



Majolica Matters

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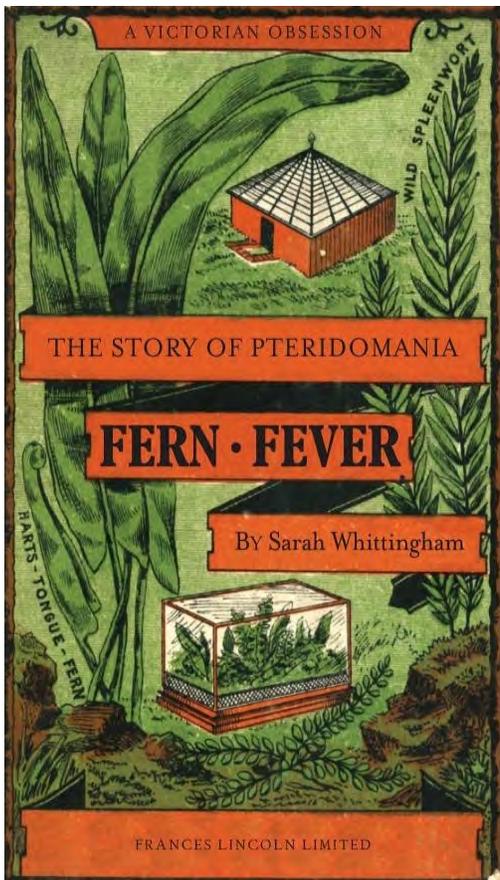
August 2012

The Beginning and How it Happened

by Deborah English

This article was born as a book review of the thoroughly interesting, often amusing, and magnificently illustrated, FERN FEVER, The Story of Pteridomania, A Victorian Obsession; by Sarah Whittingham and published by Frances Lincoln, LTD, 2012.

The subject of FERN FEVER is the development of a mania, experienced by the Victorians, for all things ferny. Indeed, Fern Fever was a craze lasting many decades and reaching a level far beyond faddishness. Ms Whittingham tells the story of how one family of plants came to unimagined prominence. At its height, Fern Mania pervaded all social classes, was the subject of many books, the center of hundreds of 'study clubs', and served as a cornerstone for Social Reformers' moralizing efforts. Ferns appeared in literature, music, fine arts and decorative arts. Buildings were created for them and their fronds were used as architectural decoration. The fern's popularity extended throughout all the English speaking world, the 'Ethnic Victorian' world, if you will. It was also noted in Continental Europe, but since Ms Whittingham limits her discourse to the English speaking Victorians, so will I.



What I discovered along the way was a story of simple profundity that shows how one lowly plant became the embodiment of all things Victorian. The book review suddenly seemed frivolous in that light, and what follows is a halting explanation of a complicated phenomenon, with thoughts about the role majolica played in the drama. All majolica images are from the Karmason Library Archive unless otherwise noted. All 19th Century subjects and images are from FERN FEVER.

THE BEGINNING AND HOW IT HAPPENED

This chronicle doesn't follow a smooth path, but jumps in fits and starts throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries.

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The Chicago Merchandise Mart – site of Majolica Heaven 2013. Don't Miss it!

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Host Hotel: HOLIDAY INN - CHICAGO MART PLAZA (Riverview)

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Fig. 2 Hart's Tongue Fern

There was nothing special about ferns before the 18th Century. Gardening had long been a favored pastime in Britain, but the ideal was a formal landscape in which the designer imposed a 'rational' order on top of natural elements. If ferns were noticed, it was for their utilitarian purposes. A common one appearing throughout the British Isles was bracken, which had many uses: as medicinal ingredient, for soap making and as material for roof thatch.

The harvest of bracken, or 'brake', was conducted only by the poorer people of the Western realms of Wales, Ireland and Scotland; and the fern was rarely considered an object of beauty or contemplation.



Fig. 3. Bracken Harvest

As it is with all cultural shifts, there were several forces that engendered Fern Mania.

The English Romantic Movement was in full bloom at the beginning of the 18th Century. William Wordsworth, one of the luminaries of literature, was a proponent of seeing the beauty found in the natural world. He believed that rugged rock formations and twisting streams, the evidence of Nature's 'accidents', served as witness to the presence of a Divine Creator. And, as the American Thoreau did, he stated that architecture, including gardens, should not intrude on their environments. From his home in Grasmere, Wordsworth wrote the 1822 pamphlet "Guide Through the District of the Lakes". The little book had an immediate influence on serious thinkers of every ilk. In 1822, Science, Art and Philosophy were more closely aligned than they are now, and important ideas tended to affect each discipline.

