

# The Use of Ceramic Tiles in Shops

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The Buttercup Dairy Company is I hope, familiar to many of you and for English tile enthusiasts travelling north of the Border, we don't just come for the kilts and the tartan but we start to look out for survivals of Buttercup Dairies because these are some of the most remarkable tiled interiors that Scotland has produced. This example is from Dunbar helps to set the scene for the elements of shops that I will be particularly talking about in the form of ceramics.



Buttercup Dairy Company tiles, Dunbar

I plan to cover three topics:

- Historical background of the use of tiles in retail buildings
- Ceramic materials - the need to understand the plethora of ceramic materials in order to consider their conservation
- Conservation issues and specific problems with tiles in shops

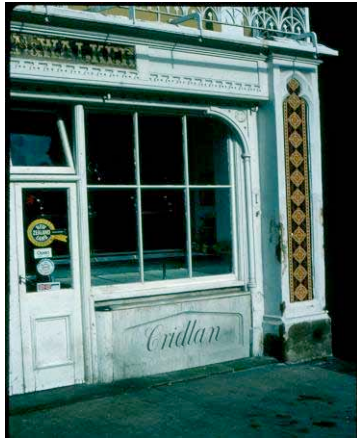
## Historical Background

At the European scale, there is an early pedigree for the use of tiles in shops and shop fronts. In Spain and Portugal and to a lesser extent Holland, there are early examples of tin glazed tiles used in shops. In the United Kingdom there is a slightly less flamboyant approach to the use of ceramics so if you hope to see 18<sup>th</sup> century examples of tiled shop fronts you will be disappointed. Scotland is particularly a stone country so the use of colourful ceramics is perhaps slightly contrary to its traditional architectural material.

## Gothic Revival

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a revival of tiles and tile making in Britain. This was centred on antiquarianism and the Gothic Revival and was associated with both the restoration and new building of churches. It is this stylistic boost which started in the 1830's and rapidly gained momentum which is important for ceramics in architecture

A butchers shop in Great Malvern is a rare example of Gothic used for a shop front. It employs marble for the stall riser but panels in the pilasters use ceramic tiles. These are late 1870's by Craven Dunnill of Jackfield in Shropshire.



Gothic shop front for a butchers incorporating tiles, Great Malvern, Worcestershire

### **Industrial Production**

Relevant to shops in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the growth of industrial production of ceramics in large factories which reduced their unit cost and allowed the use of tiles to expand very considerably. This was tied in with an expansion in consumption of decorative building materials not just in domestic properties but also in the growing number of retail buildings which served the expanding middle classes of Victorian Britain.

The use of tiles was mediated by exhibitions and displays and in some cases permanent displays were developed. The Royal Scottish Museum floor tile panels were installed by manufacturers such as Mintons in the 1860's, to show off how tiles could be used.

### **Royal Influence**

Certain types of shop premises lent themselves to the use of tiles and one of these was dairies. It is interesting to look at the democratisation of dairies and the arrival of dairies for the masses. Marie Antoinette at Versailles in 1783 is a key figure in this story and her passion for a model dairy was followed by the aristocracy in Britain, notably by the Duke of Bedford on his South Devon estate at Endsleigh where he built a beautiful tiled dairy in 1815.

Prince Albert also had a fascination for ceramic tiles. The Royal Dairy built at Windsor in 1858 was superbly lined with glazed wall tiles. This was an early use of such tiles and this royal patronage perhaps paved the way for their mass use. The Illustrated London News described these tiles as '*a perfect gem of taste and art*'. Such tiles represent a combination of functionalism with aesthetic and artistic values.

### **Colour and Style**

Ceramic tiles have many qualities. They bring to architecture and interiors colour of every possible shade and that colour is permanent; unlike paint or other materials it does not fade. They are also inherently durable. The tiles may craze and be chipped or cracked but otherwise remain in place.

Colour, allied with the ability to create style and durability is the reason for the growth in the use of tiles in shops from the 1870's onwards. The style can be a good form of advertising for the retail premises – the tiles become part of the architecture of advertising.



Colourful tiling on a shop front



Lettering in tiles on a butchers shop front

### Hygiene and Cleanliness

In addition to colour and style the other great quality that ceramics offered for shop premises is that they can be cleaned down easily and so portray the image of being hygienic. Harrison & Sons butchers shop in Leicestershire has a shop front which has been personalised by the use of letter tiles. The stall riser is durable and easy to clean and is cheaper than marble. Many old tiled shops, such as this one, serve as a rare breeds gallery with animals with which we are no longer familiar.

### Flamboyance and Style

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed, the use of ceramics became more and more flamboyant. For example, a butchers in Middlewich, Cheshire has the whole of its façade covered in ceramics and is crowned by a high relief bull's head.



