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L. G. G. RAMSEY, F.S.A.

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New light on large Rockingham vases

ALWYN and ANGELA COX

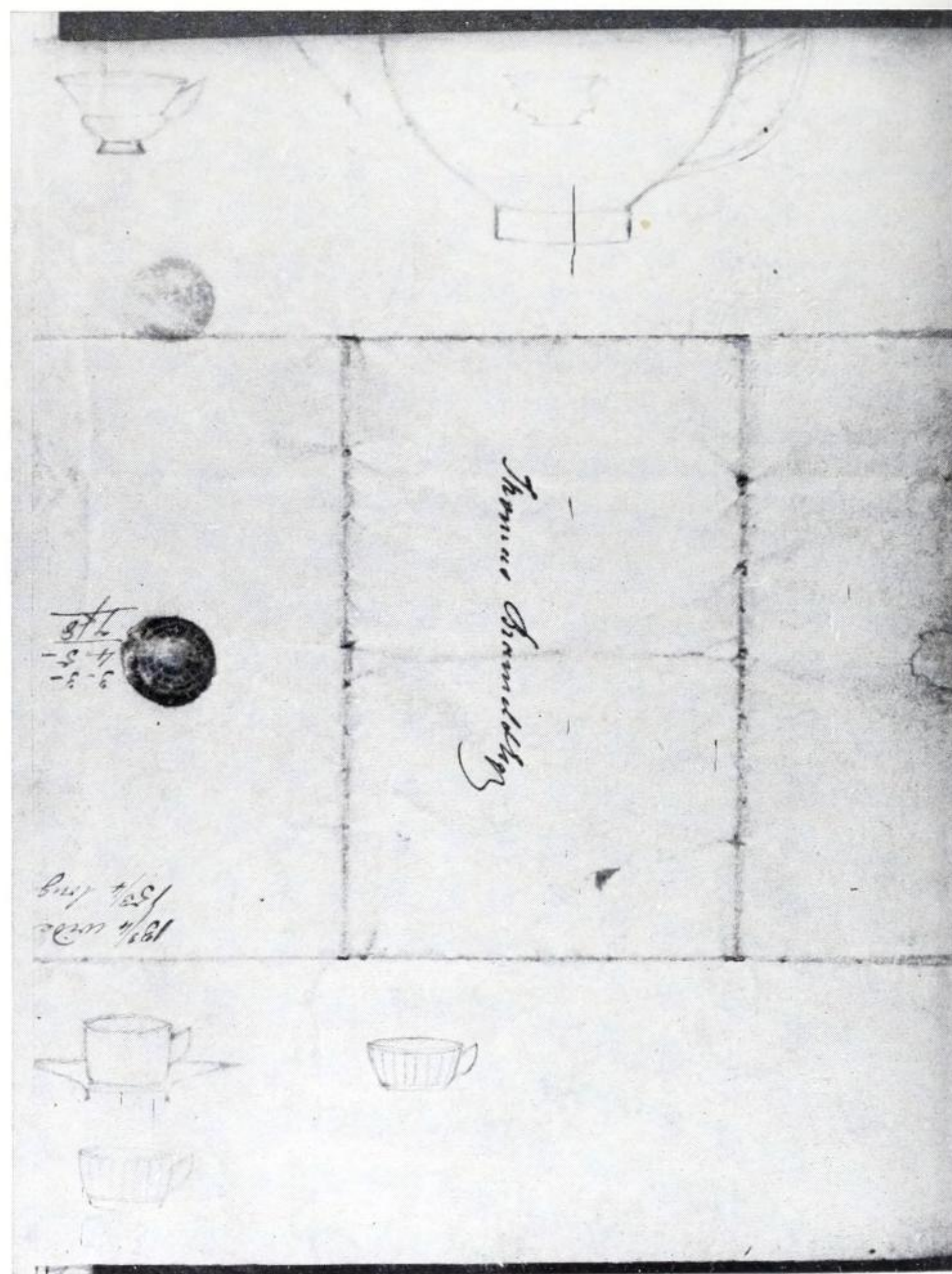
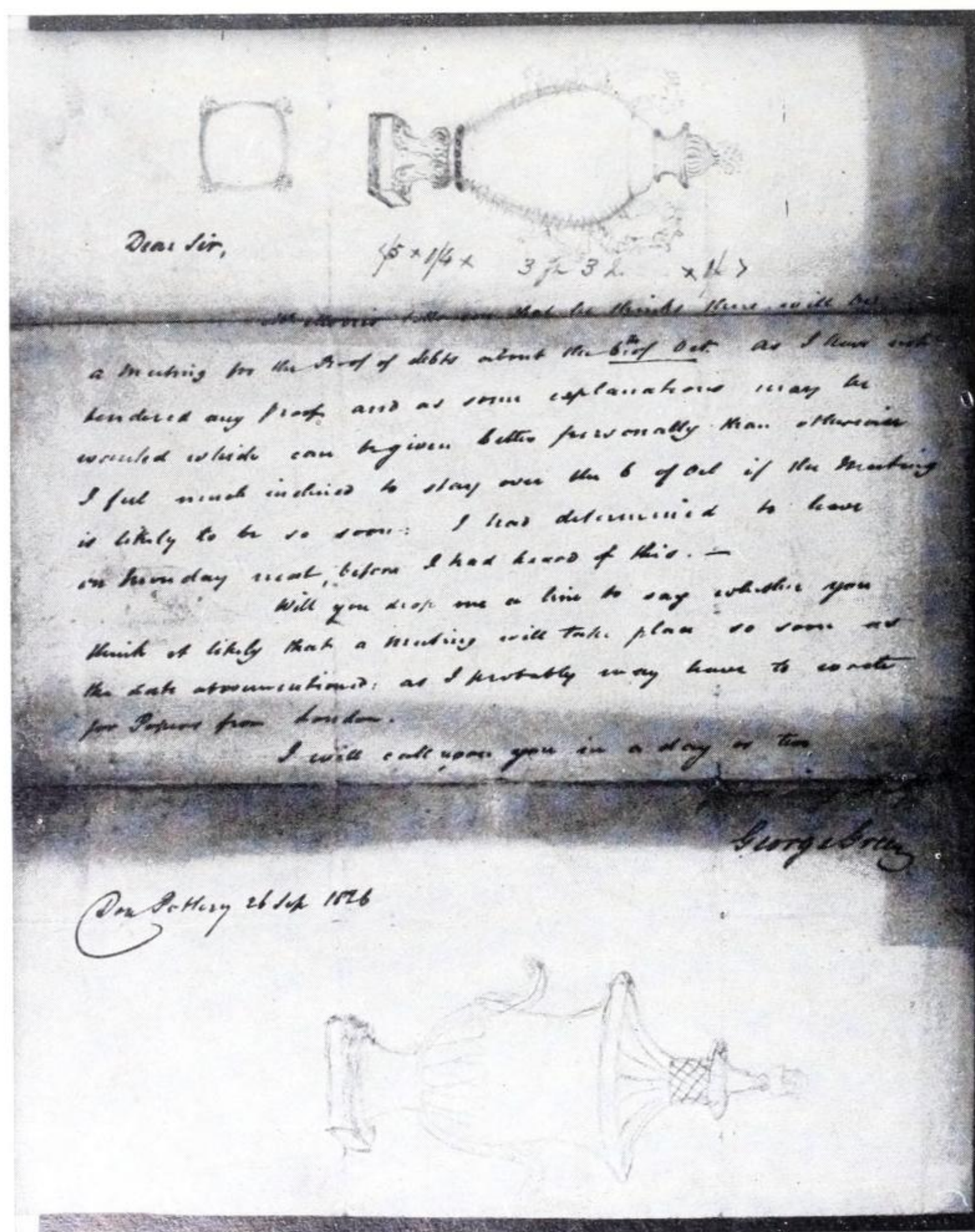
POSSIBLY the most curious pieces ever to leave the Rockingham Pottery in Swinton were the Rhinoceros and Dragon vases, both of which were of unusually large proportions and striking design. For the former vases, important documentary evidence has recently come to light (in September, 1968), whilst the latter, which until now were known only from a sketch and a brief description made by Llewellynn Jewitt, the 19th-century writer on ceramics, can now be illustrated and described in detail following the discovery of one of these vases.

