

WEDGWOOD'S 'LANDSCAPES WITH FROGS'

Gaye Blake-Roberts

In 1774 Josiah Wedgwood manufactured a dinner and dessert service decorated with views of British houses and gardens which is a unique time capsule showing the landscapes of that date and recording many views now significantly changed or lost.

One of the most important eighteenth-century services ever created was commissioned by Empress Catherine II of Russia (1729–1796). Catherine II ordered two sets of Wedgwood, one in 1770, and the second three years later. In March 1773 Wedgwood and his partner, Thomas Bentley, were approached by Alexander Baxter, a member of the Russia Company and Catherine's agent in Britain, to create a dinner and dessert service for fifty people, comprising 952 pieces: each to be hand-painted with 1244 landscape views of Britain.

The decoration was to incorporate a green enamel frog heraldic crest as it was intended for the Kekereksinensky Palace (Finnish for frog marsh). Josiah gathered suitable illustrations from printed topographical books and by writing to landowners requesting that they should lend him appropriate illustrations of their landscape gardens and houses. Artists were commissioned to make sketches of Staffordshire houses whilst a *camera obscura* was used to create some views.

The Queen's ware pieces were manufactured at the Etruria factory, Staffordshire but then sent to Wedgwood's decorating studios in Little Cheyne Row, Chelsea to be painted. Men and women were employed, and each painter had their own tasks, such as the borders, frog crests or



A dessert plate from Wedgwood's Frog Service, hand-painted with a view of Castle Acre Castle, Norfolk. From an engraving by William Ellis after a drawing by Thomas Hearne, 1772.

the landscape scenes and was paid according to the size and complexity of the individual piece. The centres were painted in monochrome sepia enamel. It seems that 33 painters were employed to complete this prestigious and important service.

On completion, it was placed on display in Wedgwood's London showrooms, Portland House, Greek Street. It was open by invitation only, during June 1774, and many of the aristocracy, whose homes were depicted, visited to see the service set out in five rooms as if for a meal. The service was dispatched, in 22 crates, in early autumn to provide ample time for the ships to arrive in St Petersburg prior to the winter closing the port. The Frog Service cost the Empress £2,290 12s. 4d. ●

Dr Gaye Blake-Roberts is a Curator at The Wedgwood Museum.

Further Reading

Michael Raeburn, Ludmila Voronikhina & Andrew Nurnberg, *The Green Frog Service* (Cacklegoose Press, in association with The State Hermitage, St Petersburg, 1995).

Robin Reilly, *Josiah Wedgwood* (Macmillan, 1992).
Hilary Young, *The Genius of Wedgwood* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1995).

Places to see pieces of the Frog Service:
Wedgwood Museum, Barlaston, Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire, ST12 9ER.

www.wedgwoodmuseum.org.uk

The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Bethesda Street, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, ST13DW. www.stokemuseums.org.uk
Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, Cromwell Road, London SW7 2RL