

Floor Tiles in St Paul's Church, Woodhouse Eaves Chancel

By Claire Ayres

Introduction

When one enters St Paul's Church and stands at the beginning of the nave there is a magnificent view of the tiles in the chancel leading up to the altar, giving it an almost regal air. Floor tiles are rarely referenced in church descriptions or records and are an often undervalued as beautiful additions to church interiors, this piece will try to counter some of this deficit for St Paul's church.



Figure 1 – Floor tiles in St Paul's Chancel (By Beth Walsh)

Tile patterns

What you are seeing on the chancel floor are Gothic style, encaustic tiles laid during the Victorian period in bands of varying patterns and colour. The tiles at the front of the current chancel floor have been rescued from under a carpet when the chancel was extended towards the nave during the recent chancel repair work. This rescue occurred during the construction of a ramp up to the chancel when over 1,500 tiles were lifted, cleaned and re-laid in a band across the front of the chancel. Tiles previously laid on the old chancel steps now form a band on the chancel floor behind the rescued tiles. The addition of a small number of reproduction Minton fleur-de-lis and plain tiles, acquired in early 2018 from the Craven Dunhill Jackfield tile works in Ironbridge, was required to fill the final deficits in the tiling of the new chancel floor.



Figure 2 – Rescuing tiles underneath the carpet



Figure 3 – Relaying rescued tiles

The mosaic-style tiles are laid in symmetrical patterns with the fleur-de-lis pattern being prominent in all the sections of tiles. There are multiple individual and grouped fleur-de-lis tiles, criss-crossed with plain bands of tiles and roundels with plainer groups between and side panels framing the back sections. When

they were purchased the small, highlighting, blue and green tiles on display were much more expensive than plain tiles so the use of plain tiles helped to keep the overall cost down. To relay the more than 1,500 tiles, rescued from under the carpet during the 2017 extension of the chancel floor towards the nave, was a major task and the pattern used to lay out these tiles in Victorian times was reproduced. The tiles are all square or rectangular and vary in size.



Figure 4 – Examples of some of the tile patterns in the chancel (By David Morley)

The tile patterns popular when St Paul's was built and extended, like the building style, were heavily influenced by medieval designs as evidenced by the roundels, crosses and fleur-de-lis. The fleur-de-lis as a very decorative symbol and, despite being a sign of the Virgin was popular even in Protestant churches. All the British manufacturers used it in Victorian times, with minor variations in the pattern that can still help to identify the tile maker when the tiles are closely examined. As patterned tiles were made successfully into arrangements, later in the Victorian period, tile manufacturers could be recognized by their tile arrangements rather than necessarily by the individual tiles.¹



¹ K. Beulah &

Figure 5 – Chancel tiles, post repair (By Beth Walsh)

Manufacture of St Paul’s floor tiles

Tile making in Ibstock in North West Leicestershire started about 1830, as a bi-product, to utilise the clay dug up by the coal industry.

The Gothic style tiles for St Paul’s church chancel appear to be of ‘dust pressed’ manufacture. They were not laid when the church was initially designed, as the company that made them was not in production at that time. ‘W. Whetstone’ and ‘Coalville’ were discovered to be stamped on the reverse of both the sets of tiles lifted during the chancel restoration, those originally on the chancel floor and those rescued from under the carpet. It had been assumed by Woodhouse Eaves residents that the tiles in St Paul’s were Minton tiles, probably because Minton is a well-recognized name and Minton tiles were extensively used at that time, especially in churches. Some of the new in-fill tiles in the chancel are actually reproduction Minton ones!

Whetstone tile production: This local company was, according to the late Kenneth Beulah, active from 1860 to about 1880.² In 1861, W Whetstone was mentioned in Drake’s Trade Directory as ‘W Whetstone Ornamental Flooring Manufacturer’. In 1863 the Stenson and Whetstone families set up the Encaustic Tile and Terracotta Works under joint ownership in Coalville.³ White’s Directory of 1877 indicates that in 1871 William Whetstone set up a separate works in his own name called The Coalville Tile & Brick Co. In an advertisement in the History, Gazetteer and Directory of Leicester and Rutland, 1877 by William White, under the company name of Coalville Tile and Brick Company Co. is printed “(late William Whetstone)” (see figure 7).⁴ In the same directory it is recorded that William Whetstone employed a large number of workers, mainly women, in the manufacturing of encaustic floor tiles. William Whetstone’s Company specialised in the production of encaustic dust pressed clay tiles (see

² K. Beulah, ‘Techniques Used in Tile Decoration’, *Glazed Expressions: Tiles & Architectural Ceramics Society*, No. 17 (Autumn 1988) p. 11.

