

Tile & Tide

Episode 1 - A postcard from Hastings

Pedalling along the Kent and Sussex coasts in September, I was struck by the amount and variety of ceramic sites, almost everywhere from Bexhill (De La Warr Pavilion, jolly shopfront and monster Edwardian yellow terracotta villa 'Oceania' on the prom) and Hastings (Havelock pub with lovely picture panels, delightful Doulton polychrome stoneware roundels on the very smart White Rock Pavilion, Ernest Runtz's terracotta music hall, a double for his Middlesbrough theatre, lots of shopfronts with tiled remnants) to Margate (colourful 1907 ceramic piers on a prom bridge, 30s faience station facade with pictorial roundels) and Gravesend (ceramic pub facades - 'Shrimp Brand Beers'! - and glorious 30s yellow-tiled café and ice cream kiosk by the Thames). And then there was Ramsgate and Pugin.... And then (again) I found a reference to a church full of memorial tiles, dating from 1872 onward and clearly resembling all those Staffordshire church plaques, in Brightlingsea of all places.

But all this holiday jollity (and a few post-pedalling pints) left me wondering about ceramics and the seaside. Despite all the above-mentioned sites and the huge number to be found at other English resorts, notably Blackpool and Great Yarmouth, the overall impression of our seaside ceramics was rather anticlimactic, rather smaller-scale, less vibrant, less fun and less colourful than one might have expected. So where is the Debenham House of the English seaside? Where are all the colourful ceramics that one might expect to find beside the sea? Just how different is the seaside? Were ceramics used more frequently at the seaside than inland? Were seaside ceramics really more colourful? Was the use of ceramics at resorts specifically related to entertainment buildings? Has the loss of so many seaside buildings over the last century affected our present impression of them? Were architects and ceramics firms specialists in seaside building? Did the unmistakably provincial character of the resorts affect seaside building? How serious is the seaside? Was the use of ceramics more innovative at the seaside? The seaside was just about the only part of England where modern movement architecture was readily accepted in the 1920s, but that did not mean the seaside was a hotbed of architectural or ceramic revolution - there was just a fashion for buildings to look like liners.

A kindly Newsletter Editor has allowed me to consider some of these themes over the next few issues, combining generalisations about the British (not just English, I hope) seaside with a look at the ceramic highlights of the resorts, almost an informal 'A to Z' of the ceramic seaside - Aberystwyth to Zennor, since you ask....

Just to begin with, the reason I intuitively expected the seaside to be grander and more colourful, ceramically speaking, was that the time of greatest popularity of ceramic use in and on buildings coincided pretty well with the time of most growth in construction at the seaside. But perhaps the material was seen as too permanent for such ephemera as arcades? And too expensive? Maybe faience came to be used more at the seaside during the 1920s and 1930s (and even into the 1950s) when big crowds could be guaranteed, before we discovered Europe and Disneyworld. And what about the present? Homogenisation of town centres continues, but one can

point to a few modern ceramic installations which add colour to the seaside - for instance at Dover, the 1993 pedestrian underpass, which delivers one safely from harbour to shopping centre, was completely tiled (by Tessera) with a mural showing the various ships which have passed through the port. All very red, white and blue, appropriate, functional and fun! Is this a rare site where seaside and ceramics meet happily?

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Episode 2 - Is Blackpool boring?

It's spring, and the sun is shining on seaside ceramics. Passing quickly over Aberystwyth - the obvious beginning of an alphabetic voyage around Britain's ceramic coast, but lacking in large-scale resort buildings - we find the brilliant 'B's of the British seaside: Bexhill, Blackpool, Bognor, Bournemouth, Bridlington and Brighton. Bexhill offers two violently opposed examples of ceramic use within yards of each other on the seafront. First there's the De La Warr Pavilion (1935, Mendelsohn & Chermayeff), the coolest of white thirties seaside structures originally clad internally in cream Carters tiles, its iconic stairwell snapped by architectural photographers the world over. Then, just across the road, is Oceania, a turbulent Edwardian Baroque villa done out completely in rich ochre terracotta (manufacturer unknown). Thirty years and a revolution in architectural theory separate these two responses to the sea, but both still feel apposite, their colours complementing the light from sun and water. Perhaps the material, the hardness of the ceramics, is what makes these buildings so effective, reflecting sunshine and repelling wind and waves.

