

Development of the porcelain factory Thun 1794 a. s., Nová Role

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Abstract. *The thesis deals with the history of the porcelain factory Thun 1794 a.s. in Nová Role from the beginning of its establishment to the present. First of all, the time and spatial delimitation is made. Next, the origin of the Thun brand itself, the establishment of the factory, the development of the product and production are presented. This is followed by the period during the Second World War, the construction of the labour camp. After the war, the company was nationalised by presidential decree, and in the late 1960s the site was completed and reconstructed. In the 1990s the plant was privatised and turned into a joint stock company. After privatisation, the company's development was not very favourable and the economic situation led to its insolvency. The company managed to find a way out of it and today the factory in Nová Role is the main producer of porcelain in the Czech Republic. In view of the fate of various plants of similar importance, it is important to look at the future development of the plant now and it is essential to consider its reuse in the event of closure.*

Keywords

Porcelain, factory, Thun, Nová Role.

1. Introduction

"To preserve, restore, and value a historic building, a temple, a castle that had ceased to serve its original purpose, or even a royal manufactory like Ledoux's famous saltworks at Arc et Senans, was not objectionable. But a factory? No one lamented its demolition. It was only three decades ago that the architecture of the industrial era, long neglected, was recognised as worthy of heritage protection. It is the subject of increasingly frequent preservation projects, which often include not only the buildings but also their machinery."

It is not a requirement that all industrial heritage be preserved, as the same value cannot be applied to all heritage. One of the aims of the discipline of industrial archaeology, which is based on the analysis of surviving field evidence, is to try to prevent unwarranted destruction.

2. Subject of research - spatial and temporal definition

The spatial classification will examine the development of the production area, objects, or smaller component units in the territory of western Bohemia, more precisely in the Karlovy Vary Region. In this region, more than a dozen preserved complexes or industrial buildings can be found, which in the past were or still are engaged in the production of porcelain. To a large extent, these buildings are strategically located near watercourses, railways, or main roads. At the same time, kaolin quarries and sites that have processed or are still processing kaolin can often be found in their vicinity.

In total, including those that no longer exist, we can speak of more than two dozen objects or complexes dealing with porcelain production since its inception in the Czech lands. The first Czech porcelain factory was established in 1792 in Slavkov, the second two years later in Klášterec nad Ohří, then in Březová and Kysibl in 1803. Other porcelain factories can be found in Loket, Dolní Chodov, Prague, Dalovice and other towns. The most important porcelain factory is undoubtedly the one producing Karlovy Vary porcelain. A minority of the premises have been demolished, the majority are out of operation, and a few are still in operation and actively producing.

From the above-mentioned buildings, I have chosen the youngest production plant of Bohemia a. s. in Nová Role. I will try to outline its development from the beginning to the present.

2.1 History of the Thun brand

The company's name Thun 1794 refers to the historical period between 1793 and 1794, named after the Thun family, who were instrumental in establishing the second oldest porcelain factory in Bohemia, specifically in Klášterec nad Ohří.

The founder of the factory was Johann Nikolaus Weber, originally from Alsace, who served as chief forester on the estate of Count František Josef Thun from 1784. After the discovery of kaolin in the vicinity of Černice in 1793, he introduced porcelain production in Klášterec. Initially, a temporary kiln was built in the castle garden with the support of Count Thun, called Gräfllich Thun'sche Porzellanfabrik.

The factory was later expanded and modernised by the tenants of the time, and Count Thun took it over in 1820. Thanks to the gradual improvement in the quality of Klášterec porcelain, he managed to obtain the privilege of porcelain production two years later. The Klášterec factory was one of the most important both in Bohemia and abroad, as it produced a specific type of so-called hard porcelain with a firing temperature of 1405 °C. In general, thanks to the success of the Thun brand (as well as other companies), West Bohemia became the centre of porcelain production, where the largest porcelain manufacturer in the Czech Republic - the Thun 1794 a. s. This factory worked under the management of the Thun family until the period of nationalization in October 1945 under the decrees of the President of the Republic and specialized mainly in coffee, tea and chocolate sets, dinner services (e.g., the representative Ferdinand set for the Imperial Court), vases, fruit plates, bowls, etc.

2.2 History of the plant Thun 1794 a. s., Nová Role

Thanks to the deposits of high-quality kaolin and brown coal, the Karlovy Vary region was already a suitable base for the development of porcelain production at the end of the 18th century. The great potential of the area contributed to the establishment of several porcelain factories, including the one in Nová Role. Although the Nová Role porcelain factory is one of the youngest due to the time of its establishment, its size makes it one of the largest porcelain factories in the Czech Republic and Europe.

