

Chapter 20

Statement Made by Henry Morris to Colonel Grant Davidson in 1850

Abstract An important historical document that is referred to by authors of Welsh porcelains is the statement made by Henry Morris, a celebrated artist who worked at Swansea and is esteemed for his decoration of Swansea china, to Colonel Grant Davidson in 1850: this document has received much interest because it was made by someone who actually worked at the china works, who knew Dillwyn, Walker and Billingsley and who could shed some light upon what happened there and who worked there. As part of this study this statement has been dissected and analysed and several inconsistencies announced of which readers need to be aware.

Keywords Henry Morris · Grant Davidson document · Swansea china works · William Billingsley · Lewis Dillwyn · Samuel Walker

One of the most important documentary pieces of evidence to survive about the founding and operational running of the Swansea china works is a statement made by Henry Morris to Colonel Grant Francis in August, 1850 which is reproduced in full in Document 2, in an Appendix, which has been briefly mentioned earlier. The uniqueness of this statement resides in the fact that it was made just 28 years after the formal closure of the Swansea china works, although it did not surface until it appeared in *The Cambrian* in January, 1896, just a year before William Turner published his seminal book on *The Ceramics of Swansea and Nantgarw* in, 1897. We need to examine the evidence presented in this statement, made by a premier artist and decorator at the Swansea porcelain factory who had spent his whole early career there from his apprenticeship and its foundation in 1814 to its final closure in 1822 and indeed thereafter in decorating post-sale stocks items of Swansea and other porcelainthe *Lysaght* in Swansea for many years afterwards. He was responsible for some of the finest decoration on Swansea china, and for at least one recorded major named service, namely service. Hitherto, Morris' comments have been accepted without question but latterly several inconsistencies have arisen in chronology and orders of events, so it is appropriate here to re-evaluate this important documentary source material in a proper scientific manner.

Several conjectural points can be raised for discussion and debate in Morris' statement as given in Document 2:

1. The initial statement that Messrs Burn and Biggs came from Coalport to assist Dillwyn in the first attempt at porcelain manufacture in the Cambrian Pottery, Swansea, in 1815 does not match with the accepted chronology: Billingsley and Walker arrived in Swansea after their first phase of Nantgarw porcelain production ceased in 1814, substantiated by Dillwyn's own records and his commission from Sir Joseph Banks earlier that year to investigate and report on the quality of the Nantgarw porcelain. Dillwyn then successfully arranged for the transfer of Billingsley and Walker to Swansea for the establishment of the new Swansea china works adjacent to the Cambrian Pottery. Morris is quite clear that porcelain manufacture had not been attempted at the Cambrian Pottery prior to the arrival of Biggs and Burn and he was apprenticed to Dillwyn at the Cambrian Pottery decorating earthenware. It can be suggested therefore that Messrs Burn and Briggs arrived in Swansea to work with Dillwyn at the Cambrian Pottery after 1813 and before Billingsley and Walker arrived later in 1814. It is interesting too to speculate on Dillwyn's role in setting up the porcelain manufactory at Swansea: the literature seems to suggest that Dillwyn had the idea to produce porcelain at Swansea after getting asked to look into Billingsley and Walker's operations at Nantgarw in late 1814. However, it is also clear from Morris' statement that Dillwyn had thought of this as a real possibility the preceding year—the difference being that he realised that he would (a) have to set up a new venture in Swansea other than the Cambrian Pottery, and (b) that he would need sound practical expertise in the craft of porcelain manufacture, which Burn and Biggs did not possess, despite their previous employment at the Coalport china works, which was an up-and-running manufactory. We do not have any information about what roles Burn and Biggs had at Coalport, but Dillwyn must have recognised the prowess of Billingsley and Walker in the decoration and manufacture of quality porcelain, subscribing to Walker's particular knowledge of kiln construction and firing processes. This document seems to be the only extant record of the attempt by Dillwyn to set up a porcelain manufactory at Swansea prior to the arrival of Billingsley and Walker in September 1814. A search of material relevant to early Coalport porcelain failed to reveal the names of either Biggs or Burn, so it is not possible at this stage to gain any insight into their expertise: for example, were they employed at Coalport as china decorators, gilders or as body specialists? Clearly, Dillwyn did not value their practical expertise in helping him to make a commercial porcelain at the Cambrian Pottery, but we may infer that Dillwyn had by that time, late 1813 to early 1814, been made aware of the rather more successful activities engaged by Walker and Billingsley in nearby Nantgarw—even though the first phase of porcelain manufacture at Nantgarw needed an injection of financial support in 1814 which was not forthcoming.

