

ENGLAND

BEDFORDSHIRE

Bedfordshire is generally a county of clay, but the Lower Greensand ridge, running south-west to north-east below Bedford and the Great Ouse valley, provides rolling country with expansive views and a plethora of fascinating churches of great ceramic interest. Often built from the iron-brown version of the Greensand known as carstone, many of these churches were restored by the Victorians, leaving a legacy of mediievally-inspired ceramic decoration. Indeed Willington Church, just east of Bedford, offers a tantalising vision of the true colours of medieval tile pavements in a setting both romantic and historic. In contrast, the towns - apart from the hospital tile panels - are a ceramic disappointment, the local clay providing ample supplies of brick but little else. Suggested reading: Jill Somerscales, 'Bedford Hospital Tile Pictures', *Glazed Expressions* 34, 1997, pp4-6; J. M. Bailey, 'Decorated 14th-century tiles at Northhill Church, Bedfordshire', *Medieval Archaeology*, vol 19, 1975, pp209-13. The *Gazetteer* entry for Bedfordshire covers the administrative areas of Bedfordshire County Council and Luton Borough Council.

BEDFORD

The **Shire Hall**, set beside the Great Ouse and fronting ST PAUL'S SQUARE, is instantly recognisable because of its abundant red brick and deep red, almost scarlet, terracotta dressings provided by J. C. Edwards of Ruabon.¹ The building, which now houses law courts, was erected in 1879-81, its architect being Alfred Waterhouse. Across the square is the former **Corn Exchange** (built 1871-4), with a cornice of knobbly terracotta dressings. The architects, J. Ladds & W. H. Powell, won the commission in a competition; perhaps the assessors were swayed by the emphatic quartet of chimneys and the unusual decorative features. East along the pleasant riverside promenade is Bedford Museum, where superb medieval tile pavements found at Warden Abbey (which stood about six miles south-east of Bedford) are on display.

South of the river on AMPHILL ROAD is the south wing of **Bedford General Hospital**, built in 1897-8 (architect H. Percy Adams, a specialist in hospital design) with a separate ward designed specifically for children, the Victoria Ward.² Here a remarkable set of twenty Simpson's nursery rhyme panels has survived, along with a tiled panel listing the names of the sixteen generous lady benefactors who provided them in commemoration of Queen Victoria's sixtieth jubilee.³ Eighteen of the panels measure 6' by 3', while two are larger at 6' by 6'; the tiles were made by Maws, and the pictures were designed and hand-painted by Philip H. Newman for W. B. Simpson & Sons, who carried out the final firing. Apart from the happily named *Woman and Pig*, all portray well-known nursery rhymes. The drawing and painting is of exceptional quality, although the predominantly green colouring results in a rather anaemic

appearance. Manufactured in the 1890s, these tiles form one of only three sets of early Simpson's nursery rhyme panels still in existence.

HAYNES

St Mary's is a most unusual church, medieval in origin but much rebuilt by Henry Woodyer in 1850; it stands, hidden by hedgerows, just south of Hawnes, a largely eighteenth-century mansion. Reconstruction of the church was the responsibility of the Reverend Lord John Thynne, an indirect descendant of the Carterets for whom Hawnes was built. Woodyer, an architect known for his inventiveness, was an adherent of Ecclesiological principles, thus St Mary's interior focuses on the colourful chancel, with its Minton pavement and reredos. The designs of the chancel tiles increase in complexity through the choir, where buff and red fleur-de-lys tiles form patterns defined by black diagonals, while the first step towards the altar has fleur-de-lys tiling in buff and blue. The next - narrow - step sports lozenge-shaped geometrics in red, green and yellow, while the sanctuary pavement is still more ornate. Two designs, a cross and the monogram IHS (for Jesus) are combined in the east wall tiling, which is topped by a reredos with lettering reading, rather oddly, 'Lo I am with you alway'. *The Builder* reported that the reredos was given to St Mary's by Minton & Co, but Haynes does not appear in the published list of churches to which Herbert Minton donated tiles between 1844 and his death in 1858.⁴ This unrecorded donation is the first such case to be identified, and at present appears to be a unique occurrence, although the reredos (apart from its spelling) is not an especially unusual design.

