Glasgow Pottery at Delftfield: Three Unrecorded Documents

A short paper read by Nancy Valpy at the Victoria & Albert Museum on 14 December 1985

The Glasgow Delftfield Pottery was established in 1748, its directors being Robert and Laurence Dinwiddie, Robert Finlay and Patrick Nisbet. Abortive attempts were made to find a suitable clay in Scotland, as described in a Law Case between one John Bird, a London potter, and the above-named directors. In this lengthy document, which is dated 13th June, 1750, one of the reasons for Bird’s employment was given as:

‘to try if there was any Clay about Glasgow proper for being manufactured into that Sort of Ware.’

Bird had at first declared that ‘after Trials he found the Scots Clay of Glasgow would answer’; however, upon experiment it was found ‘the Town’s common clay which Mr. Bird assured us would do, proved perfect Mud, the Water never separating from it.’

After this unsuccessful start the Company, as is known, set about obtaining a more reliable earth from Carrickfergus on Belfast Lough in Ireland.

I am indebted to Miss Mary Cosh, co-author of Inverary and the Dukes of Argyll, for drawing my attention to two documents in the Saltoun Papers, relative to the Delftfield Pottery. Lord Milton of Saltoun was the political agent and confidante of the 3rd Duke of Argyll and the archive is housed at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh.

The first item is a draft agreement (Saltoun 17678) with many alterations, between the Duke of Argyll and Laurence Dinwiddie and Robert Finlay, unsigned but dated 1755. It is too lengthy to read out in this short paper so I will summarise the contents: the Duke would grant them (excluding their successors or assignees) the privilege of

‘Raising Digging and exporting for the Use of the said Company and Manufactory, Clay in any part of the Island of Tirie with the Privilege of Roads and Harbours for carrying off the same and that for the full term and space of Two Nineteen years from and after the term of Whitsunday next’ for the manufacture of stone, earthen or Delft work. In return, the Company were to undertake to bring from Glasgow to Tirie, in the vessels they sent for the clay, ‘Whatever coals, flax Goods Materials or others as well as all persons’ that the Duke or his successors might wish transported from Glasgow to Tirie during the term of lease, free of freight or other payment. They were to recompense any damage they might cause to lands or tenants by digging and exporting clay, making roads etc. Any default to be fined £100 sterling.

There is no record in the Saltoun Papers of this agreement ever being ratified.
For easier access to anyone wishing to peruse it, a copy has been deposited at the Department of Ceramics, Victoria and Albert Museum.

However, some sort of an arrangement must have been made, as is shown by the following letter (Saltoun 16692) from Robert Finlay to Lord Milton, dated 5th November, 1755, referring to the Duke’s permission to the Company to raise clay in Tiree and the difficulties of finding a ship, etc.

Glasgow 5 Novbr 1755

My Lord,

As the Season is fast going and Mr. Campbell Factor in Tery hath writt me, that he cant get any Vessell to freight, about Campbelltoun and therefore begs as he hath from 20 to 30 Tons raised, to freight one immediately, and to forward her with a Quantity of Coals, Half for his Grace of Argyl’s use, the other his own.

What they want of Coals, we will Cheerfully Comply with, they paying original Cost and Charge till put on board the Vessell we must freight at and send from Greenock; I mean, now, and as long his Grace permits us to take away the Clay; and everything else is wanted to be carried to that place, at as reasonable a freight as we can, and which will not much exceed the half, it would cost any other way, and frequent oppy if the Clay answer.

His Grace bid us take whatever we wanted without any other consideration, then paying, as proposed, any Dammage to the Tennents, as he could not overtake it now; and notwithstanding, we think ourselves obigd to the coals, by all Ties of Gratitude etc. Therefore as it is necessary, and which your Ld proposed to send us a Letter, to be delivered Mr. Campbell, to the purpose forsaid, I presume to beg it as soon as your Ld can over take it.

