

The Historic Collections of Middleport Pottery

by

EDWARD HOLLAND

Middleport Pottery is an exceptional monument to the pottery industry that made Stoke-on-Trent famous throughout the world from the late eighteenth century onwards. Opened in 1889, it retains the most impressive frontage of all the surviving potteries as well as one of the few remaining bottle kilns. It is also believed to be the only place in Europe to continue large-scale production using the traditional tissue-transfer printing process, perfected by Josiah Spode in the 1780s. The story of Middleport is in itself of enormous interest but its contribution to the understanding of the heritage of the wider area is equally important and it makes the regeneration of the pottery both a link to the industrial past as well as to the future with new economic opportunities.

The particular focus of this paper is the completeness of the historic collections that sets Middleport apart from most industrial buildings. Here a complete story of one pottery can be told through the business archive including thousands of moulds and copper plates and cylinders as well as the objects themselves. The Prince's Regeneration Trust which acquired Middleport in 2011 has completed the conservation and adaptation of the buildings and is cataloguing and interpreting all the collections. Production has continued throughout the building works and the property opened to the public in June 2014.

THE HISTORY OF MIDDLEPORT POTTERY

Middleport Pottery in Burslem (Staffordshire) is a Grade II* listed purpose-built pottery commissioned by Frederick Rathbone Burgess and William Leigh as the new home for their existing ceramics company of Burgess and Leigh (Fig. 1). It was built on the site of Davenport's saggar works and when it opened in 1889, sadly shortly after the death of William Leigh, it was regarded as being a model pottery in terms of its design and layout. Frederick Burgess also died, in 1895, so the combined vision largely fell to their sons to take forward. Streets of workers housing built up around the factory and at its height Middleport employed around 500 people. The buildings, together with the bottle oven and chimney, create a striking sight in the townscape from the principal road, rail and waterway routes through the city (Fig. 2).¹

The buildings were designed by Absalom Reade Wood (1851–1922). He was a school friend of Edmund Leigh, William Leigh's son, and a fellow Methodist. He had trained

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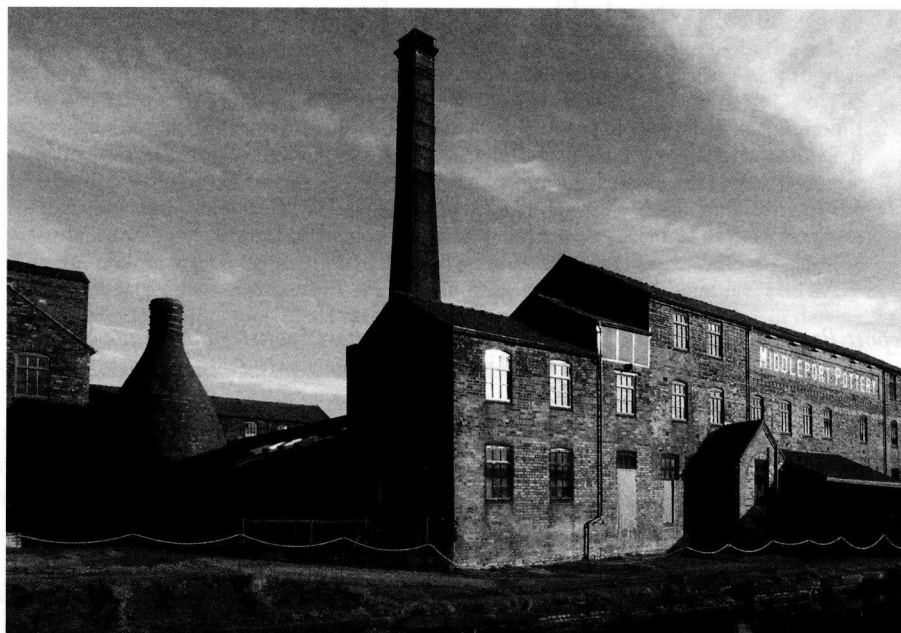


Fig. 1
Middleport from the Trent and Mersey Canal
© *The Prince's Regeneration Trust*



