

Delamain, Henry

by Terry Clavin

Delamain, Henry (1713–57), delft manufacturer, was the eldest son of at least four sons and one daughter of Henry Delamain (1688–1781) of Dublin, latterly of Co. Kildare, and his wife, Sarah (Mary?) Steele, the daughter of the deputy clerk of the Irish privy council. A French ancestor had settled in Ireland around the mid-seventeenth century, following which the Delamains became protestant landowners and merchants based in Co. Kilkenny and in or around Co. Dublin. They married into Anglo-Irish families and did not associate with Ireland's Huguenot community.

On reaching adulthood Henry spent twenty years abroad during which he claimed to have fought in Flanders against the French during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8) as a captain in the Imperial army under Prince Johann August of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg. On 26 July 1745, by when he was a widower living in the parish of St Paul Covent Garden, London, he married a rich widow of Jewish heritage, Ziphorah Maitland (née Alvarez), of Kensington, London, in the church of St Mary le Bone (Marylebone), London. They had no children and were estranged by November 1751 when Delamain surfaced in Dublin selling Chinese porcelain and tea wholesale from a Marlborough Street warehouse. By 1753 he was living with Mary Bijar whose family sold Indian and Chinese goods at Abbey Street. Bearing out his duplicitous streak, the couple posed as husband and wife, but never married.

In April 1752, having acquired an expertise in delftware (i.e., tin-glazed pottery) during his time abroad, he bought the World's End delftware pottery, then temporarily idle, on Mabbot Street, near the North Strand, Dublin, for £580. The works, previously known as the 'white pothouse', was built in the mid-1730s. Small delftware potteries had proliferated in Dublin in the 1740s, but the industry had collapsed by the time Delamain entered the market. Over the next eighteen months he spent up to £5,800 on rehiring the English potters who had left when production ceased in early 1752 and on erecting warehouses and nine kilns on the World's End site as well as a water-powered flint mill for grinding colours at Palmerstown, Co. Dublin. The mill was probably the first of its kind in Ireland.

At a time when almost all delft makers in Britain and Ireland fuelled their kilns with wood, he experimented with using coal, which was cheaper but caused discolouration. By late 1753 he was doing so successfully in a small kiln. He also searched Ireland for fresh deposits of clay and tried different types of Irish clay, discovering one that produced delft capable of withstanding boiling water without cracking or breaking. His efforts yielded a marked improvement in the factory's wares, which were examined by the Dublin Society in October 1753 and judged to be at least as good as the imported delft. One such specimen, now in the British Museum, was a sixteen by eight inches punchbowl featuring an exquisitely

decorated landscape. The Dublin Society awarded him a £20 premium. A skilled lobbyist and self-promoter, he sought political clout by presenting six high-quality pieces to the lord lieutenant of Ireland, Lionel Sackville (qv), duke of Dorset. In November he successfully petitioned the Irish parliament for a grant of £1,000, stressing that he was producing delft significantly cheaper than that being imported from France.

He travelled to London in late 1753 pursuing a reward from the English parliament in return for publicising the secret of how to make coal-fired delft. But contrary to his public assertions, he had yet to perfect this process in the large kilns required for commercial production. His evident fear that certain Liverpool pottery makers might recruit the manager of his pottery works, William Stringfellow, suggests he had made an important breakthrough. When this fear was borne out in January 1754, Stringfellow also exposed the exaggerations in Delamain's petition to the English parliament, thus ensuring its failure. Delamain persevered into March with hawking his coal-firing technique around London without finding any takers. Although the World's End pottery was making coal-fired delft on a commercial basis by 1761, and probably much earlier, no other manufacturer in Ireland or Britain followed suit.

As well as being a pioneer of coal-fired delft production, he was also one of the founding partners of the innovatory Battersea Enamel Works at York House in Battersea, London. Established in mid-1753, this venture exploited the new art of transferring a printed design directly from an engraved copperplate on to a sheet of paper or sheet of glue and then on to ceramics or enameled copper. Although its enamels gained a lasting reputation for excellence, the works was unprofitable and Delamain had quit the partnership by mid-1754. He had become involved because he wanted to use transfer printing in his Dublin factory, but no such Delamain-produced delft has emerged.

In September 1754 he finished renovating his Dublin works into one of the most advanced in Ireland or Britain. It could accommodate over two hundred workers, but he only ever employed about fifty there because the British imposed customs regime precluded large-scale exports while leaving the small Irish market open to English imports. Yet despite – or perhaps because of – the Irish customs books not registering any exports of Dublin-made delft, he developed a foreign trade, most visibly with the British colonies in America and the Caribbean. That a large portion of his domestic sales were made to traders in Cork, the last port of call for ships bound for America, suggests that he exported through intermediaries.

His factory mainly used Carrickfergus clay in producing its ornamental tableware, typically painted in dark blue or in manganese purple; polychrome-coloured delft has also been attributed to Delamain. These items are distinguishable from English delft by their factory marks and by certain idiosyncrasies, such as the tendency of the blue in his delft to sink into the glaze. Most of the designs were imitations of Chinese porcelain, the genuine article being prohibitively expensive for Irish buyers due to

British trade restrictions: his pottery was unsurpassed in Europe in terms of the range and precision of its Chinese replicas. There were also armorial designs and a range of finely drawn landscapes. Considered the high point of eighteenth-century Irish ceramic art, the landscapes have a naïve charm, each one being individual albeit with recurring elements in slightly different contexts. He introduced these French-influenced landscapes into the World's End pottery and they remained its specialty under his successors.

The export restrictions, however imperfectly enforced, combined with an inadequate domestic market to put the business in difficulties by August 1755 when he appealed publicly for additional private investment. That November he petitioned the Irish parliament for financial aid and received £1,100 in 1756. (When Irish MPs later acknowledged they had been lax in awarding grants, his factory was one of the many cases cited, though it was far from being the most egregious example). Then the start of the Seven Years War (1756–73) strangled exports and led to high quality English porcelain wares flooding the Irish market in 1757–8. This crisis was only beginning when he died suddenly in Dublin on 10 January 1757. He was buried in Donnybrook cemetery, Co. Dublin.

His will left bank stock to his estranged wife, who died later that year in London, with the rest of his estate going to Mary Bijar, and to the son and daughter they had together. Mary ran the factory until her death in 1760 whereupon Henry's younger brother William, the Dublin city marshal, took over on behalf of Henry's children in partnership with the English delft manufacturer Samuel Wilkinson. The pottery works survived Henry's death by contracting in scale – it employed only twenty workers in 1762 – before being undone by the more advanced ceramics developed in England. His family sold out in the late 1760s with production ceasing for good around 1774. Nonetheless, under Henry Delamain the World's End had become the most important delftworks in eighteenth-century Ireland, both in terms of the quality and quantity of its output. In the early twenty-first century Delamain delft was a rarity capable of fetching €6,000–€15,000 at private auctions. Examples can be found in the Fitzwilliam Museum, the British Museum and the National Museum.

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