

Exporting beauty - Pilkington's exports and exhibitions.

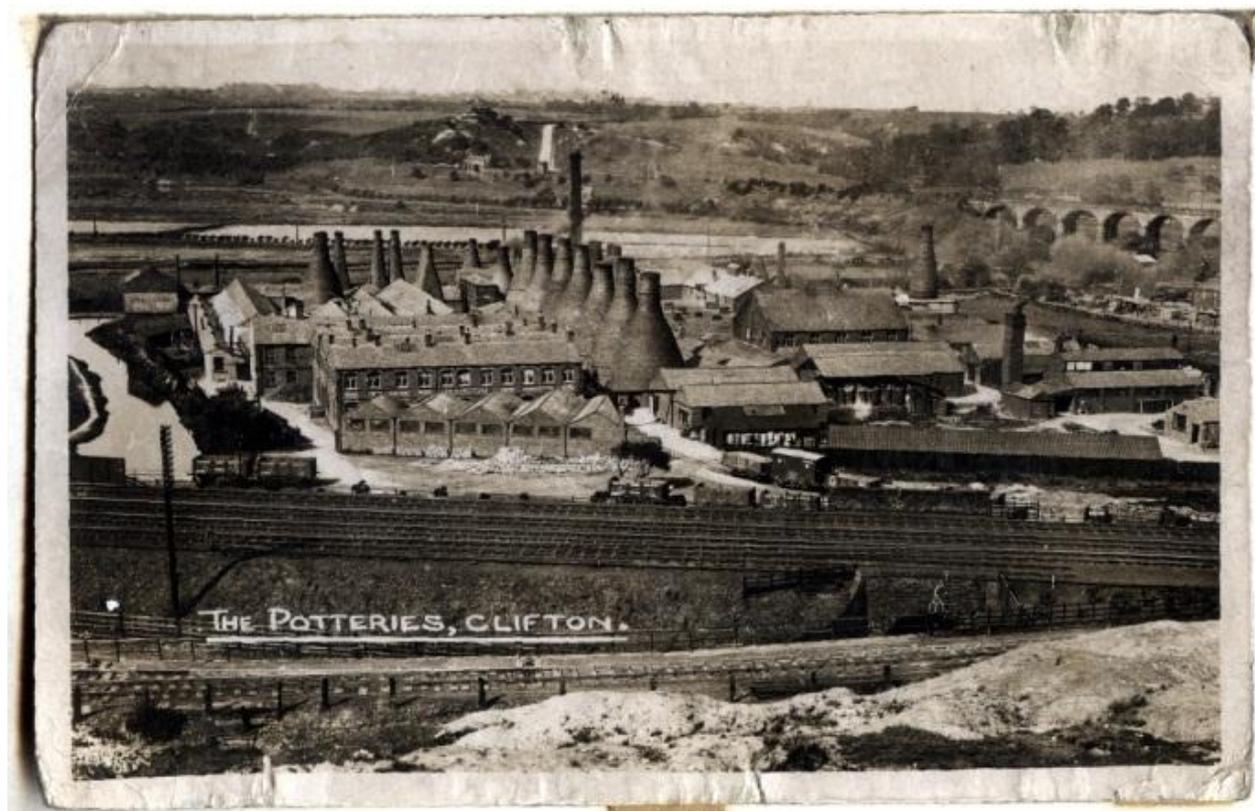
Angela and Barry Corbett

Pilkington's Lancastrian Pottery Society

Paper given at the conference *Exporting Stoke and Beyond: Tiles and architectural ceramics in a world context*, organised by the Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society, 12 November 2011, at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.

<http://www.tilesoc.org.uk/conference/exporting-stoke-2011/index.htm>

Please note that this version of the paper has only a few illustrations; the version given at the conference was fully illustrated. All illustrations included are copyright A & B Corbett.



This short talk is concerned with two connected aspects of Pilkington's Tiles between 1893 and 1938: their export business and exhibitions.

