

Kingston Local History Society event, 22 November 2018: The life and Times of William Cookworthy, 1705-1780, an introduction to the man and his times.

This was presented jointly by Angela Taylor and Liz Hext, members of the University of the Third Age (UEA), after a beautiful and apt musical presentation by our own John Connor and his Silvington duo partner, Tricia Moore.

Guy Walker new Chairman spoke of the enormous contribution made by Jennie Stanley, the previous Chair. Key points of the presentation included:-

1. The life of Cookworthy spanned the reigns of four monarchs of the Georgian period and, although his main legacy is in the production of porcelain, he was also both a wide-ranging entrepreneur and polymath. During his lifetime, Britain was '*bubbling*' with the development of commerce, industry and science, in conjunction with the growth of the British Empire and a rising middle class with money to spend.
2. He was born into a Quaker family, the eldest of 7 children, and practised and promoted the main tenets of that religion – spiritualism, prison reform, abolition of slavery, hospitableness, sobriety, industriousness - and the production of chocolate. He was also a prodigious tea drinker, allegedly consuming up to 54 cups in a day of the "*cup that cheers but does not inebriate*"
3. He was described in relation to John Opie's portrait of him as "*The Cornish Wonder*" in reflection of his prodigious talent. He was the eldest of 7 children and, after his father lost all his wealth in the 'South Sea Bubble', he was sent to school in Exeter and at the age of 15 was introduced to the Bevan family in London, all to support his mother's ambitions for her son. He walked the 200 miles from Devon to London to take up an apprenticeship with the Bevan business, whereby he was housed and fed but not clothed. In addition to his demanding work role, he read widely, becoming self-taught in the sciences and classics. The Bevans were effectively apothecaries (*making up medicines and treating ailments*) and were also mineralogical chemists. On completion of his apprenticeship, Cookworthy was sent back to Plymouth to run 'Bevan and Cookworthy' which became a business success due to his connections with the navy and supplying its ships. Whilst there, he took on two of his brothers as apprentices and developed his interest in minerals, also producing a fearsome form of gripe water. In 1735, he became a partner in the business.
4. In the same year, he married a Quaker woman from Taunton and they had 5 children, one of whom died of smallpox and another with brittle bones. In 1745, his wife died and Cookworthy moved to Looe in Cornwall, grief-stricken and unable to work. His mother came to help with the children and Cookworthy developed an interest in mysticism and the afterlife, transcribing the Latin writings of Emanuel Swedenborg.
5. During the C18, porcelain was introduced to the UK (*probably due to the trading of the East India Company*) and was a major and valuable product. Cookworthy established his manufacturing base in the China House in Plymouth.
6. He travelled on horse across Devon and Cornwall, preaching and benefiting from the hospitality of Quaker families, whilst searching for China Clay. He discovered a source of kaolin but under experimentation, this proved not to be good enough for porcelain production. However, his factory produced successful pieces (1758-1760), with a patent granted in 1768 and a subsequent transfer of the Cookworthy factory to Bristol. Production ceased in 1778 due to competition. Cookworthy discovered how to extract cobalt blue and to use it in popular glass. He also devised '*hydronic cement*' used in the building of the lighthouse off Plymouth Hoe.
7. Cookworthy had a wide circle of acquaintance, including Captain Cook, Joshua Reynolds, Dr Johnson, Smeaton, Lords Elliot and Edgcombe, and Joseph Bank (*famed botanist*). He entertained guests in his large family house on Notte Street in Plymouth (*now a bar, although the inscription confirming his residency is still visible*) On his death, he was buried behind the Plymouth Quaker Meeting house and his body was later disinterred and moved to Efford.

His legacy is reflected in the description of him as “**A philosopher without pride; a Christian without bigotry**” and “**The most loved, kind and sensible man I know. The most refined and accomplished man**”; and in a coloured portrait in a window in Plymouth Guild Hall.

More information about Cookworthy, including examples of his porcelain and other artefacts, is located in the Cookworthy Museum in Kingsbridge (originally funded by English China Clay) and in Plymouth Museum). Kingsbridge recently acquired a first edition of Johnson's dictionary owned by Cookworthy and a cane given to him by the actor, David, Garrett.