2. The chronology of paragraph two in Morris' statement is also suspect and easily regarded as being potentially false, since by late 1817 Billingsley and Walker had left Swansea and had returned to Nantgarw to commence their second phase of porcelain manufacture there: in fact, there is documentary evidence that Sarah, Billingsley's elder daughter and Samuel Walker's wife, died in Swansea in January, 1817. Hence, to state that Billingsley and Walker only arrived in Swansea from Nantgarw in 1817 is totally incorrect.
3. In this second paragraph, Morris also mentions that Isaac Wood, formerly of Burslem in Staffordshire, had also arrived from Nantgarw with Billingsley and Walker and that Joseph Goodsby was also there—both men involved in porcelain modelling. Normally, a porcelain modeller or "repairer" shapes and forms the porcelain items before firing and also applies porcelain flowers etc. to biscuit bodies—it seems that many authors, however, prefer to attribute these persons to porcelain painting and decoration.
4. Morris mentions in passing that Nantgarw employed about a score of persons—which would be considered quite small by Swansea standards—this seems to be correct since Richard Millward, a former employee at the Nantgarw China Works confirmed the number of employees there in the second phase at twenty, including several children and women, and this aspect has been discussed in more detail previously.
5. The presence at Swansea at this time of a ceramics painter called de Junic, who had arrived via the Royal Manufactory in Paris, is interesting as for some time a controversial argument has arisen over the identity of the painter of the "bearded tulips" found on some of the best duck's egg porcelain, and ascribed to De Junic, often termed "Jenny" or even more interestingly as "Jenny the Frenchman". Obviously, there was such a person of French origin experienced in porcelain decoration employed at Swansea. It is doubly interesting to find that de Junic was employed at Swansea in the period 1814–1817, since the Napoleonic Wars were at their height and the blockade of French ports by the Royal Navy was very intense: nevertheless, a Frenchman was able to escape and migrate to Swansea to find employment there. It is not surprising perhaps that little is known of de Junic's history or life at Swansea at this time, when presumably French nationals were considered enemies and treated with suspicion, so maybe Dillwyn played down his presence there for obvious reasons. The origin of the attribution of the Swansea "bearded tulip" decoration to de Junic is perhaps a tentative one and really arises from a comparison of painting styles which were manifest in the Sevres factory around the same time, a bearded tulip featuring in several of these.
6. A very significant statement in Morris' deposition relates to the hands-on approach adopted at Swansea of William Billingsley: he undertook the actual painting of china and closely superintended the work of others. This certainly contradicts the assertion of previous authors that Billingsley would not have had the time to decorate the china personally whilst being closely involved with the running of the manufactory—this belief has caused a discrediting by

many of William Billingsley's personal artistic decoration on Swansea porcelain, but clearly, if Henry Morris is to be believed he must have done so!

7. Even whilst having this resounding success in the creation of a wonderfully translucent duck's egg porcelain and its accompanying superbly executed floral and landscape decoration, the production was fraught with high kiln losses: Morris tells of cartloads of damaged porcelain being consigned to the dump at the Hafod, a short distance away. This dump was located in the 1930s and has been a rich source of broken items, which have yielded much novel information about shapes and impressed marks used at the factory. However, no business can survive with such high operating wastage levels especially in competition with other English factories and presumably the re-emergence of French porcelain imported after the Peace of Amiens in 1815, so it is not surprising that Morris also alludes to the fact that experimentation was still ongoing to try and create a beautiful china which was more robust.
8. It appears that these experiments at Swansea in the variation of the porcelain body composition, which have been recorded in Dillwyn's notebook and reproduced here in Document 1 of the Appendix, were successful in the production of the much more robust Swansea trident porcelain ware, esteemed by Morris and others locally but unfortunately not by the London retailers, who still demanded the much more beautiful duck's egg porcelain that was, however, economically unsuccessful to produce.
9. The final paragraph of Morris' statement reveals the rift that had occurred in "18—", which we can now place correctly at early- to mid-1817, which resulted in Walker and Billingsley leaving Swansea to start up again at Nantgarw in September of the same year with significant, secured new local funding and sponsorship. It is interesting that Morris refers to "management differences" as the cause of this departure—but an alternative explanation is the obvious one, namely that Dillwyn was pushing for the production of the trident body to subsume the duck's egg body and Billingsley would have none of this. William Billingsley was seeking perfection and striving for it and he would most certainly have taken a dim view of the lowering of standards for his work through adoption of the vastly inferior trident porcelain body. This would certainly come under the category of management differences between himself and the Swansea china works owner, Lewis Weston Dillwyn, and the faithful family friend and recently widowed Samuel Walker would surely side with Billingsley, even though Walker's experiments with Dillwyn to create a new porcelain must have excited his professional acumen.
10. We know that after the departure of Walker and Billingsley from Swansea in 1817 that Dillwyn concentrated upon the manufacture of his trident body, most of which would be decorated and then sold locally because of the London retailers' embargo. By 1819, Dillwyn was in financial difficulties and he leased the china works to T. & J. Bevington, who operated the sale of existing stock until the lease expired in 1822. Morris confirms that no more Swansea porcelain was made by the Bevington's and the final stock of porcelain was sold in the sale of 1823. Dillwyn resumed the ownership of the

Swansea china works after this, but effectively no more porcelain was produced there; it must be stated, however, that Dillwyn did reopen the works at Swansea for a few years only in the 1830s for the production of a special terracotta earthenware, called *Dillwyn's Etruscan Ware*, based on ancient Greek designs and decorated simply with classical themes in black and red (see Elis Jenkins, *Swansea Porcelain*, 1970).

References

- E. Jenkins, *Swansea Porcelain*, D. Brown Publishers, Cowbridge, UK, 1970.
W. Turner, *The Ceramics of Swansea and Nantgarw*, Bemrose & Sons, Old Bailey, London, 1897.