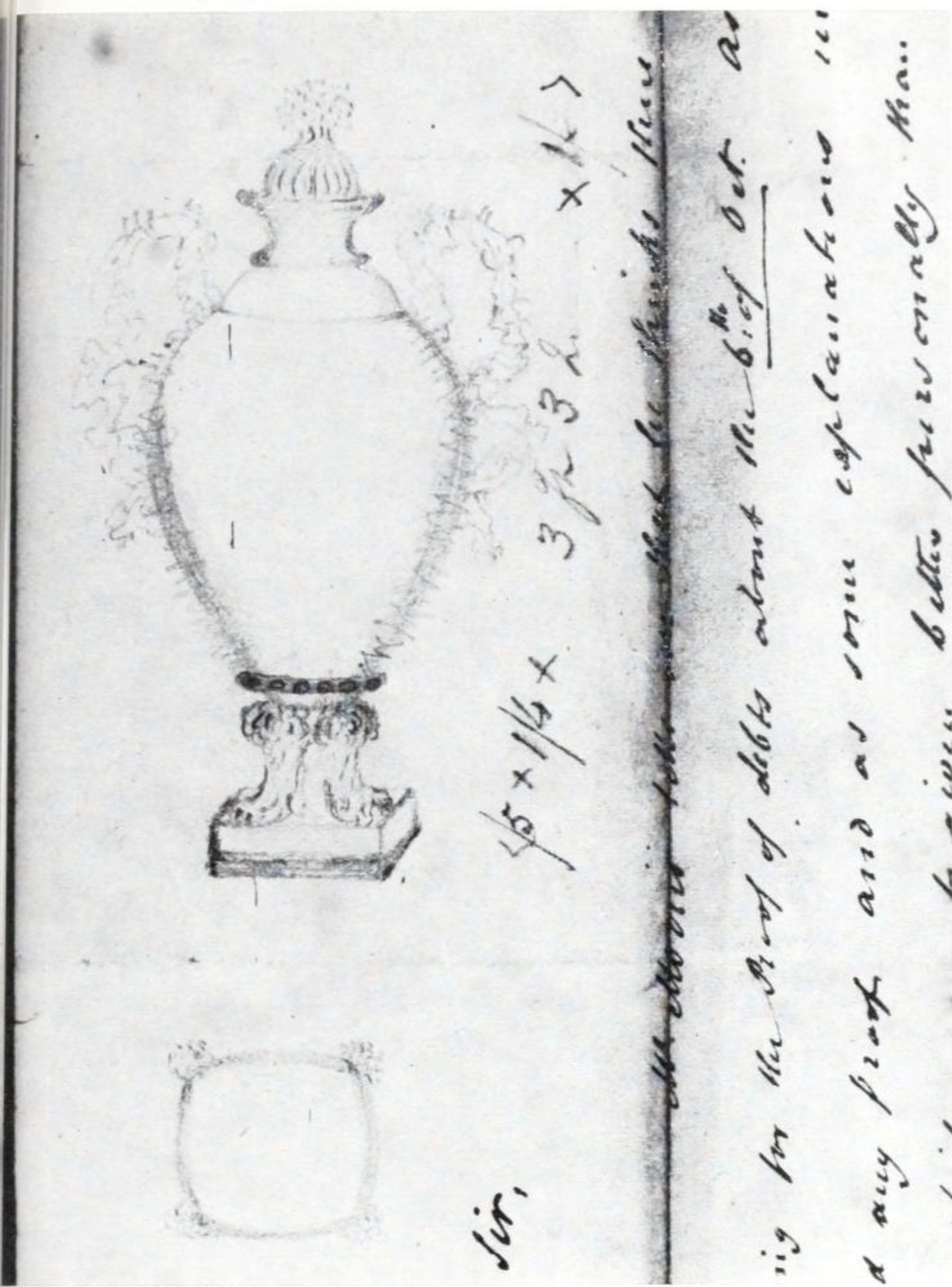
The pattern books for the decorative items produced in porcelain at the Rockingham Works are believed no longer to exist. For this reason a document in Sheffield City Libraries