A surprise is in store behind the elegant iron screen which bars entrance to the north or Thynne Chapel: inside this multicoloured but gloomy cavity is the recumbent white figure of Lady Thynne (1868), angels at her head, set above a patterned marble floor with a central pictorial roundel in black on buff marble; there are also a few encaustic border tiles. The floor, the canopy over the statue and probably the whole decorative scheme were designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, while screen and floor were manufactured by Poole & Sons. At the head of the south aisle, railed off by fine ironwork, is the Carteret Chapel, its pavement composed of geometric tiles in a pattern made up of six-pointed green stars within red hexagons.

NORTHILL

On a sunny spring morning, the interior of **St Mary's Church** is dominated by golden light emanating from the pair of heraldic windows suspended above the south aisle. This remarkable painted glass - originally a single window at the east end - was commissioned from John Oliver in 1664 by the Worshipful Company of Grocers, patrons of the church, to commemorate the 1663-4 restoration of St Mary's. The church was restored again in 1862-3, by the architect Henry Woodyer, when the chancel pavement was added; it is mostly single-coloured Minton encaustic tiling with repeats of one early design, and there are also three pairs of white on blue letter tiles, with different combinations of letters (JM, CB

and JT), perhaps referring to those involved with the restoration.⁵ It is interesting to note that although Northill retains a large number of early fourteenth century line-impressed tiles (not normally on view), with motifs including well-drawn figures, apparently no attempt was made to replicate these designs during the 1862-3 restoration.⁶

TURVEY

All Saints Church is isolated from the parkland of Turvey House and the village by an intimidating wall of yew, undulating its way around the churchyard, in which a mausoleum's giant lettering proclaims 'What man is he that liveth and shall not see death?' Beyond its iron-clad door, the church does not disappoint, with an excellent double-decker monument - the second Lord Mordaunt reclining above his two wives - and a chancel built by Sir George Gilbert Scott in 1852-4. Here there is much colour, created by the use of two Minton designs, a cross and the agnus dei, in the sanctuary pavement; there is Biblical letter tiling across the altar step riser, and fleur-de-lys tiling in the choir and around the font.

WILLINGTON

The village of Willington lies in the broad Great Ouse plain a few miles east of Bedford. Sir John Gostwick (d1545), Master of the Horse to Cardinal Wolsey, and later in the service of King Henry VIII, owned the manor from 1529 and rebuilt the church of St Lawrence during 1539-41. Sir John's manor house is long gone, but close to the church, in quiet parkland well away from the Bedford road, are his stables and a most unusual dovecote, a tall, louvred structure with nesting boxes for 1,500 pigeons.

Inside the church, the medieval atmosphere remains intense. The magnificent tomb of Sir William Gostwick (d1615) almost fills the little north chapel, where there are a few medieval tiles at the base of Sir John's rather smaller tomb. The chancel's Victorian pavement, however, is a complete visual shock: in the choir are line-impressed and relief tiles, square and rectangular, in red, green and black, while the sanctuary is floored with highly glazed yellow, green and black geometric tiles along with a few line-impressed tiles, the latter buff, with a flower motif. The geometric tiles, many of them rhomboidal in shape, are arranged so as to create an illusion of three-dimensionality, provoked by the optically-reversing rhomboids (Fig 1).