Unless I've missed something, Bognor is pretty forgettable ceramically, while Bridlington, for all its new, architecturally prizewinning beach huts, has in ceramic terms only a standard interwar faience facade on its winter garden. Even Brighton keeps its colourful tiling to itself; apart from a few pubs, all is internal. The superb eastern-style Craven Dunnill scheme in the Museum delights once inside but is not used to attract visitors; the colour palette of Brighton's exteriors is white.

Surely Bournemouth, with its proximity to the Carters works, will provide us with some external colour? Well, yes and no. There are two pubs with very showy facades, the Pembroke Arms, green and fishy, and the rather more exotic Branksome Arms, wonderfully colourful with a design including the brewer's coat of arms. Although the town's upmarket department store has an unusual red and white faience frontage dating from the early twentieth century, colourful facades in Bournemouth are otherwise mostly restricted to pubs, leading to the thought that colour, garishness, and show were all a little unacceptable, a little downmarket, perhaps a little unEnglish. Fine for pubs but not, in most cases for shops (and definitely not for houses), although one local property developer, Joseph Cutler, did commission ceramic portraits of himself for the outside of a row of shops in the east end of Bournemouth - a unique occurrence?

With the thought in mind that colourful exteriors were designed to appeal to the mass market in leisure terms, let's consider Blackpool, a town famous for its large-scale use of ceramics, not least in that tower. By day Blackpool's appearance is surprisingly dull, a riot of browns; it is really a nighttime place. Illuminations have long been part of its traditions and many of its buildings only come alive in the dark, when a combination of electric lighting and bright plastic facades add dramatic and appropriate colour. By day, ceramics are obvious only on the Winter Gardens, extended and massively reclad in a bright, scintillating white faience supplied by Shaw's of Darwen from 1929. The shape of the building, with its tall, semicircular gable end, and its blue and yellow faience highlights, make this a most effective -

almost postmodern - facade. As to the Tower, completed in 1894, there is self-effacing brown terracotta on the outside but all the colour is again inside, to please the paying customers: Islamic tiling around the circus entrance, high relief wall panels of birds by E. C. Spruce in luscious turquoise Burmantofts faience (in corridors which perhaps once led to the menagerie), and panels of other designs throughout.

Not much evidence here for colour on anything but pubs. But - once upon a time there was an exception to this series of drab facades: the Derby Baths. I saw this yellow mirage of a building but briefly in the late 1980s, and took no photograph; opened in 1939, it was demolished in May 1990. Its modernist design was by the borough surveyor John C. Robinson, who had previously worked in Banister Fletcher's office. Would he have suggested anything as daring away from the seaside? Its yellow and lime green faience walls were cut through by porthole windows and decorated with fishy roundels. The faience was by Shaw's; the commission is mentioned in a list of drawings in their archive.

I'm not sure that a single building is evidence enough to suggest anything concrete(!) about colour and innovation at the seaside, so the next Tile & Tide will paddle onward from Clacton and Cromer through Douglas and Dover to Gorleston and - most ceramically significant - Great Yarmouth.

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Episode 3 - Any port in a storm

