

CHESHIRE

Most of Cheshire's ceramic interest lies in the north of the county, where tightly packed urban terraces yield numerous tiled pubs and terracotta shop facades. But there is much more: Birkenhead, on the Wirral, was the home of the Della Robbia Pottery, founded by Harold Rathbone in 1894. He aspired to produce ornamental architectural pieces in the manner of the fifteenth-century Florentine sculptor Luca Della Robbia, which he hoped to sell to the rising business classes. The domestic flat and hollow wares were successful, but his decorative, arts and crafts-inspired wares were not, and the pottery closed in 1906; *in situ* examples of Della Robbia architectural ware are therefore rare. Cheshire's highlights include the Della Robbia panels at Wallasey's Memorial Church, tiling possibly from Liverpool's Swan Tile Works at the Stork Hotel in Birkenhead, the porch tiles of Crewe, and - out in the countryside - Alfred Waterhouse's golden terracotta Parrot House at Eaton Hall. Suggested reading: Williamson Art Gallery & Museum, *Della Robbia Pottery, Birkenhead, 1894-1906: An Interim Report* (Metropolitan Borough of Wirral, Birkenhead, 1980); the facsimile *1896 Catalogue of the Della Robbia Pottery* (Williamson Art Gallery & Museum, 1994); TACS Tour Notes *Birkenhead* (1999). The *Gazetteer* entry for Cheshire covers the administrative areas of Cheshire County Council, Halton Borough Council, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, Warrington Borough Council and Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council. Note that Trafford, including Hale and Sale, is covered in the Lancashire section.

BIRKENHEAD

The most rewarding approach to Birkenhead is via the Mersey ferry; on alighting, passengers may ascend HAMILTON STREET in search of the town's landmark Town Hall clock tower. On the right is the **Pier Hotel**, its unusual grey-green stoneware facade bearing fine lettering and a superb high-relief coat of arms, both signifying the pub's original owners as the Birkenhead Brewery Company, which brewed in Oxton Road (west of the centre) until 1962 (Fig 12). The maker of the facade is unknown; unlike many brewing companies, the Birkenhead Brewery apparently had no clear long-term relationship with any single ceramics manufacturer. Even the date of this spectacular facade, offering us *Peerless Ales & Stout*, remains a mystery, but is probably just pre-1914.

Into HAMILTON SQUARE, the largest early nineteenth-century grade I listed square outside London, where the impressive Town Hall - redundant since the 1974 local government reorganisation - has now been transformed into **Wirral Museum**. The classical pile was built in 1883-7 and restored, following a fire, in 1901. Behind the grey stone facade are several unexpected pleasures, beginning with the grand entrance hall and stairs, where there is an unusual combination of blue and green tiles in a pavement probably made by Minton Hollins and dating from the original building. Also on the ground floor, in the room immediately north of the entrance, is a fireplace grate decorated with Wedgwood's Marsden's

patent tiles; the floral designs combine stencilling and a clear transparent glaze to achieve their unique effect.¹ Upstairs, the tile pavement continues, reinforced by mainly red wall tiling, leading the visitor into the lavish council chamber. In a side room is an ornate fireplace with colourful mottled tiling and the borough coat of arms; this was apparently painted on the central tile four-tile group then glazed. It is probably mid-1880s Minton Hollins work, as are the hexagonal Pugin-designed tiles, depicting a red clover leaf on cream ground, to be found lurking in an upstairs toilet. To the rear, in a room which may have been converted into a kitchen during the 1920s, is slip trailed art deco wall tiling, possibly by the Henry Richards Tile Company.

Leave Hamilton Square at its south-west corner, passing in short order the home of Conrad Dressler, sculptor and co-director of the Della Robbia Pottery (34a Hamilton Square), and the central Della Robbia studio (2a Price Street). Head along Price Street as far as the junction with ADELPHI ROAD to find the **Stork Hotel**, a most unusual public house built in 1840 but thoroughly refurbished inside and out, probably by the Birkenhead Brewery, around 1903 (Fig 13). Its turquoise tile and brown glazed brick facade looks distinctly odd, an Edwardian interpretation of classical decoration, with heavily ornamented tiled pilasters and doorcases set upon the shiny brick ground. Inside, as well as the perfectly preserved glass and woodwork of the curved bar counter, is rather more elegant art nouveau dado tiling featuring tulip-pattern designs in yellow and green, and a fine mosaic floor, revealed in 2000 after some years in hiding beneath lino. This gem of a pub, which has managed to remain intact despite many threats of modernisation, is now listed grade II. Its singular appearance results not only from the brewery's need for a flagship pub near both its brewery and the town centre, but the employment of a local tile fixer and maker to carry out the ceramics contract, rather than one of the nationally-known manufacturers. The tiles were fixed by George Swift and may also have been made at his Swan Tile Works, Liverpool, once a substantial concern; if so, the Stork Hotel would be the only remaining *in situ* location of Swan Tile Works products in the Liverpool area.²