Fig. 2
Middleport Pottery, main front
© *author*

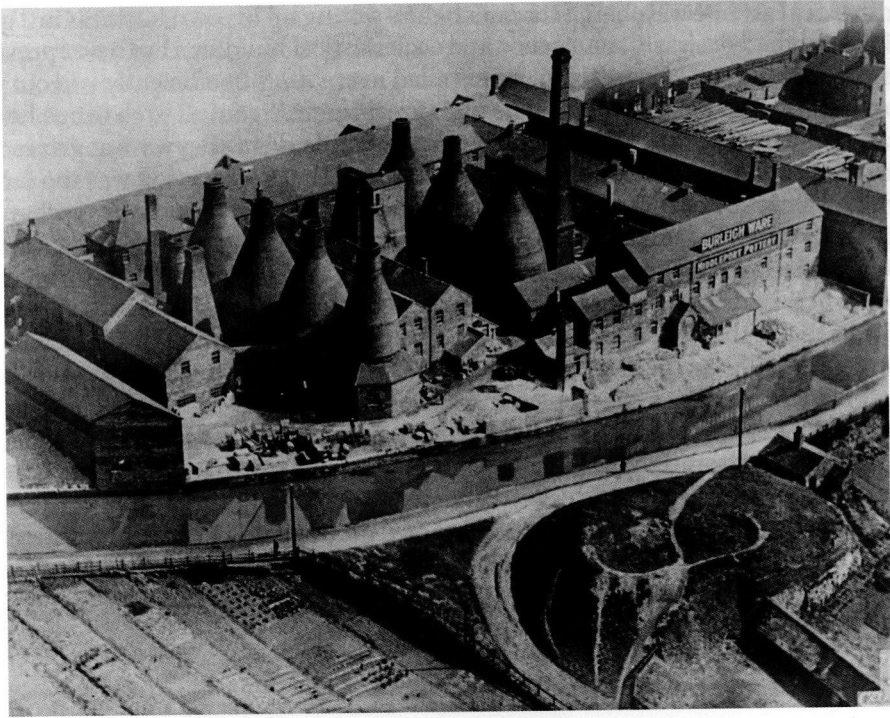


Fig. 3
Aerial view of Middleport
c. 1920
© Marion Blockley

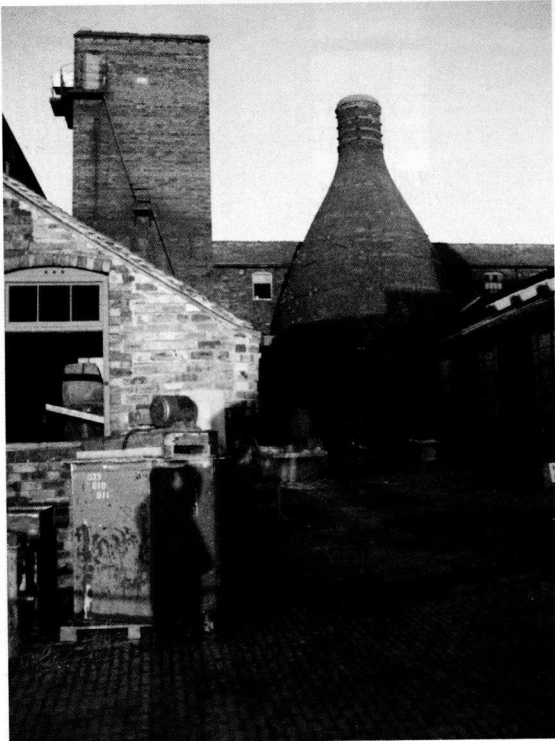


Fig. 4
Bottle oven
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under the local architect Robert Scrivener before setting up his own business in Tunstall in 1874. Wood had designed many civic and ecclesiastical buildings but never previously an industrial building. Nevertheless, he excelled in creating an efficiently laid out works with an imposing gabled frontage. The plan-form is significant as each range houses a separate department of the manufacturing process linked via alleyways at ground level and covered bridges at first floor level. This ensured that no function was too far from that which preceded or succeeded it and was in part an attempt to partially mechanise an essentially handmade craft. It was also known locally as a model pottery for its provision of staff welfare facilities including a bath-house and canteen.

As built it had three large biscuit ovens for the first firing of the pottery and four glost ovens to fire the pottery after the glaze had been applied (Fig. 3). As such it became known colloquially as the Seven Oven Works. In the 1930s the Making and Biscuit ranges were raised to three-storeys and a new two-storey extension was added at the north end. In 1947 the same firm of architects, now known as Wood, Goldstraw and Yorath, carried out some changes and over the following few years two gas-fired tunnel kilns were installed. Their introduction reflected the changing technology of the pottery industry but it also foresaw the Clean Air Act of 1956 which led to the decommissioning of the bottle oven. Burgess and Leigh then demolished all but one of the bottle ovens,