From sea to shining Cs, we paddle alphabetically on around the coast in search of colourful ceramics. Thus far the resorts have proved something of a disappointment, with even Blackpool only providing a reminder of a more colourful past (the brilliant yellow Shaws faience of the long-demolished Derby Baths). And so to C: Clacton and Cromer, Colwyn Bay and Cowes, even Cleethorpes; these resorts are not really large enough to support the larger entertainment buildings which might include lavish colour or decoration. And Deal, with its shabby main street (where Dewhursts still shows off a set of Carters farm animal panels) and grim concrete 1950s pier seems an unlikely place to find colourful buildings, but in fact the reverse is true: it has a unique set of extravagantly tiled terrace houses towards the south end of town, built from the 1880s onward while Deal was still the naval equivalent of a garrison town. Around Ranelagh Road the terraced houses display all sorts of tiles, from lancet-shaped panels below the eaves, to horizontal panels between ground and first floor windows, to fireplace-style vertical installations beside the sash windows, and other large plaques which almost seem to take the place of windows; there are tiles on gateposts and encaustic pavements too. Lots of colour, and the variety of tiles - from heavily relief-moulded fruit to transfer printed to encaustic, mostly by Maw's and Minton Hollins - is enormous. Certainly the houses were built at a time of prosperity for the town, but nowhere else is there showy external tiling, clearly a part of the original architectural conception, on this scale. Was this a response to being so close to Europe, where external ceramic displays of this nature are far more common? Or was its inspiration closer to home?

Just to the south in Dover is another fine contribution to the colourful seaside: in a most unpromising pedestrian underpass, right in the centre of town (Castle Street), there's an expansive 1993 tile mural by Tessera covering the entire wall area. The theme is shipping through the ages, the colours a maritime red, white and blue, and the effect excellent and appropriate. So much for Kent. Far away in Douglas, Isle of Man, there's something of an anticlimax; although the seafront has a continental feel, with boarding houses painted in all colours of the rainbow, there is very little in the way of ceramics apart from a few interwar cinema facades, mostly by local architect Harry Lomas. The most attractive and colourful of these is the tiny Strand cinema, but the sparkle here is added by the use of stained glass in a pair of dinky turrets.

Onward through Eastbourne, Felixstowe, Frinton - where there's a nice green-tiled shop, now the town's sole pub - to Fleetwood (best known for its grey mud) and Folkestone, where there are terracotta titbits on a few of the town's giant hotels and the 1920s Leas Cliff Hall, but little else. However, head across Kent to Gravesend, and find a delightful café on the riverside promenade, along with a petite ice cream kiosk, both probably erected in the 1930s and completely faced in large creamy-yellow ceramic tiles, which look very Carters. It is the perfect seaside café, and still very much in working order. Up the hill and into town to find a couple of ceramic pub fronts: one in shades of brown faience bearing the lettering 'Meux

Perfect Ales', the other - the Terrace Tavern - advertising the gloriously-named 'Shrimp Brand Beers' in green and white faience. Sadly no pictorial logo here!

Finally to Norfolk: Gorleston-on-Sea and its neighbour Great Yarmouth. Gorleston has one of the finest shop interiors still extant, with a frieze of well-drawn fishes in blue and white swimming around above a deep turquoise 'sea' (more Carters, c1890s), but is this really seaside architecture? No! Yarmouth, however, has one of the best ceramic sea fronts in Britain. Three of its landmark ceramic buildings - the Gem and Empire cinemas, and the Hippodrome, were the work of local architects Arthur Hewitt (the cinemas) and Ralph Scott Cockrill (the circus); Cockrill was the son of Borough Surveyor John William 'Concrete' Cockrill, concrete enthusiast and inventor of the Cockrill tile, patented with Doulton of Lambeth in 1893. This L-shaped tile retained concrete during wall construction, thus obviating the need for shuttering; it was used at Yarmouth's Fish Wharf Refreshment Rooms (now Dolphin PH), designed by 'Concrete' Cockrill and erected in 1904. Hewitt's Gem (1908), a very early cinema, was faced in cream faience (manufacturer unknown), while his Empire (1911), at the north end of the sea front, used heavyweight grey terracotta - could this be a variety of stoneware? - in Edwardian Baroque style, although with surprisingly delicate decoration. It was described by the manufacturers, Burmantofts, as vitreous terracotta. The circus (1903) provided much more colour, being faced in bright pinky-red terracotta with panels including exotic Art Nouveau style peacocks; the manufacturer is again unknown, but could perhaps be Doulton's.

