SIR EDMUND H. ELTON, Bart.,

AT WORK IN HIS MODELLING-ROOM AT CLEVEDON COURT.

Photograph, Hazell, Clevedon.

Elton Ware.

BY SIR EDMUND H. ELTON, BART.

THE beginnings of "Elton Ware" date from about the year 1880, and were on this wise. At the date mentioned I was blankly ignorant of ceramics, though more or less interested in arts and manufacture. This led me one day to the brick-fields were tile-making was in progress, and as I watched, an idea came into my mind, why not make a sort of mosaic in large pieces to be coloured, glazed, and fixed to walls with cement. This method suggested itself as being capable of supplying an effective and inexpensive form of decoration [I had not then seen it done, though it has been made use of with good effect since that time]. No sooner was the idea conceived in my mind than I determined to embark on practical experiment, and with this object in view, some tiles in the green state were sent up to my house at Firwood, Clevedon, where I executed a half-length figure of Sir Philip Sidney, taken from some painted glass at Clevedon Court. The work was done in coloured clay of three shades: then with the courage born of ignorance I proceeded to the burning, with no better appliance than a disused greenhouse furnace, altered for the purpose according to my crude ideas. The result, as may be expected, was a total failure.

I will not weary the reader with details of puerile attempts at kiln-building; suffice it to say that failure only seemed to stimulate the desire to carry out the inspiration which had come upon me in the brick-fields.

By the courtesy of the then manager of Messrs. Pountney's, Victoria Pottery, Bristol, I was allowed to see and measure a small experimental enamelling kiln, and I also got from the same source raw colours, and some glaze to practise with. On my return home, with the aid of the local bricklayer, I built a little kiln something like the one in Bristol, and in a comparatively short time I succeeded in obtaining some fairly good results. It was about this time, late in 1880, that a lad named George Masters came into my employ straight from school, who was destined to play a large part in the subsequent development of "Elton Ware." He began by occasionally helping me, and I found him such an interested and efficient helper, that he soon became a permanent worker with me. As time passed on, others came and went, doing more or less useful work, but George Masters still works, with enthusiasm hard to beat, in the production of "Elton Ware" in 1910 as he did in 1880, and is my valued friend and fellow-worker.

The next ceramic attempt was a three-quarter mosaic panel in drab, black and yellow, on a bluish-green dispersed ground, representing St. Stephen. This figure was subsequently exhibited; but the making of mosaic was for various reasons not long continued.

Modern pottery, with few exceptions, was rather unsatisfactory. Why not go back to the earliest beginnings of the potter's art? In this way it seemed probable that something with peculiar characteristics would develop. However, it was all very well to dream of a new pottery, but how were suitable forms to be obtained? There was the primitive thumb and finger work with incised decoration, such as are found in prehistoric burial-places; there were the various methods of casting, and there was the potter's wheel. A first start was made by the aid of a thrower of flower-pots, and rough shapes were produced. I used to stand by as the piece grew under the thrower's hand, and say, "Stop now, bulge out there, draw in here," and so on, till something satisfactory appeared.

Then as to decoration, coloured clay slips and lead glazes of various kinds were tried, and other methods were attempted, but finally coloured slip-work was decided upon as the line upon which the infant pottery should proceed.

As time went on, it became evident that if I wished to do anything worth doing I must make myself proficient on the wheel, and throw the shapes myself. Even the wheel would have to be of primitive construction, and I decided to use one where the thrower sits on a cross-bar and kicks a lever, which gives the required rotation. The next thing was to procure a wheel—this had to be home-made; so with the aid of the estate carpenter and the local blacksmith one was set up, and every morning I practised on it, till, in a comparatively short time, my desire was attained, and I could myself produce the shapes required. I may add that George Masters soon acquired a like proficiency, more and more faithfully translated my ideas, till practically he took my place at the wheel, and that his work as a thrower is now of the best.

To give some idea of the difficulties which had to be overcome, perhaps a few quotations from my diary may not be out of place.

July 15, 1880.—"Built new kiln and prepared 248 experiments; kiln gave way; shelves were broken; all experiments spoilt."

"Pulled down and rebuilt kiln; fired 58 experiments; sulphur came in and experiments were damaged, but results were a trifle better."

"About August 25 fired 86 experiments with wood fuel; everything spoilt but two pieces."

August 2.—"Tried salt glazing; result a failure."

This sort of thing went on with aggravating sameness, but the advance was steady. In the early part of 1881 a batch was spoilt through minute particles of lime. This necessitated the construction of a slip-kiln for the preparation of the body. The kiln was a success, but it was far from being straight

sailing; mishaps followed at intervals, but before the end of the year the production of a sound and marketable ware was an accomplished fact.

