

Overview of nineteenth century church tile manufacturers and architects

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Manufacturers

The history of the many firms who made tiles for churches in the nineteenth century is a complex one, but an excellent overview can be found in the late Ken Beaulah's *Church Tiles of the Nineteenth Century*.¹ It reveals the origins and interrelationships of the principal manufacturers of church tiles, which can be divided into four main strands. Firstly there are the various Minton firms and how they grew and evolved in the Stoke-on-Trent area. The second strand stems from Chamberlain in Worcester who was succeeded by Maw & Co. They shifted their operations to Broseley in the Severn valley and later built works at Jackfield, along with Craven Dunnill. Thirdly there is the history of the Godwin companies in Herefordshire and the last and minor strand is the Architectural Pottery Co in Poole, Dorset. It was set up at Hamworthy near Poole in 1854 and bought out by Jesse Carter in 1895.

This survey focuses only on the makers of encaustic floor tiles and does not show the makers of painted wall tiles like W. B. Simpson or Morris & Company who of course are also part of the history of church tiles. An excellent example of the work of both these firms can be found at Clapham Church in Sussex.² Morris & Co provided the tiles with the four archangels for the reredos behind the altar, while W. B. Simpson made the tile panels showing the apostles flanking the windows. Both commissions were carried out in 1874.

In 1830 Samuel Wright of Shelton took out a patent for the manufacture of ornamental floor tiles.³ The language of patents is legalistic and obscure so little can be learned about the actual process, which it is meant to protect. Wright seems to have had difficulties in making a commercial success of his invention and around 1835 he struck a deal with Herbert Minton and William Chamberlain to operate his patent under licence. This arrangement must have worked well because in 1844, when the patent was due to expire, Wright renewed it for a further seven years. In a special letter of assignment dated 29 April 1844 he transferred his right to operate the patent again to Minton and Chamberlain although his partner Fleming St John represents Chamberlain in this document.⁴ The letter of assignment reads: 'Received on the date of the within written Indenture of and from the within named Herbert Minton and Fleming St John the sum of six hundred and twelve pounds being the consideration in money within mentioned to be by them paid to me.' Signed Samuel Wright.

The ornamental or encaustic tiles covered by Wright's patent were made from ordinary malleable or plastic clay with a design of different coloured clays laid into the body using plaster moulds and a small screw press. The screw press was used to force the clay into moulds and indent a design into the clay, which was then filled with a contrasting colour. This is the defining hallmark of an encaustic tile which has a design of different coloured clay burnt into the body. (The word 'encaustic' comes from the Greek meaning 'burning in'.) The whole process consisted of impressing the design in the soft clay, filling it with a different coloured clay either by pouring or pasting, scraping it level after drying, firing the tile, and then adding a

transparent lead glaze if required, which made the brown tile look darker and gave the light coloured inlay a honey coloured appearance.

Herbert Minton dominated the early history of encaustic tile making. Between 1835 and 1840 he and his tile makers solved the various problems associated with the manufacture of encaustic tiles on a commercial basis.⁵ The great break came in the early 1840s when he obtained the important commission to repave the floor of Temple Church in London using medieval designs from the then recently rediscovered floor at Westminster Abbey Chapter House.⁶ All the early designs were incorporated into Minton's first printed catalogue entitled *Examples of Old English Tiles*.

The original thirteenth century chapter house floor tiles had inlaid designs of white clay covered with a transparent lead-glaze, but although Minton copied the inlaid designs, his early tiles were not glazed like the medieval ones but the white inlay was covered with special hardwearing yellow enamel. By the mid 1840s Minton had extended his range of coloured inlays to blue and green (possibly at the behest of the architect A. W. N. Pugin), creating tiles and floors with greater polychromatic effects as the floors of the Chapter House at York Minster and the sanctuary at Wells Cathedral show. Minton tiles were frequently used in parish churches throughout the country as at St Mark's in Shelton, Stoke-on-Trent. Herbert Minton also became a generous benefactor by donating tiles to churches for use in their sanctuary.⁷ One beneficiary in particular is St Catherine's Church, Barmby Moor in East Yorkshire, where Minton's brother-in-law was rector, which may explain the two donations of tiles given in 1849 and 1851.

