

My Forbears (by Marriage) Were Crate Makers

By Sue Wagstaff



Figure 1: Part of the Playa Donata 3 archaeological site (Tierra del Fuego, Argentina) showing some of the crates located in the intertidal zone. Photo R Ranzani 2018. Image originally published in Elkin D 2019. Courtesy Dolores Elkin.

We hear much about transferware and other ceramics being shipped to all parts of the world from the United Kingdom, but little about the crates these cargoes were packed in for transportation. The TCC Transferware Worldwide Lecture Series included an excellent lecture by Dr Dolores Elkin on an archaeological rescue project which took place between 2016 and 2017, pertaining to the accidental discovery on the coast of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, of what looked like an historic ship's cargo. The cargo consisted of wooden crates containing mainly 19th century English ceramics, much from the Staffordshire earthenware manufacturer, Anthony Shaw (Figures 1 and 2).

If you missed Dr. Elkin's lecture, a video recording was made and can be accessed by TCC members <https://www.transferwarecollectorsclub.org/news-information/lecture-series/videos>. For details, view the video. An additional reference is a 2019 article



Figure 2: Last stages of excavation of one of the crates found in Playa Donata. Photo: Chris Underwood. Courtesy Dolores Elkin.

authored by Dr. Elkin (Reference 1).

This lecture encouraged me to do further research on my family history, the reason I hope becoming clear. Genealogy has become a popular pastime and there is a temptation to chase forebears from many generations back, rather than more recent

ones. When my daughter was born I was keen to name her Harriet, much to the horror of my mother, who stated that she had an aunt of that name who she very much disliked, being the only person in the family with any wealth, who, when she died, left everything to her stable lads. Our



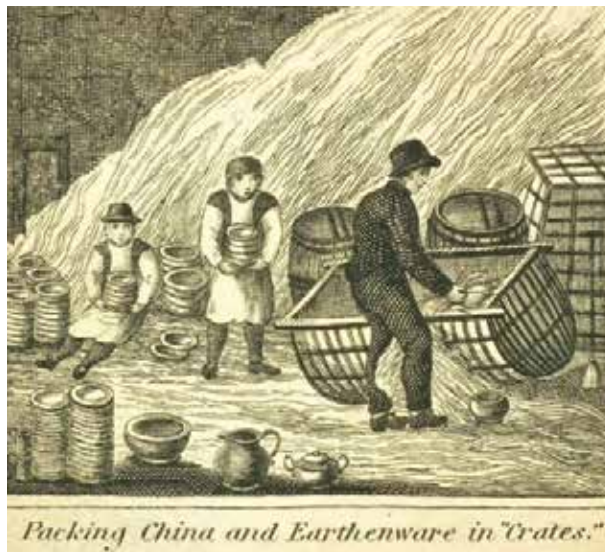
Figure 3: My grandmother, the youngest, is sitting in the goat cart and her much older sister Harriet, is standing behind her. The baby is their niece.

daughter became Catherine and I thought no more about Harriet until, during COVID Lock-down, I decided to investigate my maternal grandmother's ten siblings, children of a horse dealer in Essex (now part of Greater London) (Figure 3).

With my interest in ceramics, I was excited to discover that Harriet Moore Palmer had married one Thomas Cornelius Mansfield, an encaustic tile merchant and horse dealer. According to various censuses, Cornelius and his brothers, Horace Rendall and Frederick George, were part of Mansfield Brothers of Church Gresley and Woodville in South Derbyshire, manufacturers of every kind of tile, although I have not yet discovered one that is transfer printed. According to Geoffrey Godden in his *Encyclopedia of British Pottery and Porcelain Marks*, this company of tile makers commenced c1890 and, perhaps from the style of the tiles, were influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement. There is however, a directory listing for a firm of encaustic tile manufactures in 1881, Mansfield and Whitaker, and another source says the Mansfield Pottery opened in 1879 making earthenware



Figure 4: An advertisement from a magazine.



Packing China and Earthenware in "Crates."

Figure 5: Unusual shaped crates being packed, with a stack of straw in the background. The image features in the Spode Exhibition On Line, first launched in 2012 by the TCC in partnership with the Winterthur Museum (<http://spodeceramics.com>) and is one of 21 images in "A Representation of the Manufacturing of Earthenware, 1827", which can be viewed in Spode Exhibition On Line (<http://www.spodeceramics.com/industry/representation-manufacturing-earthenware-1827>).

sanitary goods (Figure 4).

