

Forged in Fire: The War Effort and Sudden Success

The story of Crown Lynn begins as one of classic New Zealand innovation. Its trajectory throughout the 1940s is characterised by aspiration and enterprise, as well as a connection to foreign affairs that would last the company's lifetime. Crown Lynn's ascension from a Hobsonville brick-and-pipe works to New Zealand's preeminent pottery was the result of industry, innovation, and constant reassessment of their techniques. The nascent company identified where they could improve, hire people, or find equipment that would progress their craft. And, despite all of this, it never could have happened without the economic vagaries of the Second World War. This research project looks at the perennial link between economic conditions and fortunes at Crown Lynn, specifically their reliance on economic protections. The Second World War acted as a microcosm for these forces, with a complete ban on nonessential imports facilitating their rise from one of many pottery companies on the New Lynn scene to Aotearoa New Zealand's preeminent manufacturer of tableware for the better part of half a century.



Caption: One of the ceramic swans that would later become synonymous with Crown Lynn – a much more elegant product than their wartime output.

Reference: Author's own photo.

Early beginnings: Tom Clark and the family business

Ever since Rice Owen Clark arrived in Hobsonville in 1854, the Clarks had been prominent producers of pottery in Auckland. After many murky decades replete with scandal and ingenuity in equal measure, they moved to a then-rural New Lynn to form the Amalgamated Brick and Pipe Company Ltd., which would be shortened to the near-acronym Ambrico.¹ This would remain the company's name during the war before it became Crown Lynn.² On the eve of the Second World War came an important change for the company: Tom Clark junior took over the business at the age of 20, branching out to create new products, such as acid-resistant tiles and, importantly, mugs.³

¹ "Maureen Plummer, oral history, 2006," *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-010; "Big Business Deal," *Otago Daily Times*, April 10, 1929.

² "Advertisements," *Wairarapa Times-Age*, April 8, 1943.

³ Valerie Monk, *Crown Lynn: A New Zealand Icon* (Auckland: Penguin Group, 2006), 13.

Tom Clark embodied all the controlled explosion of a combustion engine. Seemingly unable to stop working, he recalls stopping the car on holidays with his wife to taste-test the natural clay for quality.⁴ Even in his spare time in later life, his steadfast captainship of his famous *Buccaneer* during a storm in the Atlantic had earned him the nickname “Captain Araldite”, in reference to the thirty-six hours he spent fixed to the wheel.⁵ He was relentlessly optimistic but equally uncompromising. He did not tolerate mistakes in the people he relied upon but would frequently reward them if they performed well.

The war effort: a nation in need

The outbreak of the Second World War required Ambrico to become the nation’s primary producer of crockery. Though this avenue had been previously explored only experimentally at the company, their factory capabilities were such that they were best positioned for the sudden demand for locally made ceramics. The war effort resulted in a ban on all non-essential imports, including pottery products.⁶ Not only did this see a spike in demand from the New Zealand public, but it made Ambrico the government’s pottery of choice for hospitals, railways, and supply to the United States Army in the Pacific. For Ambrico, producing the sheer volume of pottery required meant putting kilns to use which were not quite fit for purpose, and using clay which was gritty and would be wholly unsuitable for crockery under normal circumstances. These initial mugs often weighed half a kilogram and had walls almost a centimetre thick.⁷ Many lacked handles by design – an ironic detail considering their later mugs were notorious for their handles falling off.⁸



Caption: The New Zealand Railways cups and saucers became iconic, and were particularly well-known for being thrown out of carriage windows after a hasty tea stop.

Reference: Crown Lynn Potteries Ltd. *Cup and Saucer*. 1955. Te Papa Collections Online, <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/68824>

⁴ Monk, *Crown Lynn*, 9.

⁵ "Captain Araldite," *Press*, June 6, 1984.

⁶ Import Certificates Emergency Regulations, 1939.

⁷ Dick Scott, *Fire on the Clay: The Pakeha Comes to West Auckland* (Auckland: Southern Cross Books, 1979), 145.

⁸ "Alan Topham, oral history, 2006," *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-015.

This early extreme economic protection from the New Zealand government foreshadows a lasting truth about the company: their fortunes would always be intertwined with economic policy, import protections, and government relations. While the war gave them the hermetic petri dish they needed in order to emerge from the clayworks scene and transfigure themselves into a dinner table staple, they would never fully sever their reliance on protections.

Almost all company records from the 1940s are lost, having been destroyed in a pair of factory fires in the decades afterwards.⁹ As such, we are limited in our ability to infer the motives of some of the decisions made during that period, but recollections of former workers help to paint a picture of the culture in the factory.

In the heat of the factory: women at Crown Lynn

While Tom Clark and a cabal of mostly male colleagues occupied the high-ranking positions within the company, the majority of workers were women, mostly given manual labour. In 1942, while Tom Clark was trying to figure out how they could graduate from cups and bowls to pots, the mostly female workforce was in the workshop handling gritty, discoloured clay better suited to pipes and tiles. Though Clark rewarded his most valuable employees – those in management and design – handsomely if they performed well, he never paid his factory workers much. Women were often compelled to take the morning or evening shifts in addition to the regular eight-hour working day because of the poor wages. They were expected to “do what you are told”, an experience one worker likens to obeying her father.¹⁰ “Loyalty without question” was always one of the qualities Tom Clark valued most.¹¹ When challenged, he was infamous for roaring over the top of people as he walked away from an argument.¹²

