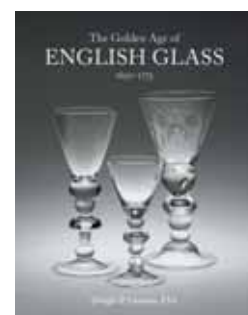


The golden age of English glass

For this special feature, *Glass International* is pleased to publish an extract from a new book, 'The Golden Age of English Glass 1650-1775', by Dwight P Lanmon, FSA. This beautifully presented book features 150 objects from the collection of John H Bryan, ranging from c.1650 to 1809. These enable a full and detailed discussion of the history of English glassmaking during its critical period of innovation and its world triumph. The following extract is taken from the chapter 'A Brief History of Glassmaking in England'.



Glass was first made in England by Roman craftsmen. After the fall of the empire in the early fifth century AD, some craftsmen may have continued to work in the English forests, especially in Anglo-Saxon Kent, producing glass vessels designed for coarse tribal lives. They include conical drinking glasses with no feet (**fig 1**) or, at most, vestigial and unstable feet.¹ The equivalent of drinking horns,² these glasses were used in the consumption of vast quantities of beer and mead and had no need of feet because the contents would be entirely consumed before the vessels were set aside (upside down) on their rims.

Glass for windows

Christianity reached England in the seventh century and the church became the primary client for glassmakers. Although glass was probably still being made in Kent, the Venerable Bede recorded that the Abbot of Monkwearmouth brought glassmakers from Gaul in AD 676 to:

... lattice [glaze] the windows of the church and of the galleries and upper rooms ... nor did they only complete the required work, but familiarised the English too with this type of work henceforth, and taught them a craft by no means ill-suited to [the making of] lamps ... or vessels for a great variety of purposes.³

Glassmaking may have continued in England during the eighth to eleventh centuries, but little is known about production and almost no glass survives. There is, however, evidence of glassmaking in Belgium and France in the eleventh century and workers and glass were almost certainly imported into England. Between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries glass production increased in the Surrey/Sussex Weald and other areas to serve the needs of the church and the gentry.⁴ Glass windows became more common in



◀ Fig 1. Cone beaker. Anglo-Saxon England, Kent, 7th century; found in the King's Field in Faversham, Kent, the site of an important Anglo-Saxon cemetery. Height 17.6cm. The Corning Museum of Glass [85.1.4].

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▲ Fig 2a-c. *Cristallo* and coloured glass goblets with enamelled and gilt decoration. Venice, late 15th century. Height (right) 19.9cm. The Corning Museum of Glass [79.3.193, 79.3.185, 79.3.170, bequest of Jerome Strauss.

the homes of the wealthy, but it was the great cathedrals being built throughout Europe (including England) that required the largest expanses of glazing. Constructed of small pieces of colourless and brightly coloured flat glass and held together in a framework of lead strips (comes), many of the church windows were decorated with scenes from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible using black enamel and yellow and amber-coloured metallic stains (which has resulted in the descriptive term “stained-glass windows”). Factories producing household window glass also made some vessels including bottles using greenish glass.⁵

Venetian glass

To understand what occurred in English glassmaking during the fifteenth century, it is necessary first to understand what was happening in Venice. In the thirteenth century Venetian glassmakers mastered the production of a nearly colourless glass called *cristallo* (crystal) and exported it to the wealthy throughout Europe.⁶ By the fifteenth century, Venice (or more accurately, the island of Murano, where glassmaking was moved in 1292 to protect the city from fire) became the single most important centre for the production of luxury glass tableware in Europe. A variety of new glass formulas was perfected, many having transparent jewel-like colours, and the production of colourless *cristallo* increased. Venetian glasses were elaborate in form, and many of them were decorated with gilding and colourful enamels (fig 2).

Venice dominated the world market for luxury glass for nearly three centuries – until the late seventeenth century. Venetian glass was imported into England before 1399,⁷ and the English nobility were among those who acquired Venetian glass at great expense during the 1500s. King Henry VIII owned more than 600 pieces of Venetian glass by 1547 when they were enumerated in an inventory; they included “standinge Cuppes of blewē glasse wth covers to

theym paynted and guilte” and “Twoo greate glasses like boles standing upon feete of blewē and white partelye guilte”, all of Venetian origin.⁸ Venetian glass was so widely admired in England that in 1586 William Harrison wrote:

It is a world to see in these our days, wherein gold and silver most aboundeth, how that our gentility, as loathing those metals [because of the plenty] do now choose rather the Venice glasses, both for our wine and beer....⁹

The trade in Venetian glass was extremely lucrative and, in order to thwart potential competition, the Venetian government prohibited the emigration of workers and threatened to assassinate them if they did (but there is no documented case of the murder of a fugitive Venetian glassmaker). The Venetian glassmakers’ guild also governed who could be trained in the art and mystery of glassmaking, for decades restricting training mainly to members of three Muranese glassmaking families who were treated like minor nobility. Nevertheless, some glassmakers were lured away by the promise of riches offered by foreign royalty and the Venetian government could do nothing to prevent glassmakers from other centres in Italy moving north, where they established glasshouses and produced Venetian-style glass.

