

OffCuts

Lifestyle news from Stourbridge Glass Museum
and the British Glass Foundation

STOURBRIDGE
GLASS MUSEUM



Stourbridge Glass Museum – how it came into being.

The remarkable tale of the period from the formation of BGF in 2010 to SGM official opening in 2013.
Now available direct from the museum. All proceeds to BGF.

Edn. 4 Dated 20.8.24
With *GlassCuts* 250

A Special Edition to accompany **GLASSCUTS AT THE 250 MILESTONE**

RHAPSODY IN BLUE

One great industry; one man's mission to promote it.

If only this were a tabloid newspaper I could get away with a banner headline in three-inch bold lettering proclaiming '*Stourbridge does it again*' or something similar. Anything to get Freddie Starr and his hamster off the front page. It certainly merits being shouted from the rooftops, but neither we nor the industry's practitioners are like that; it's all the more understated because here in the Black Country we tend to let the achievements speak for themselves.

So, the celebrations surrounding *GlassCuts* reaching its 250 milestone offer a timely, if reserved opportunity to also celebrate the near-completion of a hugely significant new work that traces its origins to around the same time as our modest little ol' email bulletin. Though you may conceal your light under a bushel, it doesn't hurt every now and then to remind people just where your bushel is, thus allowing you, our Dear Reader, to decide for yourself on its significance. Here goes ...

The 2024 interpretation of the Naples Vase is approaching its finishing stages right now as we speak. It is the culmination of more than a decade of deliberations that have ultimately led to this latest exemplar of the talents that still power the Stourbridge Glass industry. Once again, the glassmakers and artists of our world-renowned region on the southwest fringe of the Black Country have created a superb contemporary piece that will reinforce the reputations both of those who crafted it and the area in which they ply their trade. The completed vase will be lodged at Stourbridge Glass Museum for the pleasure and inspiration of others and we are delighted to present the story behind it. And, as the final International Festival of Glass ever to be held at Stourbridge looms into view before moving elsewhere, we reckon this makes it an ideal time to stamp our passport.



We start with a brief introduction to the Naples Vase before taking you along the route to the creation of this latest innovation based on the Roman original ...

Cameo glass essentially comprises a base layer, usually dark, overlaid by a second layer, usually light, which is then carved to reveal light relief standing on the dark background. Of course, it's not quite that simple; the cameo can be multi-layered and there are several ways of overlaying, but the principle is the same. This is different from *casings*, in which a gather of molten glass is rolled onto different coloured crystals or powder glass.



By the height of the Roman Empire glass had changed from an expensive labour-intensive novelty to a more widespread commodity with everyday functions. The Romans became very skilled in techniques such as cameo and several notable examples of their craft, notably the Portland Vase, still survive. The Portland Vase is up there with the very best of Roman cameo and is currently housed in the British Museum. The full tale of how it was replicated in Stourbridge is alluded to below, but as an aside here its cognisance to our region is underlined by the remarkable statistic that of the six authenticated glass examples of the vase extant worldwide (not including porcelain variants) including the original, a remarkable tally of four have direct links with Stourbridge. These comprise two replicas in the 19th Century, one in the 21st Century (all of these made alongside or near to the canal where the new museum now sits) and a late-20th Century amphora version by Steve Bradley, who worked for a while in Stourbridge. Quite remarkable.

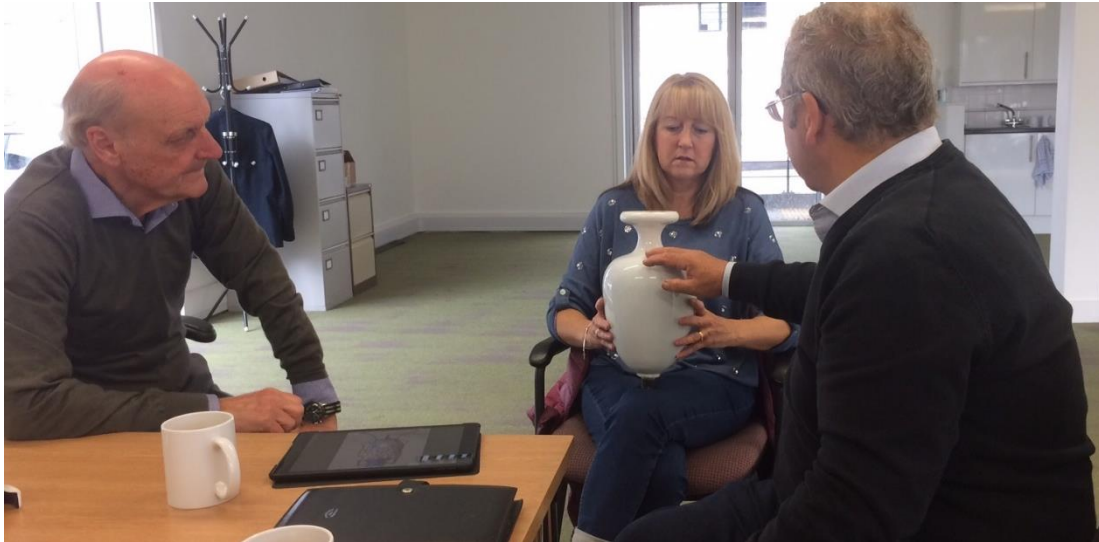
It is coincidental that as I write this there are excavations under way in Pompeii, southern Italy, where yet more treasures buried under metres of ash following the disastrous volcanic eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 are being unearthed. (*It is reckoned there is probably at least a quarter of the doomed city still to be explored - Ed*). The subject of this discourse is one such relic that was found at a previous dig in Pompeii's House of Mosaic Columns on 29th December 1837. The presence of King Ferdinand II suggests this was as part of a royal inspection. The find is currently lodged in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples. It is nowadays known as the Naples Vase.