So what - if any - generalisations can be drawn from this coastal tour? There is certainly colour at the seaside, but it tends to occur at ports rather than resorts, towns like Gravesend, Dover and Deal where there was a resort element in their trade but other activities - the navy, shipping - provided the main impetus for building. It was, perhaps, a more secure source of income than seasonal tourism. Kent, too, with France a visible neighbour, turns out to be rather more colourful than the gritty northern resorts. However, evidence of innovation at the seaside - restricted to Cockrill's tile at present, although maybe the decoration on the Deal terraces could be included - can appear anywhere. But overall, colour seems to be found in the most unexpected places. Perhaps we shall see more in part four of our journey, from Harwich through Lowestoft to Margate and Morecambe.

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Episode 4 - Hurrah for Hastings!

Our journey around the alphabetical British coastline in search of colourful ceramics in the seaside townscape now reaches H, which happily means Hastings, a town whose architectural ceramics turn out to be inspired by the merchants of Venice. Lord Brassey, railway entrepreneur and MP for Hastings, built himself a town house at the resort in 1878-80. Only a hundred yards or so from the sea, it was no ordinary house: part of the second floor was for the use of the Brasseys, but the remainder was for the townsfolk, with accommodation for a library, lecture hall, art school and assorted local societies. Even more unusual was the design, which was a gothic interpretation of the merchant palaces of Venice. In a narrow street the Brassey Institute's tower soars above its neighbours, and decoration - including about eight large pictorial tile panels by Simpson's - covers a large part of the facade. Faded now (much like those on Stoke Library), the detailing of local historical scenes may still be deciphered and the colours glow, albeit quietly. This strange building, which now houses Hastings Library, was listed in 1987, but bizarrely the lengthy list description makes no mention of the tile panels!

Brassey's landmark house seems to have convinced the town's builders that colour was the sign of success. In the tight-knit old town, several shops were re-fronted with tiles at the turn of the nineteenth century. A couple of complete tiled shopfronts survive, in Bohemia Road and The Bourne, as well as all sorts of partial bits and bobs, adding a touch of gleaming Victorian glamour to the old-fashioned street scene. And then there's the Havelock, a glorious picture of a pub not far from Brassey's showpiece. Here the colourful Doulton panels, added in 1889-90, are not all hidden inside; one is easily visible from the street - and designed, one assumes, to pull in trippers flocking downhill from the nearby railway station towards the pier and beach. This straightforward use of external colour is very effective, as are the distinctive shopfronts in the old town. The theme of the Havelock's panels is also the town's history; with such an event as the Battle of Hastings to record, it is no surprise that pub and institute share the same enjoyment in display.

Once on the seafront, between the matt black of the net lofts and the bright white stucco-fronted hotels, there is a limited amount of colour on the entertainment buildings. Most lavish is the deep salmon-pink terracotta (probably by Doulton) of the Marine Palace, an ornate music hall designed in 1899 by theatre architect Ernest Runtz. Although the theatre has been turned into the inaptly-named De Luxe Leisure Centre and the auditorium trashed, the exterior is still impressive. At the western end of the promenade is the White Rock Pavilion (1927), its relatively bland, off-white exterior brightened up by a series of relief-modelled roundels in Doulton's polychrome stoneware. They portray drama, romance, adventure and (shown here) Terpsichore, the muse of dancing; they give the whole building a lift. For once, ceramic use didn't cease in the resort after the Second World War; in an echo of the White Rock, the local Anglers' headquarters, on the front at East Parade, is marked by an exterior tile plaque dating from 1995. Colourful ceramics are alive and well in Hastings, yet another south-east coast town to indulge in prominent ceramic display.

But onwards round the coast - Harwich, a port rather than a resort, apparently can boast only one tiled shop. This seems hardly believable (more research required...) as this series of articles appears to suggest that ports are more likely sources of ceramics than mere resorts. Ilfracombe weighs in with five tiled shops, mostly erected during the late nineteenth century, when the little town was the most popular of the North Devon resorts. But no ceramically decorative entertainment buildings survive, and the new Landmark Theatre adds form - in the shape of two and a half 'cooling towers' - but no colour other than its all-white brick.

