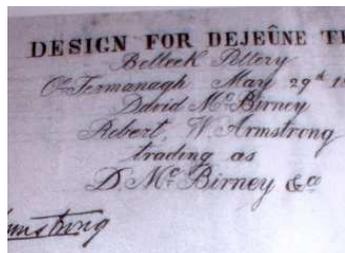


## Belleek Pottery – King of the Déjeuner Set?

We have all seen, and in my case lusted after, absolutely wonderful examples of what we all normally call “Cabaret Sets”. The Cabaret Set, or more properly **Déjeuner Set**, or



using the terminology used originally by Armstrong himself: **Déjeune Set** (thanks here to Brian Russell, this comes from Armstrong’s original descriptions on the Belleek design registrations – see picture) is a simple concept. It is a small tea set on a tray. Simple; so why do I (and a good number of other collectors) get excited about it? I don’t think it as easy as just “to see it is to love it” although personally, I *do* sometimes get carried away! A

less emotional assessment is that the Dejeuner Set exhibits the *design* of a tea set in a way no other combination can: all the shapes are there, teacup and saucer, milk jug, sugar bowl, teapot, sometimes a slop bowl and of course the tray on which the other items were made to stand. To be effective, the design of each individual item has to be functional and decorative, but the effect of the whole set needs to “work” when all the pieces are together – then, truly the whole is greater than the sum of the parts!



*Echinus “Déjeune Tray” as registered by R.W. Armstrong*



*Sèvres Déjeuner Set (Soft Paste Porcelain) 1767-1772*

The Déjeuner set (or Cabaret set, as the terms are often used interchangeably, although my opinion is that “Déjeuner set” is normally more correct) is, as the name implies, a French invention. The Sèvres Royal Porcelain manufactory, providing the most exquisite porcelain to the French royalty and aristocracy from early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, can be said to have invented the genre. When cost was no object and fashion the driving force - for tea drinking was just as fashionable in 18<sup>th</sup> century France as it was in early Georgian Britain - Sèvres had, at the time, no equal. They produced, usually to special commissions, exquisite tea sets with trays, always very expensive and intended to be used by those at the highest levels of society for intimate afternoon tea.

As the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century approached, the Sèvres style was copied by Meissen in Germany and lesser companies in France and their counterparts across the continent, but in general, the British remained resolute and were not much swayed by this slightly “degenerate” foreign taste for teaware only suitable for intimate tea parties. The major British companies at the time; Wedgwood, Spode, Chelsea/Derby, Swansea, Lowestoft and Worcester (represented by Flight and Barr, Chamberlains and Graingers) made countless shapes for teacups and teapots, huge ranges of complete large tea sets, and only relatively few déjeuner sets!



*Sèvres Déjeuner (Breakfast) Set (Hard Paste Porcelain) 1813-1815*

The French revolution largely put a stop to the “frillery and luxury” implied by use of the déjeuner set – in any case, King Louis, his family and a large proportion of the French aristocracy went to Madame la Guillotine, so there was no longer the customer base in France for this type of product! Sèvres fell on hard times but did not go out of business as Napoleon himself, having got rid of the aristocracy which *had* been buying Sèvres products, rather liked the ware they produced, so he just made a decree that they should now produce their fine porcelain for him! You can imagine the Sèvres potters breathing a sigh of relief – Kings might come and go, but this was business as usual.

It's easy to form a mental picture of Marie Antoinette taking tea with one of her admirers, *of course* using a beautiful Sèvres Déjeuner set – and her famous (but taken out of context) “Let them eat cake...”, is a powerful and most probably correct image of the French pre-revolutionary aristocracy.

After Wellington's victory at Waterloo in 1815, with the banishment of Napoleon, the Sèvres Royal Porcelain Factory's decline accelerated. In fact, a lot of undecorated Sèvres ware found its way to England and elsewhere, where elaborate pre-revolutionary styled decoration was applied and the pieces were passed off as “genuine” 18<sup>th</sup> century Sèvres with a forged Sèvres mark. Without the support of the French Royal family or Napoleon, the business was in financial jeopardy and although they *had* been buoyed up by major orders from other country's royalty, such as Catherine the Great of Russia, following the fall of Napoleon, Sèvres were effectively finished as *the* major force in world ceramics. It took another thirty years or so, but by the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851, the *British* were the new world leaders.



*Worcester Déjeuner Set – Parian, 1862. A possible forerunner of Belleek's Sea-inspired teaset?*



*Worcester Bone China Déjeuner set c. 1880*

It was really not until after the start of the Victorian age in 1837 that the Déjeuner set made a real comeback.