Adelphi Street ends at CONWAY STREET; just west is another pub, the **Crown**, with a mostly plain turn-of-the-century purple faience exterior with a sprinkling of well-moulded, high relief crowns. It illustrates the local propensity for visual renditions of the pub name to be included in the facade. Turn east along Conway Street to the **Conway Centre**, a hulking red brick and buff terracotta pile built as the Higher Elementary School in 1903 (Fig 14). It is an unexpected tour-de-force. The modelling of terracotta figures and lettering is excellent; a bending caryatid holds aloft a balcony inscribed with 'Elementary', while other figures pose in niches beneath terracotta domes, and the borough arms plus supporters stand proud above it all. The Dennis Ruabon catalogue of 1903 lists the company's terracotta as being used in the nearby (now demolished) Board of Guardian Offices on Conway Street, whose architect was Edmund

Kirby. It is possible that the same firm's terracotta may have been used for the Conway Centre.

East along Conway Street to Argyle Street; just south, on the corner of GRANGE ROAD, is the **George & Dragon**, whose white-tiled 1930s facade sports a colourful St George and dragon relief plaque; note the green dragon's tail sliding off into space. Shaws of Darwen, who supplied the Liverpool (and Salford) brewers Threlfalls with ceramic materials for their tied estate during the 1930s, made a plaque in similar style for the St George Hotel in Liverpool, which suggests the George & Dragon is also by Shaws.³ Turning north up Argyle Street, then right into Market Street, pass the **Market Inn**, with its Threlfall's lettering and cream and blue tiling - doubtless by Shaws - then return along Hamilton Street to the Town Hall.

Well south of the Town Hall area in BOROUGH ROAD, three Della Robbia panels may be seen at **Birkenhead Central Library**, in the ground floor lending library beyond the foyer. They were presented by the Pottery's founder Harold Rathbone (1858-1929) in memory of Charles Gatehouse, chairman of the Libraries Committee. The two smaller panels are a pair, *The Sower* and *The Reaper*, designed by Conrad Dressler; the most attractive of the three is *The Sower*, a highly three-dimensional representation. Finally, there is more Della Robbia ware in Birkenhead's main shopping area at CHARING CROSS, in the form of two male figures by Carlo Manzoni above the entrance to a wine bar (formerly the **Midland Bank**, originally the North and South Wales Bank).

Bidston

The **R. C. Church of the Holy Cross** (1959), HOYLAKE ROAD was designed by the architect Francis Xavier Velarde (d1960), known for his (mainly Roman Catholic) churches built in north-west England from 1930 onward.⁴ Although it was not the last of Velarde's church designs, it was the last he was able to complete himself; surprisingly, the building is not listed. Externally it is the intriguing geometric fenestration which catches the eye, but inside is a wonderfully atmospheric mosaic scheme by the Art Pavements & Decorations Co, whose parent company was Carter's of Poole.

CHEADLE

In 1849 the wholesale draper (later Mayor of Manchester) James Watts bought the villa **Abney Hall**, on MANCHESTER ROAD, and in the following two or three years turned it into a Tudorised red brick country house. The architects of this transformation were Travis & Mangnall of Manchester, but the real importance of the house lies in its interior, created around 1852 by J. G. Crace. Following the success of their Medieval Court at the Great Exhibition, the combination of Crace, Pugin, Minton and Hardman obtained commissions to carry out several interior furnishing schemes, of which Abney Hall was one; in this case, Pugin's designs were executed after his death by Crace.⁵ The house was one of the first to be equipped with gas (the gasoliers were by Hardman), while the extensive areas of encaustic floor tiles were by Minton's; the hall tiling is particularly

impressive.⁶ Cheadle Town Hall occupied Abney Hall until 1974, but the house now functions as private office accommodation, standing in the lee of the M63.