The Naples, or 'Blue' Vase is a bi-handled amphora in opaque white over translucent cobalt blue with flora and fauna around the base. Figures around the body depict a group harvesting grapes and playing instruments. Separating the scenes are elaborate vines and birds. The vines appear to be springing from the head of Silenus, companion of Dionysus the God of wine. Like the Portland Vase, the Naples Vase is an exquisite example of high Roman craftsmanship.

Our tale now moves from AD 79 to AD 2012 when Ian Dury, now retired but formerly proprietor of Stourbridge Glass engravers and before that a Stuart Crystal man to his bootstraps, decided to demonstrate that the skills require to emulate Roman cameo were still very much alive and thriving in Stourbridge. The remarkable tale of how he achieved this and more, including an astonishing replica of the Auldjo Jug that memorably reduced one museum curator to tears of joy when he first saw it, is recounted in the official biography *The 2012 Portland Vase, replication of a masterpiece* (Sparrow Publishing 2012).

Written by Yours Truly as I shadowed the project from beginning to conclusion, copies are still available at the museum or online, so 'nuff said for now as far as that is concerned. However, an indication of Ian's intent to continue his mission beyond 2012 was afforded by an image taken from around that era which catches him bang to rights in Naples closely examining the eponymous vase. Hmmm, how does that fit into the Master Plan? ... let us investigate further into this intriguing affair...

BGF Chairman Knowles (GK) is no glassmaker but he certainly has glass in his genes; his father was an avid cameo collector and the cameo room at the former Broadfield House Glass Museum contained a number of family pieces. Mr. Knowles Snr. had also commissioned a small version of the Naples Vase with a metal base that was influenced by the original. So now we know how the seeds were set when GK, knowing of Ian's interest beyond the Portland Vase provided a letter of support dated 30.8.2012 (at the height of promoting the 2012 PV, which had only recently been completed) should Ian wish to pursue this new venture. Ian approached Terri-Louise College who had engraved the Portland Vase replica (*we featured Terri and her work in OffCuts II dated 26.4.24*) but due to other commitments and, maybe, just a little bit of 'burn out' after her recent rigours, declined at that stage. Undeterred, this is when Ian visited Naples to see the original Naples Vase and came away concluding the project was viable at a future date.



Events took some time to move any further forward and by 2020 all eyes were focussed on the 'soft' opening of a certain brand-new glass museum down here in sunny Wordsley. In light of the dedication and inspirational stewardship of our Chairman GK, Ian suggested to Yours Truly that a replica Naples Vase would be an appropriate recognition of GK's efforts and leadership. The suggestion gained momentum when Terri expressed her interest in now stepping aboard.

It's looking good to go; discussions are held, funding sought, plans formulated, all as per usual for a project of this magnitude. Until, that is, the entire globe was shut down by a tiny flying mammal carrying an even tinier but deadly pernicious virus. We could only sit back helplessly in mutual anxiety and hunker down in our isolation as Covid ravaged its way across the world.

In years to come kids will be asking their parents *'what did you do in lockdown daddy?'* In GK's case he took the time to clear out his loft, as you do. And lo, what should he find tucked away up there but an enormous blue cameo with opal overlay blank complete with a lid and a base, both of which had been glued on. Amazingly, little was known about this remarkable find that had clearly been in the family for decades. GK had no knowledge of where it was produced or who had made it. There's got to be a moral here about checking your loft every now and then but you can probably work that one out for yourself.



