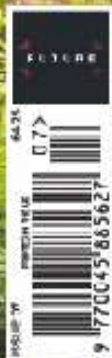


COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

FEBRUARY 17, 2021

Retreat to the countryside



The desks that saw history made
Brighten your life with a conservatory
Hand ba' and other bonkers games

Just pottering about

Inspired by wedding bouquets, native breeds and countryside walks, it is imaginative reinterpretations of past designs that give today's regional potteries their distinctive identities, says Matthew Dennison

POTTERY, my mother told me, is the closest thing to farming,' remembers Tabby Cole. 'It's very natural and its results are dependent on the quality of your ingredients. Those ingredients emerge from the earth—in our case, now that a local seam of clay in the riverbed is no longer workable, we use clay from Cornwall, processed in Stoke-on-Trent.'

Miss Cole runs Rye Pottery, based in the East Sussex cinque port, with her brother Josh. The family has owned the pottery since 1947, when, in a burst of post-war optimism, the siblings' grandfather Wally bought it with his brother, Jack, and set about employing small-scale industrial techniques to make studio pottery affordable. They were inspired by the keeper of ceramics at the V&A Museum, W. B. Honey, and, in Wally's case, by his wartime experience working alongside distinguished, forward-thinking figures in the art world, including printmaker Julian Trevelyan and architect Basil Spence, at the Camouflage Development and Training Centre at Farnham Castle, Surrey. During the early years of Cole-family ownership, Rye Pottery's output embraced a distinctive mid-century aesthetic, producing striped tablewares that garnered an international following and

Small, medium-sized and even farm-based local potteries, situated within reach of clay beds, have been a feature of English and Welsh ceramics manufacture since at least the beginning of the 17th century, when clay seams in Essex, the Midlands, north Devon, the Surrey/Hampshire borders and the Vale of Glamorgan spurred on enterprising local makers. Invariably, they copied Continental prototypes: at Harlow in Essex, Bideford in

Devon and the Kentish village of Wrotham, potters produced sturdy vessels modelled on Dutch, French and German shapes, with distinctive slipware decoration achieved using a 'slip' of liquid white-firing clay, applied, like piped icing on a cake, to the red or brown earthenware body.

This, indeed, was pottery akin to farming: its distinctive colours, as well as its textures, were those of the natural materials from which it was made. Surviving pieces delight with their busy decoration of folk-art motifs and chunky contours coloured like molten caramel. The best examples by slipware potters, including Thomas Toft and Ralph Simpson and their families or the 18th-century Devon potter Edward Reed, achieved high levels of sophistication.

At Rye Pottery today, as in other small, independent potteries scattered across the British Isles, it is the style of modelling and decoration, rather than colouration of the clay, that gives wares their distinctive qualities. The Coles work with Cornish clay, prepared for them in the Midlands, as does Griselda Hill, who, four decades ago, began making and decorating Wemyss-style ceramics in the village of Ceres in Fife, half a century after the original Wemyss factory closed. The recently relaunched heritage brand Cornishware works with biscuit-fired blanks made in the village of Ceres in Fife, half a century after the original Wemyss factory closed. The recently relaunched heritage brand Cornishware works with biscuit-fired blanks made in Stoke-on-Trent from St Austell clay, decorated and fired in its West Country heartland. All these local makers, using similar ceramic bodies, re-engage with

British pottery's long history through their focus on handcrafting.

In the 1980s, a number of British manufactories switched to overseas production, the combination of mechanisation and lower labour costs a lure for an industry struggling to remain competitive. By contrast, in Rye, the Coles responded by shifting their balance of production from predominantly tablewares to decorative items; they continued to work exclusively from their Sussex pottery, developing a range, Miss Cole explains, dependent on 'very clever, deft human hands', each piece the culmination of as many as a dozen hand processes.

In Fife, Mrs Hill's painters and modellers also work by hand. Aspects of their painted



The Wife of Bath by Rye Pottery.

decoration are inspired by the work of Karel Nekola, the Bohemian ceramics painter who, in the late 19th century, created the distinctive, bulbous cabbage roses in pink and green for which Wemyss Ware is best known. So successful has the team been in mastering Nekola's style that a member of the Royal Family commissioned a large, rose-patterned vase to match an original at Balmoral for The Queen's 80th birthday. The Queen was so pleased with the vase that she, in turn, commissioned another two.