(Misc. Doc. 182) is of great interest on account of several sketches it bears. This is a letter (No. 1), addressed to Thomas Brameld, the manager of the Rockingham Works, and dated 1826—a year which was to prove a turning point in the Pottery's fortunes. Since the letter must have been in his possession, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the drawings could have been done by Thomas Brameld himself, preliminary sketches of vases and tea wares idly but skilfully drawn in pencil.

One of these sketches is of a vase (No. 2) which has many characteristics in common with what are perhaps the most notable pieces ever produced at this Pottery—the two similar though not identical Rhinoceros vases, which must surely be

1. The letter written by George Green of the Don Pottery, Swinton, addressed to Thomas Brameld of the Rockingham Works, on which appear sketches of two vases together with contemporary tea wares. The letter is dated 26th September, 1826, and refers to the impending bankruptcy proceedings against the Bramelds. By courtesy of the Sheffield City Libraries.





2. Detail of the rustic handled vase illustrated in No. 1. Note points of similarity with the Rhinoceros vase seen in the colour plate. The dimensions pencilled beside the sketch would seem to indicate an intended height of 3 feet 3 inches. By courtesy of the Sheffield City Libraries.

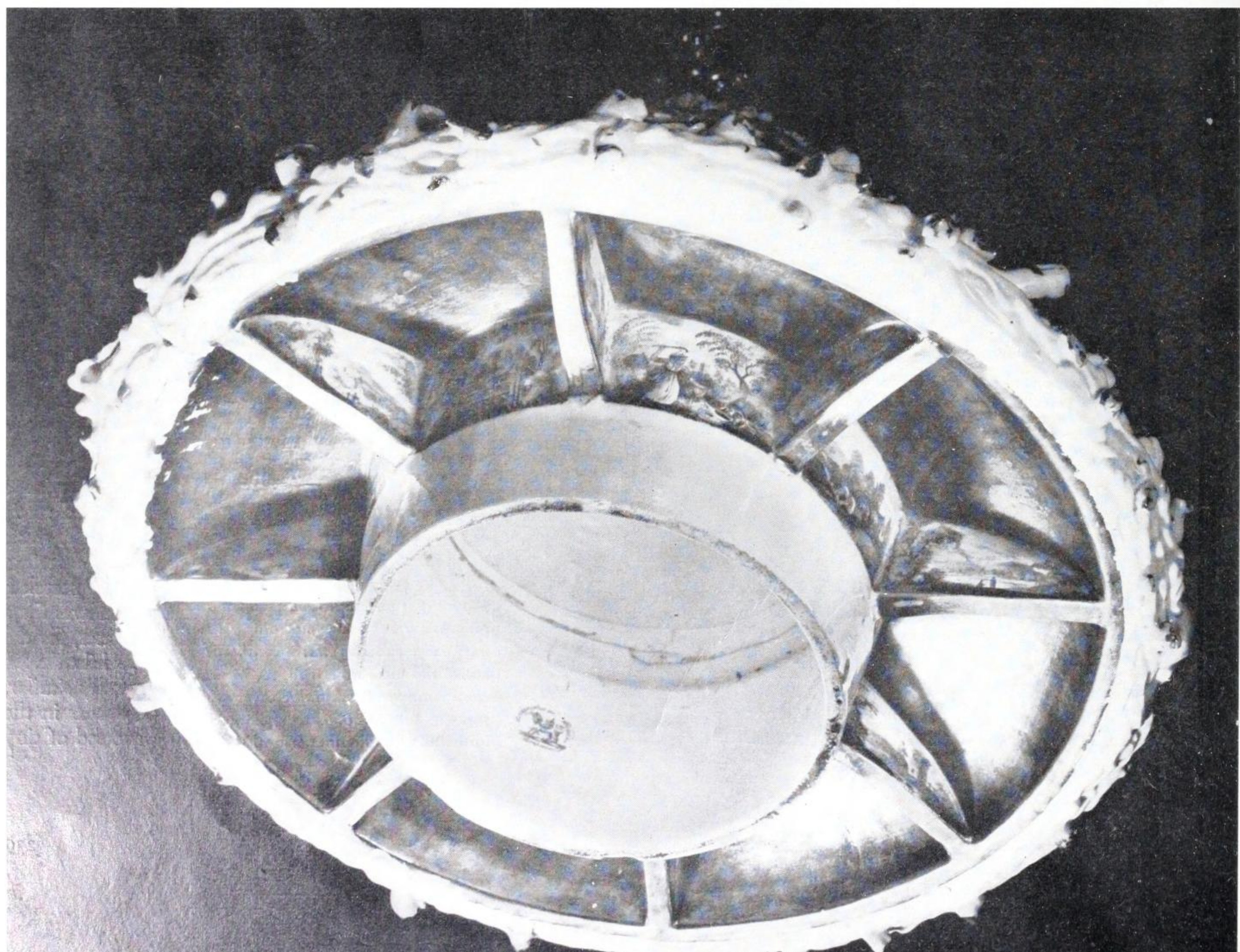
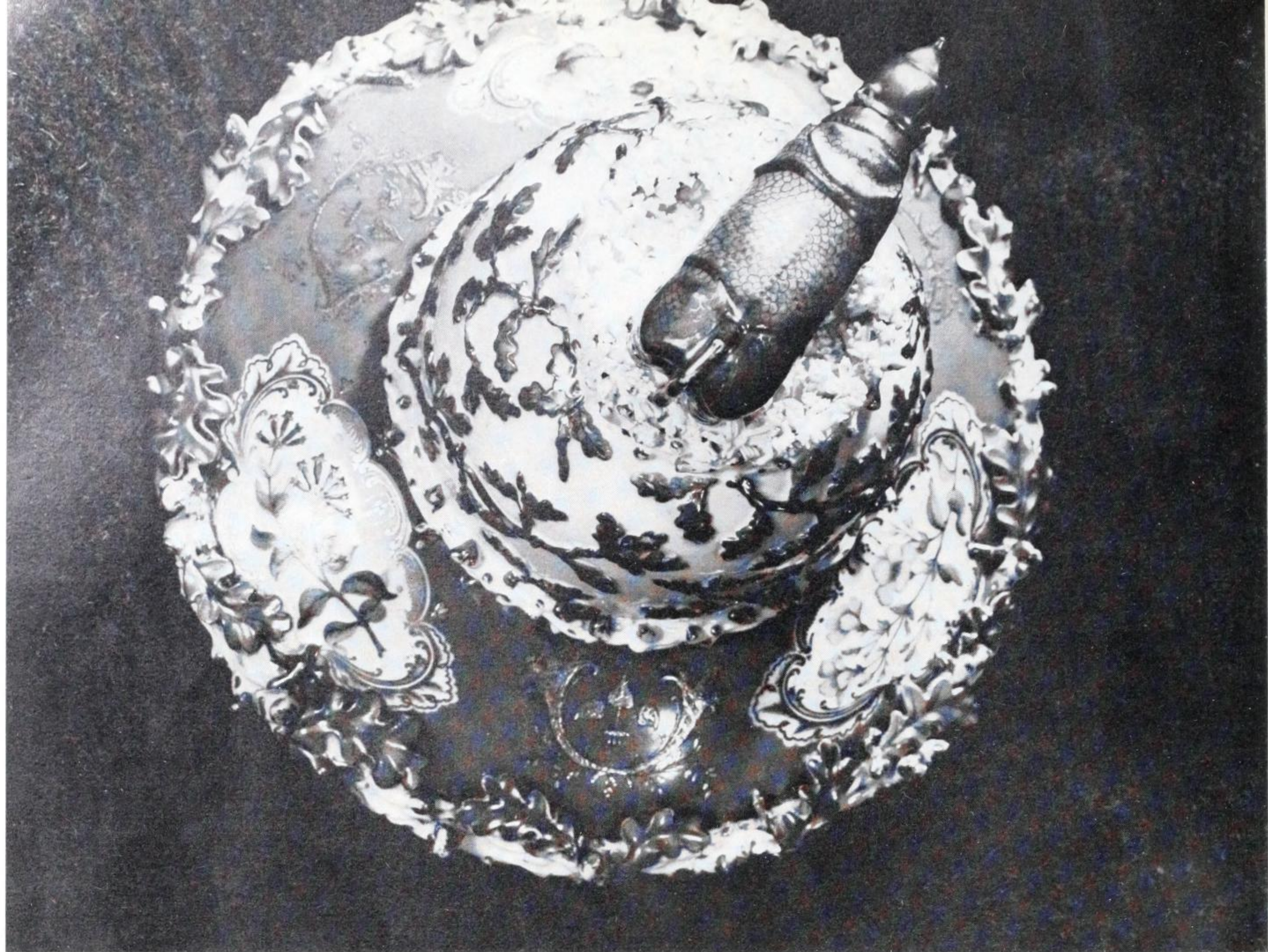


Colour Plate. The Wentworth Rhinoceros vase, polychrome enamel painting by John Wager Brameld depicting a scene from Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote*. Height 3 feet 9 inches. By courtesy of the Rotherham Municipal Museum.

amongst the most incredible pieces of ceramic art ever produced in England. One of these (see colour plate) was originally in the possession of Earl Fitzwilliam of Wentworth (1748-1833), the patron of the Pottery, from whose crest the factory mark was derived. This vase is now in the Clifton Park Museum, Rotherham. The other, which is now displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, has a somewhat obscure history and is unmarked. For the purposes of this article, only the Wentworth vase will be described in detail.