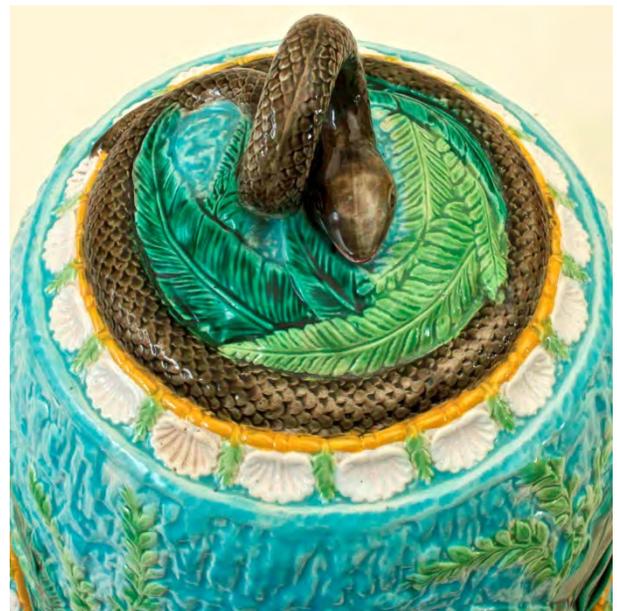


Fig. 4. George Jones Cheese Bell, Snake Finial

Curious people used Wordsworth's guide to begin tramping through the rugged landscapes he described, and they discovered for themselves truth in his message.



Fig. 5. Fern Platter, England.

Meanwhile, in the world of fine art, painters taking cues from Romantic poets began working in the "Picturesque" Style, which highlighted the natural beauty of the British landscape; lavishing their attention on fallen trees and small plants that grew within rocky nooks.

The vastness of the British Empire brought unimaginable knowledge from all parts of the world. In the 17th Century, with an already burgeoning scientific interest in exotic plant materials, it was natural that explorers would bring specimens home to their monarchs. Palms and rubber trees, the now ubiquitous bamboo-- all made their way to England in the hulls of ships. In the 18th Century, Captain John Cook sent 500 specimens of plants home.

However, most fern specimens died on the difficult journey. Many probably succumbed to the washes of seawater that inevitably doused the holds. It was not yet known that ferns don't have seeds; the existence of spores had not been found. In the 1780's, John Lindsay noticed 'fern dust' and opined it had something to do with reproduction but it was not until 1848 that the process was fully understood. Armed with growing knowledge about fern reproduction, explorers could more easily bring back the plants they found overseas. Specimens were placed in to botanic gardens, where the public could view them.



Fig. 6. Dress Design for Australian Lady

The importation of exotic ferns and the continued unraveling of the reproductive process of ferns stimulated the imaginations of would-be collectors.

Of all the reasons for the craze, perhaps the most provocative is the notion of 'Natural Theology'. In the 17th Century, Alexander Pope had written that in examining the wonders of Nature, and with close observation of the Natural World, one could catch a glimpse of God.

This is not Pan-Theism, but a concept rooted in modern Christianity, where Accident and Creation had to reconcile. How else to explain the co-existing wonders and horrors of the Industrial Revolution?



Fig. 7. Minton Ice Stand

Liberal Clergy and Social Reformers leapt at the message, seeing in it a way for the masses to find relief from the grim turmoil of life. The study of Natural Beauty was uplifting, and promoted a refreshing purity of spirit.



Fig. 7a. Flower Trough

'Natural Theology' is the phrase coined in 1802 by William Paley, who wrote, "Natural Theology; Or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature". The book was a best seller throughout the Victorian era, and

speaks loudly to the opinion that the people were preoccupied with Piety and Self Improvement.

The Fern Craze hit full steam in the 1830's, dovetailing with the Accession of Queen Victoria.