³ D. W. Baker, *Coalville: The First 75 Years (1833-1908)* (Leicestershire Museums, Arts & Records Service: 1983).

⁴ W. White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the Counties of Leicester and Rutland. Third Edition* (Sheffield: 1877) p. 874.

below for details of this technique). Due to the growth of the brick and tile industry in Coalville the population of this newly developing town had risen to 2,081 by 1871.



Figure 6 - Advertisement in the History, Gazetteer and Directory of Leicester and Rutland, 1877.

William Whetstone (1817 -1900)

In various Directories from 1864 until 1899 William Whetstone has been mentioned as a prominent landowner. In March 1869 William Whetstone of the “Mosaic Works, Coalville, Leicester” requested an estimate from G. Messenger for a very substantial roof span for partitioned vineries with heating, adjacent to his orchard.⁵

William’s brother Joseph, who was mayor of Leicester in 1839, had owned two collieries, two spinning factories and a brick works. He bought a property in Whitwick called Broom Leys. This was a farm building with an estate of farms and cottages extending to over 300 acres. On Joseph’s death in 1868 William inherited Broom Leys (as well as other assets). William, with the architect Joseph Goddard, built a Victorian mansion of oak, brass and marble with landscaped gardens, a tennis court, croquet lawn and four horticultural structures on the site. He lived there until his death in January 1900. Broomleys still exists as a district of Coalville and the property has been owned by various individuals including Horace

⁵ ‘Vinery/Ground Vinery’, *Thomas G. Messenger: The Story of Thomas G. Messenger (1828-1899)* [<https://tgmessenger.co.uk/horticultural-buildings/greenhouses/vinery/>].

Mansfield, a Whitwick brickyard proprietor in 1908. The original house has been Broom Leys primary school since 1957.⁶

Other sites with W. Whetstone tiles

Other tiles produced by William Whetstone's Company can be found in St Denys Church, Stonton Wyville, Leicestershire.⁷ Of interest this church had extensions which were undertaken by the architect Joseph Goddard who was the architect for William Whetstone's home, Broom Leys, at Whitwick (church leaflet). W. Whetstone tiles were also used in Leeds Grand Theatre built in 1878.⁸

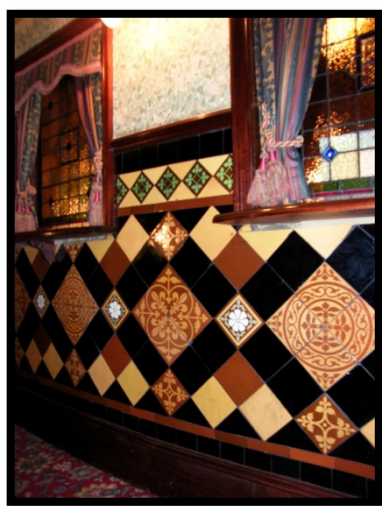


Figure 7 – Whetstone tiles at Leeds Grand Theatre.⁹

A brief history of tile production in Victorian times

Origins: There was a revival for tiles in the 1820s in Stoke on Trent. This revival had been encouraged by Augustus Pugin an architect/designer who was keen on medieval styles which later became known as the “Gothic Revival” and this was popular worldwide. The influences of the Gothic Revival Movement were seen extensively at this time in cathedrals, churches and new public buildings including The Palace of Westminster which was designed by Charles Barry and decorated extensively, internally, by Augustus Pugin. Nottingham Cathedral and St Mary's Church, Derby and St Paul's church, Woodhouse Eaves are further, more local, examples.

⁶ ‘William Whetstone’, *Thomas G. Messenger: The Story of Thomas G. Messenger (1828-1899)* [<https://tgmessenger.co.uk/prior-to-1875/1868-2/>].

⁷ *Transactions of the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society*. Volume 2 (Leicester: 1870) p.287.

⁸ Personal communication from Hans van Lemmen co-author of *Church Tiles of the Nineteenth Century* (London: 2001).

⁹ With thanks to Hans van Lemmen for photographs.

Handmade tiles: In early Victorian times tiles were initially hand made to produce expensive inlaid tile decoration, the tiles were often irregular and the hand crafted patterns variable.