The end of the Georgian period in Britain, the coming of the railways and general industrialisation opened up the market for good quality ware for sale to a new middle class. The great exhibitions starting in 1851 accelerated this. The French revolution had finished off the French aristocrats and removed much of Sèvres' market, but the new Victorian middle class opened up the market for good quality porcelain in much larger quantities. Of course, Queen Victoria herself and the upper

So what of the déjeuner set? Did it die when the fashion in France for it died at the hands of the French Revolution, or was the end of Napoleon its death knell? Well, these factors contributed to its decline. It still carried on being made in France by Sèvres and by many lesser companies in Limoges and elsewhere. The British potters were really traditionalists at heart and although the British were now to take the lead in porcelain design, the pottery business there was still dominated by old traditional companies such as Flight and Barr in Worcester and Spode in Stoke on Trent these kept on with designs largely based on eighteenth century shapes. Any déjeuner sets produced largely copied earlier French designs.



*Part Déjeuner Set – bone china by unknown British maker c. 1880*

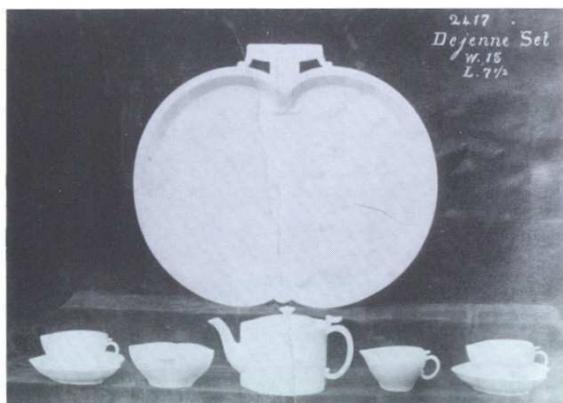
echelons of British society were still very important to the British ceramics companies and in fact endorsements by royalty and success at the Victorian-inspired "Industrial Expositions" became vital to the success of the major pottery firms.

Another element was also by now becoming important, and this was *design*. It is said that 1870 onwards (to the present day) is the age of design. Maybe today, when faced with designer *everything*, we might think this has now gone too far, but back in early Victorian days, led by people like Prince Albert himself and Henry Cole at the then new South Kensington Museum (the V&A), design came to be thought to have paramount importance – there was not yet the "cult of the designer" the first designer to attain this cult status was probably Christopher Dresser in the 1870's – but design, taste and the desire to educate and refine became very important to the middle and upper classes of Victorian society.

So came the resurgence of the *déjeuner* set. Tea was fashionable again – actually, it had never been out of fashion - but now taking afternoon tea with one's friends (indeed "Five o'clock tea" – see below) became very popular. The middle classes now had money and free time in which to enjoy the rewards of their endeavours, and so, the *déjeuner* set was back – it allowed the Victorian middle class to imagine themselves taking tea as the French aristocracy would have done 100 years earlier. The designers of the day could also indulge themselves – the *déjeuner* set was indeed a good vehicle to show off their tasteful and intricate designs. Many pottery companies took advantage of the trend and by the early 1860's cabaret sets were being made in a large variety of designs by major and minor companies in Stoke, Worcester, Derby and elsewhere.



"Déjeuner" Set (Chocolate Set) – Bone China by Minton's c. 1880



The Five O'Clock déjeuner set, c.1880.

#### Five O'Clock Set

An intriguing reference to a five o'clock tea set, with handles shaped as a figure 5 and the tray as a double 5, was published in the magazine *Decoration* in June 1883. This can be found in the shape book, along with a *déjeuner* set of similar shape comprising tray (15in. wide) teapot, sugar and cream, and two cups and saucers. Both sets were first made in about 1880. The teaset tray, which is oval, is less obviously formed from a double 5.



Two versions of "5 o'clock tea" Minton's c. 1880 (left) and Belleek post 1891 (right)

So, what of Belleek – finally to get to the point of this article! Belleek were somewhat slow off the mark, merely by dint of not being in operation until the early to mid 1860's, but once parian production was in full swing, they made *beautiful* déjeuner sets. The first examples were Artichoke and Echinus sets, then Chinese, Tridacna, Thorn and Grass pattern. All these designs are truly magnificent, particularly if in their highly decorated form. Belleek generally made the déjeuner trays as an adjunct to their “normal” teaware, as it only required the addition of a tray to make a “normal” tea set into a déjeuner set. This is true, but I believe that Belleek did not just design the tray as an afterthought. In the same way as the Sèvres sets, Belleek sets have the appearance of being designed as a *complete set* – a great deal of thought having been given to how the various shapes and designs fit together to make a complete set. Most British companies made their teaset from the now “standard” bone china body, Belleek (and also to some extent Worcester) made theirs from the Parian body which was very suitable for the intricate moulded shapes which are so distinctive to them and so necessary for their quirky and idiosyncratic shapes!