In 1910, 17 years after Pilkington's had been established, GW Rhead stated that they were probably the 'largest manufactory of decorative tiles in this country'. We have not been able to verify the comment though there seems no reason to doubt it. We do know that in 1920 Pilkington's stocks put them in the top 3 or 4 tile companies in the UK. This success was built on domestic and export sales. This paper will show the geographical extent of those export sales and seek to answer the question of how that export success was achieved.

I should say at once that there are many gaps in our knowledge of Pilkington's history. Tiles records for overseas sales have gone missing and company accounts do not offer any breakdown between foreign and domestic sales. In short, this is at best a fragmented account.

The initial investment or set up costs to establish Pilkington's was - in modern terms - £2.5 million pounds, and within 5 years that had doubled. This was not a small venture; it was a serious investment. The four Pilkington brothers were astute businessmen. Their extended family included the branch that owned the Saint Helens glassworks. The brothers were the proprietors of the Clifton and Kersley Coal Company. They knew and understood commerce.



William Burton

Joseph Burton

When they employed William and Joseph Burton, they did so on generous but tough contracts. All the following has been put in current monetary values. William Burton was employed on at least a minimum of £130,000 p.a. plus bonuses. He was given a loan that enabled him to buy shares in the company of £750,000. Between 1900 and 1914, the brothers received nearly £4M in bonuses and dividends.

The company began producing tiles in 1893 and in 1895 William wrote to the Pilkington's to say that there was an urgent need to expand the works and that in England he regarded only Edwards of Ruabon as significant competitors in the North of the country and if the Pilkington's would invest in new buildings and equipment Pilkington's could soon outstrip them.

The expansion at the works also saw a large and rapid expansion in foreign trade.

In 1897 Pilkington's began trade with the Americas, North and South, in Europe (Germany Austria and France), in South Africa and in the antipodes with Australia, New Zealand and Tasmania. In 1898, they included Stockholm, 1901 Canada, 1903 Argentina and this trade continued until - as the map below shows - it covered most of the world.

Pilkington's overseas markets.



1897 America, South Africa, Germany, Austria, Paris, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania.	1901 Canada.	1910 Holland, Denmark, Norway.	1918 Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Columbia.	1930 Canadian Maritime Provinces
1898 Stockholm, Greece, Belgium	1903 Argentina.	1911 French provinces		1935 Rhodesia, Portuguese East Africa.
	1905 America.	1914 Brazil.		1937 West Coast Africa, Canary Islands Cameroons.

How the Pilkington's secured their overseas contacts will become more clear as we progress. Some contacts may have been through the family glass business in St Helens. None the less, this was not done just on trust. Company records show overseas sales agents had to have a proven reputation. Local banks and or well known reputable businesses were asked to confirm the worth of an agent. Agents were expected to provide the names of established referees. In some cases – perhaps when knowledge was more difficult to acquire – a private investigator would be engaged. This happened when in 1898 their Stockholm agent was appointed. It happened again in 1901 for a Berlin agent.

Just how much reward the agent received seems to have varied. Usually the agent was put on a 5% commission, occasionally 10% and always subject to review and always based on 'monies received' i.e. when the goods were paid for not when the order promised. Perhaps if a breakthrough was needed the commission could increase. For example in 1907, Mr Riley in Wellington was put on commission of 15%. For some agencies, for example the Australian ones, the agent would bear the cost of showroom rents and expenses. We deduce this because no costings crop up in the accounts. Perhaps this was because the showroom was not exclusive. Other showrooms were much more important and were probably dedicated. The Paris showroom established in 1898 did receive a contribution from Pilkington's who seem to have paid for much of the equipping. Major showrooms in Cape Town and Montreal were probably supported also again known because there are costs in the account books. Occasionally travellers would be sent from the UK. A Mr Snape undertook what is described as 'an American journey' in 1900. In 1908, a Pilkington man called David Hall was sent on 'a sea voyage' to Canada at the company's expense.