Lowestoft - Britain's most easterly point - and the west coast resort of Morecambe have similar histories in that most of their best buildings are long gone. Lowestoft is perhaps the sadder case, a town which never recovered from the loss of its fishing industry; the buildings are small-scale, undecorative, uninspiring and ceramics-free, apart from one last fish-related remnant, the Boston Deep Sea Fisheries building, a little gem amidst the dross. It stands opposite the harbour, an inter-war white faience-facaded office block, with twin tiled panels of galleons at first floor level. These brightly-coloured, beautifully designed panels were featured in *Glazed Expressions* 10 of 1985, when it was suggested that judging from the surrounds, which were either Carraraware or Ceramic Marble, the manufacturer was Doulton or Carter's. We now know that the panels do not feature in the catalogue of Carter's photographs of their installations, thus it would seem that they are more likely to be by Doulton.

No problems in identifying the one ceramic item leftover in Morecambe, which has suffered dreadful losses of its entertainment buildings; here, the newly-renovated Victoria Pavilion (1897) has a foyer with Burmantofts cornucopia panels exactly like those which can be found inside Blackpool's Tower Buildings (1894). But this is interior work.

And finally to Margate, where a surprise and a puzzle await us in this *Last Resort*, its sad seaside townscape a star of the recent film. Of course, the town which gave us the phrase 'Meet me tonight in Dreamland' still has its romantic side: the fantastic fin tower of Dreamland (1935), the cinema rising above the bay, makes an effective - albeit almost monochrome - landmark, the faience panels in its facade having little visual impact. Just round the corner is the substantial station, which once disgorged trippers to the beach - but the station itself is the puzzle. Built in 1926, its not unattractive facade appears to be grey faience, perhaps even something which might be described as vitreous terracotta (or stoneware?); it is made rather more imposing by the addition of decorative roundels depicting railway scenes, Stevenson's Rocket and the like. And yet this newly-listed building is described by English Heritage as having a stone facade.... Strange.

A little moment of pure joy at Margate is provided by, of all things, a tiny bridge on the seafront, taking the promenader over the mini-gorge which is Newgate Gap. Built by the Borough of Margate to commemorate its fiftieth jubilee, Newgate Bridge was opened in 1907; it was constructed of cream, blue and green Doulton Carraraware. This perfect little structure is listed, although that has not stopped it being closed because it is now dangerous, a sad state for a fine example of integral colour in a building. Although on a vastly smaller scale, it is reminiscent of

the exterior of the Debenham House (also 1907), and it is to be hoped that the present-day council take as much pride in it as their earlier counterparts.

So where does the coastline from H to M get us? Hastings becomes a strong contender for top ceramic resort, and there's more evidence for the south-eastern preference for colour (maybe it's the climate up north which precludes the use of external ceramics), which perhaps may be reinforced by our final chunk of evidence, which will take us from New Brighton to Whitley Bay by way of Southend and Southwold.

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Episode 5 - Dolphins, Doulton and Devon

For the final part of our alphabetical paddle around Britain's coastal ceramic locations, we should begin with New Brighton, but since this could well be described as the resort that vanished, we shall move swiftly on to the ceramically prolific Ps: Poole, Plymouth and Portsmouth. The latter is famed for its ceramically competitive pubs, although the red faience signifying the Brickwoods Brewery estate and the green faience of Portsmouth United's pubs was all apparently supplied by Carters of Poole. Poole, of course, is a very special seaside town; has its combination of pottery and seaside resulted in an unusually colourful architectural display? The famous 'Welcome' panels may now have gone (apart from one at Sandbanks, by the ferry landing), but the little town does not disappoint, with the Poole Arms, a glittering green-tiled pub, set right on Poole Harbour (not far from the old pottery site) and even the town bridge ornamented with four hefty Carters ceramic plaques dating from 1926. Fishy symbolism is everywhere: on the plaques, on pubs (of the local Dolphin Brewery) and in the name of the 1960s Dolphin Shopping Centre, which has large ceramic and mosaic panels depicting life around Poole Harbour.