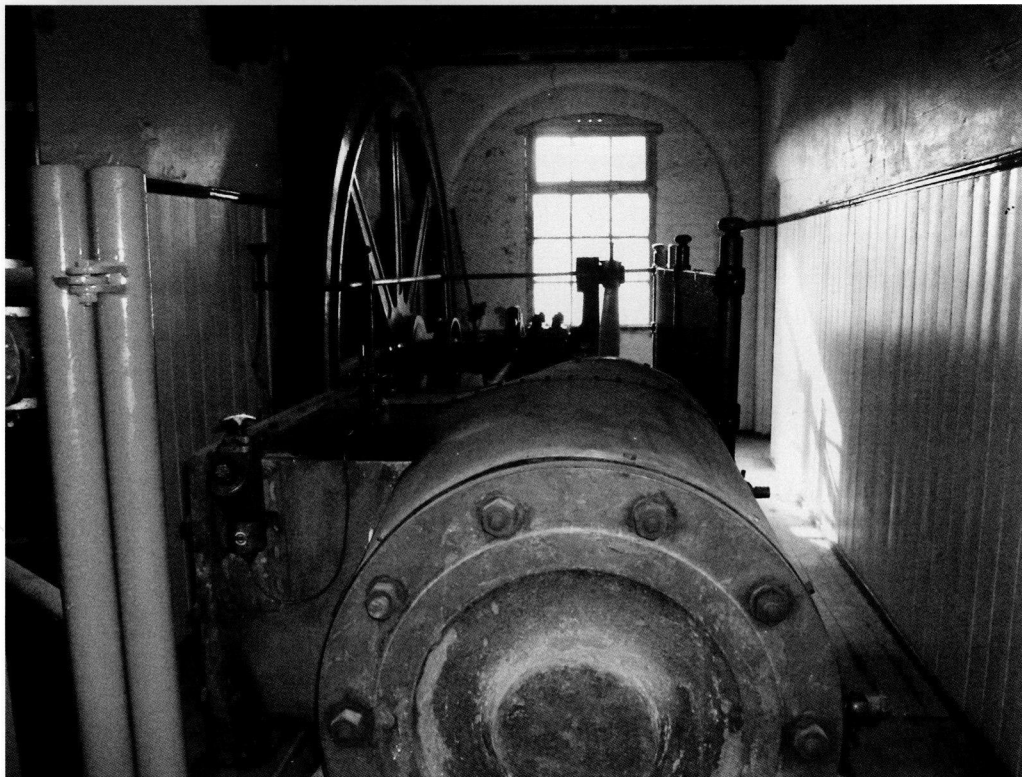


Fig.5
Boulton steam engine
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leaving the No.1 oven simply because it was structurally integral with the Middle Range. Middleport was in fact one of the last potteries to use coal-fired bottle ovens and it is telling to note how perceptions of them have changed. In their centenary publication in 1951 the directors of Burleigh commented that 'already several of the bottle ovens have disappeared and very soon the remainder will become a memory'² whereas today they are valued as iconic symbols of the region. Out of the 2000 or more that once existed only forty-seven survive and of those many have been converted or otherwise altered (Fig. 4).

Burgess and Leigh did later seek to demolish this last bottle oven but by then it was statutorily listed and fortunately the local planning authority refused the application on the grounds that it was one of the finest examples of the few potters' updraught bottle kilns remaining in the city.

All the original ranges are of red brick under plain clay tiles, with red brick chimneys and terracotta detailing. The external joinery was painted a wide range of shades of brown though paint analysis showed that when first built it was actually green. Internally it is characterised by sawn-timber trusses, boarded partitions, timber stillaging and brick paviour floors.

The company was at the forefront of technical innovation and nearly all the machinery was supplied by the renowned local engineer, William Boulton. Much of this remains including the steam engine (Fig. 5) which continued in use until the 1970s and provided power for the arks and blungers of the sliphouse. Arnold Bennett brought this to life in his *Anna of the Five Towns*³ when describing the fictional Providence Works, believed to be Middleport Pottery: 'the steam installation was complete: the steam once generated had no respite; after it had exhausted itself in vitalising fifty machines, it was killed by inches in order to dry the unfired ware and warm the dinners of the work-people'.

MIDDLEPORT'S PLACE IN THE POTTERIES

Burslem is in the heart of the Potteries, an area now defined as Stoke-on-Trent, which was in the nineteenth century regarded as a straggling series of industrial towns. Since the seventeenth century the area had been famed for its ceramic production on account of the ability of the local clay to form into moulds and the abundant supply of local coal to fire the kilns. The opening of the Trent and Mersey Canal in 1777 was a significant boost for the industry, enabling transport to most of the main centres of population. Technological advances in the British potting industry in the early nineteenth century put Britain at the forefront of the world ceramic trade. One of the techniques developed here was that of decoration through transfer printing and the success of Wedgwood, Minton and others gave rise to a large number of pottery entrepreneurs. It was not until 1910 that the six towns of Burslem, Tunstall, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton and Longton were federated, becoming the city of Stoke-on-Trent in 1925.

THE HISTORY OF BURGESS AND LEIGH (BURLEIGH)

Frederick Rathbone Burgess and William Leigh established a brand of pottery they labelled Burleigh. They opened as earthenware manufacturers in 1862, trading from the Central Pottery and taking over a company previously called Hulme and Booth.



Fig. 6
Kingsley Leigh in the Manager's office at Middleport, 1924
© Dennis and McKeown



Fig. 7
The office as shown to visitors today
© author



Fig. 8
Burleighware advertisement from
Pottery Gazette 1931
© Dennis and McKeown

They then moved to the Hill Pottery in 1868, and, finally, in 1888 built their own, model pottery, at Middleport (Figs 6, 7).

