives: several theories can be advanced:

1. Kerr had a fundamental disagreement with his partner Richard Binns.
2. W.H. Kerr and Co. had lost too much money to continue to be commercially solvent without a new cash injection from a new shareholder – Kerr took the blame for this and had to leave as part of the refinancing agreement.
3. Kerr had a disagreement with his father-in-law John Stone who still owned most of the land and buildings on the Worcester Porcelain Works site.

Advertisement placed by W.H. Kerr and Co. announcing the sale of the "Whole of their Manufactured Stock".

Diplomatically, the change in ownership is phrased: "A Change of Partnership being about to take place"

4. Kerr wanted to leave Worcester to pursue new ventures in Ireland, amongst them Belleek Pottery.
5. Kerr was urgently needed to run the family business in Dublin.



It is most probable that no single factor of the above is true on its own but that a combination of each of these factors was enough to persuade Kerr that his best interests lay elsewhere than the Worcester Royal Porcelain Works.

On the first point, Edward Phillips, who took over Kerr's management role at Worcester in 1862, buying shares in the newly formed Royal Worcester Company, had the unenviable task of working with Richard Binns. It seems from the Directors' Minute Books held at the Worcester Porcelain Museum Archives, that Binns was not the easiest man to work with – egotistical, strong willed, argumentative and ultimately, as Phillips found to his cost – very influential: Phillips was eventually fired (and then went on to found the highly successful Royal Crown Derby Factory) – Hugh Gibson's excellent book describes this. In conversations with Wendy Cooke and Harry Frost (the present and past curators of the Worcester Porcelain Museum) it seems that although Binns was "highly difficult" (In Edward Phillips' view), he actually got on fairly well with Kerr (as far as can be ascertained, as the Minute Books from the Kerr and Binns period have all been lost) – Binns even named one of his sons after Kerr (Harry Kerr Binns) - and this was not a major reason for Kerr's departure.

The second point - that W.H. Kerr and Co was a dire commercial failure and had reached the point where it could no longer continue – also has some truth in it. It was however neither insolvent nor bankrupt and Kerr was able to sell his interests in the company to the new Royal Worcester Company for £11,165 4s 11d (minus Solicitors fees) – this was a small fortune in 1862. He also still owned land at the Porcelain Works site – this is documented in the 1862 and 1863 Directors' meeting minutes of the Royal Worcester Company.

The third point that there was some sort of family row is possible, but there is no real documentary evidence to support it. It is possible that John Stone may have become disenchanted with Kerr because Kerr had produced for him neither any return on his monetary investments at Worcester nor any heir!

The fourth and fifth points relate to issues which may have attracted Kerr back to Ireland, whereas the first three points cover factors driving him away from Worcester. I have found little evidence to support these two points directly, but Kerr's reassuming his former role at James Kerr and Son and his taking on the original Dublin agency with Belleek Pottery show at least some positive influences persuading him to return to Ireland. Kerr clearly kept close contact with the fledgling Belleek Pottery, had stayed closely in touch with his friend, Robert Armstrong and was later highly active in promoting Belleek wares to his important and influential customers in his role at James Kerr and Son. It is quite possible but unproven that his continuing business involvement with Worcester was an impediment to his own future plans.

1862 must have been a critical time for the new pottery at Belleek – even though it was by then able to produce basic earthenware it seems to have had little success with high class Parian ware, even if, at this time, the factory was actually able to produce this type of ware. Kerr's manifest skills of selling, marketing and above all his important contacts would have made him very valuable to Belleek Pottery and indeed Kerr did later capitalise on his contacts with Queen Victoria, other members of the Royal Family and the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to promote Belleek's cause and to sell Belleek products. The founders of Belleek Pottery (Armstrong, an architect; McBirney, a merchant and Bloomfield, a landowner) did not possess Kerr's type of ability, at least not in 1862.