Attempts to imitate Venetian glass began in England in the 1530s when several glassmakers from the Netherlands started a glass factory in Southwark on the south bank of the River Thames in London, but nothing is known of their work. In 1549 King Edward VI approved a contract for eight Muranese glassmakers to establish a furnace in the Hall of the Crutched Friars, a former Carmelite Monastery near the Tower of London.¹⁰ (Several London glasshouses were built in the properties of monasteries, abandoned after their dissolution by King Henry VIII.¹¹) In the same year, the Venetian government commanded the workmen to return from London, but the English government imprisoned them and they were unable to return until 1551. When they finally returned, they left one Venetian and one Antwerp worker behind; the Venetian (Josepo Casselari) continued to make glass in London until 1569.¹² Again, nothing is known of their products.

Venetian-style English glass

The first significant achievement in producing Venetian-style glass in England was initiated in 1567 when Jean Carré, a native of Arras in Northern France, arrived in London via Antwerp with the apparent intention of taking over the English glass industry.¹³ His primary focus was the production of window glass in the Weald where he built two factories, but he also wanted

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to produce Venetian-style drinking glasses. He probably operated the factory that had been built by the Venetian workmen at Crutched Friars and he built a second factory in Greenwich.¹⁴ He hired two glassmakers from Antwerp: in 1570, Quiobyne Littery, a Venetian, and “Joseph, a Venetian and glassmaker”, who arrived in 1571.¹⁵ The latter was Giacomo (also known as Jacob or Jacopo) Verzelini (1522–1606). Carré died in 1572, and Verzelini bought the factory.¹⁶ In December 1574 the Crown awarded Verzelini a twenty-one year monopoly for the manufacture of Venetian-style glass and simultaneously prohibited its importation. The factory burned to the ground the following year, but it was rebuilt by 1576; he took an option on a glasshouse in Greenwich (presumably the one built by Carré).¹⁷ He also built a factory in Broad Street in 1575.¹⁸ Verzelini retired – a rich man – around 1592. The factories may have been run by his sons until the monopoly expired in 1595.¹⁹

About a dozen drinking glasses have been attributed to the Verzelini factory (**fig 3**).²⁰ All but two are decorated with diamond-point engraving in the Venetian style, with elaborate designs of foliate scrolls, inscriptions, initials, hunting scenes with hounds, stags and unicorns, and dates ranging between 1577 and 1590.

More than three years before Verzelini’s patent expired another entrepreneur entered the glassmaking field and was awarded a competing patent. Sir Jerome Bowes (before 1544–c.1616), a courtier and English Ambassador to Russia, received a patent in 1592 that gave him the same rights and privileges as Verzelini, including the importation of Venetian glass upon the expiration of Verzelini’s patent in 1595, when he presumably took over the Crutched Friars and Broad Street glasshouses.²¹ Bowes was certainly involved in glassmaking by 1596, and he sublet his patent to William Robson and William Turner, who erected another glasshouse in the former Blackfriars Monastery by 1601.²² Imports from Venice and the Low Countries (especially Antwerp) increased significantly during the early seventeenth century.²³

In 1607 Robson secured a twenty-one year patent extension, but troubles were on the horizon and a war of competing patents began. Glass and iron manufacturers consumed enormous quantities of wood and the government became concerned at the rapid decrease of English forests, which would ultimately adversely impact the British navy. A search for alternative fuels was launched, and in 1610 a patent for the use of coal to fire glass furnaces was issued to Sir William Slingsby, an investor with coal holdings in Northumberland, who proposed to erect “ovens, furnaces, and engines” for a number of industries, including glassmaking. His glass-making furnace design probably proved to be unworkable and in 1613 a sweeping new twenty-one year patent was issued to a company headed



◀ Fig 3. Venetian-style goblet, inscribed in diamond-point 'IN GOD IS AL MI TRVST', the initials 'K' and 'Y' tied with a lover's knot, and an unidentified mercant's mark incorporating a cross and the letters 'K', 'Y', 'O' and 'M'. Attributed to England, London, glasshouse of Giacomo Verzelini, dated 1583. Height 21cm. The Corning Museum of Glass (63.2.8).

“ Attempts to imitate Venetian glass began in England in the 1530s when several glassmakers from the Netherlands started a glass factory in Southwark.”

by another wealthy courtier, Sir Edward Zouche (Zouch) (c.1556–1625), for a coal-fired furnace of different design, presumably for the production of window glass.²⁴ The patent, enlarged in 1614, gave the Zouche company a twenty-one year monopoly for producing glass throughout England using coal fuel.

The company probably acquired the furnace built in Southwark on the Thames south bank by a competing patentee, Edward Salter, and five partners, and within a year Muranese workmen began producing Venetian-style glass in forms not covered by the Robson patent.²⁵ Robson attacked Zouche in Privy Council for infringing on his patents (those originally issued to Bowes and Salter), but Zouche ultimately prevailed, the decision being based primarily on the importance of forest conservation. The Zouche patent prohibited Robson from manufacturing glass using wood fuel, stopped the importation of glass from Venice, and gave Zouche the sole right to make all types of glass using coal fuel. Despite Parliamentary opposition to the patent, Robson was forced to close his glasshouse (but he later joined Zouche’s successor, Sir Robert Mansell).²⁶

With thanks to Dwight P Lanmon. For references, contact the publisher, Antique Collectors' Club (clara.heard@antique-acc.com). 'The Golden Age of English Glass 1650-1775' (ISBN: 9781851496563) is now available to buy. Website: www.antiquecollectorsclub.com