The pavement was installed as part of the 1876-7 restoration by that highly original architect Henry Clutton (1819-93), convert to Catholicism (in 1856), expert on French medieval architecture and friend of William Burges. The source of its inspiration lies in the north chapel, with its lozenge-shaped medieval tiles; the new chancel tiling was apparently intended to be a copy of the original medieval pavement. It is unclear whether the pavement survived from the original church (the church guidebook suggests it dated from the fourteenth century), or was added in the 1539-41 rebuilding; if the latter, it would be a very late example of the genre. It is interesting to note that soon after 1537, the Gostwicks built a house four miles to the south of Willington at Warden Abbey,

part of their Bedfordshire estate. The abbey itself was a Cistercian foundation dating from 1135, and the Gostwicks incorporated some of its buildings into their new house, a fragment of which is still extant.⁷ Excavations during late twentieth-century repairs to this curious remnant uncovered superb fourteenth-century tile pavements; these were part of the original abbey and were probably made and fired on site. The pavements are now displayed at Bedford Museum. Their designs show remarkable similarities to the Victorian chancel pavement at Willington, and it seems likely that the St Lawrence pavement is a copy of its fourteenth-century predecessor, which may have been installed by the same hand responsible for the Warden Abbey pavement.

The Victorian tiling certainly gives a real insight into the appearance of medieval pavements at the time they were laid. The brightness and intensity of the colours is unexpected, as is the stark geometry of the pattern and the optical illusion generated by the rhomboidal groups. Apart from its intrinsic attraction, the Willington scheme is therefore highly significant in that it effectively replicates the contemporary visual experience of a medieval pavement, in a way that excavated pavements, with their muted colours and lack of glaze, cannot. As to its manufacturer, the Willington tiles with a floret motif are based on a medieval design which also occurs at Bolton Abbey, West Yorkshire.⁸ Godwin's made replacement tiles for Bolton Abbey, and Willington also has some green-glazed buff tiles, typical of Godwin's, thus it would appear that this firm is the most likely manufacturer.

One remaining question concerns the reason for installation of this spectacular pavement. The 1876-7 restoration appears to have been largely funded by the Duke of Bedford, whose family took over the Willington estate in 1779. He was an active landlord who took an interest in the church, and was assisted in the rebuilding by the Reverend Augustus Orlebar. Both men may have been concerned about the effect on the congregation of the opening of a methodist church in the village in 1868; the lavish restoration was perhaps an attempt to combat the forces of non-conformism. Although Willington was by no means the only church where medieval tiling was replicated by Victorian restorers, it appears unique in the scale and accuracy of its reproduction.

Bedfordshire Roundup

All Saints Church, **Clifton** has a chancel pavement of decorative Minton tiles, installed in 1863.⁹ At St Peter and St Paul, **Flitwick**, there are a few Minton tiles on the altar step risers, and Powell's opus sectile panels either side of the altar on the east wall, showing Christ as the *Good Shepherd* and *Light of the World*; they were installed in 1907 in memory of Major Brooks of Flitwick Manor. In **Luton**, the little-changed Painters Arms, 79 Hightown Road (1913) has a green glazed brick exterior with floor and dado tiling inside; in Holy Trinity Church, Trinity Road there is an encaustic tiled chancel pavement and tiled east wall. The Church of the Virgin Mary, **Meppershall**, has a large Powell's opus sectile and

red glass tile reredos, installed in 1880; it includes extracts from *Exodus* (Fig 2). All Saints Church, **Renhold** was restored in 1863, when the attractive Minton encaustic tiled chancel pavement was laid. At St Peter's Church, **Sharnbrook**, the Powell's opus sectile reredos of the Last Supper was installed in 1901; its bright, robed figures are set upon a background of gold mosaic, with red glass tile panels to the sides.

References

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3. John Greene, *Brightening the Long Days* (Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society, 1987), p2.
4. *The Builder*, vol 9, 9th August 1851, p502; *Glazed Expressions* 32, 1996, pp3-6.
5. *The Builder*, vol 21, 28th February 1863.
6. J. M. Bailey, 'Decorated 14th-century tiles at Northill Church, Bedfordshire', *Medieval Archaeology*, 19 (1975), pp209-213.
7. *Landmark Trust Handbook*, 19th ed (Landmark Trust, Shottesbrooke, 2001).
8. Elizabeth S. Eames, *Catalogue of Medieval Lead-Glazed Earthenware Tiles in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum*, (British Museum Publications, London, 1980), vol 1 pp91-2, vol 2 design 122.
9. *The Builder*, vol 21, 9th May 1863.