According to the published 1865 Dublin Exhibition catalogue, McBirney states that he (D. McBirney and Co., the Belleek Pottery) was:

*"...wholeheartedly assisted by W.H. Kerr in his research on the commercial possibilities of the pottery."*



Interior of the 1865 Dublin Exhibition where Belleek won its first Gold Medal

Unfortunately, McBirney does not state over which span of time Kerr provided this assistance. It is not clear, either, what McBirney means by "commercial" – was the "research" limited to the business operation, promotion and marketing of the Pottery or did it include technical assistance on the design and manufacturing side as well? In the early days, before the Pottery's founding, Kerr (or at least Kerr's company, W.H. Kerr and Co.) clearly assisted in the technical sense – McBirney does not say if this assistance was continued once the Belleek Pottery was operational (after 1860).

Over a long period, starting from 1853, Kerr had been instrumental in a good deal of arm-twisting, on issues of the commercial viability of the new Belleek business and in providing the principals (Armstrong, McBirney and Bloomfield) his research findings on the suitability of the raw materials – he may originally even have gone as far as to have offered the services of his friend and architect, Armstrong, to the nascent Belleek Pottery project. This, however, is speculation.



[Name plaque from Kerr's Strandville House in Clontarf. Sadly the house has now been demolished and replaced by new housing development – the plaque is the only thing remaining.]

After his possibly enforced “retirement” from the Worcester Porcelain Company in 1862, having returned to the family china business, and by 1867 living in Clontarf, a pleasant area just North of Dublin City centre, Kerr continued to be associated with the manufacture of China, being granted a patent in 1867 describing an improved method for preparing materials for use in china production. It is highly probable that Kerr was still working with Armstrong at this time: the 1867 patent (expanded on in a later 1877 patent) describes a method which was highly

suitable for the “manufacture of telegraph insulators”; Armstrong, in his turn, had submitted a patent application in 1865 (not granted), expanded upon in a further detailed (granted) patent in 1866 for a spring driven press for making hollow ceramic ware: just such a press would be very useful for making telegraph insulators! By 1878, Jewitt, in his first edition of the “Ceramic Art of Great Britain” was stating that: “Belleek furnishes largely the “porcelain insulators” (containing 70% local feldspar) used for telegraph poles, and these have been pronounced by “authorities” the best.” This looks like a good example of the result of Kerr continuing to work and co-operate with Armstrong at Belleek.

Kerr certainly remained extremely interested in the Belleek Pottery's activities and gave his company's commercial assistance: Kerr was glass and china supplier to Queen Victoria and to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

### James Kerr and Son price list The Queen's Breakfast Service:

1. Breakfast Cup & Saucer	each	5s. od.
2. Tea Cup & Saucer	"	3s. 8d.
3. Coffee Cup & Saucer	"	3s. 8d.
4. Plate (7 inch)	"	3s. 3d.
5. Plate (7 inch)	"	2s. 9d.
6. Slop Bowl	"	5s. od.
7. Milk Jug	"	5s. od.
8. Cream Ewer	"	4s. od.
8a. Sugar Box	"	6s. od.
9. Cake Plate	"	5s. od.
10. Covered Muffin Dish	"	8s. 6d.
11. Egg Cup	"	1s. 9d.
12. Butter Dish	"	8s. 6d.
13. Honey Pot with Stand & Cover	"	8s. 6d.
14. Covered Steak Dish	"	£2. 2s. od.
15. Toast Rack	"	8s. 6d.
16. Dish (12 inch)	"	13s. 6d.
16a. Dish (ten inch)	"	9s. od.

### Designs of the “Institute” Pattern registered by R.W. Armstrong, acting for D. McBirney and Co. (Belleek Pottery)

247248:	12 <sup>th</sup> Nov 1870	Designs for “Institute” tea ware
249389:	9 <sup>th</sup> Jan 1871	“Institute” plate
249390:	9 <sup>th</sup> Jan 1871	“Institute” dish
249391:	9 <sup>th</sup> Jan 1871	“Institute” sugar box
249392:	9 <sup>th</sup> Jan 1871	“Institute” (slop) bowl
249393:	9 <sup>th</sup> Jan 1871	“Institute” butter tub with underplate
250168:	6 <sup>th</sup> Feb 1871	“Institute” honey pot stand and cover
250169:	6 <sup>th</sup> Feb 1871	“Institute” seaweed & shell design for plate
250170:	6 <sup>th</sup> Feb 1871	“Institute” covered (muffin) dish
250171:	6 <sup>th</sup> Feb 1871	“Institute” large oval covered (steak) dish

Through Kerr, Belleek won important and prestigious orders, the first being a teaset for Queen Victoria (An Echinus set). Later the Queen is said to have presented this set to the Empress of Germany (I have found no record of it remaining in any royal collection in the UK).