This led me to examine the Mansfield family further, hoping to discover earlier potters, but instead discovered that the brothers' grandfather, another Thomas, born in 1804, was a grocer and crate maker in Church Gresley, and in 1871, described as

being a master crate maker employing four men. Two of his brothers, John and William, were also pot crate makers, all being retired by 1881. One of Thomas' sons combined being a crate and hurdle (a portable, temporary fence strengthened with willow branches) maker with being a timber dealer, wood then being the main constituent in crate making. The main frame of crates, usually rectangular and of differing sizes, was made of rough, sturdy, wooden staves which were then woven with hazel and willow saplings. Wooden crates were still being used until around 1970 when they were replaced by crates made of metal mesh.

The Mansfield's neighbours throughout the 19th century were potters and miners; South Derbyshire, having a local supply of clay and coal, had long been the home of potters. In Church Gresley, Swadlincote and Woodville, they were making

mainly utilitarian wares, so one would imagine there would have been a great necessity for crates, just as in Staffordshire and other pottery areas. The 1835 Pigot's Directory lists four crate makers, eight brick and tile makers, four fire brick makers

and 16 ironstone and coarse earthenware manufacturers, all working in the Church Gresley area.

Crate making was an important ancillary trade in the pottery industry, helping to reduce breakages when transporting wares. The ceramics were further protected by being packed with copious amounts of straw (Figure 5). There is evidence crates were used more than once. Image 6 shows two crate makers at work in Brocksford Street, off King Street, Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent in 1949. I suspect that other than the clothes the men are wearing, this picture could well transcribe to several decades earlier and I would imagine the process of making the crates, and the crates themselves, would hardly have changed since Thomas Mansfield was in business, which was probably before 1835. The crates found in Argentina look very similar to these.

There is still much for me to discover about the Mansfield family, both crate and tile makers. Most of Thomas' family stayed in the Church Gresley area where many generations had lived, but one son, Cornelius, moved to Stratford, in Essex, where he married and had nine children. This was a fast growing area, and he made a fortune as a builder. It was three of his six sons, Horace Rendall, Frederick George and Thomas Cornelius, who were described as merchants with Mansfield Brothers. Horace and Frederick returned to South Derbyshire but Thomas Cornelius remained in Essex dealing in horses, but was still involved in some way with the pottery manufactory.

In Cornelius' Will, dated 1905, he describes himself as a builder but also that he was carrying on the business of encaustic and tessellated tile manufacturing at Church Gresley under the title of Mansfield Brothers in partner-



Figure 6: Photo reproduced by courtesy of the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke on Trent.

ship with two sons, Horace Rendall and Frederick George. His estate of £44,000, a huge sum in those days, was divided equally between his nine children. Each also received an individual legacy, Horace getting four framed photographs or portraits of his father and mother and paternal grandparents. How I would love to see those. As to the family myth, Harriet did leave her money to her stable lads, but she also left each of her surviving siblings four tenanted prop-

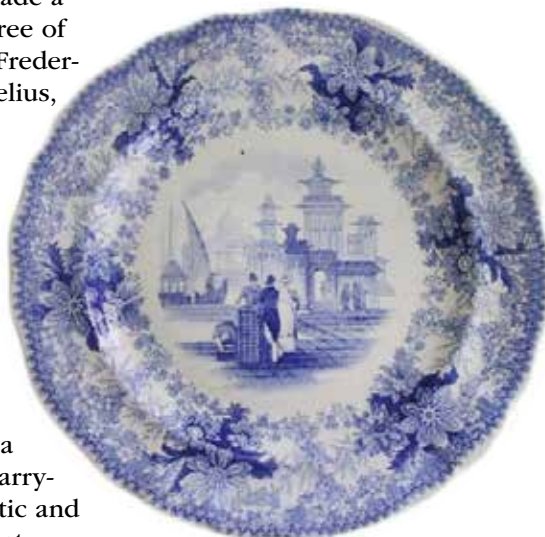


Figure 7: One of the 'Commerce' series by Samuel Alcock and Co 1828-1859.



Figure 8: I wonder if the scene depicted on this children's plate by an unknown maker could possibly be of wrecked crates left on a shore!

erties in East London, which might seem generous but the upkeep of these was probably more than the rental income.

There are several transferware patterns in the TCC Database of Patterns and Sources which feature shipping crates. Two examples complete our story (Figures 7 and 8; DB entries 13,841 and 5291, respectively). The reader can learn more of these and other patterns by searching the Database.

Reference:

1: ELKIN, D. 2019. Arqueología histórica del litoral atlántico fueguino: El cargamento de vajilla de Playa Donata 3. En Arqueología de la Patagonia: el pasado en las arenas (2019). J. Gómez Otero, A. Svoboda y A. Banegas (Eds.). Puerto Madryn, Instituto de Diversidad y Evolución Austral. ISBN 978-987-46578-1-7.

Credits

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