CHESTER

Chester Cathedral, off ABBEY STREET, not only provides a quiet contrast to the famous double-decker black-and-white Rows, but offers displays of both Victorian and medieval tilework, the latter being Chertsey border tiles with a fleur-de-lys and castle design. Much more extensive is the encaustic tile pavement in the choir, installed as part of George Gilbert Scott's restoration around 1880. The tiles were manufactured by Craven Dunnill, and were a relatively unusual venture into cathedral work for this firm. Their designs, based on medieval tile motifs, have a Celtic feel and incorporate several gargoye-like faces. In addition there is an attractive Maw & Co pavement, dating from 1863-4, beyond the choir in the Lady Chapel; its rich brown and white tiles were designed for Maw's by the architect George Goldie, one of their regular designers. The tiles were supplied by W. B. Simpson & Sons, who were responsible for the overall layout.⁷ There are smaller tile pavements in several other chapels, and the north wall of the nave has a splendid series of four full-height mosaic panels dating from 1883-6. They show Old Testament characters and were designed by the stained glass artist J. R. Clayton of the church decorators Clayton & Bell, here working in conjunction with the Venetian mosaicist Salviati.⁸

Across NORTHGATE STREET from the Cathedral is **Chester Library**, built in 1914 as the Westminster Coach and Motor Car Works for J. A. Lawton & Co to the designs of the architect Philip H. Lockwood; its shiny pinkish-buff terracotta was designed and made by Dennis Ruabon, a picture of the building appearing in the firm's catalogue.⁹ The two-storey structure is dominated by a row of three semicircular windows at first floor level; above is a richly ornamented relief frieze topped by a massive balustrade, broken only by a curved pediment bearing the name of the works. The building was converted to a library and arts centre during its restoration in 1983-4, when the balusters - which had been replaced by brickwork - were reinstated; at that time, the new balusters were the largest ever made by Shaws of Darwen. Next to the Library is the Town Hall, with the **Forum Shopping Centre** to its rear. Its HAMILTON PLACE facade is ornamented with several terracotta plaques showing shopping-related motifs; they were made by Timothy Clapcott in 1995.

South towards the River Dee lies BRIDGE STREET; on its east side is the towering black-and-white form of **St Michael's Buildings**, built in 1910 for the Grosvenor estate. Its five storeys were originally faced in white faience, but this was replaced immediately by half-timbering on the orders of the second Duke of Westminster. Some faience remains, however, on the ground floor exterior, and more importantly inside the two-storey St Michael's Arcade, entered at Rows level. Here the renaissance-style decoration combines grey and green faience, including an elaborate frieze, with cream and pink tiling. This is probably a

Doulton scheme; there are heads - perhaps of Magog - near the entrance, modelled in a style resembling that of Doulton's designer W. J. Neatby.¹⁰

CREWE

In the streets off NANTWICH ROAD, just west of Crewe's fabled railway station, is one of the country's finest collections of porch tiles, dating from around 1890 up to the First World War. The open porches of these simple terraced houses are adorned with a dazzling variety of colourful wall tiles, the basic pattern being a dado, with border tiles top and bottom, enclosing a five tile by four tile area with a pictorial centrepiece; there is often an encaustic geometric pavement (Fig 15). However, some porches are completely tiled and there appears to be almost infinite variation of tiling even within the confines of a few streets. The centre tile panels are especially striking, and include elegant female figures on tiles made by the Photo Decorated Tile Co (Catherine Street), as well as rural scenes signed E. J. B. Evans (Bedford Street). Many manufacturers and many tilemaking techniques are represented in this magic miscellany, for instance a single house in Furnival Street displays turn of the century dust-pressed transfer printed and relief moulded tiles by T. G. & F. Booth and T. & R. Boote.

The best of the porch tiles can be seen by heading west from the station along Nantwich Road, then following this route: Gresty Road, Catherine Street, Bedford Street, Ernest Street, Furnival Street, returning along Nantwich Road past the **Earl of Crewe** pub, which retains its Queen Victoria Jubilee terracotta plaque made by Stanley Brothers of Nuneaton. The two-foot square terracotta plaque shows a relief bust of Queen Victoria, with an inscription including named parts of the British Empire and the date in a cartouche at the top. Stanley's made the plaques to mark the Queen's fiftieth jubilee in 1887, and the mould was later adapted for use on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee; roughly equal numbers of each design survive.¹¹

A deviation from Furnival Street into RUSKIN ROAD will allow a view of **Ruskin County High School**, opened in 1909 as the County Grammar School. Its lofty (and lengthy, at twenty-three bays) classical facade and masses of salmon-pink terracotta are totally out of scale with the surrounding houses. The school, more imposing than attractive, was designed by the county architect H. Beswick, and was mentioned in the 1908 Dennis Ruabon catalogue.