The business grew rapidly and exported widely. It established an office in New York in 1897, New Zealand in 1905 and South Africa in 1912 as well as others in Australia and Canada. Back stamps from the early twentieth century, of which many survive in the archive, depict a globe and the company proudly claimed that 'the globe is on all Burleigh Ware and Burleigh Ware is all over the globe' (Fig. 8).⁴ Indeed Burgess and Leigh prospered into the third generation thereby proving Arnold Bennett wrong – he had said in 1902 'no potting firm, except Wedgwoods, had survived to the third generation. The first generation was of the people, industrial simple; the second, though raised in the social grade, was still plodding and energetic and kept the business together; the third was a generation of wastrels coming to grief'.⁵

However Burgess and Leigh did fall into receivership in 1999 and the firm was acquired by William and Rosemary Dorling. The trading name became Burgess, Dorling and Leigh Ltd. In 2008 the business entered a CVA (Company Voluntary Arrangement) with its creditors and in 2010 was sold to Valco, a holding company for Denby Pottery Company Ltd. They then sold it to The Prince's Regeneration Trust in 2011 and leased back almost 50% of the site to continue production. The legal agreement is that production has to continue for a minimum of twenty-five years. The Trust has also introduced two other pottery businesses, Poole and Leeds, and in so doing has made Middleport a diverse pottery-making hub.

THE REGENERATION OF MIDDLEPORT

The project has not only saved the historic buildings, it has also saved at least fifty jobs and created many more. Sales of Burleigh have grown, increasing the need for skilled staff. The conservation works created employment and now that Middleport is open to the public the visitor services side of the project has also created jobs. Overall it has had a recognised catalytic effect on the area and has led to the saving of the terraced housing opposite in Port Street. This was on the point of demolition but has now been repaired and reoccupied, retaining the character of the grid-pattern of streets near the pottery (Figs 9, 10).

The Trust embarked on a £9m project and was fortunate to be awarded substantial grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage, Regional Growth Fund and European Regional Development Fund as well as receiving generous private donations. The aim of the project was to keep it operating as a viable business – it had to be profitable as there could be no ongoing subsidy. The strapline for the project was '*mend the factory*'. This meant taking a light touch where possible so as to maintain the authenticity and special character of the place and to guide that objective this author wrote the Conservation Management Plan. The Trust was fortunate to have Feilden Clegg Bradley of Bath as Conservation Architect, under the careful leadership of Geoff Rich. The contractor was William Anelay of Manchester who has long experience of working on listed buildings and managed to complete the works while pottery was still in production. Middleport was formally opened on 24 June 2014 by H.R.H. The Prince of Wales.



Fig. 9

Middleport and neighbouring housing after rescue

© author



Fig. 10

Further terraced housing still at risk

© author



Fig. 11
Middleport after repairs
© *author*

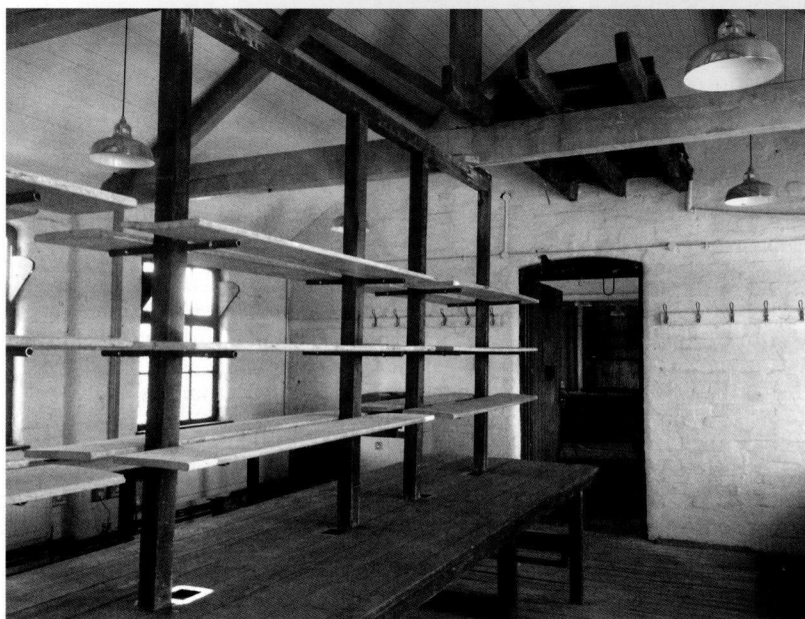


Fig. 12
Top floor after repairs
© *author*

No one will forget their first impressions of Middleport, the feeling of having stepped back in time, of having arrived somewhere that has changed little and has an especially evocative patina of age. But it is that very character that created the particular conservation challenge. Clearly if nothing had been done this would have been lost slowly through progressive decay but it was agreed at the outset that if changes were made without enormous care in both their delivery and future management, that patina of age could be lost very quickly and it would not be recoverable. Figures 11 and 12 confirm that the historic character was retained.

