Church Recording Society

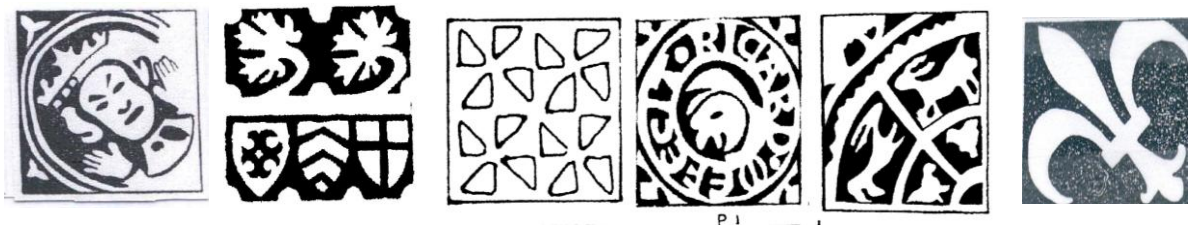
TILERIES IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The Medieval Penn Tileries

Part of the fascination of researching church buildings, and particularly the medieval ones, is 'meeting' the craftsmen, who, over the years, have helped create the church we see today. They are shadowy figures, like the clockmaker who repaired the turret clock at St Mary, Chesham in 1606 and was paid four pence for "oyle". There was Symon Dye in Reading at the end of the 16th century who was paid five shillings for "having the (recast treble) bell into the steeple and for hanging her up" and, on the same occasion, one shilling and one penny "for drink for those that did help with the same bell". We "meet" Gabriel Sleath who completed his ten-year apprenticeship as a goldsmith in 1701, lodging with a fellow goldsmith in the heart of the City of London, marrying and burying an infant son there, but finally building up a prestigious business, enabling his family to move out to the fresher air of Friern Barnet.

But one of the most endearing groups is the medieval tilers who worked in the Chilterns in the middle of the 14th century. Here we find John le Pottere and his companion William Tylere (they found additional fame by being charged with breaking into a cleric's property and stealing 100 rabbits, but the Sheriff, who probably appreciated a tasty rabbit, failed to arrest them. The founders of the Penn Tileries seem to have been John and Henry Tyler and Symon Pavyer. Then there was Richard the tiler who drew himself and signed one of the tiles shown below. And Elie the paver who was responsible for laying all the Penn floor tiles at Windsor Castle, where, in the Aerary (treasury, now archive room) at St George's Chapel, the only remaining complete floor of Penn tiles is to be found.

The medieval tiles we find today are rarely in situ but more often an assembling of tiles rescued probably from the chancel following a church 're-ordering' and re-laid later in a less prominent position as a reminder of the earlier building. Now, 600 years on, they are well worn but one can imagine how impressive the floor would have looked with the basic design repeated many times, the feature tiles placed at strategic intervals, the glaze shiny and the colouring bright. On one of these tiles you might see Richard the tiler's profile, complete with woolly hood and 'RICARD ME FECIT' round the edge, on another a crowned bust with hands raised, and on another a bounding animal, possibly a rabbit or a dog. Some, particularly the animals and devil faces, show a sense of humour and real observation of the countryside around (the animals, not the devil!).



Background to floor tiling

To explain the importance of floor tiling in the middle ages, and of the Penn tileries in particular, some background is needed. Tiled floors were used extensively in important buildings, both ecclesiastical and secular, as an improvement to earth floors, particularly in areas where there was no local stone. In the Chilterns there were (and are) many clay pits - pockets of brick/tile earth - as shown by local place names like Potter Row, Tylers Hill, Bricky Pond, and Tylers Green, and the area has always been well known for its tile and brick factories. Tylers Green is adjacent to Penn, where thriving tileries, using as many as fifteen kilns over time, were known to

have been in production in the 14th century. Most of the medieval floor tiles found in the Chilterns are likely to have been made at Penn and the finds from the excavations at the Penn Tileries themselves in 2001 and in cottages in the immediate vicinity, as recorded by Miles Green in 2003, have enabled some 25 designs to be identified as definitely originating at Penn.

Christopher Hohler, in two articles published in the Records of Buckinghamshire in 1941 and 1942, listed all the then known 172 tiles, which he titled ‘’Printed’ tiles probably from Chiltern factories’, numbering them P1 to P172. He added a written description of each pattern together with a note of where each was found, while his wife who accompanied him, made a drawing of each design.