Butchers, Middlewich, Cheshire

A number of shop chains particularly developed the use of tiles, the most outstanding being Sainsbury who used Minton Hollins tiles in England in a standardised scheme. By the turn of the century these shops had become quite common although Sainsbury's did not come to Scotland until the 1990's.

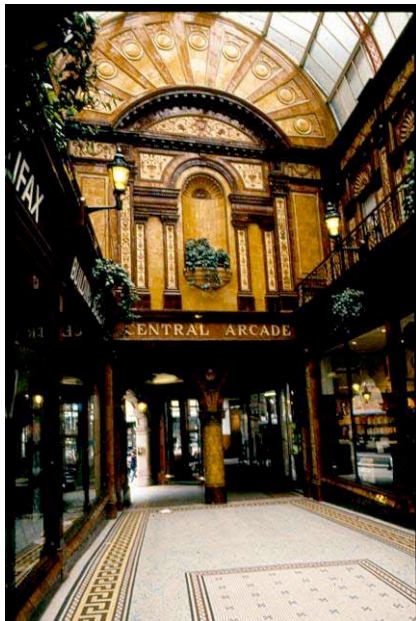
By 1900, the scale of some of these tile schemes had become quite outstanding and one of the finest examples is probably Harrods Meat Hall in London, designed by W.J. Neatby and made by Doulton's of Lambeth in 1902. It features a spectacular frieze of hunting scenes around the high level of the meat hall. It is this ability of the ceramic tiles to tell a story and create an image which is interesting. Is it too wild to suggest that here the tiles are acting as retail 'dream weavers' where you can imagine going out to hunt in the forests and come away with your meat?



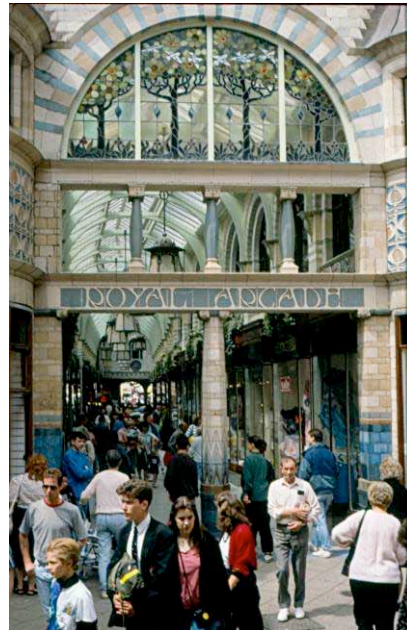
Harrods meat hall, Knightsbridge, London

### Shopping Arcades

The other area where tiles were used extensively, particularly during the Edwardian period, was in the creation of shopping arcades. In Newcastle-upon-Tyne an elaborate scheme was created by Burmantofts of Leeds who specialised in treacly, soft colours and this scheme dates to 1906. Less well known is Royal Arcade in Norwich designed by George Skipper with Doulton's the manufacturers. Ceramic material is not only used for the superstructure but also for the detail around the shop fronts.



Central Arcade, Newcastle



Royal Arcade, Norwich

### Landscapes on Ceramics

What marks out the use of tiles in shops is the ability to create pictures on tiles and there are some remarkable landscape scenes depicted on ceramics particularly found in butchers, fish shops and dairies. A tiled panel in a dairy in Reading shows particular similarities with the image used by the Buttercup Dairy Company in Scotland of the girl wearing a blue cap. Tile historian Hans van Lemmen tracked down the fact that the Buttercup Dairy image was from a Victorian picture hanging in the company head office in Leith. It would be interesting to know which tile panel came first and whether this was a piece of English plagiarism.



Dairy shop, Reading

### **James Duncan & Co, Glasgow**

Scotland's greatest contribution to tile panels comes through the work of a company called James Duncan who operated in Glasgow from 1865 to about 1965 but about whom remarkably little is known. The surviving tiled shops are from the Edwardian period and some are from the 1920's and 1930's. The blanks which Duncan's used were supplied from England and were from T&R Boote in Stoke-on-Trent and from Maws of Jackfield in Shropshire.

A former butchers shop in Gourock by James Duncan displays remarkable images. Elspeth King formerly from the Peoples Palace in Glasgow described them as '*Peoples Pictures*' - these are what people perceive as rural areas of the country with which they may not have any further direct connection but which are nonetheless very appealing in a nostalgic way. It is these Scottish landscapes which are of particular significance in Scotland. The English equivalents are much more lowland, lush and bucolic and lack the epic landscape quality of Scotland

Other themes occur and the Scottish engineering tradition is celebrated in a butcher's in Linlithgow. The James Duncan contribution to shop tiling is clearly very important indeed.