Walter Chamberlain is the other important figure in the early history of Victorian encaustic tile making. It seems he was encouraged by the Worcester architect and antiquarian Harvey Eginton to make replicas of medieval floor tiles, and in some ways the rough clay of the tile bodies and the overall glaze gave them a more medieval appearance than the early Minton tiles. In 1840 Chamberlain amalgamated with George Barr and Fleming St John and in 1844 they, together with Herbert Minton, were partners in the renewal of the patent arrangements with Samuel Wright. In the same year they issued a catalogue with a series of encaustic tile designs mainly based on medieval patterns. The operation of their encaustic tile production was the subject of an article in the *Penny Magazine* of 1843 which provides a rare first hand account of encaustic tile making at that time.⁸ Essential manufacturing methods are described as follows:

'The ground colour of the tile is frequently a brownish clay with a yellow device; but this may be varied at pleasure. Let the colour be what it may, however, the first clay is mixed up very thick and pressed into the mould by the aid of the press... On leaving the press it presents the form of damp, heavy, uniform coloured square tile of clay with an ornamental device formed by a depression below the common level of the surface. The second coloured clay, so far from being made stiff like the first, has a consistency somewhat resembling that of honey; and herein lies one of the niceties of manufacture, for it is necessary to choose clays which will contract equally in baking although of different consistence when used. The tile being laid on a bench, the workman plasters the honey-like clay on it, until he has completely filled the depressed

device using a kind of knife or trowel in the process. The tile, in this state, is allowed to dry very gradually for the long period of eight weeks, to accommodate the shrinking of the clays to their peculiar natures. After this, each tile is scraped on the surface with an edge tool, till the superfluous portion of the second clay is removed, and the two clay become properly visible, one forming the ground and the other the device.'

This is a very clear description and we must presume that similar basic production processes were in operation at Minton's. Chamberlain only produced glazed tiles in brown and yellow and they never aspired to the polychromatic range that Minton brought out in the 1840s, but good examples can still be seen in Malvern Priory and Slebech Church in Pembrokeshire.⁹

By the late 1840s tile production at Chamberlain's had ceased and they sold their moulds and stock to John Hornby Maw in 1850, who saw it as an investment venture for his sons George and Arthur. The Maw family operated at Worcester for a couple of years and then moved to Broseley near Ironbridge in 1852 and began to take a share of the encaustic tile market.¹⁰ In 1883 they moved into a new factory at Jackfield designed by Charles Lynam and became one of the biggest tile producers in Britain. Their tiles for churches were of high quality and were not only used on the floor but also on walls and sometime in the arches of the nave of the church. Fine examples are in St Asaph Cathedral in Denbighshire, the local church at Jackfield, Battlefield Church in Shropshire and the chapel at St James's Hospital in Leeds where the tiles with Maw's name leave us in no doubt who made these particular church encaustics. Maw also exported abroad and the fine floor at the Maria Jesse Church in Delft in Holland is at present being restored to its former glory.

Another manufacturer who arrived on the scene after Wright's patent had expired was William Godwin who with the help of his brother Henry (who had worked at Maw's) set up a factory in Lugwardine near Hereford.¹¹ At first their encaustics were made of plastic clay employing the usual techniques, and they produced some very fine floors including the one at Worcester Cathedral, but also stunning circular pavements as can be seen in the Lady Chapel at Chichester Cathedral. Sometimes their tiles have distressed surfaces creating an effect close to that of medieval tiles, like the fine pictorial tiles in the sanctuary at St Mary's Church, Shrewsbury. They took advantage of the invention of dust pressing encaustic tiles that had been patented by William Boulton and Joseph Worthington in 1863.¹² In many ways this opened up the church tile market for mass production and other firms like Maw also took advantage of this process.¹³ Many churches throughout Britain, for instance Leeds Parish Church, feature dust pressed Godwin tiles and their smaller four and quarter inch size became very popular rather than the standard six inch tile.

Although new firms like Maw, Godwin and the Architectural Pottery Co had now become rivals of Minton & Co, the Minton firm remained a dominant force in the world of encaustic church tiles. After the death of Herbert Minton in 1858, Colin Minton Campbell ran the china business and Michael Daintry Hollins was in charge of the tile business, acquiring an additional partner in the shape of Robert Minton Taylor in 1863. This arrangement continued until 1868 when all the partnerships were dissolved.¹⁴ Hollins built a new tile factory designed by Charles Lynam in

Stoke in 1869 and Robert Minton Taylor started his own factory in Fenton, although Hollins was not happy that the name Minton appeared in Robert Minton Taylor's factory mark. When Colin Minton Campbell bought the Robert Minton Taylor tile works in 1875 and set up a new company under the name of Minton Brick & Tile Co, Hollins began legal proceedings about the use of the name Minton. He won his case and Campbell was forced to change the name of his company to Campbell Brick and Tile Co with Robert Minton Taylor staying on as manager. In 1882 they became known as the Campbell Tile Co.

All this may explain why after the court case of 1875, Minton, Hollins & Co were sensitive about the use of the name Minton; in their company catalogues brought out after this date they often stressed their exclusive right to the name Minton. 'The patents of the manufacture of encaustic and plain tiles belonged exclusively to and were carried out by the firm who have the sole right to the use of the name Minton in the manufacture and sale of these tiles'. Their encaustic tiles are usually carefully marked with the name *Minton & Co* or *Minton, Hollins & Co*.