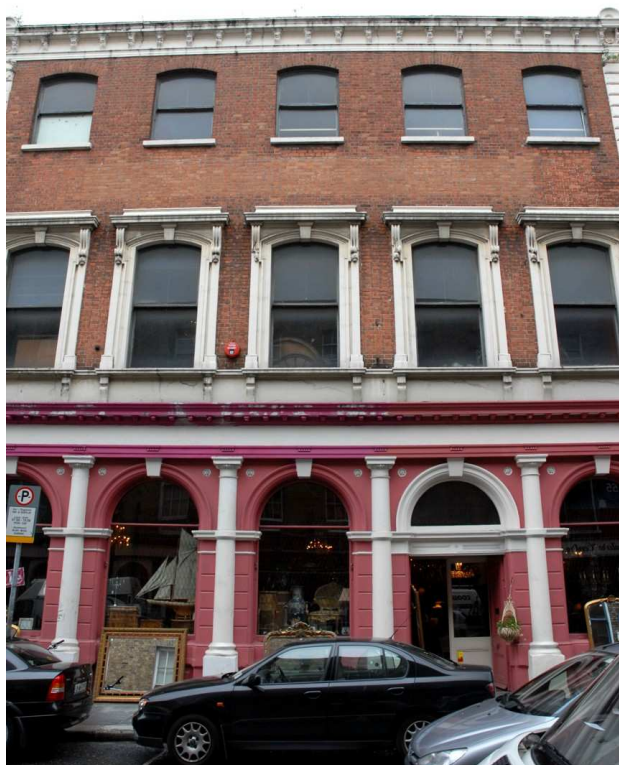
The strong link between Kerr and Belleek continued: in 1870, W.H. Kerr commissioned from the Belleek Pottery one of the most comprehensive sets of parianware ever produced by Belleek. This set was the (Queen's) Institute Breakfast Service. The name “Institute” comes from the Queen's Institute, Molesworth Street, Dublin, where the original designs were done.

[The pricelist (left) was published by James Kerr and Son, probably in 1871.]

In all, to register the designs making up the pieces in the “Institute” pattern range, Belleek Pottery submitted these *ten* separate registrations (above). This is a far greater number of individual design registrations than for any other pattern: clearly,



these designs, produced uniquely by Belleek Pottery, were considered worthy of protection. As just about the only set of Belleek designs coming from a source external to Belleek Pottery, it would have been even more important than usual to protect the designs and “keep the paperwork in order”.



Exterior and interior of 114, 115 and 116 Capel Street Dublin, formerly Kerr's shop, as it appears today, probably incorporating Kerr's modifications of 1871. Even though it is now somewhat dilapidated and is used as an emporium for curios and reproduction furniture and fittings, it still retains something of the grandeur it would have had in Victorian times when it was known (in 1850) as “The China Saloon”

## The Dublin Queen's Institute

The Dublin Queen's Institute itself is a very interesting organisation. It was founded in 1861 and was the first technical college for women in Europe. The impetus for its foundation came from the same roots of philanthropism and the desire to aid Irish industrial development that drove Dargan to sponsor the 1853 Exhibition.

There was also a keenly perceived need to provide training and employment for Ireland's considerable “regiment of disadvantaged gentlewomen”. The extract here is from Patricia Phillips, in her book “Prometheus's Fire”:

Kerr himself had a project with the Queen's Institute which went further

than just commissioning designs from them: he wanted to transfer the Painting on Porcelain School of the Institute from Molesworth Street to new premises, which he would supply by converting the family shop at 114 and 115 Capel Street into a lavish showroom and by adding apartments for the Institute's lady painters. Kerr sold his family home in Clontarf, Strandville House, to offset the cost of these enlargements and modifications to his Capel Street building and the large cost of building apartments for the relocated personnel of the Queen's Institute.