'We like to stick to the old. Nothing really changes in Cornishware,' asserts Karina Rickards, who, with her husband, Charles, bought the ailing brand in 2008. Many of the 160,000 pieces made each year by the Rickardses are visually indistinguishable from earlier Cornishware, first produced by the Derbyshire company of T. G. Green in 1924. The iconic striped decoration of bright blue and white—reputedly inspired by the Cornish sea and skies—is as crisp and fresh as it was almost a century ago and heritage shapes, including the Large Betty Teapot and sturdy 10oz mug, remain bestsellers in their 10th decade. Mrs Rickards champions gentle innovation: 'Most of my ideas come to me when I'm walking or sailing in Cornwall. We introduced a yellow colourway, inspired by coastal walks: the gorse in full bloom, fishermen's bright-yellow jackets.' In line with modern eating habits, the couple have also added a Cornishware pasta bowl.

The inspiration of the past, reinterpreted for the present, plays a key part in the distinctive identity of many of Britain's regional potteries. In 2011, the decision of The Prince of Wales's Regeneration Trust to strike a £7.5 million deal to save the Burleigh pottery brand was partly motivated by a desire to protect the livelihoods of the factory's 40 workers. It was also a means of keeping operational Stoke-on-Trent's only working Victorian pottery and preserving a brand that has stayed faithful to its mid-19th-century origins.

Among designs of transfer-printed earthenware tablewares made by Burleigh is Asiatic Pheasants, which has been in production since 1862. For a more modern twist on this classic design, the pottery introduced new

colourways, including pink, plum and dove grey. In the same way, Mrs Hill has expanded the range of decorative motifs used on Wemyss pieces to include a variety of different plants and flowers to supplement Nekola-inspired roses. A South African client commissioned a Wemyss cat patterned with protea flowers in honour of South Africa's national bloom. Other orders have included flowers featured in the clients' wedding bouquets.

For many independent potters, working outside pottery's latter-day heartland of Stoke-on-Trent and its surrounds, it is the country about them that provides the greatest inspir-



Items ready for a last firing at Rye

ation. Walks in the Chilterns with her fox terrier Freddie provide Jane Hogben of Buckinghamshire-based Hogben Pottery with a ready source of ideas for her range of jugs, bowls and mugs. The pottery specialises in pieces decorated with applied, moulded decoration—in the shape of birds or fruit, for example—a technique called sprigging.

At Reptile Tiles in Carmarthenshire, Carlo Briscoe marvels at the diversity of wildlife

‘For many potters, it is the country about them that provides the greatest inspiration,’

visible from her studio windows. Many of the plants and animals around her find their way onto the maiolica- and Delft-inspired, tin-glazed earthenware tiles she paints with her husband, Ed Dunn. The Wildflower range of Delft-style tiles includes images of meadow-sweet, herb robert and, of course, Welsh poppies; there is also a selection featuring garden birds, among them nuthatches, goldfinches and siskins. When we speak, Miss Briscoe is painting Herdwick sheep, that doughty, coarse-fleeced breed that partly owes its survival to Beatrix Potter's championing in the mid 20th century.

Historic inspiration repeatedly strikes at Rye Pottery. In 1977, with the opening of a gift shop, Canterbury Cathedral commissioned from the pottery a figure of the Wife of Bath, one of the best known of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims. The design proved so successful that the Coles and their modellers created a full set of the author's pilgrims and, later, the company developed a range of figures inspired by the Norman invasion of 1066 and the Bayeux Tapestry. Further along the Sussex coast, the Royal Pavilion at Brighton commissioned figures of the Prince Regent and Mrs Fitzherbert, inspired by caricatures by Thomas Rowlandson.

It is the passion of their owners, the skills of their makers and their distinctive brand identity, more than proximity to naturally occurring seams of clay, that sustain Britain's smaller potteries today. Their output is extraordinarily varied, but testifies overwhelmingly to a desire to preserve a skill set threatened by mechanisation in a craft at which British makers have always excelled. It testifies, too, to unchanging habits of our life: the production of so many cups and mugs prove that we remain a nation of tea drinkers. 🍵