

NEWSLETTER

Issue 53 March 2015



· INSTITUTE · OF · HISTORIC ·
BUILDING · CONSERVATION

WEST MIDLANDS BRANCH

DIARY

❖ Next Branch Meeting – 18th March 2015, at Ludlow. See meeting agenda for details.

Are YOU going to volunteer?



My name is Herbert Kitchener. When I was in the nursery I was told, “Little boys mustn’t point, it’s rude”. However, as a big boy, I have a special dispensation to do the forbidden thing, being the possessor of a handlebar moustache, a Peer of the Realm, a Field Marshal and a Cabinet Minister. In the exercise of this dispensation, I have been asked to point out that the West Midlands Branch of IHBC is still in need of a new Chairman. There must be a member reading

this who has the necessary time and skills. Whoever you are, please volunteer now! Your Branch needs you!

EDITORIAL

This Newsletter edition does the familiar thing – ‘cascading’ the experience of our last Branch meeting at Middleport Pottery for the benefit of those Branch members unable to attend in person. This same coverage gives the Newsletter status as a ‘journal of record’. Also familiar are some ‘magazine’ items featuring your Editor’s personal travels – this time in the USA last Autumn.

Being a retired person makes it possible for me to sit down and write these things up. Something that is so very difficult for most Branch members as they handle almost desperately busy day jobs. The time (and indeed the energy) is so often not there. Yet it is the busy ones who are in intimate contact with issues technical and legal, making new discoveries that do merit ‘cascading’ through the Newsletter to benefit and inform other practitioners with a very professional interest in what we do.

So your Newsletter very much welcomes letters, case studies and articles about materials and craftsmanship to disseminate vital or very helpful information amongst the membership. So – over to you. Please sit down at the keyboard, or take pen and paper, and write to:

The Editor

VIEW OUT OF THE WINDOW

Middleport Pottery

4th December 2014

The venue for the December 2014 Branch meeting was Middleport Pottery, Stoke on Trent. The Pottery provided us with the bulk of the day’s subject matter. We also ate there, the Branch Treasurer picking up the tab for the event!

The branch meeting took place in a first floor function room near the main entrance. Many original fixtures, fittings and finishes remained in situ, but the roof had been rebuilt and fitted with double-glazed opening rooflights, electrically operated. The

electrical installation was new, and even included an overhead projector. A long shallow ramp ran from the upper stair hall, ensuring disabled access. Next door, a lift had been installed to give disabled access to the first floor, access including a disabled toilet.



Middleport Pottery. View from the meeting room over an inner courtyard



Meeting room at refreshment time. Refurbished ceiling and electrically controlled rooflights. Burleigh production examples on shelving

The day's programme included an introductory talk by *Teresa Fox-Wells*, Prince's Regeneration Trust Visitor Centre Manager, on the history of the premises to date, including their acquisition, repair and part conversion. The downstairs café served us with a finger buffet, and the afternoon involved us being split into three groups for a guided tour of the working Burleigh Pottery. Some of us took the opportunity to patronise the Factory Seconds Shop!

Middleport Pottery had been the subject of a previous Branch visit a few years ago, and some participants had the opportunity to compare the 'then' with the 'now'.

MIDDLEPORT POTTERY

Introduction by Teresa Fox-Wells

4th December 2014

In 1888 the Middleport Pottery was purpose-built by a Mr Burgess and a Mr Leigh for their new pottery. Their firm had been founded in 1862 but they were looking for larger premises designed for a proper production flow. They found a suitable plot flanking the Trent and Mersey Canal that had been operated by the Davenport company making 'saggers' – the ceramic containers used in the industry to load green

pots into the kilns for firing. Their architect was one Mr Absolom and the name of their company and product *Burleigh*.

Production peaked in the 1930s and involved the building a new side wing to provide more space for packing. This side wing is now the factory shop. Original construction created seven large brick bottle kilns, of which one now survives. The 1940s Clean Air Acts made bottle kilns redundant at a stroke, and six were removed to be replaced by a shed containing new gas and electric kilns that did not make smoke. The one remaining bottle kiln survived because it was physically part of the Pottery fabric, and its removal would have meant part of the building falling down.

Through the 20th and into the 21st Centuries production at the Burleigh Pottery reduced in scale. This left an excess of space. Redundant spaces were simply shut off and left out of use, complete with all their original fixtures, fittings and finishes. Items in storage included a huge collection of 19,000 original moulds, some commissioned by Burleighs and others acquired from other manufacturers. Most of these were stored at second floor level, where the floors were not designed for such heavy loadings!