The “liberty to dig clay and sand” was a traditional “right of common” at Penn/Tylers Green, providing the tile-makers with a free source of the main ingredient for their trade. Water was available from the ponds and wells nearby and local coppiced wood to fire the kilns could be bought very cheaply. It was seasonal work, with the clay dug in the autumn and left to weather over the winter, when maintenance to equipment was carried out and the wood store replenished. Once the danger of frost damage was past and the weather was warm enough to dry the tiles leather-hard prior to firing, tile making began in earnest. The procedure, as far as it can be deduced from the evidence available, is described at some length in *English Tilers* by Elizabeth Eames and in *Medieval Penn Floor Tiles* by Miles Green.

Roof tile production was an equally important aspect of the tileries. Roofs have always needed periodic repairs and, as roof tiles did not go out of fashion nor were they decorated, they were always in demand and provided a ready and continuous market. Similarly, brick making, which uses the same raw materials, is an allied local industry which is always in demand and one which is still important in the Chilterns. As workers in tile making and in brick making were both members of the Tilers’ Guild, there would have been a certain amount of movement between the two trades according to the work available at the time.

Decorated floor tiles

Two-coloured decorated floor tiles did not originate in the Chilterns, earlier examples being found in Wessex in particular. These were bigger and thicker than Penn tiles and were made by stamping the design in the red clay, letting it dry, and then filling it with white clay in a separate operation. They had elaborate foliate and heraldic designs - wonderful examples including prancing lions, a crusader knight, a dappled horse and a selection of griffins can be seen at Romsey Abbey. But in the 14th century a new technique was pioneered at Penn whereby the design, which was now simpler and more geometric, was imprinted with a shallow-cut beech-wood stamp into the red clay while at the leather-hard stage and still in the mould. The imprint of the design was then smeared with white clay, and the whole left to bond and dry out together, before glazing with lead oxide powder and firing to provide an integral glazed surface to the clay. This technique produced better results, avoiding the shrinkage problems of the previous method. Iron minerals in the clay and contamination from the tilers’ iron tools resulted in the darkening of the glazes from white and red to the yellow and brown we now see. Some of the more skilled tilers were also able to modify the colours of plain tiles during firing by varying the amount of oxygen or adding iron, copper or brass to the lead glaze. As a result, tiles in a range of shades of yellow, brown, green and black were produced.

The Penn Tileries

According to Elizabeth Eames, the Penn Tileries were highly successful commercial enterprises, at least from 1330 to 1388, and, according to the Royal Accounts, were the main purveyors of tiles to the Royal Clerks of Works from 1350 to 1388. This confirmed the high quality of the tiles and acted as a recommendation to other clients who brought further business. In the Subsidy Roll of 1332, Henry Tyler, Symon Pavyer and John Tyler, farmer-tilers of Penn and Taplow and probably the founders of three generations of Penn tilers, had tax assessed jointly on their property, stock etc which was in excess of the tax levied on the Lord of the Manor, which shows that their business was very profitable, even in the early days.

The Black Death in 1348-50 resulted in a national shortage of craftsmen and an impoverished customer-base. However, it appears that the Penn Tileries were still able to maintain technical quality and output levels. Although the designs became less intricate, and were mainly single-tile patterns, without inscriptions, human figures or heraldry, they were still acceptable to the Royal Household. Symmetrical designs and clear patterns were now favoured, these being easier and quicker for the pavier to lay, and thus the tile makers maintained their popularity with this allied trade. The Penn tilers also had business ability and, from 1350 on, maximised on the number of tiles they could make per cartload of clay and per firing by reducing the size of the tiles from 11.8cm sq. to 11.0cm sq. and then to 10.5 cm sq. As the tiles were priced per 1000, this improved their profitability, and the quantity and size of orders they handled shows that they must also have been well-organised. During the main output period from 1350 to 1370, most of the churches and other important buildings in Buckinghamshire, the surrounding counties and along the Thames Valley to London were paved with Penn tiles.

By 1388 there are no further known records of Penn floor tiles being specified. Floor tiles are hard-wearing and it is likely that, by then, the Penn Tileries had exhausted their market. The kilns were probably then abandoned and the tilers dispersed, taking their patterns with them. Good quality tiles with decoration in the same, if less sophisticated, style were manufactured during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century at Little Brickhill. Certainly decorated floor tiles remained popular until the mid-sixteenth century, at which time architecture changed and Renaissance-style marble and wooden floors became more fashionable. It took the Gothic revival some three hundred years later to see a new demand for tiles with medieval designs.

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