2.3 The beginnings of production

After the end of the First World War, the demand for porcelain. The industry was experiencing rapid development, as all porcelain factories in the region, despite their continuous production, were constantly selling out and achieving interesting market turnovers. Porcelain, especially utilitarian porcelain, was a highly sought-after commodity in this post-war period. In 1919, a pair of large-scale industrialists, Ludvík Redlich, and Samuel Beran, responded brilliantly to this situation by founding the company "Bohemia" Karlsbader keramische Werke, Gesellschaft m. b. H., and in the following two years they managed to complete the construction of the factory in 1921. The porcelain factory was subsequently converted into a joint-stock company due to lack of funds to start production. With an initial 600 employees, the porcelain factory started production and initially faced a few problems. It was unable to get its goods to market, hire capable designers or artists and soon found itself in financial difficulties. It was Philipp Rosenthal (1855-1937) who took over the management of the factory and, due to his knowledge of porcelain, managed to save the porcelain factory from certain ruin. During his tenure, the quality of the products rose rapidly and soon the porcelain of Newrol became a first-class commodity on the market. Starting in 1923, the porcelain factory ranked among

the best in the Karlovy Vary region and production was concentrated mainly on hotel sets and luxury decorations. The growing worldwide interest in the quality products of the Bohemia factory gave rise to foreign exports. Despite considerable interest, the plant unfortunately suffered a financial loss of several million CZK due to the economic crisis in 1933.

2.4 World War II period

Following the Munich Agreement of October 1938, many Czech families were evicted after the entry of German troops. At this time, the porcelain factory was in a difficult situation due to the interest of the Schutzstaffel, a branch of the NSDAP, which planned to use the Bohemia plant as a branch of the Munich porcelain factory Porzellan-Manufaktur Allach-München GmbH and in 1939 also obtained permission to purchase the company. The Bohemia plant specialised in the production of canteens for the SS, Wehrmacht, and others during this period. Only 10 % were intended for export.

Initially, the development of the Porzellanmanufaktur Allach branch seemed very favourable due to the large number of orders, but during the war it faced a shortage of labour. At the request of the factory director, Heindrich Hechtfisher, to involve prisoners from the concentration camps in production, a camp was built near the factory (a branch of the Flossenbürg camp) in Nová Role with a capacity of 700 prisoners. These were mainly young girls. All the prisoners, without distinction, worked in the porcelain factory and did the hardest work.

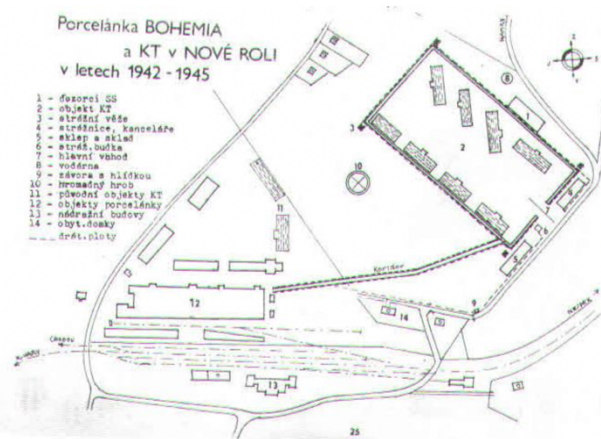


Fig. 1. Plan of the camp and its location next to the porcelain factory

2.5 Post-war period, reconstruction of the premises, privatization

It was only at the end of the war that the order was given to evacuate the camps and erase all traces of their existence. The evacuation of Nová Role took place in two phases, the first on the night of 19-20 April and the second on 22-23 April 1945. In the same year, the former director of the porcelain factory, Heindrich Hechtfisher, was arrested and sentenced to death. The gradual restoration of

the porcelain factory's production began and after its nationalisation by decree of President Edvard Beneš, it was returned to Czech hands as part of the national enterprise Bohemia. Despite this, several highly skilled workers and experts of German nationality worked there, who were retained at the request of the new factory management when the Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia to help with the restoration of production at the porcelain factory.

Later, in 1958, the plant became a national, then state-owned enterprise, Karlovy Vary Porcelain, which included specific porcelain factories, including the one in Nová Role.

According to the project documentation by the architect Zdeněk Plesník for the expansion of the premises, which was prepared by the design institute in 1956-1959, a three-stage construction and reconstruction of the plant to produce utility porcelain was carried out, which was to produce 5 700 tonnes of porcelain products and 3 200 tonnes of firing aids annually. The first two phases, which included a new two-storey production hall, a firing aids factory, a heating plant, a generating station, a waterworks, an administration building, a factory kitchen, and other small-scale buildings, were completed in 1963.

As a result of an accident in the tunnel furnaces, caused by deficiencies in their construction, a gradual reconstruction of the furnaces was carried out during the trial period, which was practically completed only at the end of June 1965 and only partially remedied the deficiencies found. From July of the same year, the plant was already using all the tunnel furnaces for production on an even basis, thus meeting the conditions for normal operation and allowing the final technical and economic evaluation and permitting procedure to be carried out to put the plant into permanent operation. In spite of the unconvincing initial course, lack of documentation and experience, it should be noted that this was the first ever commissioning of a large-scale plant in the fine ceramics industry. Knowledge from existing factories and available documentation on technology from abroad was used. The final techno-economic evaluation concluded that the building as a whole was of a good standard. The reconstruction and extension were evaluated very positively, especially in terms of the quality of the architectural and construction concept. The concept was remarkable for the location of the entire main production of the monoblock, the separation of clean and dirty operations, the design of an efficient structural and layout solution of the monoblock and the good solution of the colour scheme of the environment. The entry of the employees through a passage through the office building via a connecting neck above the siding was also very successfully solved. The aforementioned high-rise building, located at the head of the plant, responds well to the presence of similar architectural and urban elements in the nearby housing estate. The entire factory complex has been designed to be architecturally appropriate when viewed from the estate and from locations in the central Carlsbad Reserve.