Despite this, the Crown Lynn factory could also be a place of opportunity for women. During the war, many young women were required to register for “manpowering”, a scheme that would connect them with a job which would assist the war effort and earn them precious money at a difficult time.¹³ Happily for Ambrico, pottery was considered non-essential vis-à-vis imports, but qualified for manpowered workers as an “essential industry”. In the postwar period, a larger number of women in the factory were Māori or Samoan – another example of inequality in the workplace that nonetheless could be mutually beneficial. Aspiring workers could simply walk up for an interview and be offered a job the very same day. The only requirement was being able to speak English, and even that was flexible.¹⁴ It is true to say both that many such women were exploited by Tom Clark’s uncompromising business nous and that for many it was an attractive opportunity. Work at Crown Lynn in the 1960s provided a completely new experience in the big city as well as enough money to

⁹ “Tom Hodgson, oral history, 2005” *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-007.

¹⁰ “Bebe Cowdery, oral history, 2005,” *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-002.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ “Merl Phelps, oral history, 2005,” *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-009.

¹⁴ “Naomi Davy, oral history, 2006,” *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-004.

send some back home to workers' families overseas.¹⁵ The strong and broad family connections typical of Pacific cultures proved useful to a company in search of extra workers.¹⁶ The factory floor was hot, noisy, and dusty, but the women were hardworking and found camaraderie with each other, either by singing together or exchanging joking insults.¹⁷ Bonuses earned for completing six heavy crates (each containing eighty plates) were often shared around to those who struggled to finish three crates.¹⁸



Caption: One of the few surviving kilns from the West Auckland clayworks scene, now standing outside Te Toi Uku Crown Lynn & Clayworks Museum.

Reference: Author's own photo.

Economic fortune and failure

The second half of the 1940s was a paradoxical period for the company. On the one hand, they were innovating more rapidly than they ever had or would again. Cognisant of the need to move past the crude, *sans* handle designs of the Second World War, Ambrico reinvented itself as Crown Lynn in 1948,¹⁹ making reference to royalty and the New Lynn area.²⁰ They realised that the postwar period demanded a higher quality product and, as a result, a more elegant and distinguished brand. At the same time, this rapid pace was not enough to keep them competitive: opening the country to non-essential imports led to the re-entry of British-produced ceramics which compared highly favourably to Crown Lynn's best efforts. It seems Tom Clark anticipated this: right at the tail-end of the war he set out for England to recruit as much talent as possible.

The return of imported products was not the only problem for the company. The American military demand in the Pacific had dried up after the war, followed by a 25% revaluation of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid; "Merle Phelps."

¹⁸ Rose Hunt, *Working at Crown Lynn* (Auckland: Literacy Waitākere & Auckland Libraries, 2021), 9.

¹⁹ "Advertisements," *Otago Daily Times*, September 14, 1949.

²⁰ "Alan Topham."

the New Zealand Dollar brought about by the then-Minister of Finance, Walter Nash.²¹ Crown Lynn's export market to Australia, by then more than half of total sales, vanished overnight. Where previously the exchange rate had allowed them to undercut comparable products in Australia, they now found themselves in the position of having to compete on quality alone.²²

Tom Clark's frenetic, borderline obsessive energy was well-suited to these difficult changes in circumstance. He was dedicated to constantly improving his craft, making many trips to Britain and other parts of Europe to see how they did things. He recruited some young Auckland-based talent from Elam School of Fine Arts, but many of his most valued employees were found by dint of an advertisement in one English newspaper or other, whereafter they would haul their families overseas to put their skills to work in New Zealand.



Caption: A magazine from the 1940s in Stoke-on-Trent, advertising the kind of quality pottery manufacture that Tom Clark sought out from that area after the war.

Reference: Catalogue for Wengers Ltd. of Etruria. Box 22, folder 2, Richard Quinn Collection. Te Toi Uku Crown Lynn & Clayworks Museum.

The wilderness years

Despite sudden success, the future of Crown Lynn was in danger at the end of the 1940s. Without any meaningful export opportunities or the extreme import protections which had facilitated their ascension, the future of the company was in question. They spent a decade struggling, determined to compete with British crockery producers, rather than returning to their pre-war status. They maintained a steady staff of around 100 and remained the main supplier of the railways during this period, but were constantly chasing the competence of their overseas competitors. Crown Lynn's modest success at this time belies the fastidious efforts of Tom Clark and his core team to bring their production up to speed, but they would have to struggle along for another decade before they really started to gain traction again right around the start of the 1960s.

The impact the Second World War had on Ambrico was pivotal. Their experimental production in the few years prior, spearheaded by Tom Clark, proved essential to their ability to fulfil a national need for domestically produced crockery. The face of the company was suddenly changed by this transformation, and the name would change accordingly before the end of the decade. Though their rustic appeal, "local in every sense of the word"

²¹ Reserve Bank of New Zealand, *Exchange rate changes to the New Zealand dollar before it was floated on 4 March 1985* (1985), 3.

²² Monk, *Crown Lynn*, 41.

according to the *New Zealand Herald*, was not able to survive the postwar period, this initial episode is essential to understanding major factors behind Crown Lynn's eventual ubiquity, while providing a thematic microcosm for the Crown Lynn story which would unfold in decades to come.²³ During the Second World War, the Clarks' business rapidly differentiated itself from other companies who had been their competitors for decades in the production of bricks and pipes. Business at Crown Lynn had begun a new chapter.

²³ *New Zealand Herald*, September 3, 1941.