By 2000, the sheer size of the factory and its need for repair was making the on-site Burleigh operation increasingly uneconomic. The next step would have been Burleigh moving out to smaller and much more manageable premises, leaving the Middleport Pottery decaying and empty. But this did not happen. Enter the *Prince's Regeneration Trust*, which put together a £9m funding package to (1) buy the Pottery; (2) repair and part convert; (3) re-let part to the Burleigh Pottery for continued manufacture; (4) create a self-sustaining Visitor Centre with a museum, café, and an events programme; (5) create lettable space for small businesses. English Heritage, Heritage Lottery Fund and EEC contributed to the funding package, as did private donors.

Repair and conversion work began in 2011. 50% of the repaired building complex is occupied by Burleigh, now part of Denby. The rest is being applied to the new uses. Public opening of the repaired and converted complex was on 1st July 2014. The premises are already attracting visits from coach groups and local organisations. One or more special events take place each month. There is free access but the guided tours of the working Burleigh pottery attract a charge. One of the project objectives is to help keep traditional skills alive, including those of the Pottery industry. Fifty Burleigh jobs were saved by the initiative.

MIDDLEPORT POTTERY

Walkabout and Guided Tour

4th December 2014

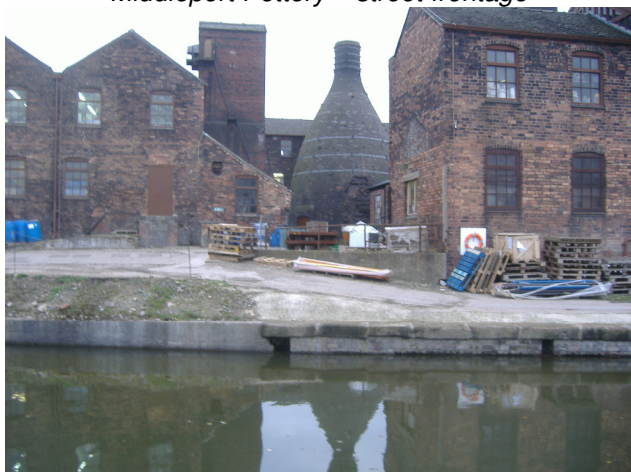
The Pottery stands in a grid of residential backstreets characterised by late C19 terraced houses. All that can be seen from the street is a very long two-storey frontage topped by gables at regular intervals. At one end is a coach arch with wrought iron gates. Above this is a terracotta gable featuring the initials of Messrs Burgess and Leigh and the date of building – 1888.

There is a very different view from the towpath of the Trent and Mersey Canal, which runs along the west boundary. Here a series of gables and courtyards present themselves to view, along with a tall chimney, a boxy brick structure once used as a drying tower, and the surviving broad-girthed

bottle kiln. An original crane is positioned by the water, for loading narrowboats.



Middleport Pottery – street frontage



The Pottery – viewed from the Canal towpath, including the one surviving bottle kiln.

Repairs seem to have been largely concentrated on weatherproofing, with roofs being reinstated and rainwater goods overhauled. A large proportion of the original exterior joinery has been kept, albeit carefully repainted in the same brown livery as previously. During our visit, work was proceeding on the detached wing next door to the café. Even though the bottle kiln had been carefully weeded during the contract, we were told, new growth had already regenerated. Sheets of Perspex or a similar material had been screwed to the outer face of the street frontage windows to deflect missiles.

Internally, much of the original fittings and fixtures had been retained, along with the finishes. New finishes only appeared where there had been interventions, particularly around the roofs and ceilings. Nothing seemed to have been changed for the sake of it, and the ground floor office suite had been little changed - apart from its current use as part of the museum display. All the details and furnishings had survived and been retained.

The impression is that the work was carried out over and around the Burleigh Pottery operation as it continued in production. The 'working pottery' guided tour takes participants through the pottery systematically, starting with preparation of the basic clay slip, moving on to the moulding of green pots, firing to biscuit stage, application of transfers, re-firing to fix the colours, and a final glazing consolidated by a last firing. The completed goods were then quality-checked and packed.

Burleigh ware is made using traditional hand skills, with a minimum of mechanisation. We

watched plates being formed. Clay was slapped on to a former, and then turned to shape by a machine, with all the 'trimmings' being re-circulated into the process. The 'green' plates were then set aside for drying. All this being done by one man!