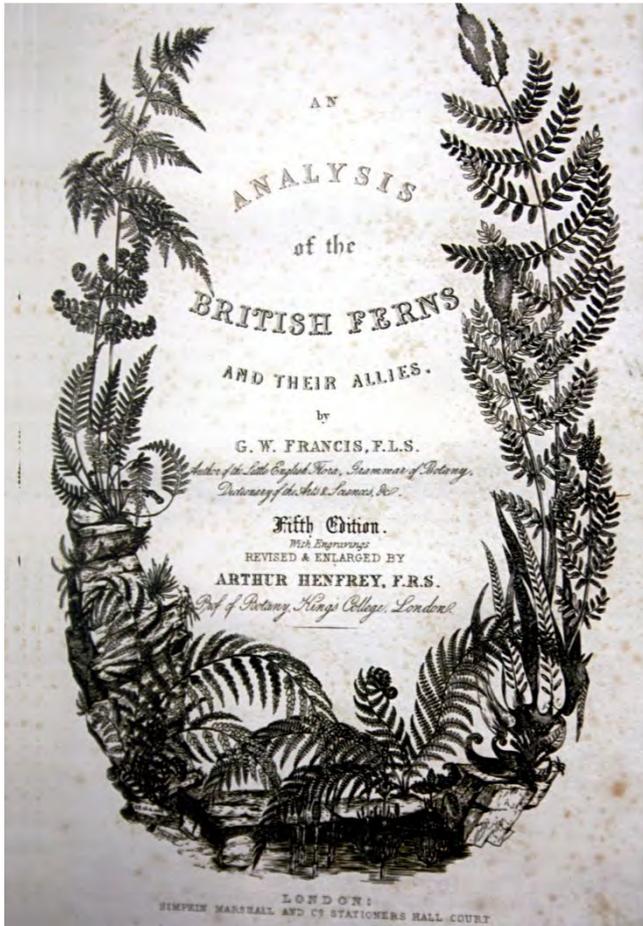


Fig. 8. Analysis of British Ferns, 1855

THE RECEPTIVE AUDIENCE

By the late 18th Century, social clubs devoted to botanical studies were no longer confined to the wealthy scholar's class. Many new clubs formed, and these were geared for more modest tastes and pocketbooks.



Fig. 9. Lake District Fern Club

While exotic ferns were imported by those who could afford them, Middle Class folk were encouraged to harvest their own. One of the benefits of becoming a fern lover was the vigorous exercise and exposure to fresh air that collecting one's own ferns inspired. Countless books and tracts were written on the improving quality on one's life that fern hunting could bring.



Fig. 10. Lecture at a Pennsylvania Fern Club

Certainly there were dangers involved, as the cartoon below suggests.



Fig. 11. Illustration to the story, "The Scented Fern"



Fig. 12. The 'Conversazione'

The idea of hordes of amateurs armed with trowels hacking at the pristine fern beds of the provinces

would make any 21st Century botanist go pale, but hundreds, perhaps thousands of identifiable species and subspecies of ferns were discovered and catalogued as a result of the craze.

In actuality, one's experience might more closely remember this scene below of a scientific 'conversazione'. Notice the large glass case.

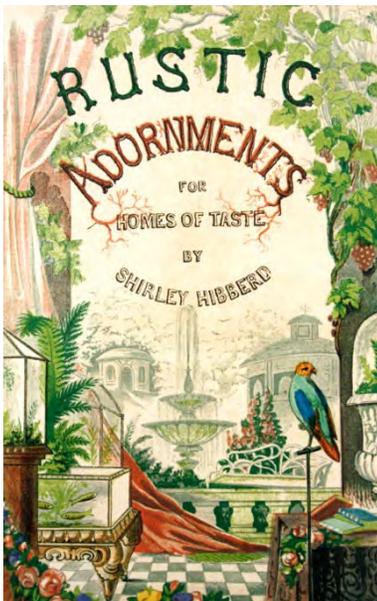


Fig. 13. Grape Leaf and Fern Platter, Holdcroft, attr.

Methods and devices for the raising and nurture of ferns came on the market, enabling hardy adventurers to climb mountains themselves to harvest their prizes.

Women were encouraged to become fern collectors. Of all the Sciences, Botany had long been the only one deemed 'suitable' for a ladylike disposition. The collection and observation of ferns fit tidily into that schema.

Books continued to appear to the fern-hungry public.



James Shirley Hibberd (1825-90), was, to quote Ms Whittingham, a 'self-appointed arbiter of Good Taste.' He had no qualms about dictating what did, and what did not, constitute Good Taste; and as Ms Whittingham points out, "No one wanted to have Bad Taste".