*Belleek Full coloured Chinese and Thorn déjeuner sets – note the Thorn Tray and one of the cups and saucers is a different colourway to the rest. Both sets first period (1863-1891)*



*Belleek Grass Pattern déjeuner set (solitaire set as made for one person on a small tray, first period)*

So why are the potters of Belleek the “Kings” of the déjeuner set? Well, as the fashion for parian declined towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Belleek Pottery, towards the end of its first period and going into the second, now designed and produced such a bewildering plethora of teaware and déjeuner sets, in a huge variety of original patterns, that they eclipsed all other manufacturers! It seems that they were oblivious to the changes in fashion and taste, but the sheer number and variety of the teaware patterns they produced is remarkable – they also produced a déjeuner set version of almost all of their general teaware patterns – it makes a collector's mouth water! This was the golden age for Belleek teaware. Some Belleek déjeuner

sets pictured here (on the next page), Lily, Low Lily and Thistle are good examples of the care and attention to detail that Belleek pottery brought to the design of the pieces in each set. It is quite remarkable that they found it necessary to come up with *two* variants on the “Lily” theme, though clearly they took elements from their water lily designs that already existed and added other elements from the leaves of the lily – a flower then much in vogue through the popularity of the

Aesthetic Movement in the 1880's and 1890's. The Thistle set truly shows the unity of design of all pieces of the set, even the tray with its out-turned crinkly edge, surely impractical and prone to damage!

As the second period progressed, patterns were withdrawn and simplified – Fred Slater (from the famous Stoke-on-Trent Slater family) came up with some new designs but also vandalised others – for example, he took the feet off the Limpet Pattern and simplified other early designs so as to largely destroy their balance and unity. Unfortunately, this trend continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with “difficult” designs, such as Shell pattern, being modified to “New Shell” and losing its intricacy and integrity (and its feet!).

The fashion for the déjeuner set was carried on into the twentieth century in the USA by manufacturers of American Belleek. A good example produced by Willetts is illustrated later in this article: it is interesting to note that Willetts sourced the tray (at least) from Limoges in France, so it may have been added to the teaset as an afterthought – the decoration being applied to the tray to match that already on the (standard teaware shapes) of the other pieces.

From 1900, the trays for the sets were produced less and less, production finally stopping altogether in the mid 1920's as new fashions (Art Deco) began to predominate.

In the 1920's innovative designs were again introduced with the new Celtic patterns. This was the last gasp of the déjeuner set. There is **ONE** recorded example of a tray (yes, only *one* tray) made for the Low Celtic teaware, owned by a very fortunate collector in Northern Ireland. This was the last tray produced in “normal” production – so the end for the déjeuner set at Belleek came in the mid 1920's – or did it? Belleek Pottery have now reproduced a Grass pattern tray to complete a modern Grass pattern déjeuner set; there was talk and even a promise that the Chinese Tray would be reproduced to make a modern Chinese déjeuner set possible by combining all the “collectors” pieces of Chinese ware which have been made in recent years (sadly now lacking *their* feet!); unfortunately it turned out to be impossible to produce the tray, so it now really looks like the end of the line for the Belleek déjeuner set.



*Three Belleek déjeuner sets – Lily 2<sup>nd</sup> period (top), Low Lily 2<sup>nd</sup> period (middle) and Thistle 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> period (bottom)*



*American Belleek (Willetts) déjeuner set c. 1900, with tray sourced from Limoges (see mark)*



*'Low Celtic' Tray. Third Period. 1926-1946*

*The fabled one and only example of the Low Celtic Tray, early third period c. 1926*

Rather than end on this gloomy note, it is much better to look back on the glory of Belleek déjeuner sets available towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As I have said, although other manufacturers made déjeuner sets, in quantity and of good design; Worcester, Minton, Derby and Doulton being amongst these companies, Belleek were unrivalled in the sheer quantity of patterns, the quirky inventiveness, the unity of design of the sets, the fineness and originality. Its difficult to ascertain whether Belleek made a commercial success of their forays into the déjeuner set: it seems rather unlikely, as contemporary sources at the time of Armstrong and McBirney's deaths reported that McBirney had "lost heavily by the [Belleek Pottery] venture" and that following Armstrong's death a few months after McBirney's, that "The company was no longer prepared to pour money into continual experiment and invention". Let's just be glad that Armstrong *did* do all that experiment and invention, or we wouldn't now have the gloriously individual designs that are Belleek déjeuner sets!

- *Chris Marvell*

**Appendix: Belleek Teaware Patterns available as déjeuner sets (A tray being available)**

Aberdeen	Artichoke	Blarney	Chinese	Cone
Echinus	Erne	Fan	Finner	Five o'clock
Grass	Harp Shamrock	Hexagon	Lace	Lily
Limpet	Low Lily	Neptune	Ring Handle	Scroll
Shamrock	Shell	Sydney	Thistle	Thorn
Tridacna	Victoria			

In addition to these 31 patterns, where trays were definitely available, it is known that at least one tray exists in Celtic Low pattern (this may be a prototype that did not go into production) and early bone china déjeuner sets were made decorated in the Sèvres style.

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