

An Article on the value of the Wedgwood Museum by **Hon. Dr Tristram Hunt, MP**

(Member for Stoke-upon-Trent Central) originally published in [The Observer](#) newspaper on June 27th.

On the southern edge of Stoke-on-Trent, deep within the sprawling Barlaston complex of the Wedgwood business, lies one of Britain's greatest treasure troves. Here stands a museum dedicated to 'The People Who Have Made Objects of Great Beauty from the Soils of Staffordshire.' And we need to do everything we can to save it.

The Wedgwood Museum goes far beyond telling the extraordinary life of the manufacturer, agitator, inventor, internationalist and salesman Josiah Wedgwood. It describes the advent of industrialisation, the nature of the English Enlightenment, and how the French Revolution and struggle against slavery reverberated through 'The Potteries.' This is a compelling account of Britain through a company and its collection.

We are guided through the eighteenth-century consumer revolution – when the British public began to use cutlery, drink tea, and decorate their homes – through an array of pipes, teapots, plates and vases. This is a commercial as much as aesthetic history, with succinct guides to earthenware, creamware and then Jasper and basalt production as well as the changing fads of rococo, chinoiserie and neo-classical.

The ceramics collection is indubitably amongst the finest in the world with some 8,000 objects on display, testifying both to Wedgwood's genius and the company's productivity. From black jasper Portland designs to bone china tea-sets and Robert Adam-designed vases. Wedgwood himself died in 1795, but the museum charts how the firm prospered by responding to the Victorian cult of the home, the Great Exhibition, the growth of Empire and the changing fads of Grecian, Egyptian and Oriental styling.

For me, the museum's greatest treat lies with its twentieth-century artefacts. The extensive social history of Wedgwood and The Potteries is well recounted, with a particular focus on the role of women within the industry. But, even better, there is a stunning display of Eduardo Paolozzi plates and Eric Ravillious coronation designs. Here, instantly, one understands how the Wedgwood business retained its place at the forefront of global markets and changing aesthetics. And with the business's new order for the 2012 Olympics, there are now signs of renewed success.

Crucially, the Wedgwood family and business has always had a keen sense of its place in history. The firm opened its first museum in 1906 and, since its acquisition of Royal Doulton, it has also housed the highly valuable Minton Archive. So, what sits on the Barlaston site is not just a collection of vases and tea-sets; not just a remarkably lucrative deposit of intellectual capital which future designers and ceramicists will wish to exploit. It is also the story of the people of the Potteries – their creativity, industriousness, manufacturing identity, and civic pride. We can't let all this fall into the grasping hands of Christie's.

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