In Mr. Shirley's opinion, only people of "unusual refinement" could appreciate the subtle beauty of ferns. Which just about sealed the deal.

Well, no more picking on Mr. Hibberd. Many other books were published: 24 new titles in the 1850's, and 33 between 1870 and 1910.

One last note about the Receptive Audience: We remember that Victorians loved color, and their homes were awash in bright and dark hues, with multiple layers and patterns. The simplicity of ferns helped provide a rest for the eyes, and so became important decorative accents.



Fig. 15.



Fig. 16.



Fig. 17. Lear Cheese Bell



Fig. 20. Creamer, Unknown Manufacturer



Fig. 18. Cheese Bell, Unknown Manufacturer



Fig. 19. Tray, Unknown Manufacturer

DISPLAYING FERNS

The caption below this picture is, ".....the management of a fern case was essentially a young lady's work".



"The management of a fern case was essentially a young ladies' work"

The need for display and protection of the fragile plants led to the development of display cases, called 'Wardian Cases', after the botanist who first produced them beginning in the 1840's, Dr. Nathaniel Ward (1761-1860).

The Wardian cases were an important invention, for they allowed the Middle Classes an affordable way to house their treasures. Glass domes provided light and humidity required by the tender fronds. Furthermore, they protected them from the heavy smog of urban dwellings. It also became possible to house fragile exotic ferns from tropical areas of the world.

There are dozens of examples of Wardian cases in Ms Whittingham's book, and they are fascinating in their own right. The glass top was constant, even if the shape and size varied, but the under-construction

should interest those of us in the MIS. The bases were made from terra cotta, tin and majolica. Sometimes, they appeared with majolica tiles, including Minton's. One wonders if there is a class of majolica we have not yet identified; are there examples of Majolica Wardian Case bases?

The selection and placement of one's Wardian Case was as important as the ferns collected therein. Cases appeared in window wells, creating a woodland vista that replaced whatever urban view would otherwise dampen one's spirit. In the summertime, cases went into fireplaces to enliven an empty hearth. They were nearly always in the drawing room, where they could be admired by visitors.

Although called 'Wardian' cases after their inventor, many companies made and marketed them.

The cases in Figures 22, 23 and 26 each show bases of 'imitation' oak, bamboo or basketry.

DICK RADCLYFFE & Co.,
SEEDS.
 —
 WINDOW
 CASES.
 —
 WINDOW,
 BOXES.
 —
PLANTS.
 —
Catalogues Gratis



Fig. 22. has a base made of iron to look like twigs

No. 1.—Rustic Fern Stands.

Diam.	s.	d.
8 in.	.	3 0
9 „	.	4 0
10 „	.	4 6
11 „	.	5 6
12 „	.	7 0

Imitation of Oak.

No. 2.—Rustic Fern Stands.

Diam.	s.	d.
5 in.		1 0
6 „		1 6
7 „		2 0
8 „		2 6
9 „		3 0
10 „		4 0
11 „		5 6
12 „		7 0
13 „		8 6
14 „		10 0
15 „		12 0
16 „		14 6

Imitation of Oak.

Fig. 23.



Fig. 24. According to the author, there are Minton tiles on these cases



Fig. 26 & 27

Fig. 25 and 25a. These cases interest me because they look like cheese bells. I have looked for bells that resemble these, but haven't found any. Given the Victorian penchant for visual puns, I believe they must exist.



Fig. 25 & 25a.

Wealthy people had more options for the collection and display of ferns, often building greeneries and designing gardens incorporating the new plants. This allowed them to import Fern Trees from Australia and other regions. These could grow to 60 feet high. They would occasionally show up in dining rooms, peeking up through holes in the tables for special events.



Fig. 28 & 29. Glass Houses

The original glass house might have been at Chatsworth, designed by Joseph Paxton. So well regarded was he, that his design was chosen for the building at the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition.



Fig. 30. Jardinière Golden Pheasant, Minton



Fig. 31. Umbrella Stand, Fawn, Minton.

Another class of display options derives from the ferns' original habitats. These were designed to mimic the rugged and mysterious regions of the Western counties.



Fig. 32. Game Dish, George Jones



Fig. 33. Jardinière, Fox Glove, Minton

At this point in our story, we begin to delve into subject matter that subliminally made its way into the fern craze and into majolica as well. It is the story of life and survival in the Natural World. It harks back to the notion of Natural Theology. Yet, it also comes from the folklore of the regions where ferns grew. Pre-Christian awareness of sprites and fairies was still a vibrant part of the local culture of the mountains, and urbanites were reminded of it when they went fern hunting.

