

The History of Bagley's Glass

Bagley's heyday was the period between the World wars (1918-1939) when the firm became a leader in inexpensive domestic pressed glassware. This was achieved by its wide range of products, experiments with coloured glass, expanding domestic and foreign markets, and a Royal seal of approval.

Founded in 1871 as a bottle works in Knottingley, West Yorkshire, Bagley's branched out in 1912 into two new areas – lead crystal and pressed glassware. True lead crystal was produced for two years only; Bagley's manufacturing the blanks which were finished off by another company which had the cutting wheels and the experienced labour. The pressed ware continued until 1975 and for most of this period sold as crystal although it did not have the lead content of true lead crystal. Bagley's pressed "crystal" was very popular and enabled a range of inexpensive luxury items to be made which had many of the properties of light refraction which characterised the more costly lead crystal.

To begin with the "crystal" was produced only in flint or clear glass, and the range of products was limited to everyday articles such as beer glasses (or cans), sugar bowls, butter dishes, cream jugs and plain table sets. With the establishment of a mould department more ambitious designs could be attempted. The mould department grew out of the bottle shop with, at first, five craftsmen working in a corner of the building. By 1920 a separate department was formed which grew to eighteen strong including those involved in the maintenance of the machinery. Bagley's exhibited at the Wembley exhibition of 1924, and were given a boost when Queen Mary purchased several pieces of pattern 1122, which were subsequently called "Queen's Choice." This was a broad-fluted design, somewhat similar to the popular Chippendale glass, which was being imported into Britain from America.

Most of the items produced were the result of drawings made in the mould department. Some were adaptations of existing products made by other companies both in Britain and abroad. Others were completely novel patterns sketched from all sorts of sources. For example a cast iron flower vase from the cemetery provided the model for a geometrical flower vase (pattern 334), a Christmas card was used as the basis for two floral designs (patterns 3121/3 and 3157) and a living plant in a member of staff's garden was the inspiration behind a fruit set in the form of a leaf (pattern 3055). Litigation was also very common between the glass companies, who copied each other's designs.

If a design was successful (that is, if it could both be made quickly and would sell well) it would continue in production without too much concern whether it might look dated or not. It is therefore very difficult to tell when an individual piece was actually produced as the glass was generally unmarked and a popular line introduced in the 1930s might still be in production in the 1960s. Sometimes an attempt was made to update a design. For example, during the 1930s Bagley's introduced a black glass known as jettique. This continued in production after 1945 with the addition of red and white polka dots painted onto the surface.

The look of a piece had to come second to practical needs if production levels were to be kept high. Some lines were unpopular with the glass workers because it was difficult to reach and exceed the target number of pieces in a shift. Ordinary and bonus rates were constantly re-negotiated depending on which lines had been successful in the order books. Flower blocks and asymmetrical art deco candlesticks were very difficult to produce without a high proportion of imperfect pieces. Bloom-ring moulds were particularly awkward to drop molten

metal into. Straightforward fruit sets such as the design “carnival” (pattern 3141) could be turned out at a staggering rate of 2,400 perfect pieces per shift. The target number per shift was only 1,500.

By the 1920s, the techniques used at Bagley’s were a halfway house between the pure skill of the glass blower and the fully mechanised production lines of today. Many skills had still to be painstakingly acquired in often primitive and unhealthy conditions, for example, judging the temperature of the molten glass and the right amount to drop into the mould. The mould only gave the basic shape. Final shaping such as spinning out a vase, turning down the lip on a jug or crimping the edge of a bowl still had to be done by hand. After the glass had been gradually cooled, flattening, sandblasting and acid-etching completed the process. Sandblasting gave a slightly textured surface all over while the acid etching produced a silky opaque finish. With a concave pattern on the base of a bowl it was possible to etch the whole underside and then repolish the flat surface (flattening) to leave the concave decoration matt against a polished background (patterns 742 and 3123.)

A watershed in the company’s history came with the introduction of coloured glass under the name Crystaltint by the engineer Branscombe in the early 1930s. He experimented with opal and cloud glass, but the main tints were blue, green, pink and amber in both clear and matt finishes. As with designs and the mould departments, the batch department adopted an ad hoc approach to glass manufacture. When expensive and dangerous arsenic was being used in the production of pink glass, it was accidentally found that temporarily immersing a large potato in the batch produced a similar effect! Bagley’s crystaltint was an immediate success, and received the Royal seal of approval when Queen Mary purchased some pieces at the 1934 British Industries Fair.

In the mid-1930s some half dozen designs were commissioned from the designer Alexander Hardie Williamson, although not all were put into production. The most successful design was the Marine Bowl (pattern 3000, registered in 1937), a low circular bowl moulded with fishes and crabs. These were sometimes matted with acid so that they formed a contrast with the rest of the glass. Another design was a leaf vase (pattern 300). This could be inverted to form a lamp base, the shade of which was moulded with butterflies in panels. The shade too could be inverted to serve as a bowl. Other designs included two sets of bookends.

Chrome stands, clock mechanisms and lamp fittings were added to the glass products during the 1930s, and an enamelling department was set up. Generally speaking, as the 1930s progressed, the product range became wider and more ambitious. Designs ranged from some that were distinctly art deco with the emphasis on abstract geometrical form to others that harked back to older shapes and styles of decoration. The general appearance was heavier and cruder than the range produced by Jobling’s, which was aimed at a more sophisticated and wealthy market.

A great event during this period was the Royal visit to Knottingley by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth on 21st October 1937 during which the Queen was presented with one of the Marine Bowls. A souvenir booklet was produced to mark the occasion, and a special commemorative pressed glass plate was brought out which was presented to the firm’s employees and the school children of Knottingley. This plate was remoulded to commemorate a subsequent royal visit to Canada, and sold there in large numbers.

During the Second World War the company was involved in turning steel shell cases on their lathes as well as making battery containers for the RAF, the Post Office and for railway signalling equipment. The mainstay of the department during the war was the regular supply to the army canteens of beer glasses to make up for the enormous amount of breakage. In fact they were unable to keep up with demand from the armed forces! It is interesting to note that with the discovery of the atomic bomb at the end of the war the Government confiscated some three tons of uranium rich material which had been regularly used throughout to give a yellow tint to green glass.

In 1945 the decoration department resumed activities by merely hand-painting dots on black glass, designing stencils for retailers of milk bottles and putting bought-in transfers on jugs and tankards. The weights and measures department had a separate lockable workshop to acid-etch levels on tankards. Glass items were described as for use with food to avoid tax, eg. ashtrays looking like butter pats and vases with narrow necks marked as for “celery”!

Increased post-war affluence gave the crystal department some new outlets. They produced plain glass boxes for Electrolux refrigerators and ornate covers for the internal lights of motorcars. The decline and eventual closure of the crystal works in 1975 is attributed to the lack of availability of skilled labour, which had turned to newer industries where pay and conditions had overtaken those in the glass industry, for example, the construction of Ferrybridge C power station. A transfer to the production of plastics was considered but never implemented. Bagley's was taken over by Jackson's, which in turn became part of the Rockware group, which is still in business today.