Classic Burleigh ware is recognisable by its blue-on-white or pink-on-white floral patterns. Tissue paper is printed with the pattern on the premises using a special ink. The printed sheets are hung up to dry a little. Each operator takes the sheet she needs, folds and cuts it to the necessary shape, and then burnishes the pattern on to the pot. Some of the shapes are very complex, and the printed tissue paper is manipulated with very considerable skill – and physical effort. A firing bakes the ink on to the biscuit ware and the remains of the tissue are removed. A further firing glazes the patterned pot.



Burleigh pottery on display

The pottery does not produce just traditional Burleigh Ware. The range includes special orders from such stores as Harrods and Fortnum and Mason, and also takes in traditional cream Leeds Ware (Hartley Greens & Co). Classic Poole Pottery is also created here.

Apparently the security of being able to continue production on refurbished premises has enabled Burleigh to build up a new order book and step up production, recruiting additional staff. The workforce is now 100-strong. A future problem may be a lack of space for expansion! Traditional skills are being rewarded and safeguarded by the revitalized pottery, but all has not been plain sailing. The craftsman moulder, who creates the master-moulds from which the working moulds are made, is retiring in a year's time, and it has not been possible to find an apprentice to learn these important skills from him – it needing 3-5 years to learn from a lifetime of experience.

The experience is completed by the shop selling Factory Seconds – examples of all the hand-made pottery created in the factory

MIDDLEPORT POTTERY

Neighbourhood

4th December 2014

Interesting things have been happening in Port Street, where the Pottery is sited. Apparently the City of Stoke-on-Trent has acquired the terraced houses in the street, subjecting them to major refurbishment re-creating their original appearance, though the windows are not double-hung sashes in operation but chunky double-glazed units. Some two-bedroomed properties have been amalgamated to their next-doors to create space for family use.

Some are for rent and others are being put on the market.

The terrace at right angle to the Middleport Pottery entrance is empty awaiting refurbishment. The end cottage facing the gateway was apparently occupied originally by the Pottery gate-keeper.

The refurbished terrace powerfully complements the reinstated pottery, and demonstrates how attractive original Victorian cottages can be made to look. Of course, the work has not been perfect, as it displays the usual plastic plugs stopping the holes drilled for the chemical damp courses.



Refurbished terraced houses in Port Street

Middleport Pottery is just one of three potteries neighbouring each other on the canal frontage. The other two, though physically massive, are now derelict. One rises to five stories but has lost its roof. Perhaps the revival of the Middleport Pottery will give sufficient regeneration impetus to result in their repair and conversion to new use. The five-storey block has particular potential for conversion into waterside apartments, as the block rises direct from the water.



Next door to Middleport Pottery. Massive ruined redundancy.

HENRY CHAPMAN MERCER

The Editor

Some years ago I wrote a short piece about the Moravian Pottery in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, USA, which I had come across whilst passing by. I was back in the States in October 2014, and took the opportunity to make a planned visit, to inspect all three buildings created by Henry Chapman Mercer in Doylestown. A man of considerable personal wealth, Mercer became his own architect and builder for

three extraordinary buildings all made of concrete 1908-1914. The first was his own residence, a large house which he called 'Fonthill'. The second was the Moravian Pottery and the third the Mercer Museum to exhibit his large private collections. Mercer apparently used a direct labour team of eight men and a horse.

I wonder whether he was conscious of the irony in naming his house 'Fonthill', bearing in mind the fate of millionaire William Beckford's Fonthill Abbey, created by James Wyatt and built largely of timber with applied stucco and plaster, which blew down in a gale. Anyway, in superficial form Fonthill rather resembles a Scottish Baronial mansion in its slenderness, height and busy silhouette. Beyond that, resemblance rather ceases, as all the exterior structure is in concrete of one kind or another, including the steeply-pitched roof. Chunky timber glazing appears in all the window openings, and here and there decorative tiles from the Moravian Pottery appear. As do orange pantiles.



Fonthill, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, USA. Main garden frontage.

A tall end tower acts as a bookend to a lower jumble of roofs and bays. A much smaller tower acts as the opposite bookend. The pitched roofs are concrete simply laid and smoothed. The walls are largely of shuttered concrete, with the individual pours clearly visible. Here and there are thin veneers of render, either later patching or early civilising of the material. Where mix was simply laid the plastic medium is reflected in curves rather than angles.



Fonthill. Part of east front

Fonthill is flanked by a smaller villa, perhaps a sort of Dower House. It has a tower with machicolations low down, which give it a slightly Italianate air.