*“In England there was founded in 1859 the Society for the Promotion of Employment of Women, associated with the English Woman's Journal. This had roots in the Bradford Mechanics Institute for Working Women, set up by Fanny Hertz.” ...In 1861, a conference was held in Dublin and an Irish initiative was started... “The prime movers in this were the Quaker Anne Jellicoe (celebrated as the founder of Alexandra College) and Barbara Corlett. The former was married to a mill-owner, whose attempts to educate and train the local girls in useful arts had fallen foul of the Catholic Church, and the latter was the daughter of a coach-spring manufacturer. They had to overcome the social barriers between perceived 'gentility' and work and this in the Irish environment proved to be more acute a problem than in England. Dublin was awash with impecunious gentlewomen, consequent on the numerous bankruptcies of estates due to the famine.*

*Rather than attempting to invent 'suitable' occupations for distressed gentry, they decided to embark on a technical training centre for women, to teach the basic skills of industry and commerce. They got patronage from leading citizens and from Royalty, and set up classes covering a wide range of skills, including telegraphy, photography, engraving. They got industrial sponsorship from the B and I Magnetic Telegraph Co. The RDS opened up its library in support.”*

In this project, Kerr was motivated by two main factors. Firstly his Irish patriotism: he wanted to expand the Irish industry of porcelain decoration based on the ladies of the Institute and secondly, commercial interest: he could use his showrooms as a showcase of the decorated ware and turn a good profit by using his excellent connections to sell the ware to his important customers. He planned to use blank ware bought in mainly from Worcester but possibly also from Belleek and then sell the finished decorated ware at a high price. He had already been using the Institute's resources at Molesworth Street for this purpose, working with Worcester blanks, but he now planned vastly to expand the venture.

Kevin Curry, in the Irish Arts Review of 1993 has written an excellent account of the Queen's Institute and the Painting on Porcelain School. Curry writes:

*"Kerr was in the process of installing a magnificent suite of apartments at nos 114 and 115 when something went drastically wrong to halt his plans."*

Basically (as Curry relates), Kerr had a major disagreement with Herbert Cooper, the master artist that he had previously known at Worcester and had been brought across to Dublin to manage the venture. The result was disastrous: the apartments were not completed and Kerr never recovered from the financial loss, recouping virtually nothing from his large investment. Although Kerr tried to carry on with his plans on a much smaller scale, the failure of his ambitious scheme had an adverse effect on Cooper, the Institute Painting on Porcelain School and his own business, James Kerr and Son which failed in 1872. This was reported as follows in the Worcester Royal Porcelain Works Directors' Minute Book:

*Royal Worcester Company, Directors' Minute Book 1872.*

### ***Kerr & Son bankruptcy***

*Minute No. 1609*

*Mr Phillips reported that Messers Kerr & Son had obtained the protection of the bankruptcy court until June 14<sup>th</sup> and were endeavouring in the meantime to make arrangements for paying 13 shillings and 4 pence in the pound.*

## **Decline and Death**

So, Kerr's project for the Queen's Institute never happened: the Institute Painting on Porcelain School did not move and worse followed: Kerr's own china retailing company went bankrupt in 1872 and the Capel Street shop closed in 1873.

By 1877, Kerr was living in Malahide, a very attractive seaside village on the main Dublin-Belfast railway line, some 8 miles north of Dublin. He published a refinement to his "materials for ceramic production methods" patent in this year, showing that he still retained his interest in ceramic manufacture but just two years later, in 1879, at the age of 56 years, William Henry Kerr died.

Caroline Louisa Kerr, his wife, returned to Worcester. She died in Worcester on 18th July 1905 at the age of 79. William Henry and Caroline Louisa had no children.

As to the Queen's Institute itself, (again from Patricia Phillips):

*Ann Jellicoe having left the Institute... "Barbara Corlett steered the curriculum away from the practical arts, towards things like French and music, considered more ladylike. The Institute declined as a consequence of this policy, and had closed by 1883; there was a hint of some disgrace."*

As for William Dargan, the great Engineer and Philanthropist had always controlled all his affairs himself—he did not believe in employing managers—and when he fell from his horse in 1866 and was badly injured there was no one able to manage his many business interests. His affairs became disordered and his health and spirits were undermined as a result. He had to sell his splendid mansion in Dundrum but he kept his town house at 2 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin. He died there at the age of 68 on 7th February 1867. His widow was awarded a pension of £100 a year on 18 June 1870. He is buried at a civic funeral, which was attended by the Lord Mayor of Dublin and dignitaries of Dublin as well as hundreds of railway workers, in Glasnevin cemetery where his tomb, like his statue at the National Gallery, carries the single word DARGAN.



