

The Golden Years: A New Era of Anglo-Kiwiana

The 1960s represented a flourishing time for Crown Lynn. After many years of struggle during the 1950s, fortunes at the budding New Lynn business started to shift. Crown Lynn had worked hard to perfect their craft and were beginning to win favour with the New Zealand government. They carved out their own identity: a design style whose influence was principally British but with a creative streak that was undeniably Crown Lynn, and even Kiwi. At this point in time, they were producing around ten million pieces of crockery per year and increasingly establishing themselves as a New Zealand icon.¹ This article tells the story of a company no longer desperate or wholly dependent on economic protections, allowing it to flourish under its own unique identity, whilst never losing sight of the importance of maintaining good government relations.

Import licences and government lobbying

The 60s was a period where success at Crown Lynn was sustained but not guaranteed. Every year they presented their case to the government over import regulations, as did the would-be importers. On the whole, successive governments usually decided in Crown Lynn's favour, but their relative monopoly was always at risk. Their competitors could be very specific about the gaps in Crown Lynn's catalogue of products, and accordingly Tom Clark – the charismatic face of Crown Lynn for many decades – would warn the New Zealand public about the supposedly drastic cuts he would have to make if import competition was let in.² They went so far as to run smear campaigns against unnamed “potteries throughout the world”, warning of the cracking and splintering that their “scientists” were assiduously working to avoid.³

In 1969 Crown Lynn was given a continuity of protection, which would continue until 1989. Once Tom Clark was satisfied with how the factory was running, he started making more trips to Wellington, making allies with some of the government officials. Holyoake, then the Prime Minister, with whom Tom Clark enjoyed a particularly congenial relationship, asked him what he needed, and Tom managed to secure representation of their interests, at one point even employing a full-time lobbyist in Wellington.⁴

A New Zealand icon

Aside from the economic front, management at Crown Lynn progressed a sustained effort to turn the company into a New Zealand icon in the public arena. Tom Clark had never been particularly interested in this aspect of their success, one of the reasons so much of their history is little documented. He was first and foremost an innovator and engineer, pursuing whatever avenues necessary to solve the problems in front of him. Despite his usually charming celebrity, he showed little interest in Crown Lynn's public standing, insofar as sales were not affected. When they were, he was prone to bouts of anger, such as his infamous rant about New Zealanders being too snobby for

¹ "The golden age of Crown Lynn pottery," Ministry for Culture and Heritage, updated May 23, 2023, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/interactive/crown-lynn-pottery>.

² "Traders' Reply On Crockery Imports," *Press*, May 23, 1962.

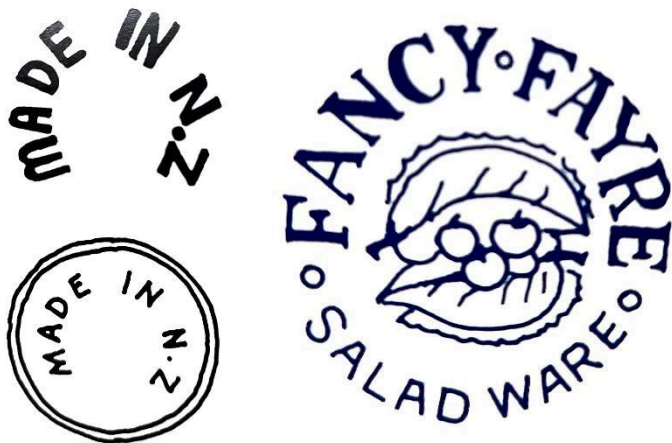
³ "Advertisements," *Press*, April 30, 1960; "Advertisements," *Press*, March 5, 1960.

⁴ "Alan Topham, oral history, 2006," *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-015.

Crown Lynn.⁵ Nonetheless, it became clear that with crockery, public perception of quality was almost as important as quality itself.

Crown Lynn has always sat in a complicated position with regards to New Zealand's national identity. Its origin story is undeniably Kiwi – Rice Owen Clark walking all the way from Wellington to Hobsonville, picking up Te Reo on the way, figuring out how to mould drainpipes around trees to deal with the disagreeable Hobsonville soil, before turning this knack into a family business is a story that practically invites a mention of “Number 8 wire”. The gritty and cumbersome mugs made from equipment intended for pipes and tiles may have seemed quaint and useful enough during the war, but they quickly lost their appeal afterwards when people had ready access to better and classier options. Crown Lynn's best efforts to catch up during the postwar period involved frequent advertisement in the British newspapers. Tom Clark was constantly on the hunt for fresh talent and new techniques, most of which were to be found abroad.

While previously Crown Lynn designs had been proudly emblazoned with “Made in New Zealand”, this began to be avoided as they rebranded themselves in the late 40s and early 50s. Clark also opted for more British-sounding names for collections, such as Fancy Fayre, eventually giving in to the temptation to put the word “British” at the start of his collection names.⁶ The New Zealand government put an end to the use of this description, not heeding Clark's protestations that he, like all New Zealand citizens at the time, had a British passport.⁷



Caption: The proud “MADE IN N.Z.” backstamp was replaced during the 50s by more British-sounding collection names, exploiting the greater prestige enjoyed by tableware from England.