One thing we did know is that it had the potential to become a Naples-style (*note the term*) vase. This was a huge fillip of good news which reinvigorated the proposals that had been stymied by lockdown. Back in 2012 the bulk of the cost in creating a replica Portland Vase went in producing the blanks. For starters, more than one was required in order to cover possible breakages during engraving; Daniel Hancox, who blew the blanks for the Northwood replica of 1876, is said to have made a couple of dozen or so. Even then, the selected vase cracked before completion by Northwood in 1876 and had to be glued by Edwin Grice using 'coaguline', most likely a sticky composition of rendered animal bone. For this latest project we only had the one blank, which was a bit daunting, but at least the considerable costs of blowing would drop out of the equation.

Another consideration lay in the 2012 PV blanks being made specifically to requirements whilst here we had a vase of unknown origin and purpose that was evidently never intended as a NV *replica*. It could be shaped and ground to look more the part - which, eventually, it was - but in the interests of maintaining the project's probity it was felt this should be considered more of a stylised *interpretation*.

So far, so good and a soaking in water for 48 hours saw the animal glue on our blank dissolved away, releasing both lid and base. Oops, not quite so good; the base broke during removal. No problem, we can manage without that. Onwards and upwards.



With kind agreement of GK to fund the next phase, it was off to the grinders to refashion the blank ready for the attentions of Terri. Restoration expert Richard Lamming, based at Ruskin Glass Centre in Amblecote, was the man for this phase. He skilfully fashioned the base out of the existing retaining peg that was still glued into the bottom, reduced the size of the top rim and skimmed the overall outer opal case thickness. If you've never tried grinding layers of glass, take my word that it's darned hard work; Richard certainly earned his corn on this one. The result was a blank that now actually looked something like the Naples Vase, so a job well done.



Reverting to the images and information he accrued all those years beforehand in Naples, Ian and Terri developed the engraving plans. Easier said than done; transferring 2D plans onto a 3D vase that doesn't quite match the 3D original is a recipe for sleepless nights. Sometimes I'm glad I'm just the geezer who writes about these things.



It's in the shape of an amphora, meaning it won't stand up on its own. Cue Blacksmith Gary Hodgetts, also based at the Ruskin Centre, who made the stand for the 2012 Portland Vase and who has graciously agreed to do likewise for this one in the style of the original. In order to take accurate measurements the stand can't be started until the vase is complete, but it's otherwise all in hand.



Thus did it come to pass that as 2023 melted its way into 2024, Terri (who by now was based at Stourbridge Glass Museum as our resident cameo engraver) came to work one January morning to find a big lump of blue glass with opal overlay lying across her desk. Armed with nothing more than the plans, her trusty pneumatic dentist's drill and an unfathomable level of talent, she downed her coffee, rolled her sleeves up and commenced the first of many sessions engraving. As with the 2012 Portland vase, this most likely represents the first occasion that a female ever got her hands anywhere near carving a Naples Vase, especially the original which would have almost certainly been crafted by a male. The handles are to be added by a local glass artisan when Terri has finished her engraving. She will be on hand throughout the International Festival of Glass demonstrating her talents on the vase, with the finished item projected to be formally launched in Autumn 2024.



Et voilà. The sequential images tell the story better than I ever could. There you have it, the 2024 interpretation of the Roman Naples Vase, courtesy of 21st Century glassmaking talents. Another masterpiece, made in Stourbridge. It just doesn't get more inspirational than this.



Cameo survivors

Citing a definitive number of cameo items that have endured from Roman times, notwithstanding there may be those as yet undiscovered or unrecorded, is no mean feat. Presently, there are understood to be fifteen Roman cameo glass artifacts, including vessels and large plaques, which are more or less complete. This rises to sixteen if one considers as genuine a Portland Vase-like relic that touched on the market briefly some two or three years ago. There are then several smaller objects such as medallions, ring settings and so forth, followed by a larger number of fragments. A recent count of all these - many of which are very small - identified 377. The overall total, including every scrap and morsel, is thus believed to be somewhere just shy of 400. *Extract, The 2012 Portland Vase Project (Sparrow Publishing).*

The author gratefully acknowledges all involved in the production of this feature, with particular thanks to Graham Knowles, Ian Dury, Terri-Louise College and Lynn Boleyn MBE. Special thanks on behalf of the team to Richard Lamming who shaped the monster GK blank into something more resembling a Naples Vase. The 2024 Naples Vase is expected to be officially launched in Autumn 2024. It will then be on display in perpetuity in Stourbridge Glass Museum as an indicator of the talents still thriving in what continues to be one of the foremost and innovative glass-producing areas in the world.

Join us again soon for more *OffCuts*. In the meantime, *Keep it Glass*.

GF@BGF
Summer 2024