Belleek Pottery soon had its share of woes too: David McBirney died, aged 78 in 1882 and a bitter battle ensued between Armstrong and the main beneficiary of McBirney's will, his son Robert, who was by then living in America and wanted to wind up the Belleek Company and realise the asset value. Robert McBirney had every right to do this as his father had never legally recognised Robert Armstrong as a full partner in the business. David McBirney was the only shareholder and ownership of the Belleek Pottery thus passed directly to his son, who had no interest in the loss making business: Armstrong was left with no stake in the company and the prospect of his endeavours in ruins. After protracted and unsuccessful legal wrangling, Armstrong himself died in January 1884, seemingly exhausted by the bitter battle, at the early age of 59.

With regard to David McBirney, Sir Charles Alexander Cameron commented in his memoirs of 1912:

*"Most of the money which founded the Belleek factory was provided by the late Mr. M'Birney, of M'Birney & Collis' firm, Aston's Quay. It was not a profitable enterprise, and Mr. M'Birney lost heavily by it. I am, however, glad to state that the Belleek factory is still turning out good china, and I hope is now a paying concern."*

On John Caldwell Bloomfield, Cameron also commented (again in 1912):

*"My dear, lifelong friend, Mr. Bloomfield, has passed from us [Bloomfield actually died in 1897]. I often regretted that he had not embraced the profession of barrister, for which he was peculiarly fitted."*

By 1884, one might say that the Belleek "Dream" was over. A new company was formed, "The Belleek Pottery Works". As Belleek Historian, Miss Jenkins, working from Tommy Campbell's notes (In the "Thomas Corrigan Manuscript"), comments, perhaps a little unfairly:

*"Very little remarkable porcelain or parian ware was produced from 1884 to 1919, for the pottery was now being run under quite different principles. The new proprietors were businessmen and not content, as Armstrong had been, to plough back their profits into constant experiment."*

The new reality at Belleek was *money*. The original motivations for founding the pottery were Art, Idealism and strong Irish Patriotism. McBirney and Kerr were dead by 1882. With Armstrong's death in 1884, the emphasis finally changed and with a few notable exceptions, the demands of business have taken precedence over art ever since.

## The Life and Achievements of W.H. Kerr

Finally, what of Kerr? He died in 1879. There are no significant published works by him (known to this author), even his time at Worcester is documented only by his partner, R.W. Binns, writing much later in 1897. Here, Binns seems determined to take all credit for any artistic or commercial success that the company enjoyed, although it seems that Kerr and Binns actually remained friends after Kerr left the Worcester company. Very little has been published recently on Kerr during his time at Worcester or afterwards, the excellent articles by Kevin Curry are the exception to this. No major book has yet been produced on this interesting - if transitional - period of Worcester Porcelain (1852-1862). Kerr came from a successful and respectable family of china merchants in Dublin and became Managing Director and principal owner of one of the World's most important Porcelain Factories at the early age of 27. At Worcester he assembled a team of talented Irishmen: Armstrong, Binns and Kirk, to take his plans forward. By his and Richard Binn's efforts (amongst others of course), *"the Company's fortunes were restored"* – by 1862, Worcester products were again at the forefront of British ceramics and in demand by Royalty. In spite of the acclaim for the new designs and the artistry of the new products that Kerr and Binns produced and the reported success at international exhibitions, the company was a commercial failure. Kerr had worked very hard to establish connections with important people and above all, Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort – these skills made him highly valuable in restoring the Worcester Royal Porcelain Works' reputation after years of decline in the hands of the aging and ailing Walter Chamberlain. The same skills made him valuable when a new wholly Irish Pottery project seemed possible. He was heavily involved with the introduction of Irish materials into the mainstream of British porcelain manufacture. He worked closely with other talented Irish designers and businessmen.