Reference: Henry, Gail. *New Zealand Pottery: Commercial & Collectable*. Auckland: Reed, 1999.

By the time the 60s rolled around, Crown Lynn could afford to lean into their New Zealand roots once more. This was partly a consequence of a cultural shift towards a New Zealand identity separate from Britain – the concept of “Kiwiana” was in vogue – but also a reflection of the fact that Crown Lynn no longer needed to embellish their products by false comparison. They could compete on quality and often had more interesting designs than their British-produced competitors. Their baseline high quality allowed them to be experimental and unique. Now that Crown Lynn was on a par with the British brands, they were no longer forced to emulate them.

⁵ Monk, Valerie, *Crown Lynn: A New Zealand Icon* (Auckland: Penguin Group, 2006), 65.

⁶ Gail Henry, *New Zealand Pottery: Commercial & Collectable* (Auckland: Reed, 1999).

⁷ Monk, *Crown Lynn*, 55.

Alan Topham was employed in 1962 as Sales Manager, bringing an “appreciation for the things that sell” as well as a keen eye for interesting designs. Although having a flare for design, he had been told by a former boss that “roses will never die.”⁸ The balance between the classic British-inspired range of designs and the newer, more artistic, and often more Kiwi range was a key component of Crown Lynn’s success during this period. Topham was also familiar with import licences, having previously worked for Crown Lynn’s competitors importing from overseas. He understood what was needed to satisfy the government and keep the droves of importers at bay, part of which involved producing an immense range of products. Each time a new shape came out, they did the whole range – gravy boats, meat dishes, salt and pepper shakers – nothing was left out, even though each required a new mould and often hardly made a profit, because any untouched corner of the market would play into the hands of their competitors.⁹ Under Topham, Crown Lynn made the savvy decision of starting to sell replacements for individual pieces within a set, which quickly became a hit.¹⁰

The 1960s saw pottery suddenly become one of the most rapidly emerging art forms in New Zealand, leading to countless exhibitions of more niche, artistic designs, with a sense that New Zealand pottery was still new but suddenly more grown-up.¹¹ Crown Lynn toed the line between the traditional and the artistic, familiar and obscure.

Starting in 1959, Crown Lynn ran an annual design competition.¹² This proved a useful way to cement their position as a mainstay of Kiwiana, as well as outsourcing some of their design talent. There were prizes for the top four spots, but the regulations stipulated that even designs that did not place became the intellectual property of Crown Lynn. One victim of this scheme was Fijian-New Zealand artist Eric Lee-Johnson, who felt one of his six designs had been “stolen”.¹³ No matter the conditions of entry, he was a professional and precocious artist, and was paid nothing for the commercial sale of his design.¹⁴ Ironically, some of the winning designs were never made, because the judges often did not understand what could be practicably translated from design to product.¹⁵

⁸ “Alan Topham.”

⁹ “Alan Topham.”

¹⁰ “Advertisements,” *Press*, September 18, 1967.

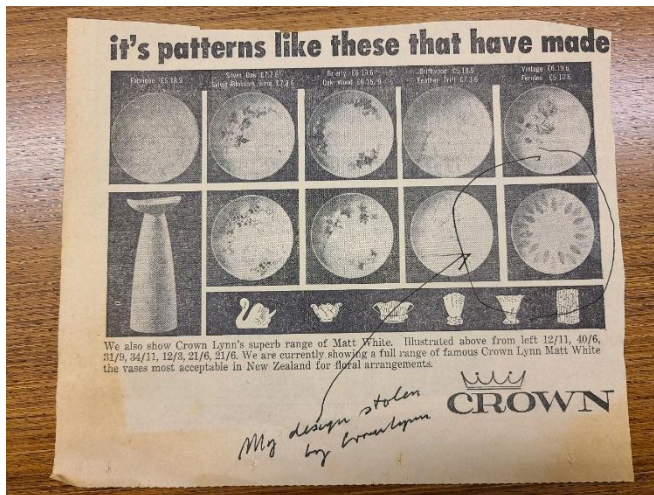
¹¹ “Ephemera of octavo size relating to work and exhibitions by potters and ceramic sculptors in New Zealand. 1960-1969,” Eph-A-CERAMICS-1960s, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

¹² “£610 Offered In Prizes For N.Z. Pottery Designs,” *Press*, March 20, 1959.

¹³ Crown Lynn design contest clippings from “Papers relating to Waihi,” MS-Papers-5437-179, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

¹⁴ Maurice Shadbolt, “Lee-Johnson, Eric Albert,” *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2000, Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/517/lee-johnson-eric-albert> (accessed January 29, 2024).

¹⁵ “Larry Moore, oral history, 2005,” *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-008.



Caption: A newspaper clipping showcasing some of Crown Lynn’s iconic designs, one of which has been captioned by Eric-Lee Johnson: “My design stolen by Crown Lynn”.