The Picturesque Movement spawned gardens borne of dreams; Fairies must have lived there.



Fig. 34. Stumpery Detail



Fig. 35. Fairies in a stumpery



Fig. 36. Nursery tile, Unknown manufacture.
Private Collection

Victorian fascination with fairies appeared in music, dance and literature. The earthiness of living things and the ferns' mysterious method of reproduction

invited their collectors to view them with a sense of wonder.

Collectors wanted to bring home the mystery and charm of the wild regions. Taking a cue from the French Grottoes of the 17th Century, they devised a new garden form: the Stumpery.

Here we see a real stumpery and its imaginary inhabitants. Great constructions were formed of twisted branches and tree trunks, with gnarled stumps as focal points. Ferns and ivies were placed in nooks prepared with growth mediums.



Fig. 37. John Adams Jardinière



Fig. 38. Fern Pitcher, Maker Unknown

People could amble though these constructed environments and feel closer to their origins. Majolica makers seem to have stopped short of depicting actual fairies in their work, but they clearly alluded to the magical environment in which fairies lived. This is not a Beatrix Potter world; it is something more serious, closely aligned with Creation.



Fig. 39. Garden Seat, John Adams

Incidentally, ferns and fairies were not the only inhabitants of these magic gardens. Frogs, goldfish and lizards were imported.



Fig. 40. Bowl with Frogs, Minton

Attractive insects, such as butterflies also 'made the scene'. Fish and frogs appeared regularly in Wardian cases. One writer records that, as house pets, "opportunities for expressing emotion of any kind are exceedingly limited." This man's toad slept all day, then stared at its owner at night, while the poor man tried to write in his journal. Giving in, the owner would release the frog (whose name was Jack) until bedtime. Sometimes Jack would croak and the owner would respond, Well, Jack?" he says, "Rarely beyond that are we conversational."

Another owner cleverly put glow worms into his garden, thinking they would enhance the mysterious beauty of his space. They were beautiful, until they disappeared down the gullets of the frogs.



Fig. 40a. Game Dish, Minton.

Ferns appeared in all areas of decorative arts.

On items for vanity tables. On desks in the studies. Etched on glassware. Tatted into lace shawls and collars. Embroidered as trim on ball gowns (See Fig 6.) On metal fire screens. The Victorian passion for decoration provided endless venues for things ferny.



Fig. 41.

Ferns even appeared as decorative elements in architecture as on the column capital below.



Fig. 42. Architecture ferns

Most British and American ceramicists produced wares decorated with ferns. Not all were majolica. Maidenhair ferns on porcelain was a popular motif. Maidenhair ferns were also ubiquitous in bridal bouquets, for their allusion to Virtue; and they graced many dining tables.

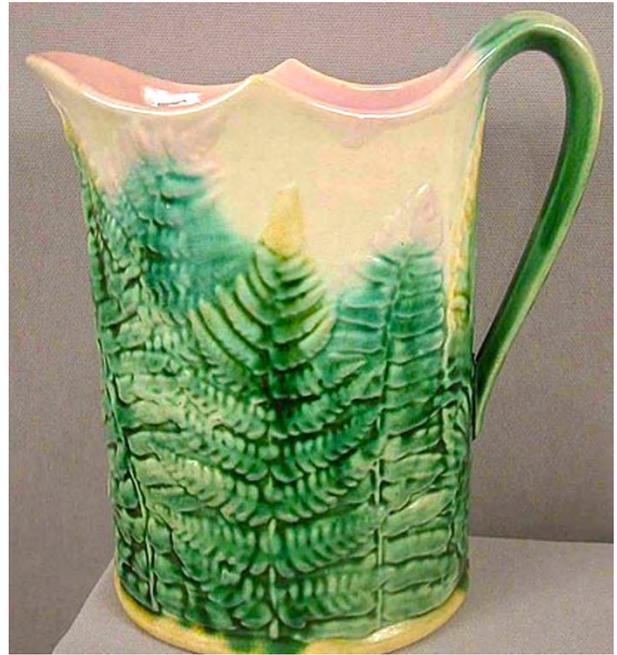


Fig. 44. Griffen Smith & Hill Fern Pitcher



Fig. 43. Fern Plate, Courtesy Christie's New York.