James Duncan mural, Gourock



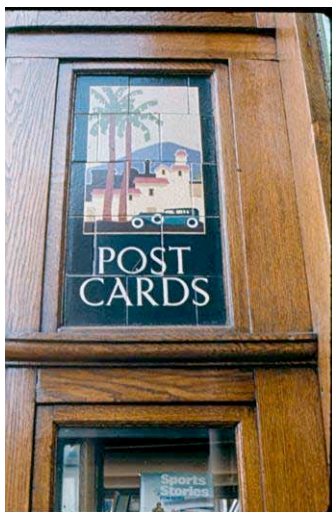
165 High Street, Linlithgow

### **WH Smith**

WH Smith, used a standard form of shop in the 1930's using oak with tile panels fitted in. In 1975, European Architectural Heritage Year, they selected a particularly good surviving example of one of their shops in Newtown in mid Wales and restored it, developing upstairs space as museum and archive storage. Selecting a particularly good example of a shop front and restoring it as an example of its type can be a useful and realistic approach to conservation.

### **Post-war Shops**

The use of tiles continues to the present day and there are some interesting post war examples. Tewkesbury Post Office with its stylised historical map represents what was a key period for the production of murals the 1960s and 70s were.



WH Smith shop front



Post Office, Tewkesbury

### **Ceramic Materials**

A range of ceramic materials are available for use in shops:

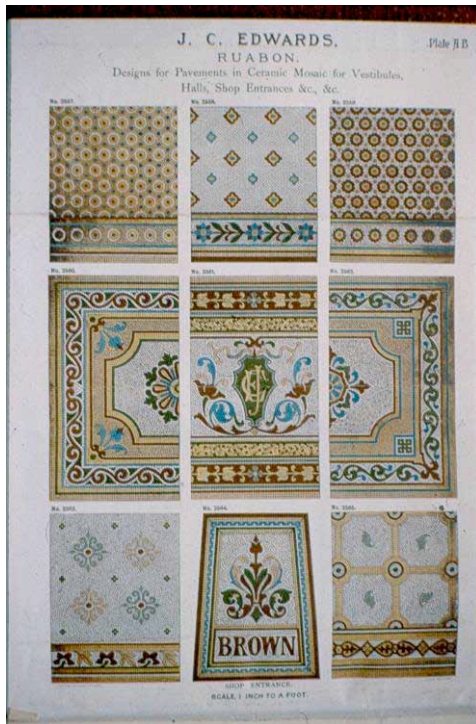
- Floor tiles - encaustic, geometric and quarry tiles
- Floor mosaic
- Wall tiles - relief decorated, hand-painted, tube-lined
- Architectural faience and terracotta and glazed bricks

### ***Floor tiles***

Quarry tiles are plain, square, usually red tiles or sometimes black, and form the basis for many floors, including for shops. Patterned encaustic tiles were made by a thin layer of coloured clay inset into the tile and then fired, hence the word encaustic (although they were known as inlaid tiles before the Victorian period). They are very durable but the thin coloured inlays are susceptible to wear by abrasion. More durable are geometric tiles, usually pressed from dust clay of a single colour.

### ***Mosaic***

Ceramic mosaics were used to decorate entrances to shops. This JC Edwards catalogue page (from North Wales) shows the adaptability of mosaic in order to give shop entrances a personal quality.



Page from JC Edwards catalogue

### ***Wall tiles - Relief Decoration***

The cheapest way of creating attractive wall tiles was the use of relief decoration. These raised tiles were pressed in a dye in a mould using dust clay and fired. When the glaze was applied it ran off from the high areas into the low areas and heightened the decorative effect.

### ***Wall tiles - Hand-painted***

At the other end of the spectrum was the hand-painted tile panel which was very expensive but could be absolutely customised to the need of the retail premises.



Relief decoration



Hand-painted tile panel

### ***Wall tiles - tube-lining***

A third type of wall tile decoration is the technique of tube lining which was the bread and butter of James Duncan and Company and was how their lovely landscapes were produced. Tube-lining is created by clay/glaze lines formed like squeezing toothpaste from a tube. The areas outlined by the raised lines are then filled with coloured glaze and the net result is that you get strongly visible features. The strength of the image is the key feature of tube-lining.



Tube-lining a tile



A tube-lined tile

### ***Architectural Faience and Terracotta***

Architectural Faience is sometimes used for shop front elements such as console brackets, although they are not always recognised as ceramic because they may have been painted over. Architectural faience is essentially large slab material with a glazed finish whereas terracotta is usually semi-structural or structural block material without a glaze. Both were used extensively for shop exteriors, together with glazed bricks.