EATON HALL

Although the first Duke of Westminster's astonishingly palatial Eaton Hall (1870-83, architect Alfred Waterhouse) was demolished in 1961, many of its estate buildings remain, including the exquisite classical **Parrot House** (Fig 16). This circular garden temple was also designed by Waterhouse and built in 1881-3; it was constructed from golden yellow terracotta manufactured by J. C. Edwards of Ruabon.¹² The walls are block terracotta through and through; inside, caryatids support the ceiling. The temple, now surrounded by greenery, has been restored using terracotta supplied by Shaws of Darwen. Near the stable block is

Waterhouse's gothic **Chapel**, which retains its Godwin tile pavement, and the large **Summer House** with an unusual Minton-tiled fireplace.

HOYLAKE

In **CABLE ROAD**, Hoylake are a few houses with groups of five colourful handmade Della Robbia tiles - showing flower fairies and gardening scenes - set into their porches; it is very unusual to find Della Robbia ware used on house exteriors (Fig 17).

NEW BRIGHTON

Facing the **PROMENADE** is the **Floral Gardens Theatre**; a few remnants of the original late Edwardian theatre are intact, including the tiled shelter just west of the theatre. Decorative ironwork suggests that the shelter was once glass-roofed, while the tiled dado along its rear wall is mainly yellow with some relief-patterned tiles. Its front is open to what would originally been a fine view across the Mersey, but now looks on to the crazy golf course. Uphill into the town's shopping centre, where **Rowson's Building**, on the corner of **VICTORIA ROAD** and Rowson Street, features a good red terracotta plaque by Dennis Ruabon depicting the insignia of the Prince of Wales.¹³ The building probably began life around 1900 as a branch of the North & South Wales Bank.

PORT SUNLIGHT

There is much of external ceramic interest in the Lever Brothers' model village Port Sunlight (founded 1888), including lacy, bright red terracotta decoration above the dormers of a row of houses (1896) in **CROSS STREET** (Fig 18). The village's first public building was the **Gladstone Hall** (1891), which bears a pretty ceramic plaque commemorating its opening (Fig 19).

ROSTHERNE

St Mary's Church, which has a beautiful setting above Rostherne Mere, was restored in 1888 at the expense of Wibraham, second baron Egerton of Tatton; the work included encaustic tiling around the font and a reredos with two Powell's opus sectile panels of angels by Frank Mann.¹⁴ The east wall of the church was further embellished in 1910 with the addition of two large and elaborate tile panels (around 6 feet in height) showing St John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary; these were erected by the Countess of Albemarle and were also designed by Powell's.

SANDIWAY

St John's Church, **NORLEY ROAD**, is unusual for several reasons: not only was it designed by the architect John Douglas, who became lord of the manor, donated the site for the church and contributed towards its cost, but it contains a Della Robbia wall panel. The body of the church was built in 1902-3, but the tower was erected later as a memorial to Douglas.

STOCKPORT

The monumental stripped classical white faience facade of the **Plaza Cinema** (1932) still dominates **MERSEY SQUARE** in the middle of Stockport; it was listed grade II in 1997 and began to show films again in 2000, having been dark since

1966. About two miles south of the centre, just off the A6 on POPLAR GROVE, is the **Stepping Hill Hospital**, where two ceramic panels by Gerald Buchanan - one showing a tree house, the other entitled *Waterside* - were installed at the Treehouse Children's Centre during the mid 1990s.

WALLASEY

The **Memorial Church**, MANOR ROAD (1898-9) is a testament to the creative potential of nonconformism combined with arts and crafts ideals. The Unitarian church was built in memory of William Elam (1821-96) by his wife Martha, the architects being Frederick Waring and Edmund Rathbone, brother of Harold Rathbone, founder of the Della Robbia Pottery; the Rathbones were also a Unitarian family.¹⁵ The intention behind the decoration of the church was to portray the new religious and social ideas, thus the interior includes work by Benjamin Creswick, Bernard Sleight and members of the influential Bromsgrove Guild. This rare arts and crafts interior is completed by a Della Robbia reredos, a triptych signed by Harold Rathbone and dated 1899. It shows beautifully sculpted figures set amongst verdant scenery, with a biblical inscription winding its way through the trees. The church is now in the care of the Historic Chapels Trust.