CONCLUSION

As we learn more about Victorians and their culture, we come to appreciate the seemingly paradoxical deliberation they had in pursuing their passions.

The two principles of Natural Theology and Self-Improvement acted as the engines-in-partnership that drove Fern Mania for so long. Yet, in majolica design, the fern often plays a supportive role; either as a design element, or as a narrative device. Rarely does it take center stage.



Fig. 43a. Syrup



Fig. 46. George Jones Plate.

The fern motif is usually expressed in one of three ways.

1. As a part of Natural History, with focus on the anatomy of the specimen, as in Palissy Ware.
2. As a formal design element, animating a composition, and employed for its decorative value, as in Aestheticism.
3. As a symbolic key to what the Victorians wanted most: Grace and Good Works.

The lovely young girl in the picture below, with her rosy good health and pleasant smile, stands in contrast to the overburdened fern picker from a century before, (Fig. 45). We see in her gentle hold of the plant that ferns, because of their Proximity to Creation, are themselves emblematic of Innocence and Purity.



Fig. 45. Fern Picker Gently Holds a Fern

The Middle Class believed that gardening had a 'civilizing' effect on the Working Poor. (They had conveniently forgotten that the poor had moved to the cities from the countryside for work, and presumably already knew how to grow vegetables.) The handling and appreciation of plant life was thought to have a 'temporizing' effect on the one's soul. To quote Nathaniel Ward, this would alleviate the "physical

and moral want" of those in crowded cities. It was an argument that ignited the fad that became Pteridomania.



Fig. 47. Philadelphia Exhibition 1876.
Entrance to the Hall of Horticulture

What better expression of the dual messages of Virtue and Study than this little box with fern and dove?



Fig. 49. Match Box, George Jones

Victorian Fern Fever



Fig. 50 Victorian Iron and Wood Fern Garden Bench

Shrewsbury, England Auction - Results

By Duane Matthes



This Shrewsbury, England auction: back on April 18, 2012, really attracted my attention because I believed this was a very significant item. It has connections to the Royal Dairy at the Model Farms, and the St. George and the Dragon fountain.

It was estimated at £20,000 - £30,000 and was a "Pass". This fabulous piece will be seen again.

Save the Dates: April 25-28, 2013

All plans are finalizing for the next Majolica International Society Convention to be in The Merchandise Mart International Antiques Fair, April 25-28, 2013. Right in downtown Chicago fabulous Lake Michigan water front! You must be there!

Highlights and details already include:

- Annual Business meeting
- Daily Entry to the International Antiques Fair
- The Fairs Majolica Pavilion with Majolica Heaven
- Member presentations on Forrester majolica
- Art Institute outing on Victorian Decorative Arts
- Joan Graham-Stacke Forum
- Driehaus Museum outing
- Toby Museum guided tour
- Raven & Dove Antiques outing
- Gala Dinner with Stuart Slavid keynote speaker
- Carol is working on a "surprise" home visit

Look for the "2013 Registration" form with all the details in the October mailing of the next Majolica Matters Newsletter.

Don't miss this one!

Minton Bird Mystery?

by Duane Matthes

We have had an ongoing debate in our home about the two green and yellow Cockatoos that carry the "MINTONS/ENGLAND" mark. We have always considered them to be a product of the Minton Potteries of Stoke-on-Trent, England. Are we correct?