Plymouth has one rarity that Poole lacks: a nineteenth-century outdoor pictorial tile panel. The former New Palace Theatre (1898) is packed with nautical motifs, inside and out; its facade has masses of Doulton terracotta and faience as well as a pair of spectacular semicircular tile panels. These, according to *The Doulton Story*, were designed by W. J. Neatby using vitreous enamels, and show scenes of the Spanish Armada from a painting by Sir Oswald Brierly. There are few examples of this type of early pictorial panel in Britain: Hastings Library (1880), Stoke Library (1878) and York City Art Gallery (1887) come to mind, and - like the Plymouth panels - all are terribly faded. Lowestoff's Boston Deep Sea Fisheries (built as Columbus Buildings) galleon panels are rather later, but there's clearly an entire book to be written about the portrayal of boats on tiles: think of Rochdale's Two Ships Hotel, or Hull's Bonny Boat Inn.... But back to Plymouth and the Armada: in the city's Armada Underpass is a huge late eighties tile scheme by Kenneth Clark and Eddie Pond, while the Civic Centre has a large Kenneth Clark panel dating from the 1960s.

P is also for Pugin, who was a seafaring man; his externally forbidding Ramsgate house has a tower from which he could view the goings-on at sea. Inside his St Augustine's Abbey Church the decoration is typical Pugin, but there's nothing colourful about the exterior, so along the prom to the harbour. Here the Queen's Head, all ornate green and yellow faience, and the domed red terracotta Customs House next door - newly restored by Shaws of Darwen - look out across the water.

If the Kent coast is a delight for ceramic location hunters, it's a different story up north: Southport, still a thriving resort, is all white in terms of ceramics, with just a pair of interwar white faience facade cinemas and not a lot else in terms of tiles apart from the dado in the pierhead gents! More whiteness at St Annes-on-the-Sea, or more precisely Fairhaven, just to the south, with the classic faience Congregational Church (1907-12), although St Annes itself has one of the longest faience barfronts in the country at the St Annes Hotel. This colourful bar, known as

'Burlington Berties' a few years ago, now goes by the name 'Tiles' - ceramics must be fashionable! Scarborough's grand ceramic gesture is the bland Hathernware of the interwar Spa Buildings, but more surprising is the Pilkington's tile frieze (galleons again!) inside the local newspaper office. Then down south to Southampton and Southsea, the latter being the resort end of Portsmouth, where - typically for ports - the pubs remain the prime area for ceramic display.

With the end now in sight we visit Torquay, where the creamy-white Doulton faience of the town's renovated Pavilion looks as fresh as it was when brand new in 1912; however, most colour on the seafront comes from flowerbeds rather than faience. Weymouth and Whitby have little in common but the style of their shopfronts; the assortment of tiled stallrisers, mostly plain but some lettered, would have been commonplace in the early twentieth century but has disappeared from the generality of our shopping centres. And finally to Whitley Bay and Worthing, with a dome apiece but few tiles, although the former's seafront has a long terrace of houses (now mainly restaurants) heavily ornamented with deep yellow terracotta which has been sadly neglected.

It seems clear that ceramic colour on seaside buildings is a southern thing; as England is to Iberia in terms of tilework on buildings, so Lancashire and Yorkshire are to Kent and Devon. Experiments with pictorial tiling have not stood the test of time, but stoneware and faience have successfully and permanently added colour and delight to the coastal townscape. The seafronts of Kent and the coastal towns of Devon are clear winners in terms of colour, both having population density (working or holidaymaking) large enough to warrant the expense of ceramic display. Now I know why the 1950s fisherboys of Lowestoft - young men working as deckhands on the fishing boats - spent their pay on brightly coloured suits from Burton's; the reds, yellows and greens of the Teddy boy-style suits brightened up the townscape!

So what's a northerner to do about this lack of visual stimulation? Well, there's always the seaside on tiles, like the bathing machines on the beach shown in one of the four Longton Swimming Baths (1886) Minton Hollins tile panels now at the Potteries Museum in Stoke-on-Trent, or the image of Brighton West Pier on a tile by the Photo-Decorated Tile Co at Jackfield Tile Museum, but that would be another story altogether....