MIDDLEPORT POTTERY AND ITS TRADITIONAL PRODUCT

Middleport pottery is mainly decorated by a traditional process of underglaze transfer printing from engravings. Josiah Spode first perfected this technique in 1784 and it responded to a surge in demand for blue and white pottery. Although popularity dipped in the mid-nineteenth century, by the end of the century there was a revival on which Middleport capitalised. Middleport Pottery is believed to be the only remaining place in Europe still to use this highly skilled, hand-applied tissue-transfer process in a mass production context (Fig. 13). This makes every piece that is produced here unique and the



Fig. 13

Rolling tissue patterns to be transferred by hand to decorate the ware

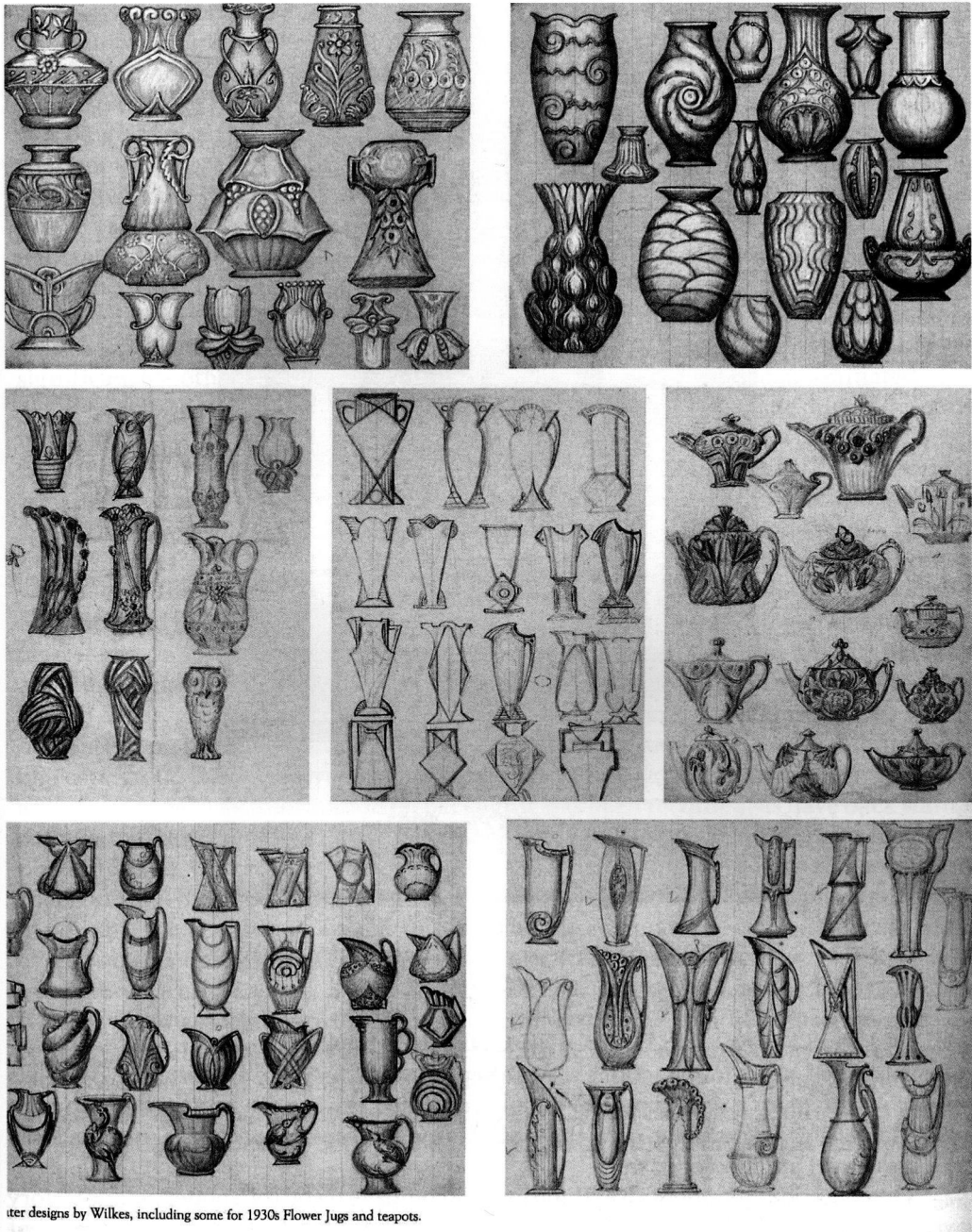
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Trust's project has set in place training that will ensure the retention of this technique.