It seems very probable that one of the sketches on the letter represents a version of such a vase, perhaps a prototype, even

before it was decided to crown the finished article with a rhinoceros. The general shape is the same, the knotted rustic handles are there and the lions paw feet; although the vases themselves have three feet, not four as shown in the drawing. The significance of the measurements given beside the sketch is not altogether clear, but they indicate that the design was for a piece of the same large proportions as the existing vases, for the Wentworth example is three feet nine inches high, whilst that in the Victoria and Albert Museum, although structurally similar, is seven inches smaller. The rhinoceros does not appear in the drawing, but in the finished piece it stands on a mound of tiny



3. Two views of the cover of the Wentworth vase showing the elaborate decoration. The rhinoceros and oak leaves heavily gilt; botanical paintings in panels reversed on a blue ground. Note the painted panels on the underside of the cover and the more unusual red griffin mark of the Pottery. By courtesy of the Rotherham Municipal Museum.

shreds of porcelain (No. 3), not unlike the finial in the sketch.

All these characteristics are quite distinctive and would suggest a connection between the drawing and the vases. Moreover, the letter is dated September, 1826, and it was certainly about this time that the Wentworth vase was being made at the Pottery. The date 1826, together with the red griffin mark¹ of the Pottery, appears inside its cover (No. 3), but it seems hardly likely that it was made in the early months of that year, for bankruptcy proceedings against Messrs. Brameld and Co.—Thomas and his two brothers—were then taking place. Earl Fitzwilliam's financial support which was to enable them to continue in business, was not guaranteed at least until the summer, and although they would no doubt have been experimenting with the porcelain which was to herald their new lease of life, it is unlikely that such a major and ambitious piece—in fact the largest item in porcelain ever to have been potted in one piece in England at that time—would have been attempted with much success during the early weeks of production.² More probably it was produced after the Earl's support was given as an indication to him of the standards of which they were capable in order to win his confidence.

A local writer, Ebenezer Rhodes, who recorded a visit to the Pottery in his book *Excursions in Yorkshire*,³ mentions that he saw there the Wentworth Rhinoceros vase soon after its completion, and evidence in the work itself shows that his visit must have been made after the middle of October, and probably as late as December of 1826. There is therefore no reason why the vase sketched on the letter addressed to Thomas Brameld should not refer to an experimental piece in production during late September, perhaps an earlier version of the final vase; for certainly two are known to have been made and the first attempts at such an ambitious piece may well have met with failure. This was perhaps the reason for the slight alterations to the design before it finally attained the form in which we now know it. Certainly no other porcelain vases of this size or with these characteristics of style are known to have been made at the Rockingham Works.

The intricate scenes on the body of the Wentworth vase (No. 4), painted by one of Thomas Brameld's younger brothers, John Wager,⁴ are from the adventures of Don Quixote, a popular theme with the Bramelds, for similar scenes appear transfer-printed on their earthenware. The vase in the Victoria and Albert Museum is decorated with flower paintings attributed to Edwin Steele. It is difficult to suggest a reason for the inclusion of a rhinoceros, seemingly the most unlikely of beasts to crown a work of art. Its significance seemed very clear to certain late 19th and early 20th-century writers who found nothing to admire in the vase.⁵ Nonetheless, in its own day it was acclaimed as a wonder, the epitome of the potter's skill, and in the best of taste, as is well shown in the writings of Ebenezer Rhodes. The local newspapers of the time unfortunately do no more than quote Rhodes on the vase and so give no further insight into the reasons for the rhinoceros finial, or any other information.

The Wentworth vase has everything one might expect in a show-piece. The painting is meticulous, both in the finely detailed landscapes on the body and in the botanically accurate flowers on the cover and foot, but such is the care for finish that

virtually invisible sections beneath the cover are filled with painted scenes (No. 3). Further attention to detail is shown in the intricate and skilfully executed gilding, whilst the neck of the vase, suitably pierced for a pot-pourri container, is made in imitation of a honeycomb, over which crawl perfectly modelled bees. When one remembers that this piece was made at a time of crisis for the Bramelds, and a time too when they had only just begun to manufacture porcelain commercially, the Rhinoceros vases must be wondered at if not admired.

