

Thomas Webb Glass: from the [Glass Encyclopedia](#)

Thomas Webb & Sons Glass: A short explanation

Thomas Webb was the son of a successful Stourbridge farmer; he was a partner in several glassworks in the Stourbridge area near Birmingham, England in the first half of the 19th century including the Wordsley Flint Glassworks, the White House Glassworks, and Platts Glassworks. In 1855 he moved his company to the new Dennis Glassworks and a few years later changed the company name to Thomas Webb and Sons and welcomed into the business his sons, Thomas Wilkes Webb and Charles Webb.

The company specialised in high quality engraved crystal glass and also speciality colored glass. Frederick E. Kny was a glass engraver from Bohemia who worked for Webb from 1860 until 1896. He joined the company at the age of 27 and had his own separate workshop within the factory. William Fritsche joined Thomas Webb and Sons at the age of 15 in 1868, and having trained as a glass engraver he too had his own workshop within the factory until he died in 1924. Kny and Fritsche were the most famous and successful of the crystal glass engravers at Thomas Webb's, and examples of their engraved glass can be found today in the world's leading glass museums, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Corning Museum in the USA.

The designs and the engravings in the second half of the 19th century at Thomas Webb's were predominantly classical, Greek, or mythological. In 1878 Thomas Webb & Sons were the only company awarded a Grand Prix for glass in the Paris International Exhibition, and the official catalogue of this exhibition described the company as "the best makers of Crystal Glass in England, and consequently in the world".

Up until that time (the late 1870s) the engraved part of a glass vessel was normally left unpolished to give a clear distinction between the design and its surrounding polished surface. Kny and Fritsche developed a style of engraving called "Rock Crystal" in which the engraving was deeper and the entire surface including the engraved areas was polished. Thomas Webb & Sons advertised "rock crystal" glass in 1878, and they led the way in this kind of engraving. It became very popular and was produced by many other glassworks, including the nearby Stevens and Williams.

A completely different technique of engraving glass was also very popular in the Stourbridge area from the 1870s onwards. John Northwood

developed techniques of cameo engraving, where an outer layer of opaque glass, usually white, was carved away to reveal the design set against a darker opaque background. J and J Northwood operated their own workshop and took commissions from other Stourbridge companies. In 1876 Thomas Webb and Sons commissioned the "Pegasus" vase (also known as the Dennis vase) from John Northwood, which took six years to complete, and was shown by Thomas Webb's in an unfinished state at the Paris International Exhibition in 1878.

The company recruited Thomas Woodall and his brother George who had worked in the J and J Northwood decorating company, to run their cameo glass workshop during the 1880s and 1890s. The arduous and tedious task of hand carving cameo designs was replaced by a combination of acid etching and wheel engraving. Their designs and technical skills evolved to an outstanding level, using the depth of cutting to emulate fine drapes and also to create a sense of distance within the beautiful scenes which were engraved onto the glass. The Thomas Webb exhibition of cameo glass which was shown at the Chicago International Exhibition of 1893 was widely acclaimed and won the company many orders from the USA.

The company was also famous for its speciality colored glass during the second half of the nineteenth century. They made a heat reactive glass called "Burmese" which was an opaque pale cream at the bottom shading to pink at the top (similar to the "Burmese" glass produced by many other UK and USA glass works); and another heat reactive glass called "Alexandrite" which was a clear glass shading from amber to deep red/purple, rather similar to Amberina glass. They made irridized glass which they called "Bronze", "Green Bronze" and "Iris"; and they also produced satin glass with enamel decoration and satin glass with air trap patterns, sometimes called "Mother of Pearl".

In 1900 the last manager from the Webb family retired, and Jackson Congreve became Managing Director. He led the company successfully for twenty years, until in 1920 a new company was formed called Webb's Crystal Glass Company which incorporated both Thomas Webb and Sons and the Edinburgh and Leith Flint Glass Company, and had its Head Office in London. Jackson Congreve retired in favor of his son, but the new regime dismissed Jackson's son and also generated considerable discontent amongst the other managers of Thomas Webb's, so much so that several of them left and formed a new company called the

Stourbridge Glass Company. There followed ten difficult years for the Thomas Webb company with several changes of managers.

In 1932 the Directors recognized that drastic action was needed to save the company from failure, and they persuaded Sven Fogelberg to leave the Kosta Glassworks in Sweden to become General Manager of Thomas Webb and Sons. He brought in sweeping changes in designs, plant, equipment, and techniques. He recruited glass blowers from Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Germany and Holland who were familiar with these more-efficient techniques and he imposed them on sometimes reluctant local glass workers.

In 1930 the Wordsley Glass Works was taken over from Henry G Richardson & Sons and its production transferred to the Dennis works. Cuts in jobs and even in remuneration were imposed during the difficult years of the 1930s, and young people were given opportunities to advance. Tom F Pitchford, for example, became the company's chief designer at the age of only 21. During the 1930s Tom Pitchford was responsible for designing some 8000 new items, and just after the war in 1947 he trained another school leaver, David Hammond, who went on in his turn to be the company's chief designer in the post war years.