A catalogue of 1893 produced for Burgess and Leigh's London showroom said that they exhibited:

an endless array of varied patterns, in tea, dinner, toilet and pheasant or common sets, some brown, some white, some glittering with gold and brilliant enamels, and painted in blues, greens, pinks or the natural colours of flowers, foliage etc... In a word, those desirous of seeing a truly Fin de Siecle museum of the finest things in modern pottery could do no better than ask this courteous firm for permission to have a look at its warehouses.⁶

The most famous designer in Middleport's history was Charlotte Rhead, who together with Clarice Cliff and Suzie Cooper, led the way in inter-war ceramic design. Other notable artists and designers employed by Burleigh in the late-nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries included Louis Swettenham, Harold Bennett, Charles Wilkes and Ernest Bailey, many of whom remained there for decades (Figs 14, 15).



ter designs by Wilkes, including some for 1930s Flower Jugs and teapots.

Fig. 14
1930's Charles Wilkes' designs for jugs and vases
© Dennis and McKeown 2003



Fig. 15

Ernest Bailey banner as part of the interpretation for visitors

© Marion Blockley

MIDDLEPORT AND ITS HISTORIC COLLECTIONS

The combined historic collections at Middleport are of national importance. This has been confirmed by a wide range of people consulted during the project development phase including English Heritage, the local Council, ceramics specialists, conservators and industrial archaeologists.

The collections represent an extraordinarily complete record of a pottery manufactory over more than 120 years. There is no other working pottery factory in Stoke-on-Trent that retains *in situ* such a complete archive. Whilst the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery retains a large amount of material from a range of different pottery companies they are no

longer *in situ* and it is also known that a great deal of the archive of the major companies such as Spode and Minton has been lost or destroyed. The collections have been kept intact at Middleport and are being carefully stored and interpreted. Collectively they tell the story of Burleigh, making it much more than an historic building.

As far as we know there is nowhere else in Britain where such a complete picture can be gained of the range and character of the output of a single pottery works in continuous operation since the nineteenth century. The collections are indeed remarkably complete by the standards of any industry in Britain. Knowledge of the collections has grown as they have been unpacked, sorted and catalogued. At the time of acquisition, understanding of the collections was hampered by their being in areas without sufficient space to assess them and in some cases they were locked in cabinets for which no keys existed. The examination of others was also halted when the top floor was condemned as asbestos-contaminated. This resulted in the loss of some papers, believed to be of low significance – others, whose significance was undoubted, were decontaminated.

The collections would have been at risk if they had remained on site during the main repair works, so in March 2012 Stoke-on-Trent Council loaned the Trust part of the Spode factory where it set up a collections store. Initially it was not watertight, it was poorly lit and unheated and lacking in adequate security. Although its space seemed initially to be larger than needed, in the end it was entirely filled. The doors were made secure, the roof repeatedly patched and a warm office area created to accommodate a growing army of volunteers. These worked under the expert guidance of Frances Halahan and Jennifer Dinsmore of Halahan Associates, leading a complex curatorial task together with Lizzie Hazlehurst as Collections Manager. They were required to work to a tight timetable and limited budget in non-museum conditions. At the time of writing the inventory has 15,808 entries, although many individual entries are for multiple items, such as groups of identical plates, so the actual number of items catalogued is a great deal more. Each object or group has been given a unique number and catalogued according to collection and object type. Any information on packaging has been recorded, as have back stamps or dates on the object. Brief condition notes have been compiled and all items have been photographed. Criteria have been agreed as to what should remain as the permanent collection and there followed a long sifting process. Limited space for display and storage means that it is not always possible to keep multiple examples of everything but in many cases two examples of each design is sufficient to interpret the breadth of Burleigh's production over the years. It was also agreed that items which are not Burleigh and have no other association with Middleport can be offered to other museums (Fig. 16).

In parallel to this work the Trust contracted Marion Blockley to take charge of interpretation, so benefitting enormously from her experience, especially of industrial sites. The visitor route includes an impressive display inside the bottle kiln and for children a board game has been created through which they can learn about the pottery making process.

The collections are primarily displayed and interpreted in the former offices near the entrance to the site. These rooms are set-dressed to reflect the golden era of Burleigh between the wars. In the former showroom the Trust is fortunate to be able to display a collection loaned by Richard Dennis, the publisher of the monograph on Burleigh pottery.

The moulds are in a newly created mould store since the original attic store was not easily accessible and was alarmingly overloaded, demanding extreme care in how the moulds were removed.