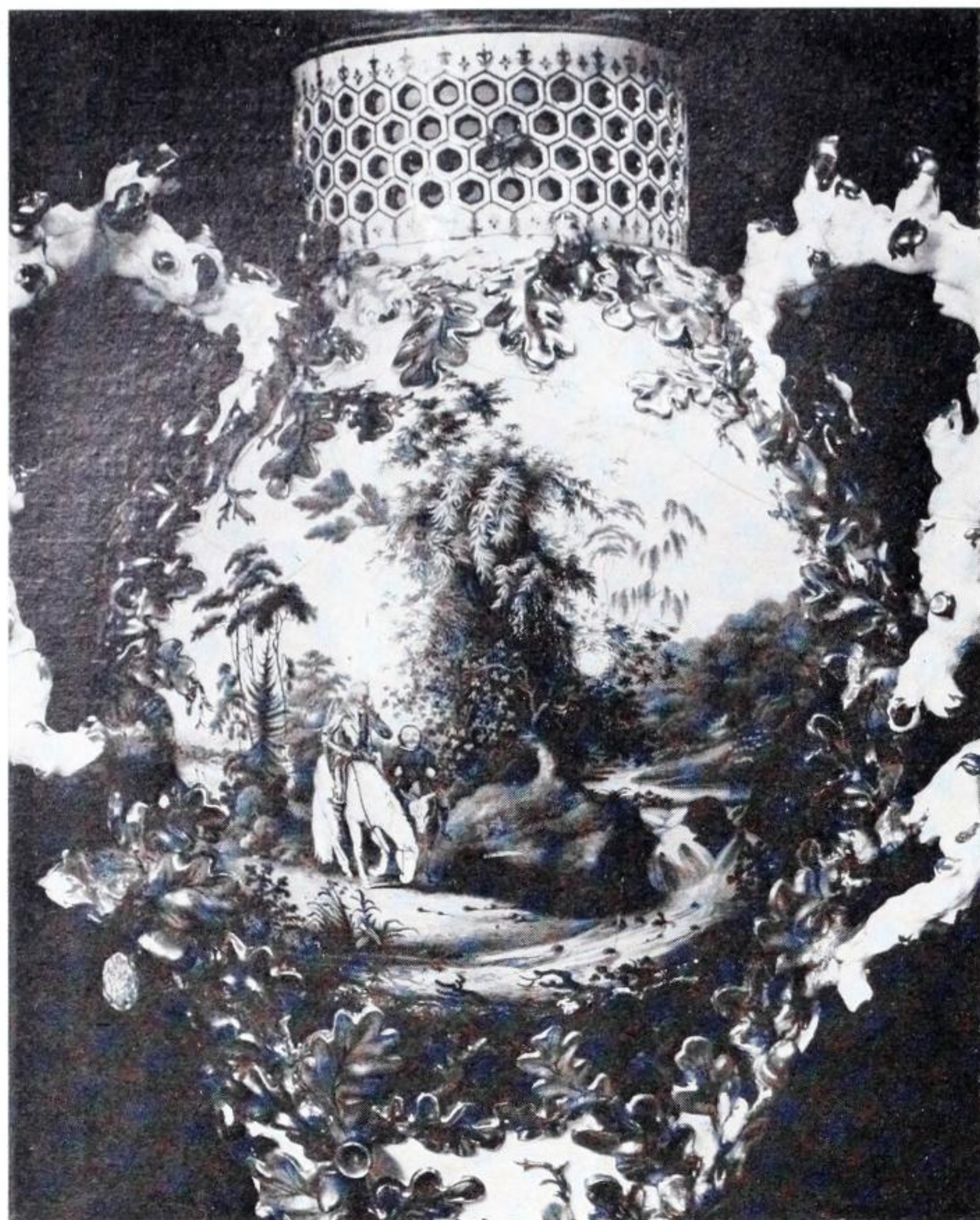
Rhodes was warm in his praise of the very high quality of the goods being produced at the Pottery in 1826, stating that, 'In fact, the tea, table and dessert wares manufactured at this place are not surpassed in quality, design and execution in any part of the kingdom.' It would seem that even in the first year of porcelain production, the standard of excellence reached was quite outstanding. The vases are proof of this, and would indeed seem to represent an attempt by the Bramelds to prove their abilities in a striking manner. Apart from the potting skill required to produce a vase of such dimensions, it embodies many of the different styles of decoration to be found on their wares throughout the period of porcelain production.

On the same letter appear sketches for tea wares⁶ and a further vase, the body of which is almost identical to the Empire style vases⁷ made at Swinton. Seen side by side, the two sketches may well represent two possible designs for a large vase—the one classical, the other neo-rococo in most of its details. It may well be that although the neo-rococo version was the one developed and ultimately produced, some features from the classical vase were incorporated. It is possible, for example, that part of the cover of the classical version represented in the drawing by hatching became the honeycomb neck of the Rhinoceros vase. Several Rockingham Empire-style vases are known, but none has a cover.

The letter on which all these sketches appear was written by George Green, proprietor of the rival Don Pottery also in Swinton; and although its content is irrelevant to this article it is worth noting the splendid irony of the situation: the drawings for the Rhinoceros vases, this most ambitious of adventures, are executed on a letter which refers to the impending bankruptcy proceedings against the Bramelds.

The Rhinoceros vases, as we have outlined, have always attracted attention, but the largest earthenware vases, the subject of the final part of this article, are in their way equally remarkable pieces. These were the Dragon or 'Infernal' vases,⁸ and the illustration (No. 5) is thought to be the first photograph of one to be published. For comparison, Jewitt's sketch of such a vase⁸ is reproduced (No. 6). It is not known when the Dragon vases were produced,⁹ or indeed, how many of them; although with reference to those mentioned by Jewitt, together with the example illustrated, which is in private ownership, at least three were made. The latter came to its present owner through a member of the family who was employed by Earl Fitzwilliam and who obtained a number of interesting items directly from the Pottery.

The Dragon vases are of the same large proportions as the Rhinoceros vases, the example shown here being three feet four inches high. Jewitt gives the height of the vase reproduced here (No. 6) as three feet four and a half inches, but one might expect a slight variation of this kind in such a large piece. The body, too, is more rounded than Jewitt's sketch would indicate, but the basic essentials are identical, with four dolphin feet, two serpentine handles and a dragon finial to the cover. The inspiration is clearly Oriental. The body is transfer-printed with the so-called 'Twisted tree' design which frequently appears on Brameld



4. Details of two other painted panels on the body of the Wentworth Rhinoceros vase depicting the adventures of Don Quixote. The honeycomb neck of the vase is clearly visible, as are the bees which crawl over it. By courtesy of the Rotherham Municipal Museum.

earthenware dinner services and which consists of a stylised tree surrounded by exotic birds and flowers touched in with bright colours. The leaves forming the neck of the vase are coloured orange on a deep blue background, whilst the dolphins, serpents, and dragons are each coloured green, blue, and red. The effect is striking if somewhat gaudy. There is no mark on the vase, but its authenticity is beyond doubt.