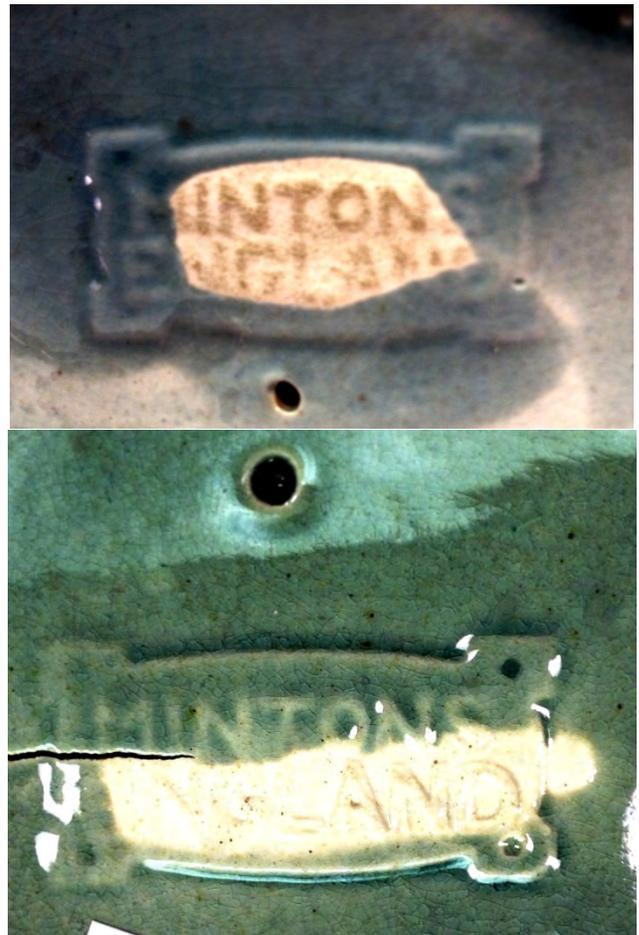
The pair of Minton Cockatoos above, with photos of their bases showing the "MINTONS" mark

When we see these items at Michael Strawser's Majolica Auctions, he always documents them as Minton. So that's what we always believed! Now, to make things even more puzzling we saw two more birds by MINTONS at the April 2012 Majolica Actions.



"MINTONS" Cockatoo and Partridge at auction

Spring 2012 Majolica Actions had what Michael documented as an 8" Cockatoo and an 8 1/2" Bird on Rock (I think it is a Partridge).



"MINTONS / ENGLAND" marks from the Cockatoo and Partridge

These four birds must be in the same pottery series and even carry very similar marks. But these Minton marks are not like any other Minton majolica marks.

Ok, so here is my delimiea! I could care less what the birds are called, but why do these four birds carry a raised plaque with "MINTONS/ENGLAND" mark that I have never seen on any other piece of majolica produced by Minton Potteries. I've proposed this question to several collectors and some say "Oh, Duane yes they are Minton", but others raise their eyebrows in doubt.

Does anyone know why these strange and unique marks were use on these birds? Was the potting or molding outsourced and Minton lost control of how objects were being marked?

Please send your comments and material for the newsletter to:

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Icons of the First MIS Meeting - April 1989

By Duane Matthes

The photos that follow capture the hours before the creation of the Majolica International Society. It was April 1989 and these three mega majolica collectors where leaving New York City to join other collectors to fundamentally start the Majolica International Society. On this day, the Society had no name and no members...just an idea and interest shared by dozens of passionate collectors, dealers, writers and auctioneers.

Fort Wayne was the chosen birth place because of Michael Strawser owned and operated Strawser Auctions and the passionate people would be gathering for his auction. There, they would meet and create our Society!



Marilyn Karmason, Robert Lehr, and Joan Stacke

At this time, Mayilyn and Joan were working on their book with French majolica authority, Robert Lehr. They asked Robert to fly from Paris to New York to help create the new majolica club. Robert flew to NYC. When he arrived, he was unaware he would need to fly to the United States "1989 majolica center" of Ft. Wayne, Indiana.



At the Holiday Inn, left to right Marilyn Karmason, Robert Lehr, and Joan Stacke Graham

Organized by Michael Strawser, ninety-two people registered for the meeting, an additional thirty nine paid membership dues. Eight major majolica dealers set up to sell their wares at the Ft. Wayne Holiday Inn!

The meeting started on Friday night with a social hour. The next day, Marilyn Karmason and Joan Stacke Graham gave an excellent one-hour lecture on majolica, along with a superb kodachrome show of many of their pieces. The lecture covered American, English, and Continental wares. Following their lecture, there was a give and take discussion, and an organizational meeting.

Then, at noon, and with great anticipation, they all descended on the dealers who were set up in another room. It was like a feeding frenzy! The collectors swept through the place like a starved, but very well mannered, gaggle of majolica lovers. They eyed the merchandise, touched and talked and murmured, all the time with great smiles and clear pleasure. They came around again and again, some making fast deals, others taking their time and being very careful. And then, all of a sudden, the place was quiet. Everyone was gratified, and within a little better than ninety minutes, the "Very First Majolica Heaven" was virtually complete.

In 1989, people wondered what our initials of "MIS" stood for. Marilyn helped defined it as Majolica International Society with the International indicating Mr. Lehr's presence and future involvement. We now had a name and a template for our gatherings!