The overall construction period was long compared to abroad, as technological equipment evolved during the construction and the overall design had to be adapted to

these new requirements. However, all the resulting changes were to the benefit of the plant's production.



Fig. 2. Archival orthophoto of the Nová Role area in 1952.

During the privatisation in 1993, the company was changed into the joint-stock company Karlovarský porcelán a.s., which merged the porcelain factories in Most, Klášterec, Lubenec, Loket and Chodov.

At the same time, a competition was held by KP Stará Role for the construction of the largest porcelain production plant in the Czechoslovakia, located in Most, which was won in 1968 by Zdeněk Plesník and his team of Centropjekt employees. The concept of a functional four-storey monoblock, which was set into the terrain in such a way that the internal layout took advantage of the slope of the construction site. Unfortunately, despite its considerable qualities in both architectural and operational design, the plant was never realised and the question remains why this was the case.

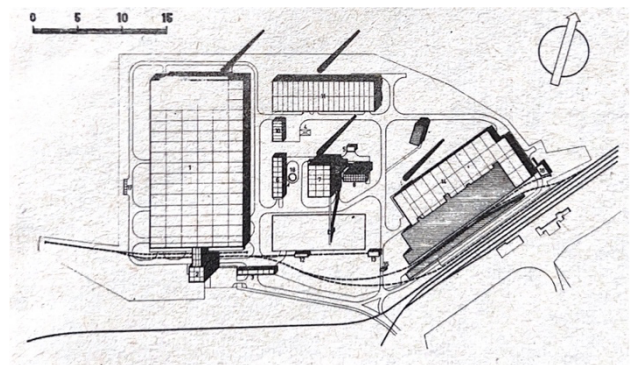


Fig. 3. Plan of reconstruction and extension of the premises according to the design of Zdeněk Plesník.



Fig. 4. Views of the new building of the complex.

2.6 Insolvency period

The joint stock company Karlovarský porcelán ended up in insolvency proceedings in 2008. At that time, it consisted of the Nová Role, Klášterec, Chodov, Thun Studio and Concordia Lesov plants. The insolvency was caused mainly by the company's poor management.

There were enough orders for production in this period and production was almost problem-free.

The plant was forced to reduce production capacity by 30 % to avoid a complete interruption of production and the threat of 1 100 employees being out of work. Despite the subsequent debts of 1,4 billion, the subsequent raising of the necessary funds and the payment of all debts, 1 100 employees lost their jobs as a precautionary measure in case no buyer could be found. At first, only the Chodov plant was bought separately, and then the remaining plants were bought en masse by the investor Hengis a.s., who gave the company the new name Thun 1794. After a few weeks of downtime, production resumed in May 2009. The company bounced back from the bottom and in 2010 the company already employed over 680 people with further hirings planned. Now that the production mix has been renewed, the plant's technological equipment is relatively comprehensive, including an extensive service department. The porcelain factory in Nová Role, with its 5.3 hectares of land, was chosen as the company's headquarters due to its good transport accessibility and favourable location.

Exports are ensured by a good road network by truck, and it would be great if in the future the railway network, near which the porcelain factory was originally built and which has served exports for many decades, could also be used for exports.

2.7 Conclusion

Based on the history of the factory described above, its important position in terms of porcelain production, as well as its historical context and the legacy of the cruel war period is clear. Even though Thun 1794 a.s. is considered a relatively young company and its economic situation appears to be stable, there is already a need to debate and reflect on its future. The biggest problems for the future remain the age structure of the plant's workforce, the lack of new skilled workers and the long-term decline in the population of the Karlovy Vary region. It is not certain where the plant will be in, say, 20 years' time and there are already several examples of similar plants that have ceased production and are now either unused and dilapidated, have been inappropriately adapted and partially demolished, or have been completely demolished.

In view of the more than 100-year tradition of porcelain production in the Czech Republic, with its exclusive representation in the Karlovy Vary Region, it would be advisable to find a solution to the currently not very comforting situation. Of the original more than ten production plants in the Karlovy Vary region and the surrounding area, only three are currently in operation.

Nová Role is one of the largest and most important of them, but its fate may be similar to that of the giant designed by the eponymous architect Zdeněk Plesník in the garment industry OP Prostějov. From the end of production and bankruptcy in 2010, only four years passed before the gradual dismantling of the six production halls and the subsequent complete demolition in 2014. A quarter of the previously mentioned period of time between the insolvency of Karlovarský porcelán a.s. and the unexpected happy ending in the form of a buyout by Hengis a.s. remains to be considered.



Fig. 5. View of the current state of the plant 2021.

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