Fig. 16
Collections store set up at former Spode factory
© author

Moulds

Middleport Pottery holds a unique collection of pottery block and case moulds, some of them predating production on this site. The moulds, which are mostly no longer used, were housed on the second floor of the Slip House on a series of timber racks or stillages. Cataloguing is still in progress but it is estimated that there may be 19,000 retained here, all of them to an individual pattern. The skill in making these moulds is considerable and although the resulting pieces were intended for a specific transitory function they have an artistic quality to them. Furthermore their survival *en-masse* over such a long period



Figs 17 and 18

Examples of moulds in mould store

© *The Prince's Regeneration Trust*

of time means they are of very considerable historic value. There are notable themes within the collection such as the series of Dickensian and Shakespearean characters, those depicting Churchill, those commemorating members of the royal family and specific events such as Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation. On a different note there is also a large collection of jelly moulds, a number of architectural pieces such as chimneypots typical of Victorian and Edwardian buildings, and moulds acquired from Davenport after its closure. Others are simply decorative examples of typical ware, such as jugs, or ornamental items including animals.

Mould-making is a highly skilled three-stage process. First a hollow block-mould is made from a hand-made model; then a case-mould made from the block mould and a hollow working mould made from the case mould. The Block and Case moulds are kept for future use and it is these that are stored here (Figs 17, 18, 19).

Specialist advice received was that there is no other comparable collection for this kind of pottery producing everyday ware. The Sèvres collection in Paris, to take one well known example, is certainly larger but is different being porcelain and of higher status.

The Trust's Conservation Management Plan judged the proper preservation of this collection in its totality as an essential objective. This was accepted by the Heritage Lottery Fund who generously increased their grant offer specifically to fund the necessary work in cataloguing this collection (Fig. 20).



Fig. 19

Original mould store on top floor
© *The Prince's Regeneration Trust*



Fig. 20

The new mould store on ground floor
© *author*

The Engraved Metal Plates and Rolls

Of similarly high importance is the collection of copper plate and cylinder engravings. It is estimated there are 500 cylinders and 800 plates but these have not yet been fully catalogued and remain in the ownership of Denby Pottery. They are used in the underglaze transfer printing process and they preserve a vast number of the patterns used over more than 120 years. Whilst the cylinders that are in use require regular re-chroming, the patterns last a long time if properly maintained. They are prepared using a skillfully controlled quantity of ink and then tissue paper is rolled over them to imprint the pattern. This is carefully applied to the fired but unglazed ceramic which is then gently washed to remove the paper but leave the ink. This is then fired to fix the pattern.

Silk Screens and Transfers

Another way in which patterns were applied to ware is through the use of ready-printed transfers and it was particularly suited to the more complicated designs. The transfers were applied onto glazed ware – i.e. over-glazed decoration in contrast to the under-glaze decoration applied with the tissue paper. The transfers were made on the second floor in the Silk Screen Printing Studio, established by David Copeland, and were applied on the first floor in the Litho Shop.

Paper and Photographic archive

A sizeable business archive survives, adding to the national importance of the Middleport collection. Prior to the Trust's moving the collections to Spode in 2012, these archives were strewn throughout the factory making their significance difficult to appreciate fully (Fig. 21). The main offices had cupboards full of leather-bound ledgers, loose letters, index cards and trade catalogues. Some of the account books, dating back prior to the company's arrival at Middleport, are leather bound and of remarkably high quality paper. There were even booklets and papers found under the floor when it was replaced to eradicate the dry rot. There were filing cabinets and large wooden cupboards on every floor full to bursting with papers and miscellaneous items and then there was the main store on first floor known as A2 where piles of material had been randomly deposited. For this author every visit was a mission of discovery and it was a particular relief the day a locksmith came to break into the locked filing cabinets where pattern books were found together with an assortment of beautiful hand-drawn designs for pottery as well as sheets of technical data specifying the dyes needed for specific designs and their accompanying patent certificates. Letters, newspaper cuttings and photographs of staff help to build up a picture of life at Burleigh throughout the twentieth century.



Fig. 21
Some of the paper archive as found
© author

Index cards give the salaries of employees and another book records what they were given for Christmas (turkey or cigars or other gifts). There is even a staff canteen menu from the 1940s. Altogether this archive provides an exceptional insight into how the business developed, what was being manufactured, how it was manufactured, by whom and to whom it was sold and for how much.

At the start of the project none of the archive was stored in environmentally appropriate conditions and all were at risk of accidental damage. It was also hard to understand the full significance of the collections until they were moved and sorted. Now, thanks to the work of the collections team and volunteers, they have been catalogued and appropriately stored in acid free tissue. As well as the original photographs there is a good collection of facsimiles of historic photographs, framed and on display in the shop showing production as it was 100 years ago.

Movable Tools and Equipment

There is a large collection of movable tools and equipment used by the production staff on a day-to-day basis. For example in Flatware and Bowl making there is a good collection of templates but there are also tools of significance in the Mould-makers studio and in the Fitters Shop where there is day-to-day mechanical repair work being carried out. The fact that all these remain in use much as they would have been in 1889 is of significance and adds hugely to the sense of authenticity. However it also places the objects at risk through damage or loss (Figs 22, 23).