Apparently at the height of his success, he retired from his prominent position at Worcester (aged 39) and went back to the family firm in Dublin. He became more interested in the fortunes of the Belleek Pottery, maintained his association and friendship with Robert Armstrong, his company worked as export agent for the Belleek Pottery and he commissioned important pieces from Belleek. Queen Victoria arranged her Belleek purchases through Kerr: in accomplishing this, Kerr must have used his influential position gained during his time at Worcester to convince the Queen to buy items from a hitherto unknown small Irish pottery. Patronage by the Royal Family was of course vital to the success of the "Belleek Project" as the publicity it generated guaranteed public recognition of the Company's wares and enabled the Belleek

Company to achieve artistic acclaim in an unprecedentedly short time. Kerr retained his interest in ceramic manufacture and was granted two patents after he left Worcester in 1862. In his later years, he had ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful plans to promote painting on porcelain in Ireland. The disastrous failure of these plans then caused the original Dublin china retail business to become bankrupt. He died in 1879 aged 56 years. This is a simple enough story but it leaves much unexplained.

## Unanswered Questions

The following points have not yet been completely answered or the answers contain speculation and assumptions:

- What was Kerr's actual involvement with Armstrong, McBirney and Bloomfield following the Dublin Exhibition in 1853 and when the Belleek Pottery project was first seriously proposed?
- Why did Kerr really "retire" from Worcester when the company had apparently become successful once more, seemingly at the height of his powers at the age of 39, to the relative obscurity of his family's shop in Dublin - was the continued development of Belleek Pottery then still one of *his* "projects"?
- Was Kerr involved with the Belleek Pottery after his return to Ireland in 1862 in a influential way, or did he act only as a distributor, collaborator and commissioning agent for the wares?
- What was the extent of "co-operation" between Worcester and Belleek? Was it limited to the original contact, the experiments with Belleek feldspar and china clay, business advice and Armstrong ending up running the Belleek Pottery, or did it go much further than this?
- Many Worcester designs (from the Kerr and Binns period and later) are remarkably similar to Belleek designs. Did Kerr (or Binns for that matter) offer advice, expertise or even practical help in the form of recipes, designs, models and moulds to the fledgling Belleek Pottery? There are certainly Kerr and Binns pieces in existence that predate the similar Belleek items. McBirney wholeheartedly acknowledges Kerr's "assistance".
- Later Worcester pieces and some Belleek parian is also remarkably similar (Nautilus Shell on Coral, for example); both companies produced the same items: is this coincidence or was there continued collaboration? Which company produced the items first? Was Kerr involved with this collaboration after he left Worcester?



Above left: Kerr and Binns Worcester Shell Dish (painted) 1857.



Above right: Belleek Shell Dish, 1<sup>st</sup> Black Mark (post 1863)

- On the subject of sharing designers, William Boyton Kirk is reputed to have designed Belleek's "Figure of Erin", but was contracted from 1852 until 1860 to work for Kerr at Worcester – in 1860 he retired as a sculptor and started his training for Holy Orders then in 1863 he entered the Church. How then, assuming that Kirk *did* design Erin, without Kerr's co-operation and/or getting Kirk out of "retirement" for a special commission, was the Figure of Erin created? Was Erin therefore designed by Kirk *well before* Belleek Pottery started parian production?
- On the subject of the vital first meeting between Bloomfield and Armstrong: was Kerr involved, directly or indirectly?



- How closely and in which ways did Armstrong and Kerr continue to co-operate after Kerr's return to Dublin in 1862? Did Armstrong produce blanks for Kerr to decorate at his premises in Dublin? Was this part of Kerr's plan to provide and manage the Painting on Porcelain School of the Queen's Institute?