Weatherhead High School, a specialist media arts college, moved to its new site on BRECK ROAD in 2003; in the entrance is a large mural by ceramicist Jean Powell showing the original school building, where she was a pupil.

WARRINGTON

Warrington offers some substantial terracotta and faience facades, firstly at the **King's Head** on WINWICK STREET, almost opposite the railway station. There is a Burmantofts look about its olive green faience, the moulding involving a jumble of faces and flowers. Winwick Street leads south towards the town centre and BRIDGE STREET, which displays a good range of partly terracotta facades, the best being that of **Howard Buildings** (now Boots); this late Victorian work includes two picture panels and four lion finials. **St Mary's R. C. Church**, BUTTERMARKE STREET, has an ornate sanctuary pavement, while east of town in GORSEY LANE is the grade II listed **Orford Hotel**, built around 1908 with a terracotta pseudo-Tudor facade; inside is a tiled frieze in the corridor. Finally, well south in Stockton Heath is **St Thomas Church**, with unusual Victorian tilework in the chancel.

WEST KIRBY

West Kirby Residential School (1886-8), MEOLS DRIVE was originally a children's convalescent home which moved to West Kirby from Hoylake in 1888. The facade has good, bright red terracotta decoration by J. C. Edwards of Ruabon; the building was mentioned in the firm's 1890 and 1903 catalogues. Over the years the children's home built up a collection of Doulton pictorial tile panels commemorating the endowment of individual cots, ranging in date from 1889 to 1953. Donors were mainly local families, the plaques being individual memorials, but also included the Freemasons of Cheshire. The panels had some

unusual designs featuring children and animals.¹⁶ By the 1990s only nine panels remained; all were moved from their original positions and some required restoration, but they were once again on display in the school in 1997. The surviving panels date from between 1909, when the open-air ward was added, and 1951.¹⁷

WILMSLOW

A scary, bearded wizard, storm-driven trees and all manner of animals greet shoppers arriving at **Sainsbury's** supermarket in the centre of Wilmslow on ALDERLEY ROAD. They are players in *The Legend of the Iron Gates*, a lengthy (around 80 feet) terracotta mural depicting a local story; it was designed in 1989 by Judith Bluck and fired by Istock Brick Nostell Ltd. The installation is around nine feet in height, and uses terracotta in the form of tile-like squares; the moulding of figures is excellent, the animals having an especially weirder-than-life quality (Fig 20).

About a mile north-west of the centre near Pownall Park is **Pownall Hall** (now a school, no public access), CARRWOOD ROAD, furnished for the brewer Henry Boddington by the Century Guild in 1886-8; the glass was an important commission for Shrigley & Hunt, who were also tile painters. There are De Morgan tiles on four fire surrounds, the best being in the former drawing room where no fewer than twenty-four different fabulous green beasts cavort. More De Morgan tilework may be found in a bathroom, and the products of other manufacturers including Minton Hollins decorate still more fire surrounds.

Cheshire Roundup

The pair of cemetery chapels (1860-80) sited off Cheshire Street in **Audlem** have external tile decoration as well as rich encaustic tile pavements. St James Church, **Christleton** (1875-7) was William Butterfield's only church in Cheshire; its polychromatic interior includes a chequered red-and-white stone chancel, tiled floors, and Minton mosaics in the 1893 reredos. Inside Antrobus Street United Reformed Church, **Congleton**, is a Second World War memorial to the Netherlands Forces comprising twelve delft tiles. St Michael's Church (1856-8), **Crewe Green** (the Crewe Hall estate church), was designed by George Gilbert Scott in polychromatic brick, the interior being of red and yellow brick with tile bands above. St Cross Church, Mobberley Road, **Knutsford** (1880-1, architects Paley & Austin) was built using brick and red terracotta both supplied by the Knutsford Brick & Tile Company; inside is a Craven Dunnill line-impressed tile pavement, typical of Paley & Austin's work after the late 1870s.¹⁸ Cheshire School of Art and Design (1897), London Road, **Northwich** bears a large figurative terracotta plaque depicting the Arts.

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