The Moravian Pottery uses a more varied system of construction, with elements using mortared concrete blocks as well as shuttering with irregular pours. Some roofing is in Roman Tiles, and

the very tall stacks are in brick with their caps decorated with tiles from the Pottery. The general effect is of a low and spreading building of the Spanish Mission type. Inside there are rough groined vaults in coarse concrete, perhaps laid over sacking spread across a temporary framework.



*Moravian Pottery, Doylestown.
General view from east.*



Moravian Pottery. Entrance wing.



Fonthill 'Dower House'



Mercer Museum, Doylestown. View from south west.

Fonthill and the Pottery are next door to each other, occupying the same stretch of urban parkland. The Mercer Museum is in another part of

town and is decidedly different in character, being rectilinear in plan and outline. Wall surfaces are smooth and plane, with no articulation or modelling at all, just window holes in various shapes and locations punched through. Modelling only appears at the eaves and above, with a series of hipped roofs, gables, chimneys, turrets and dormers. Mercer was perhaps demonstrating that buildings of this type of shuttered concrete construction could rise to a significant height – in this case up to seven stories. All the high roofs are laid in hand-smoothed concrete.



*Mercer Museum. South-east view showing
reconstructed concrete roofing*

Mercer was very much an amateur, feeling his way with a novel form of construction. An awful lot of superficial patching has gone on over the years, indicating that weather resistance has been poor. I rather think that the coarse texture of the original concrete allowed water to settle in the pits and crannies, leading to freezing and cracking in Pennsylvania's harsh, cold winters. For whatever reason, this novel form of building did not catch on at the time, leaving these three extraordinary buildings as a strictly local phenomenon. And Mercer himself did not achieve international fame – or notoriety. Though, on my first discovery of the Moravian Pottery, I was thinking, 'Gaudi, Gaudi!'



'Well House' at Fonthill



Contemporary lavatory block at the Moravian Pottery

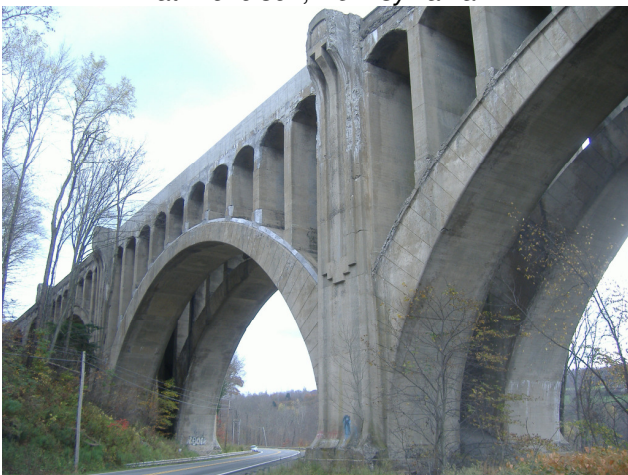
RAILROAD GIGANTICISM

The Editor

Some years ago I published a piece about the gigantic Tunkhannock Viaduct at Nicholson, Pennsylvania, USA. This vast Roman-style structure in reinforced concrete had been built by the Lackawanna Railroad 1912-16 over a deep, wide river valley as part of a massive programme of re-alignment aimed at speeding up traffic on a previously steeply undulating route. I later discovered that the Tunkhannock Viaduct was not unique, and that, as part of the same programme, the Lackawanna Railroad had built the large, but not so utterly enormous, Martin's Creek Viaduct a few miles to the north. So, during my October 2014 visit to Pennsylvania, I took the opportunity to seek it out.



The Big Grey Giant itself – the Tunkhannock Viaduct at Nicholson, Pennsylvania



Martin's Creek Viaduct, Pennsylvania.



Martin's Creek Viaduct. Detail, showing frost damage high up.

Unlike its Tunkhannock bigger brother, Martin's Creek uses elliptical arches. Each main arch supports a series of transverse arches (also elliptical) which, in turn support the trackbed. The

same reinforced concrete construction had not worn well, with repeated wetting and freezing cycles breaking up the concrete surface. Where the viaduct crosses the Route 11 Public Highway, all the cornice detail has been dressed back to ensure that loose lumps of concrete do not fall on the passing traffic.

The viaduct crosses the Martin's Creek valley on a diagonal, so was not easy to photograph. And, unlike its bigger brother to the south, there is only one public viewpoint, from Route 11 itself. Interestingly, though, Route 11 uses the formation of the original, C19, railway.



Martin's Creek Viaduct, showing several arches

The viaducts are not redundant monuments. The former Lackawanna Railroad main line is now operated by Canadian Pacific as a single-tracked freight line. I saw a train using the Tunkhannock Viaduct later on that same day. However, the inability of this type of construction to cope with the Continental climate of NE Pennsylvania has made these huge impressive structures a potential liability.