## The Real History of Belleek Pottery

The history of Belleek Pottery is full of "Celtic mystery" and supposition. It is clear that Armstrong, McBirney and Bloomfield wanted far more than just a pottery turning out "useful" wares (Earthenware) that would make them a tidy profit. They wanted, *from the outset*, to compete on the World stage with the likes of Worcester and Minton. All the major personalities involved were Irish, mostly with a strong Dublin connection. There was a clear element of "National Pride" involved, but it does not only seem to have been nationalistic fervour which drove the men involved, also the pursuit of *artistic excellence*. This fits well with the strong "Art and Industry" resonances of the time, promulgated in Britain by Prince Albert and Sir Henry Cole, leading to the Great Exhibition and the foundation of the South Kensington Museum (the Victoria and Albert Museum as we know it today). In the pottery business, knowledge was power: "secret" recipes and carefully guarded formulations allowed one company or another to lead the market – this was certainly the case with the development of the Parian body in the 1840's and 50's. The influence of Royalty and the Aristocracy was paramount in a pottery's success: what the Queen bought today, the new middle classes had to have (in simpler form) tomorrow. It was vital for the success of the Belleek Pottery that the appropriate expertise was obtained, then that products of the utmost quality were produced - products suitable for sale to those holding the highest positions in Victorian society. In a marketing sense, success in the popular International Exhibitions was also vital.

Belleek Pottery achieved all this. Furthermore, the people involved achieved these objectives very quickly compared to just about every other company in the pottery industry's history. How did they do this? The popular version, as written by Degenhardt and Langham (amongst others) tells how the pottery was founded following what amounted to a series of chance meetings of the principals: Armstrong, Bloomfield and McBirney. There are a lot of questions left unanswered or only having a partial answer, such as: why was the Pottery built on quite such a grand scale (at huge expense)? How was McBirney persuaded to put up this considerable amount of money – were his conversations with Kerr crucial in this? How did Armstrong obtain his ceramic design expertise, he was, after all, an architect by training?



William Dargan 1799-1867

On the right is the Statue of Dargan by E.J. Jones which stands outside the National Gallery of Ireland on Merrion Street

Belleek Pottery was an "all Irish" *project*. Ireland, at this time was still struggling to recover following the famine, was suffering high unemployment and was considered "a land of raw materials". There was a strong desire from the leaders of Irish society and industry, especially William Dargan but certainly also scientists like Cameron and Kane and businessmen such as McBirney and Kerr, to harness Irish creativity to make use of those raw materials. Dargan felt this keenly – he was most emphatically not a nationalist in the sense that O'Connell and Parnell were, but "a patriotic Irishman" – his idea was to use Irish creativity to make a mark on the industrialised world. McBirney, Bloomfield and Kerr all avidly desired to emulate William Dargan.



William Dargan's great project was the 1853 Dublin Exhibition, which, although it was only one third the size of the London 1851 Exhibition, still attracted over



**Plaque outside the National Gallery of Ireland**

**“NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND  
Founded A.D. 1864**

Erected by the contributions of the fellow countrymen of William Dargan Esquire aided by the Imperial Government in commemoration of his munificent liberality in founding and sustaining the Dublin Industrial Exhibition of 1853.”

a million visitors and was a huge success with the public. Dargan invested £100,000 of his own money in the venture and escaped with a personal loss of £9,000. The money was not important: it was the opportunity and publicity given to *Irish* designers and industrialists, such as Kerr with his Shakespeare Service, that mattered to him. The reality at the time of the 1853 Exhibition, was of virtually no true Irish industrial production, although Dargan and others tried hard to convey the impression that Ireland's industry was awakening – the World would have to wait a few more years before meaningful Irish production got going – Belleek Pottery being a fine example of this!

The 1853 Dublin Exhibition was both a wake-up call to Irish businessmen and an opportunity for those like-minded individuals interested in developing Ireland's industry to get together and plan for the future. Dargan's efforts in setting up the Exhibition and motivating people like Kerr to produce items to exhibit there was a watershed in the development of Irish industry. Without the Exhibition, there would almost certainly not have been a Belleek Pottery, or at the very least, Belleek Pottery's history would have been very different. Bloomfield's philanthropic motives to provide employment to the people of Belleek was a key factor that allowed the Pottery to be founded but without the patriotism and drive of leaders of Irish business and society (Dargan and Kerr), Belleek Pottery would never have been built.