The general lines of the process in those early days for the coloured ware was as follows—though many changes in detail have been made, and disasters from various causes have not been unfrequent. The body of "Elton Ware" was then, as now, principally formed of the ordinary red brick-clay of the district, mixed with white, or with Rockinham. The method of manufacture differs little from that used by our Somerset forefathers in forming their pitchers and posset-cups, which are found in the neighbourhood to-day. First the clays are mixed with water to about the consistency of cream, and then passed through fine sieves of wire-lawn, after which the moisture is driven off by heat, dug out, and beaten together till the mass is homogeneous. It is now ready for the thrower. The piece to be decorated is formed entirely on the wheel, and subsequently handled or spouted and finished by hand, no turning being resorted to. After a period of drying, the pattern is cut with a suitable wooden tool, and is coated entirely with coloured clays about as thick as an egg-shell, when a further period of drying has to be undergone. The spaces between the cut lines is then filled with clay-slips which have been coloured by the admixture of various oxides. These are applied rather thick, leaving the pattern in slight relief.

Then comes the finishing, which may be very simple or very elaborate, and consists of further raising with thick clay paste. Further effects may be produced by modelling or by incised lines. Nothing is now required but drying and firing, but this final operation is no easy task. First it is burnt at a low heat, say 850 centigrade, and when cool taken from the kiln and coated with a clear uncoloured plumbic glaze. It is then returned to the kiln and fired to the highest possible heat, say 1050 or 1100 centigrade. Success now depends on many things, and I can only say that I have found that small kilns

cannot as a rule be depended upon. If the temperature has not been too high or too low—if the fumes of combustion have not entered the saggers—if no sand has fallen on the glaze—if no bubbling of the glaze has occurred—if the atmosphere has neither been too reducing nor too oxidising—well, then the best quality of "Elton Ware" may be expected.

An enamelling kiln was first used, now a sagger-kiln has taken its place; that is the only difference between now and then; and early specimens of "Elton Ware" may be found which do not compare unfavourably with those of 1910. In fact there are fine colours with effects which we have lost the art of producing, and as an example of the sort of thing, I may say that about eight years ago there was a very uncommon crimson red, which we are now unable to produce with any certainty. I myself have only one perfect specimen of this red.

In 1902, a new departure was made, when I began to introduce gold and platinum in decoration. Gilding was easy enough, but the crux in my mind was how to avoid the vulgarity so easily introduced with gold. To avoid this, a series of experiments with precious metals were embarked upon, but some time elapsed before anything with promise of originality rewarded our efforts. One day I noticed a curious appearance, where some gold overlapped the platinum, which seemed likely to give unique and beautiful results if they could be obtained with certainty. This at first looked easy, and several other effects were also evolved. Four in particular struck me as worth working out on a larger scale, namely, "blue platinum crackle," "gold crackle," "bright platinum crackle," and "fiery platinum," so called because of the frosted gold crackle super-imposed on the "platinum crackle."

But, as if to rebuke presumption, troubles now began which took years to overcome. At first the body was very low-fired, and glazed with a very soft glaze, also very low-fired. This caused the ware not to be watertight; also white specks to

appear on the glaze through under-firing. Only two specimens of "blue platinum crackle" survived out of the many pieces made, and the process was discontinued owing to the

SERPENT VASE OF ELTON WARE, 1883.

accurate temperature required involving too much uncertainty. "Gold crackle" shared the same fate owing to the same reason. "Bright platinum crackle" and "fiery platinum" were good

from an artistic point of view, but I deemed it essential to produce it with a high-fired watertight body. This, however, started a fresh crop of difficulties; the high heat destroyed the regularity of the crackle. The platinum began to take on a blackish hue, and the "fiery platinum" became inferior and lost its brilliancy, though several new effects were accidently produced, the most curious of them being two or three pieces of "gold crackle," which, when removed from the kiln, resembled *copper*, but gold was deposited on the edge of the crackles. The effect was curious and beautiful, but its reproduction has hitherto been found impossible, though attempted again and again. I have taken expert opinion, but can find no explanation of the mystery. It is only within the last few months that the metallic work has once more been produced with fairly certain results.

Time and labour have been ungrudgingly spent, and the development of "Elton Ware" has been a very interesting experience, but its position in the world of ceramic art, and the question whether its production has been worth all the trouble that has been expended on it must, however, be left to others than myself to decide.