### **Conservation issues associated with tiled shops**

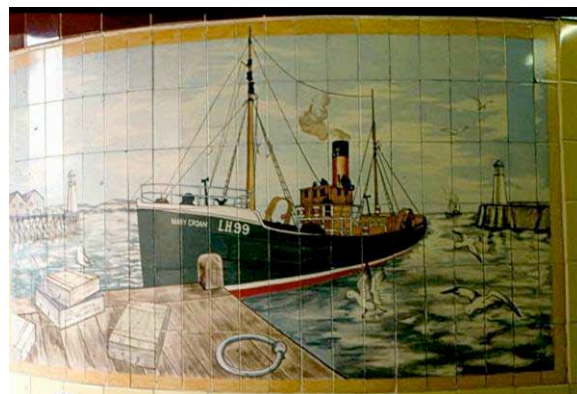
There are a number of issues to consider:

- Rescue and removal
- Cleaning and restoring
- Replacement tiles
- Education
- For the future?

### ***Rescue and removal***

Is it possible to rescue and remove tiles? How successful can this be?

Croan's fish shop in Canongate, Edinburgh has a shop front of vitrolite and faience but the key feature is an interior tiled panel of the *Mary Croan*, the company's own vessel. The thing which I would like to stress most about the closure of a business in tiled premises is the inevitable, inescapable irrelevance of the tile decoration to most future occupiers. Unless another fish shop comes in here it is not going to work. This shop has been a chocolatier and gift shop and so you can understand why the tiles here have been covered over by the new owner.



John Croan's fish shop, Canongate, Edinburgh



Derelict shop, Maybole, Ayrshire

Take the example of a derelict, vacant shop in Maybole - should there be rescue and removal of the tiles and what is the scenario for the conservation of a shop like this? With a tiled shop dating to the 1920's, the durable tiles are over 80 years old; three generations of people have admired the tiled panels and gathered a sense of place and navigation and they have become part of the social history of the area. But the shop closes and the tile panels become completely irrelevant, so what do you do? Do you need to keep the tiles in situ? There are 4 options:

1. **Retention:** if it is Harrods you can make a good case for retention of the entire scheme.
2. **Partial retention** is possible but the remaining tiles can look very awkward in their new environment.
3. **Covering them over** may be acceptable but the problem is that sometimes people forget they are there and then 40 or 50 years later they are rediscovered but they may become damaged in the intervening period.
4. **Record the scheme** and allow the tiles to be destroyed.

The alternative to keeping the tiles in situ or simply recording them is to remove and rescue them. Where do you move them to? In some cases they can be moved to a new shop and relocation has been done successfully, for example in hospitals with nursery rhyme tile panels, but shops are a more difficult consideration. You can move to a museum such as an open air museum or an art collection or simply put the tiles on the open market. All of these options are essentially removing the context of the shop and illustrate the inescapable dilemma which happens when businesses close and change.

A recent example of this is a fish and chip shop in Acton, West London built in the 1930's. This building was listed recently by English Heritage. Its conventional architectural value is low but the tile panels are by an artist, Polly Brace, who was interesting and significant in the 1930's. But in a sense the other aspect which is equally important is the social history context of the fish and chip shop in its entirety, down to its hand lettered signs. English Heritage's step in listing was not perhaps expected but provides a stay of execution to enable a museum to take the interior on board, but the building has structural problems so may not survive. The listing process can therefore help but it is not 100% of the solution.



Fish and Chip shop, Acton. Images © Brian Seabrook, Acton History Group

The advent of the diamond tipped water-cooled circular saw has been a huge technical advance for tile removal and can be very successful in skilled hands. However, to my mind the resulting rescued material is more like shop archaeology than building conservation; a kind of cherry-picking of the key elements.

### **Cleaning, Restoration and Replacement**

Cleaning tiles is relatively easy. There are some excellent commercial products on the market. Tiles are frequently painted over and although this does not damage the tiles

inappropriate use of metal blades to remove the paint can be seriously damaging, particularly for tube lined tiles.

For sourcing replacement tiles, there are a number of companies in England who do this work with a high degree of authenticity such as Craven Dunnill, Jackfield who will replace wall tiles including tube-lining or Shaws of Darwen for terracotta and faience.

### **Education**

One other element in the conservation story is education - raising interest and awareness of shops and shop design generally. A shopkeeper may not have a technical background in ceramics but can enormously enthusiastic about the tiled interior which he has inherited. A step towards this process of education is the recent publication of the Tile Gazetteer (edited by Lynn Pearson for the Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society) which helps to raise awareness of the many tiled premises which exist.



Shopkeeper in his tiled shop

### **For the Future?**

Tiles don't stop in the 1950's and 1960's but are still being actively commissioned today from a talented pool of ceramic artists. Some of these are of extraordinary quality and will become the conservation issues of the future.