Kerr was clearly involved with Belleek Pottery before its formation and in its earliest days. It is speculation, but a valid hypothesis nonetheless, that as well as the fervour and kindly paternalistic vision of Bloomfield, the design and artistic skills of Armstrong, the financial muscle of McBirney and the later influx of English pottery talent from Goss in 1863; there was another *strong* influence at work - that of William Henry Kerr. What we know for certain is that Kerr was an Irish patriot. He was also a highly successful businessman, he knew how to turn around an ailing pottery, and crucially, he had some of the best contacts in the industry, both designers and craftsmen *and* influential customers, including Queen Victoria. He understood the politics and priorities of the pottery business and was no stranger to winning the highest acclaim for his company's productions. The help and advice which Kerr could have provided to the three Belleek Pottery founders would have been invaluable in setting up and developing the new venture. In the “official” history of Belleek Pottery, Kerr is certainly mentioned but gets only small credit. His actual level of involvement in the “Belleek Pottery Project” was a great deal more than this and his efforts were almost certainly vital to the original foundation and continued development of the Pottery.

*- Chris Marvell*



William Henry Kerr 1823 - 1879



## Appendix: List of Notable Events in Chronological Order: 1799-1884

1799	William Dargan born
1804	David McBirney born
1809	Robert Kane born
1823	William Henry Kerr born
	John Caldwell Bloomfield born
1824	Robert Williams Armstrong born
1834	Dargan builds Dublin-Kingstown railway. Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) becomes <i>the</i> fashionable area in Dublin
1840	William Henry Kerr enters his father's china retailing business in Dublin
	Chamberlains merge with the ailing Flight, Barr and Barr company in Worcester
1843	Dargan builds Kingstown-Dalkey "Atmospheric Railway"
1844	Robert Kane publishes "The Industrial Resources of Ireland"
1846	Kerr marries Caroline Louisa Stone, daughter of Caroline Sarah Chamberlain
1848?	Kerr and W.B. Kirk move to Worcester
1849	Bloomfield inherits the Castle Caldwell estate
1851	Kerr assumes control of the Chamberlains Worcester Company
	Chamberlains make a lamentable showing at the Great Exhibition
1851?	Kerr and Armstrong make tour(s) of Ireland to survey for raw materials
1852	Kerr and Binns Worcester Company begins (W.H. Kerr and Co.)
1852?	Feldspar and kaolin suitable for parian production found on John Caldwell Bloomfield's estate
1853	(May 12th) Shakespeare service using the "Irish clay" exhibited in Dublin by Kerr and Binns
1854?	Bloomfield begins the profitable export of his raw materials to Worcester and other English firms
1857	"Official" date of Belleek Pottery's founding (D. McBirney and Co.)
1858	Thursday 18th November, Bloomfield's wife lays the Belleek Pottery foundation stone
1859	Probable date for building of most of Belleek Pottery
1859	Kerr and Binns commissioned to produce the "Queen Victoria Service"
1860	Completion of Belleek Pottery building, start of Belleek Production (Useful ware)
	W.B. Kirk leaves his employment at Kerr and Binns, starts training for the Church
1861	Dublin Queen's Institute opens
1862	Kerr wins acclaim for the "Queen Victoria Service" in London Exhibition then retires to Dublin
	Binns forms Worcester Royal Porcelain Company
1863	Arrival of English workers from Goss at Belleek Pottery, start of parian production at Belleek
	W.B. Kirk ordained a minister of the Church of England
1864	National Gallery of Ireland opens in Dublin, largely due to Dargan's efforts
1865	Belleek Pottery exhibits high quality ware in the Dublin Exhibition – wins first gold medal
1867	William Dargan dies
1869?	Belleek Pottery receives order(s) via Kerr from Queen Victoria (for Echinus Teaware)
1870	(Queen's) Institute ware commissioned by Kerr from Belleek Pottery
1871	Kerr attempts to update the Queen's Institute Painting on Porcelain School
1872	Major artistic success for Belleek Pottery at the Dublin Exhibition
	James Kerr and Son's business on Capel Street Dublin announces bankruptcy
1873	Kerr's Capel Street shop closes.
1879	Kerr dies
1880	More acclaim for Belleek – Gold Medal at the Melbourne Exhibition
1881	Dublin Queen's Institute Closes
1882	McBirney dies
1884	Armstrong dies
	D. McBirney and Co. closes, replaced by the "Belleek Pottery Works" under Joshua Poole

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