I presume also to beg your Ld countenance that if his Grace will not allow a Tack or rather a favourable Grant for two 19 Years (exclusive of all others) to the Glasgow Delftwork Co: in Generall, that he will at least do it, to us the present Proprietors, & our heirs whatever; for your Ld who knows well the Nature of Manufactures, knows, that otherways it will be scarce of any advantage to us, and would be only of reall use, were it to our Assigneys also, used by that Co. here, and I know little of business, if the Clay be got through great Attention and Charge, to answer the purposes designed, if it will not turn out to the far greater
Interest of his Grace and familly, than ours in proportion, as it may, yea will be, not only often a Communication with, and to that Island, but to all others his Grace hath Interest in: and leave it entirely to your Ldsps Management, in whom his Grace can Truely confide. My fears sincerely are, though it be got to answer to hearts wish, it will turn out too dear, unless by the Communication we push Something or other, & must ransack every Corner of our Brains for it.

I hope youll pardon this Freedom and presumption, and be assur Gratitute will reign in the Breasts of all concerned & will be shown in all desird Instances and by him who begs liberty to be

My Lord
Your Ldsps
Most faithfull, much obligd, obedient & very
Humble Serv
Robert Finlay

It has not been known hitherto that the Delftfield Company attempted to obtain clay from a source other than Carrickfergus and one can only assume that the proprietors were attracted by the prospect of getting the material free of charge from the Duke of Argyll on the island of Tiree, a distinctly more advantageous proposition than having to purchase and import it from Ireland. However, from the doubts expressed in Robert Finlay’s letter to Lord Milton as to the financial viability of the scheme, it is probable that nothing came of it.

I am indebted to the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland, for permission to publish or quote from the above two documents.

My thanks are also due to Mr. Murdo Macdonald, archivist, Argyll and Bute District Council (retired archivist, Inverary Castle) for informing me of an undated letter from the 3rd Duke of Argyll to Robert Finlay, at the Tannerie, Glasgow. The archive at Inverary is regrettably unavailable for research but Mr. Alastair Campbell, Chief Executive of Clan Campbell, has kindly sent me a copy of this communication see below and Fig.1:

Sr

I sent a good while ago a box of Bow China directed to you as a present to your family.

I received the parcel of your earthen ware which is by far the best I ever saw, the whole question upon it is, whether if can be made cheap enough to rival the Staffordshire ware, your glazing & colouring are both wonderfully good. They were very ill packed up, I opened them myself & I found broken 1 Dish 14 Inches diameter, 1 Soup Dish, 14 inches diameter, 1 Soup Dish 12 Inches. 3 Soup plates 9 Inches & one Plate 9 Inch.

I shall want 2 Soup Dishes for Inverary, I think one of 14 & one of 12 will do. I shall see you before it be long. I am S’t your ob’t humble servant Argyll.
The 3rd Duke of Argyll was a connoisseur and collector of porcelain, so his
comments on the quality of the Delftfield product are of interest; and as a
leading promoter of Scottish industry he would, of course, have wished to give
every encouragement to the Glasgow enterprise. His concern for the
Company’s capability to compete with the Staffordshire factories is shown in
this letter and perhaps the offer of free clay from Tiree was an attempt to assist
the proprietors to keep down their running costs. The mention of a box of Bow
China will not have escaped the notice of devotees of that manufactory; there
are other items of Bow interest amongst the Argyll Papers — see p.98 and
Appendix B, p.103.

I record with thanks the kind assistance of Mr Michael Archer, Department
of Ceramics, Victoria and Albert Museum, in the preparation of these notes.

Nothing is known about Patrick Nisbet, beyond the fact that ‘a man of that
name was described as a Merchant and elected a Burgess and Guild Brother of
Glasgow in 1747’ (Garner and Archer, English Delftware p.74); it seems
appropriate therefore to append here a few facts that have come to light since
this paper was read to the Circle.

