

The Stepney Chinese porcelain armorial service delivered

15 March 2010

The Stepney Chinese porcelain armorial service has been described by the late David Sanctuary Howard, the outstanding expert in this field as 'arguably one of the finest services of this mid century date'.

It will be delivered to National Museum Cardiff tomorrow (Tuesday 16 March 2010) where it will be put on display later this year.

During the 18th century thousands of porcelain table services (perhaps as many as 5,000) decorated with coats of arms were ordered from China by wealthy British families. Only a very small number of these – less than 50 – were ordered by Welsh families and this group of 125 pieces (from a service that originally consisted of 366 pieces) is easily the most impressive survivor from Wales – indeed, one of the most impressive of all surviving Chinese armorial services.

What is particularly exciting about this service now is that it has just been acquired by the Carmarthenshire Heritage Regeneration Trust, thanks to funding by the National Heritage Memorial Fund, a substantial anonymous donation, support from Llanelli Town Council and Friends of Llanelli Museum so that it can be returned to Llanelly House, the Stepney family home for which it was originally commissioned 250 years ago. Once the restoration of the house is complete in 2012, the service will be placed on public view.

Also of great interest is an inventory of the contents of Llanelly House, dated 1764 and written by Sir Thomas Stepney, 6th Baronet (1725-1772). This was discovered recently in the Carmarthenshire Record Office and lists the service under the heading 'Tea Table China with the arms came to Llanelly ... 1762', the dinner wares following the tea wares in separate sections. Delivery of the completed service would have taken about two years from the time of the order, so this proves that the service was commissioned for his house in Llanelli by Sir Thomas Stepney in about 1760. It is extremely unusual to have a surviving contemporary inventory listing a Chinese armorial service in such detail.

The service is also unusual in that it includes two different shapes of dinner wares, octagonal and circular, which are used for the plates, soup plates, serving dishes and matching tureens. The service also includes trencher salts (small individual salt dishes), cruet bottles, sauceboats, mugs, a punch bowl, a wash basin and gullet (water bottle), and coffee and tea services.

Until the restoration of Llanelly House is complete in 2012, the service will be placed on loan at the National Museum in Cardiff, where part of the service will be put on public view.

William Wilkins, Special Advisor to the Llanelly House Project said: "This acquisition will be a huge advantage to the appeal of Llanelly House, to the general public and to tourists. It will help draw people into the town centre when Llanelly House opens in 2012."

Carole Souter, Chief Executive of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, added: "This is an extremely well-travelled dinner service having spent time on three continents over the last two centuries. The purchase of the collection means it will finally be coming home to Wales where it will go on display for everyone's enjoyment."

Amgueddfa Cymru operates seven national museums across Wales. These are National Museum Cardiff, St Fagans: National History Museum, National Roman Legion Museum, Caerleon, Big Pit: National Coal Museum, Blaenafon, National Wool Museum, Dre-fach Felindre, National Slate Museum, Llanberis and the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea.

Further information

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