Automation of production: A new technique to produce identical and symmetrical encaustic patterned tiles was invented by a Samuel Wright, who patented his invention in 1830. Samuel carved a pattern into a slab of plaster or clay and from this a raised, positive, relief was cast as a mould and then a cast iron plate with the manufacturers name or mark and air holes was placed over it with the clay between. The actual depth of the frame was the same depth as a tile and there was allowance for shrinkage. Soft, wet, (plastic) clay was then pushed into the mould, especially the corners of the frame, by hand and with enough sitting proud of it, so that when pressed in by a ‘fly-press’ it completely filled the mould. Pegs kept the frames in line. Once the two frames were taken out of the press and separated, the clay would show its pattern as a depressed impression in the top of the clay (in intaglio). A soft clay or slip would be hand poured or trowelled into the depressions in the surface to form the pattern. After that the clay would be scraped level and allowed to dry before being fired.¹⁰

Dust Pressing: In 1840 Richard Prosser took out a patent for a technique called dust pressing which replaced the Samuel Wright method of tile manufacture. Although these tiles looked superficially identical to those produced by the previous method, the process of manufacture was very different. In this manufacturing process the tiles were made from dry powdered clay with patterns of dry coloured clay, mainly using simple figures in one colour. The big innovation seen with this process was that it was the first time that tiles could be made by machines. The machine used was a screw press with a large cast iron wheel that turned a screw connected to a metal plate (the top die). Underneath the plate was a box containing another metal plate (the bottom die) this could be flat or have a pattern on it. The dust pressed clay was slightly dampened and pushed into the box, the wheel was turned and the top die flattened the clay with 30 tons of pressure. The top die was removed by turning the wheel in the opposite direction, the machine worker used a foot pedal and the tile, which was now compacted clay was released from the box. This was later fired.

There were great benefits to using the new dust pressing tile making technique, one man with a screw press could produce tiles faster, with the added bonus that dust pressed clay dried quicker than “plastic” clay and so could be put in the kilns quicker. This automation led to the production of cheaper tiles which consequently led to more people being able to afford them.¹¹

¹⁰ K. Beulah, ‘Techniques Used in Tile Decoration’, *Glazed Expressions: Tiles & Architectural Ceramics Society*, No. 17 (Autumn 1988) p. 11.

¹¹ The Jackfield Tile Museum at Ironbridge Gorge contains a fantastic collection of Victorian tiles and information boards explaining the tile making process. See also, L. Durbin, *Nineteenth-Century Tiles. Industrial Mass Production and Construction Methods of Interior Tile Schemes in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* [<https://www.arct.cam.ac.uk/Downloads/ichs/vol-1-989-1006-durbin.pdf>.]

Improved dust pressing: In 1863 Boulton & Worthington used a different type of screw wheel and instead of having a fixed metallic mould, the mould moved, by means of a special gear, both vertically and horizontally.¹² This invention meant that up to seven differently coloured clays could be incorporated in one tile and much more elaborate patterns and pictures could be created on a single tile.¹³

Sources and references

Although detailed information about William Whetstone's Company has been hard to come by, there are many other Victorian tile manufacturers of this period about whom there is much recorded material, these include Chamberlain of Worcester, Minton of Stoke on Trent, Godwin, Maw & Company, Robert Minton Taylor, etc the list is fascinating and endless. If you wish to know more about the history of tiles then here are some places to look.

- The Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society - www.tilesoc.org.uk
- Tessellation: A National Database of Historic Tile Designs - <http://www.tessellations.org.uk>

¹² W. J. Furnival, *Leadless Decorative Tiles, Faience, and Mosaic, comprising notes and excerpts on the History, Materials, Manufacture & Use of Ornamental Flooring Tiles, Ceramic Mosaic and Decorative Tiles and Faience* (Staffordshire: 1904) P. 460.

¹³ K. Beulah, 'Techniques Used in Tile Decoration', *Glazed Expressions: Tiles & Architectural Ceramics Society*, No. 17 (Autumn 1988) p. 11.

- Hans Van Lemmen: Historical Tiles - <http://www.hansvanlemmen.co.uk/>
- The Minton Archive - www.themintonarchive.org.uk
- Visit Jackfield Tile Museum at Ironbridge - <https://www.ironbridge.org.uk/explore/jackfield-tile-museum/>

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'William Whetstone', *Thomas G. Messenger: The Story of Thomas G. Messenger (1828-1899)*
[<https://tgmessenger.co.uk/prior-to-1875/1868-2/>].

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