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Learning from the Past in the Set-Up of a Sustainable Glass Workshop

In 1995 I attended a talk given by Dan Kline in which he stated that the studio glass movement was becoming unworkable as a business model.

Since then the British glass industry has been decimated with cheaper and, more importantly, increasingly good quality imports from abroad. I have spent 4 years as a manager of a glassworks and I can state with confidence that whatever the picture society has of the economic standing of British manufacturing, the reality is in fact, far worse.

It is vitally important for businesses to put a 'rosy spin' on their financial position. Any unfavorable information or rumors can fatally undermine a business with banks refusing to support what they perceive as a failing business, and just as damaging, suppliers and vital services refusing to do business because of a fear of non – payment.

I am contracted as a freelance designer for 2 of the last British glassworks still manufacturing tableware, Dartington Crystal and Caithness Glass. The 2 companies combined employ about 20 glassmakers. As a business they are about the size of a large garage. Fifteen years ago they employed about 700 people. As energy costs have increased over the years, small glassmaking businesses are now struggling to survive.

It is no longer financially viable for a glassblower to start a business with current technology and processes available.

What is needed is a new approach to setting up a glass workshop, one that takes advantage of developments from the past and of new technology and materials.

The whole notion of a separate furnace, glory hole and annealing oven needs to be looked at. Since the industrial revolution, technical rationality has ensured that superior glass quality and speed of production have been the main criteria when developing glassmaking processes.

A glory hole that runs at 1200 degrees C is used perhaps for 10% only when making a piece of glass. The rest of the time the energy is wasted. A glassmaker before the industrial revolution would use reflective rationality as the preferred mode of thinking and would never have allowed such waste. The glory hole was simply a hole in the furnace wall and the annealing chamber was also built into the furnace.

Waste heat from a glory hole can easily be fed directly into an annealing oven. Even if it only generates half the heat needed, it will half the funning costs. The glory hole could be situated above the furnace, combining all three processes back into one piece of equipment.

I propose to talk about how the industrial revolution changed our mode of thinking and led to a diminishing of the influence of the glassmaker in society. I will examine how ideas from the past can be used with new materials and processes in order to achieve a sustainable business model for a contemporary glassmaker.