Reference: “Papers relating to Waihi.” MS-Papers-5437-179. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

Crown Lynn worked hard to establish themselves as a cultural force beyond simply their products. They invited past and present Prime Ministers to their cocktail soirées and started a monthly public newsletter showcasing their designs, key employees, and the good terms they were on with Parliament.¹⁶ Nonetheless, a prejudice that favoured the British products persisted. Crown Lynn dinnerware, though often marketed for “fine dining” and a romantic evening, could withstand 1200 degrees, its hardiness not compromised in the search for delicacy.¹⁷ A visit from the Queen in 1962 helped to remedy this impression, lending credence to Crown Lynn’s claim to sophistication for those who were still doubtful.¹⁸

¹⁶ “Ceramic Preview 1963: Invitation to Cocktails”, 1963, Eph-B-CERAMICS-1960s, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand; Crown Lynn Potteries, *Ceramics*, 1967-1976.

¹⁷ “Advertisements,” *Press*, March 19, 1965.

¹⁸ Monk, *Crown Lynn*, 84.



Caption: An invitation to a cocktail night hosted by Crown Lynn, attended by both former Prime Minister Walter Nash and the Prime Minister at the time, Keith Holyoake.

Reference: "Ceramic Preview 1963: Invitation to Cocktails." 1963. Eph-B-CERAMICS-1960s. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

At the same time as people were comparing Crown Lynn to the finest British brands, the real threat of foreign imports loomed over the company. The 60s were a sunny period for the company in retrospect, but it was not until nearly the 70s that their relationship with the government ensured that this relative economic security would continue. Nothing approaching the extreme restrictions of the Second World War was required to protect the company's fortunes, but their success was still largely contingent on economic protectionism. As Topham describes, every year Crown Lynn would lobby the government, as would their overseas competitors, each half-pretending an unfavourable decision would spell their downfall.¹⁹

Opportunity in the workforce

There was always a firm limit on the upwards mobility of Pacific and Māori workers at Crown Lynn. Even the Pākehā women were sometimes allowed to graduate to office jobs during the Second World War, particularly if Tom Clark took a liking to them, and a number of the preeminent designers at the company were women.²⁰ However, Māori and Pacific women at the company were almost never able to set their sights on anything above the daily toil of the factory floor, which they usually bore incredibly graciously.²¹ The first Polynesian woman to become a Ceramco cadet training for management, Karen Karaka, made the news in 1980, but she was firmly the exception to the rule

¹⁹ "Alan Topham."

²⁰ "Bebe Cowdery, oral history, 2005," *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-002.

²¹ "Naomi Davy, oral history, 2006," *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-004.

throughout the company: letters addressed to her often began “Dear Sir”.²² The fingerprints of a largely Polynesian workforce on each item of crockery are belied by the almost entirely European list of names associated with Crown Lynn’s legacy.



Caption: A flyer for the cadetship scheme that Crown Lynn offered, mostly to young men, and a mug made by Ernie Cooper while he was a cadet, which he named “Cooper’s Folly”. He went on to work as a chemist at Crown Lynn.

Reference:

“Crown Lynn Potteries Limited Queen Elizabeth II Scholarship Management Cadetship Scheme.” Eph-B-CERAMICS-1960s. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

“Cooper’s Folly” Crown Lynn cadet beer mug. Ernie Cooper Collection, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

This sits in especially uncomfortable contrast with the Queen Elizabeth II Cadetship Scheme, which started up after the Queen’s visit to Crown Lynn in 1962, and boasted of the administrative, technical, and marketing opportunities it provided to many young boys, both at home and overseas.²³ Many women came over from the Pacific, for whom the simple chance to live in a big city and send some money back to their families was opportunity enough.²⁴ Young, aspirational men could quickly climb the corporate ladder at Crown Lynn, either staying on or going on to lucrative opportunities elsewhere.²⁵ Polynesian women’s highest aspirations were often that their children would enjoy that kind of success. Race and gender usually played a decisive role in the opportunities afforded to workers. Polynesian women and young white men were entirely different categories of

²² Ann Elder, “The letters start with ‘Dear Sir’,” *Auckland Star*, December 10, 1980.

²³ “Crown Lynn Potteries Limited Queen Elizabeth II Scholarship Management Cadetship Scheme,” 1968, Eph-B-CERAMICS-1960s, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

²⁴ “Naomi Davy.”

²⁵ “Chris Harvey, oral history, 2005,” *Crown Lynn Story Oral History Project*, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, WOH-1079-005.

employee, something which broadly does not appear to have been challenged during the company's history.

The 60s could hardly have been a more prosperous period for Crown Lynn. Their technical capability meant they had no one to emulate, and could lean into their local roots, even expanding their significance within the local community. However, this success was often the result of, yet not shared by, a majority Polynesian women workforce. And, as clement as Crown Lynn's relationships with contemporary governments were during this period, they serve as a reminder that Crown Lynn's ability to thrive was always contingent on economic policy. New Zealand's highly protectionist economy was not going to last forever, nor would the company's fortunes.