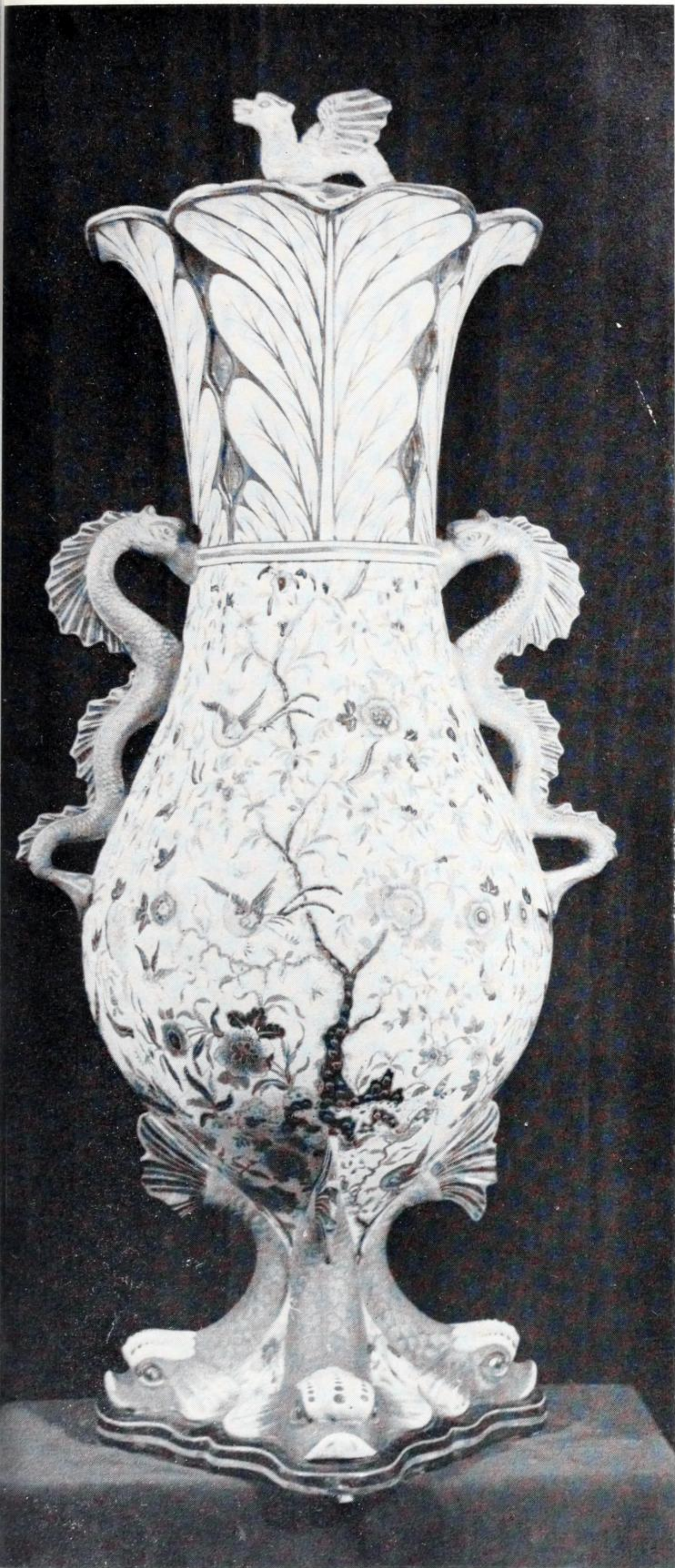
The Rhinoceros and Dragon Vases, the largest produced by the Bramelds, were certainly some of the most impressive pieces they created. The variety of their work is always surprising, the standard of perfection very high, and had the Bramelds been better businessmen their fame would no doubt have been so much the greater. As further information comes to light and more of their products are recognized, it becomes all the more apparent that their aims were too ambitious. And whereas a firm whose economic structure was sound might have thrived on such inventiveness, it was inevitable that they should fail. For imagination, artistic perfection and potting skill many pieces produced at the Swinton Works could not be equalled in their own day, but this was not enough to save the firm from further bankruptcy and final closure in 1842. In the light of what is known of the Bramelds themselves and the history of the Rockingham Pottery, these large vases, which are amongst the items for which they are particularly remembered, are of great interest.