A major new tile firm that emerged in the 1870s was Craven Dunnill in Jackfield. This firm had grown out of an earlier one called Hargreaves and Craven, but when Hargreaves left, Craven brought in Henry Powell Dunnill as a new partner, who helped to change the firm into a major tile producer.¹⁵ A new factory was opened in 1874, again designed by Charles Lynam, and church tiles became a major part of their output. They obtained important commissions like those for Chester Cathedral as well as the large floor of Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin. They made not only encaustic tiles but also line impressed and relief tiles for use on floors in churches like those at Bangor Cathedral in Wales.

If Craven Dunnill was the last major firm to be set up, a small latecomer was the Worcester St Georges Encaustic Tile Co set up in 1878, that made interesting encaustic floor tiles with a real medieval look. They were bought out by Jesse Carter in 1880 but production continued for only a few years. Tiles *in situ* by this firm are rare but good examples can be seen at St Ignatius in Preston. This shows that at this time the market for church tiles was still growing, and even established china manufacturers like Wedgwood entered the encaustic tile business in the 1880s with dust pressed tiles all carefully marked with the Portland Vase logo on the back.

Architects

It goes without saying that church architects occupy a pivotal role in the history of church tiles. Pugin, Scott, Butterfield, Street, Burges and Seddon specified the use of tiles in their churches. A. W. N. Pugin was not only a prolific designer as can be seen from his *Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament* but he was also a prolific user of encaustic tiles in his ecclesiastical buildings and his business relationship with Herbert Minton resulted in the designing and making of some of the best church tiles of the Victorian era. He was using Minton tiles as early as 1840 as can be seen from a letter written by him to Minton on 19th September 1840 in relation to tiles for the Hardman's Hospital Chapel in Birmingham.¹⁶ These early tiles were only in yellow and brown but by 1844 Minton was making more colourful encaustics probably at Pugin's instigation. This can be seen in Pugin's private chapel at the Grange in Ramsgate where blue is used alongside brown and yellow in the tiles on the altar

dais and in the same chapel we can find encaustic tiles bearing Pugin's personal monogram. One of Pugin's greatest achievements in the design and use of colourful church tiles can be found at St Giles in Cheadle, built for Lord Shrewsbury (opened 1846), where the polychromatic effects of the encaustic floor tiles blend so well with colourful wall and ceiling decorations and the stained glass windows.

Sir George Gilbert Scott is often seen as the great church restoration architect on a par with his French counterpart Viollet-le-Duc.¹⁷ In many cases he would recommend the removal of old tiled pavements and their replacement by copies of the old tiles or the laying of new encaustic tiles. The restoration of Westminster Abbey Chapter House carried out between 1866 and 1872 was his work, although here many medieval tiles were luckily left intact with only small areas patched with Minton replicas. However the Chapter House at Salisbury Cathedral was completely repaved with Minton copies based on the medieval originals as were St Asaph Cathedral with Maw encaustics. There are Minton tiles at All Saints, Harewood, and St Barnabas, Weeton, both in West Yorkshire, while the floor at St Oswald's in Ashbourne was relaid with Campbell Brick & Tile encaustics.

William Butterfield's use of tiles was more individualistic and creative as can be seen at his well known All Saints Church, Margaret Street, Westminster, consecrated in 1859. The outside is constructed of three kinds of different coloured bricks and in the interior there are decorative Minton tiles on the floor interspersed with plain marble tiles creating interplay between plain and decorative surfaces. Eye-catching features in the same church are the ornate pictorial tile panels with religious scenes designed by Butterfield himself. His chapel at Keble College (1868-82) in Oxford also has a floor made up of marble tiles augmented with Minton encaustics.

George Edmund Street carried out many church commissions in Britain and abroad. One of his most important restoration commissions was the refurbishment of Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin between 1871 and 1878. This restoration scheme was generously funded by the vast sums of money donated by the local distiller Henry Roe which may explain why it was possible to pave the whole floor of this large church with Craven Dunnill tiles of every description ranging from circular encaustic tile pavements to line impressed tiles.

William Burges is well known for using tiles lavishly in his secular commissions like Cardiff Castle, but he used them more sparingly in his few church commissions where floor mosaics were his preferred medium.¹⁸ However in some of his churches encaustic tiles do make an appearance, like the beautiful little church of St Mary's (1878) at Studley Royal near Fountains Abbey, where the floor of the nave is covered with dust pressed Godwin tiles.

Finally there is the work of the architect John Pollard Seddon. Like Pugin he was prolific designer of tiles and did work for Maw, Robert Minton Taylor and Godwin. Several sheets of designs for church encaustics done for Maw & Co and Robert Minton Taylor are illustrated in *The Building News* of 1875.¹⁹ However his best work was done for St Leonard's Church in Sunningwell, Oxfordshire, which he restored in 1877. Here he designed some amazing floor tiles made by Godwin based on the *Book of Revelations* combining beautifully designed tiles with complex Christian iconography.²⁰

This brief introduction to the history of the manufacturing of church tiles and the architects who used them shows the rich diversity of the topic and also reveals much fertile ground for further study.

Notes and references

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