Patrick and Gabriel Nisbet (brothers) sent an undated treatise on decimal
arithmetic to Sir Hans Sloane, in his capacity as President of the Royal Society
(British Library Additional MSS 3944): Patrick followed this up by a letter,
derunder the pseudonym ‘Philanthropos’, demonstrating the rules of the treatise.
There was apparently no reply from Sir Hans for on 21st April, 1737, the
brothers wrote from Edinburgh, pressing for his opinion on their work. This
time the letter was enclosed in one written by Patrick to John Corsby, at the
Hand and Scissors, in George’s Street, in the Mint of Southwark, begging him
to undertake delivery to Sir Hans, ‘to see if he and the Society would accept the
Dedication . . .’. It seems they were successful in their petition, for the treatise
was printed in Edinburgh in 1738, with an effusive dedication to Sloane.
Perhaps the fact that it appeared under the name of Gabriel only, can be
explained by a postscript in Patrick’s letter to John Corsby which indicated that
he was pursuing stronger interests:

‘in my last I told you I had turned me to the study of Divinity — have been 4
years in passing my course and 3 years in the Divinity Hall . . . am not very
positive whether I shall graduate Doctor of Physicks or not, but shall give
you notice if I do . . .’

He must have persisted in these studies, for in 1776 there was published in
Edinburgh, by a man of that name, ‘An Abridgement of Ecclesiastical History,
from the Commencement of Christianity to the Beginning of the present
Century, divided into four grand Periods.’

Divinity, arithmetic and pottery manufacture seemed such an unlikely
alliance of interests as to make me doubt they could be ascribed to one
individual. However, I solicited the help of the National Library of Scotland
and have received interesting information from Mr Patrick Cadell, Keeper of
Manuscripts. Mr Cadell reports as follows:

‘The Dr Patrick Nisbet who wrote the abridgement was minister of Hutton in
Berwick-shire. In Hew Scott’s Fasti it is noted that he started out as a
Glasgow merchant. His daughter Mary married Laurence Dinwoodie —
I sent a good while ago a box of Bow China directed to you as a present to your family.

I received the parcel of your earthen ware which is by far the best I ever saw, the whole question upon it is, whether it can be made cheap enough to rival the Staffordshire ware, your glazing & colouring are both wonderfully good. They were very ill-packed up.

I opened them myself & I found

Broken: 1 Dish 11 inches diameter.
1 Soup Dish 14 inches diameter, 1 Soup Dish 12 inches, 3 Soup plates 9 inches, 1 one Plate 9 inch.

I shall want 2 Soup Dishes for Inveraray, I think one of 14 1/2 one of 12 will do. I shall see you before it be long. So be your old humble servant.

Argyll.
not the early Delftfield partner, but presumably some relation — and he himself died in Glasgow in January 1803. This particular Patrick Nisbet became minister of Hutton in 1767 and was ordained at the same time. Yet his daughter was born in 1754, which would suggest that he might easily have been the man who became a burgess of Glasgow in 1747 . . . This Patrick had a brother David who was also a Glasgow merchant. Since these are the only Patrick and David Nisbets listed amongst the burgesses of Glasgow, it must be supposed that this Patrick is the minister of Hutton . . . For the same reason it must be supposed that the partner of Delftfield is the Glasgow merchant, since it is unlikely that he could have worked there without being a burgess. He also published A Seasonable Address to the Citizens of Glasgow, in 1762.’

It does not appear to be recorded that Patrick Nisbet, minister of Hutton, had a brother named Gabriel; nonetheless, the postscript to the letter written to John Corsby in 1737, by a man of the same name, is a strong indication that he and the minister were one person. As a final link in the involved chain of circumstantial evidence that coalesces the three Patrick Nisbets of disparate interests into one individual, it has been possible to compare the hand-writing of Patrick who wrote to Sir Hans Sloane in 1737 with that of a letter by the minister of Hutton, of 1769, copy of which was kindly sent to me by Mr Cadell and there are sufficient similarities, taking into account the gap of thirty-two years, to assume with reasonable confidence that they were by the same hand.