The authors wish to express their sincere thanks to Mr. L. G. Lovell, Curator of the Clifton Park Museum, Rotherham, for illustrations of the Rhinoceros vase, and permission to publish these; similarly

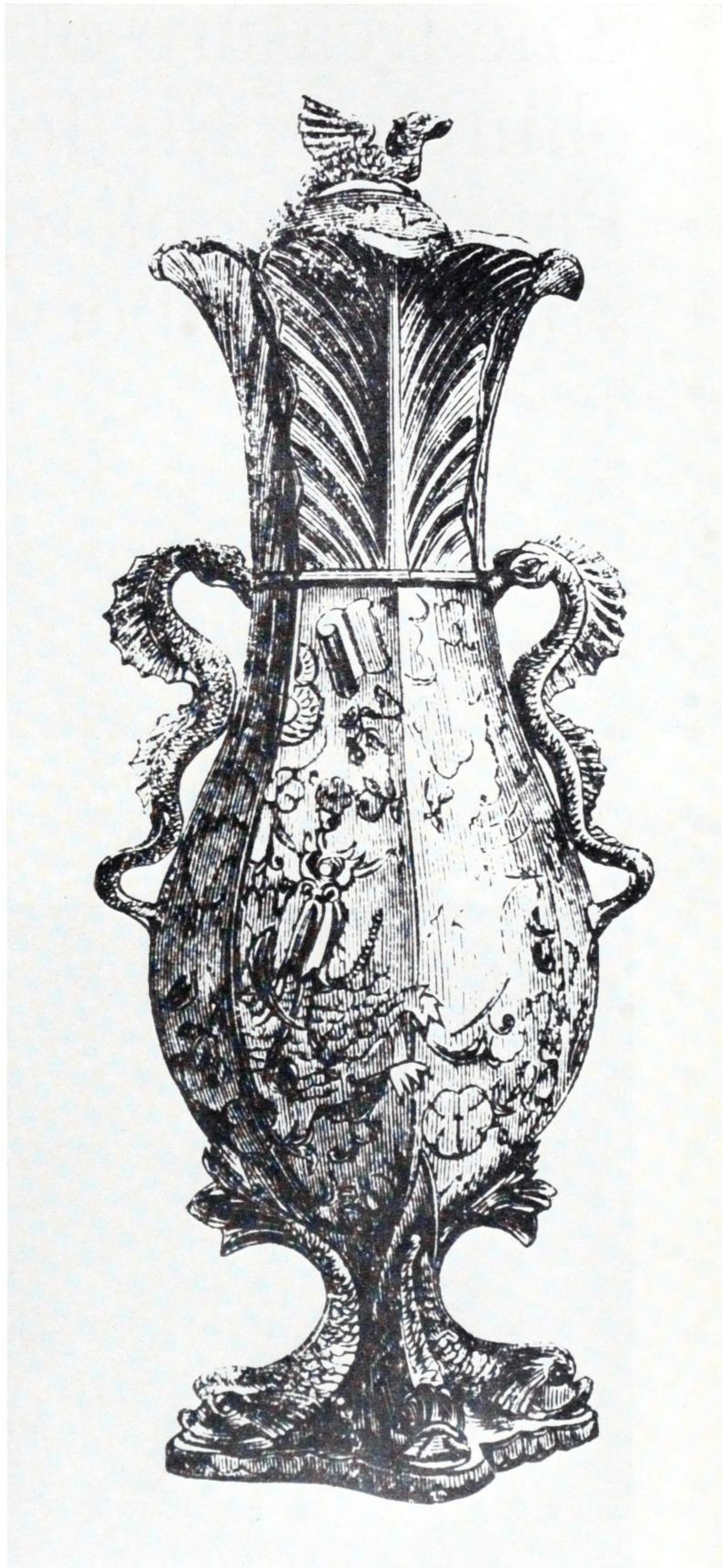
to Sheffield City Libraries for photographs of the letter. They also wish to thank the owner of the Dragon vase for bringing this piece to their notice and for permission to publish details. Finally, they wish to thank Mr. A. Gebbie of York University for assistance in the preparation of the photographs of the Dragon vases.

NOTES

1. This version of the red mark in which the words *Rockingham Works* encircle the griffin instead of appearing beneath it occurs only rarely. The griffin itself is different, being statant instead of passant and it was probably in use for only a very limited period. This would explain its rarity and suggests that the pieces on which it appears were made in the early days of porcelain production at Swinton.
2. That 1826 may be taken as the first year of porcelain production for public sale is fully substantiated by the researches of A. A. Eaglestone and T. A. Lockett and published in their book *The Rockingham Pottery* (1964)—see p.96. This work gives a detailed history of the pottery and a description of many of its wares.
3. E. Rhodes. *Excursions in Yorkshire* (1826), p.153 et seq.
4. L. Jewitt. *Ceramic Art in Great Britain* (1878), p.512.
5. See, for example, E. Dillon, *Porcelain* (1904), p.372.
6. The tea wares are examples of the services which Rhodes mentions were already of such good quality. The very deep saucer is typical of the tea wares made during the red griffin period (1826-30), as is the distinctive handle shape. One cup is shown with moulded fluting on the body, and although no specimen of this design is known to the authors, there is a description of a cup which was at one time in the Museum of Practical Geology in London. This cup is listed as item number M.9 in the 1876 catalogue of this Museum's collection where it is described as having a ribbed body. This piece was red griffin marked.
7. An example of such a vase, in the collection of Sheffield City Museum, is illustrated in *Rockingham Ornamental Porcelain* (1965), by D. G. Rice, p.98.
8. L. Jewitt. *Ceramic Art in Great Britain* (1878), p.513.
9. The Pottery, under the proprietorship of the Bramelds, was in operation from 1806 to 1842, when the firm was finally declared bankrupt, and throughout this period earthenware is believed to have been in continuous production.



5. Dragon vase in earthenware. Unmarked. Height 3 feet 4 inches. By courtesy of the owner.



6. Sketch of a Dragon vase by Llewellynn Jewitt and reproduced from his *Ceramic Art in Great Britain* (1878). Height 3 feet 4½ inches.