REVIEW

Title: Venetian Glass Mosaics 1860-1917

Author: Sheldon Barr

Publisher: Antique Collectors' Club

Published: 2008

ISBN 10: 1851495487

One of the greatest of Victorian artworks is to be found in St Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham. It is a series of four stained glass windows designed by the painter Sir Edward Burne-Jones and executed by the Morris Company. Everything to do about these windows is brilliant. Burne-Jones also designed in another medium – mosaic. It was for this reason that I bought the book, spotting it in a second-hand bookshop. Burne-Jones created another hugely significant C19 artwork in the sanctuary mosaics at the American Episcopal Church of St Paul within the Walls, Rome. The three principal panels illustrate the *Heavenly Jerusalem*, the *Annunciation*, and the *Tree of Life*, reproduced in large scale colour photographs in the book.

It is both a fascinating and infuriating read. The description of the revival of mosaic work in C19 Venice is good. Demand was created by the need to do something about the spectacular but decaying medieval mosaics in the Basilica of St Mark. A lawyer, Antonio Salviati, got together with a priest art historian Vincenzo Zanetti and an innovative technologist, Antonio Colleoni. The three developed a system of prefabricated mosaic using glass rather than glazed terracotta. What then happened was that the original mosaics in St Mark's were replaced

by 100% replica glass mosaics. There was an international conservation campaign led by William Morris condemning this destruction of major medieval art work. And the 'restoration by replication' treatment of the interior of St Mark's was stopped.

However, the prefabrication element of the system gave Salviati a marketable product which undercut on price traditional mosaic work (in which the tesserae were individually bedded in mortar). The glass *smalti* could be manufactured in spectacular colours and metallic finishes too.

An early commission was for the Royal Mausoleum in Windsor Great Park. For some reason pictures of the mausoleum are very rare – it is as if there were a kind of censorship in operation. The book pictures both the building (German Romanesque) and the stately Salviati mosaics in its porch. Salviati went on to gain commissions for the dome spandrels at St Paul's and the Albert Memorial.

What is infuriating is that the technical descriptions of manufacturing the glass *smalti* and creating the prefabricated panels of mosaic are limited to little more than two paragraphs. Nothing at all is said about what was done to ensure that the prefabricated panels fitted settings curved both in plan and in section.

The 'Heavenly Jerusalem' mosaic in St Paul's Within the Walls Rome is on the apse half-dome, meaning curvature in both horizontal and vertical planes. However the prefabricated panels were prepared to compensate for the double curvature, the result is stupendous. Burne-Jones was a fine colourist and an innovative designer. In the very centre is Christ in Glory. Unlike the convention, this Christ is not bearded. He sits on a living throne of Cherubim, whose feathery wings are crimson, blue and purple. On His lap he holds a roundel containing a landscape representative of creation.

This mosaic must have been sheer hell to photograph. Involving lowish natural light levels, the need for artificial lighting, and coping with curved subjects high up. Whoever the photographer was (there are no credits) he or she did very well. Only to have the hard work sabotaged by reproduction crossing the centrefold. In fact, the book has to feature a whole series of pictures to give an idea of what this set of mosaics look like.

The appendices include lists of Salviati mosaic commissions. They include Birmingham Municipal Buildings (Yeoville Thomason) and a reredos in Rugby School chapel (William Butterfield).

Over all, the book is an instructive but significantly flawed introduction to the revival of the mosaic craft in the C19 using glass technology.



'Heavenly Jerusalem' mosaic in St Paul's Within the Walls, Rome. Designed by Edward Burne-Jones, made by Salviati & Co.

EDITOR'S SHOPPING LIST

Your Editor welcomes, for the next Edition of the Newsletter (No 54), to go out in June 2015, the following:

- ❖ Personal news of moves, retirements, arrivals;
- ❖ Copies of announcements and press releases;
- ❖ Case Studies;
- ❖ Letters;
- ❖ Articles on Law and Techniques;
- ❖ Book Reviews.

Material for inclusion in No 54 should, preferably, arrive not later than the end of May 2015.

Please contact your *Newsletter Editor*:

Peter Arnold, 16 Elmbank Road, Walsall WS5 4EL;
01922 644219; peterdeearnold@yahoo.co.uk

PICTURE POSTSCRIPT



Middleport Pottery – Main Entrance.



Port Street, Stoke-on-Trent. Detail of terraced house refurbishment