Fig. 22
Templates in flatware
© author

An early imperative with regard to the historic collections was to safeguard the large number of traditional potters' chairs and the circular tables, known as Lining or Banding Wheels, used by the tissue transfer printing staff. These were being dispensed with in favour of more comfortable seats but their contribution to the authenticity of the place was such that they have been kept and are included in the visitor display where appropriate.



Fig. 23
Potter's chair and banding wheel
© author

Ceramics

A large quantity of ceramic, glazed and unglazed, finished and unfinished, survives and like the moulds and other collections, they provide an extensive visual record of the output of the Pottery. They include examples of patterns once typical of Burleigh but no longer produced, some of which are also designs that made Burleigh especially admired such as their jugs with birds and sportsmen. Many items had been randomly stored and some had suffered damage as a result.

Although some important early items were found the surviving collection did lack key examples of Burleigh such as the work of Charlotte Rhead, all examples of whose work had been removed. She was the greatest of all Burleigh's designers and worked there from 1926-1932, specialising in tube-lining, a particularly skilled decorative technique often using strong colours. Recently the Trust has been exceptionally fortunate to have been loaned the collection of Richard Dennis, the publisher of *Burleigh, The Story of a Pottery*. It is especially strong on the work of Ernest Bailey who started work at Burleigh when he was fourteen in 1927 and became its main designer through the 1940s up to the late 1970s. The Trust is now seeking to raise funds to purchase this collection so that it can be permanently displayed at Middleport (Fig. 24).

Among the most significant pieces in the collection remaining at Middleport is the Geisha Teapot (Fig. 25). Burleigh had become known early on for its fancy teapots and *c.* 1896 it made this as a sister to the one it had daringly produced after the design of the famous Huntley and Palmer biscuit box, having noticed that they had not registered their design. The Arms of All Nations Jug designed by Samuel Alcock was acquired by Burleigh in 1860s but not reproduced until the 1930s and then again in 2001 during the company's 150th anniversary. It illustrates the coats of arms of numerous nations, including some such as Prussia that no longer exist. The Guardsman jug from *c.* 1932 was produced in a number of different colour patterns, some of which survive in store. The collections illustrate the diversity of the table and toilet ware that Burleigh produced and their specialist line in hotel and medical ware. Their fame rested also in commemorative ware, including pieces for the Coronation of George VI, the Coronation of Elizabeth II, the Silver Jubilee and more recent Royal events such as the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton. A further specialism was Toby Jugs, of which many are retained here.



Fig. 24

Dennis collection as now displayed in former Showroom

© author

LONG-TERM CARE OF THE HISTORIC COLLECTIONS

The paper archive, in particular, needs careful environmental control with a recommended RH (Relative Humidity) of around 50 to 55%. This is higher than exists in the offices or production areas so needs to be managed to achieve the appropriate conditions. There are some items, conversely, that favour a lower RH, for example the steam boiler which for the protection of its metalwork would be best kept at under 40% RH. The moulds have been stored in a relatively humid environment for a very long time and so their removal to the drier environment of the new mould store needs to be carefully monitored so that they do not dry out too quickly or too much. In terms of light control it is the paper archive and prints that are most vulnerable since light can cause colours to change and fade and render brittle the organic material. The historic machinery has been identified as a key part of the collections but much of it is in regular use placing it at risk. However its operation is part of the interest of Middleport and so demands a flexible balance between operation and conservation, different from more typical museum conditions.



Fig. 25
Geisha teapot, late 19th century
© author

SUMMARY

The conservation, repair and continued operation of Middleport Pottery has saved an important piece of Britain's industrial heritage and created a very individual visitor attraction allowing people to learn about the heritage while also experiencing an active site. The project has been challenging but the recognition that the buildings retain their essential character demonstrates that the right balance has been struck. In terms of the collections some of them are now on display but the work continues to catalogue the remainder and to carry out limited conservation where necessary. There is more research to do in gleaning from the paper archive more about the people who worked at Middleport and about the markets to which the company exported. The completeness and significance of the collections can now be enjoyed by all and will undoubtedly offer opportunity for future academic research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. For an account of the buildings and processes see also D.Baker, *Potworks* (London 1991), 90-95.
2. Burleigh Centenary Publication, 1951.
3. The Prince's Regeneration Trust *Middleport Pottery Home of Burleigh* (The Prince's Regeneration Trust, 2014), 20, quoting Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902).
4. Julie McKeown, *Burleigh, The Story of a Pottery*, (Richard Dennis, 2003), 76.
5. McKeown, *Burleigh*, 69.
6. *Middleport Pottery Conservation Management Plan*, (The Prince's Regeneration Trust, 2012), 14. The catalogue is in the Middleport Pottery Archives.