

## Tom Wedgwood and the Birth of Photography

The Wedgwood family are synonymous with just one thing. To be fair, it's not the worst thing in the world to be associated with: making the most famous pottery in England. In the middle years of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the firm founded by Josiah Wedgwood created some of the most striking ceramics ever made on these shores. But there's another claim to fame, just as pioneering in its way, that we can lay at the Wedgwoods' door. Were it not so clouded in controversy and speculation it might overshadow the achievements even of the great Josiah.

Josiah Wedgwood I had no less than eight children, all but one of whom reached adulthood. The fourth of the line was Thomas. Thomas's involvement with the family business was minimal, though he stood to gain financially from its continued prosperity.

It is Thomas Wedgwood's links with the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which tends to garner the most attention. In January 1798 Thomas and his brother, Josiah II, bailed out the impoverished writer to the tune of £150 a year. It was a clear indication that for the Wedgwoods art and industry were allies, not enemies. Even if Thomas Wedgwood was not involved in the day-to-day running of the factory in Etruria, there were certain aspects of it that must have made an impression. Like the jannners down in the Black Country, late 18<sup>th</sup>-century pottery manufacturers were becoming interested in how art work could be applied to their products, without simply employing an artist to paint it on.

Over in Birmingham too Matthew Boulton and Francis Eginton were exploring how paintings could be copied, reproduced and sold.

There was already one, well-established, way in which an image could be projected from one place to another, and you could find it all over the place, even in a travelling circus. It was called the camera obscura. Working much like a pin-hole camera, an image of the outside world could be projected onto a wall. Add a cunning mirror and it could even be the right way up.

Now, how could that projected image be captured and fixed ?

This was the starting-point for Thomas Wedgwood's experiments with light and chemicals; indeed, the starting-point for photography itself.

It was Thomas's luck to be born into a family with considerable connections. As a member of the Lunar Society, Josiah I was a close associate of many of the greatest scientists of the day. His son shared his ideas and findings with none other than James Watt and the young Humphry Davy. The latter was working at the Pneumatic Institute in Bristol, whither Wedgwood was sent for medical treatment.

At the heart of Thomas Wedgwood's experiments was silver nitrate. It is a property of silver – more so still of silver nitrate – to darken when exposed to light. Sometime in the 1790s – the exact date remains contested – Wedgwood tried coating paper or leather with silver nitrate and exposing them to light. A camera obscura did not work, but solid objects or light passing through a painting on glass left an image on the leather. The area exposed to more light darkened, producing a kind of silhouette. James Watt referred to them as "silver pictures".

In 1802 Davy wrote up his friend's findings (and his own variations on them) and submitted them as a paper to the Journal of the Royal Institution. It was entitled "An

Account of a Method of Copying Paintings upon Glass, and of Making Profiles, by the Agency of Light upon Nitrate of Silver. Invented by T. Wedgwood, Esq."

The paper failed to take the world by storm, but first steps often don't. It was later translated into French and German and circulated in Scotland.

The problem – freely admitted by both Wedgwood and Davy – was that the darkening process on the silver nitrate could not be stopped or stabilized. The chemicals continued to darken, unless the image was placed in complete darkness, say between the pages of a book.

If photography – literally "writing with light" – could be said to have begun anywhere, it began here. It was for later pioneers such as Daguerre and Fox Talbot to work out how to fix the image, and prevent it continuing to develop.

You might ask whether any of Tom Wedgwood's first tentative steps in photography survive. Back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a photographic historian called Samuel Highley claimed to have seen some of Wedgwood's "silver pictures". Highley's claim has since been disputed.

But in 2008 an item came to light (if you'll excuse the expression), which made the photographic world sit up and take notice. A detailed image of a leaf, showing its veins and internal structure, appeared in an auction catalogue in the US. The picture displayed what appeared to be a letter "W" in one corner, and had been originally attributed to William Fox Talbot.

An essay in the auction catalogue, however, linked the picture, not to Fox Talbot, but to Thomas Wedgwood, and suggesting a date in the 1790s.

The leaf in question blew away in the storm of controversy that followed. The item was removed from the sale for further investigation, and nothing has been seen or heard of it since. Given that a genuine photographic image from the 1790s would surely have sold for millions, it makes one think that the further research was inconclusive.

But if that humble leaf re-surfaces, history will surely have to be re-written, and Staffordshire's claim to be "the creative county" will take another step forward.