This issue of money received indicates some of the risks in the business. Their Paris agent was a Mr. Ostrom who proposed an agency in St. Petersburg in 1898. No further mention is made of this in the account books but it is significant that Pilkington's 'bad and doubtful' debts records show the difficulties. In 1904, Pilkington records record small debts by a Mr Moldenhauer of Moscow. Debts were common and grew as the company

grew. Some of these debts indicate that there were more agents than are documented for example £50 owed by a firm in Colombo and by firms in Boston, Montreal, and Philadelphia, There were also debts in Egypt and in Winnipeg.

No overseas catalogues are known (indeed in the 1950s it was a policy of the firm to destroy them). Catalogues that survive from the Paris exhibition (of which more later) were printed in Spanish and French this may have been the case in later years at exhibitions but trade catalogues even in the UK are rare and overseas ones unknown. The evidence for the volume of tile exports has not been found. Some members may be familiar with a catalogue issued by the Uruguayan museum of Montevideo that contains several examples of Pilkington tiles. An alternative to catalogues and one that would make more sense was to place Pilkington tiles in whatever general overseas sales publicity was being used. For example in 1901, Pilkington's signed an agreement with the English and Canadian Trade Promoting company. They took two pages in the trade company's catalogue at a cost of £20.

Though no catalogue evidence is to be found for the foreign sales it is the South American connection with does give us our only glimpse of what the sales pitches may have looked like. Thomas Holt was Pilkington's agent in Buenos Aires in 1903. He arranged to sell Pilkington's mosaics and other tiles through a company called Tudor Moore and Co. This was general trading company which continued until 1933. Their records are held in the West Sussex records office though we have not researched them ourselves. Thomas Holt actually visited Pilkington's in 1910 and his family sent us a delightful photograph of his Pilkington's display - presumably in Buenos Aires. There is also evidence that Pilkington's would occasionally send their own tile fixers to foreign destinations and this would almost certainly have been the case when sales were linked to exhibitions which brings us to the second part of this discussion.

William Burton was a man who valued publicity. In 1907, he gave evidence to a Royal Commission which had been set up by the Board of Trade with the rather grand title of a committee:

To make enquiries with reference to the participation of Great Britain in Great International Exhibitions.

1908 [C.d. 3772] Report of Committee appointed by the Board of Trade to make inquiries with reference to the Participation of Great Britain in Great International Exhibitions, with the Appendices thereto (Exhibitions)

1

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS COMMITTEE

REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE APPOINTED BY THE BOARD OF TRADE

TO MAKE ENQUIRIES WITH REFERENCE TO

THE PARTICIPATION OF GREAT BRITAIN IN
GREAT INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS,

TOGETHER WITH THE

APPENDICES THERETO.

Burton gave 9 pages of evidence to the commission which took the form of questions and answers from the investigating committee. Pilkington's had taken part in several National exhibitions between 1895 and 1900 - especially important were those of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, the Northern Art workers Guild

and the Manchester Arts and Crafts exhibition. However, Paris 1900 was their first International exhibition. They were to exhibit at many of these international exhibitions before the First World War. In particular, Paris and the Franco British exhibition (1908) stand out. Other exhibitions 'abroad' included those listed below.

- 1895 Arts & Crafts Exhibition Manchester
- 1896 Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society 5th exhibition.
- 1898 Northern Art Workers Guild exhibition
- 1899 Health Congress Exhibition
- 1900 Paris Exhibition
- 1900 Ironmongery and Hardware Trades Exhibition Islington London
- 1901 Exhibition Glasgow International Exhibition
- 1902 Wolverhampton
- 1903 Exhibition Ironmongery and Hardware Trades
- 1903 British and Colonial Industrial Exhibition Cape Town
- 1903 Arts & Crafts Exhibition
- 1905 Milan
- 1905 Liege
- 1907 Dublin Grand Central Palace Exhibition
- 1908 Franco British Exhibition Palace of Decorative Arts
- 1908 Liverpool Crafts Exhibition Bluecoat School
- 1910 Brussels Exhibition
- 1910 Queen's Park Exhibition Manchester
- 1911 Manchester Art School Exhibition
- 1911 Turin Exhibition British Section
- 1911 Glasgow International Exhibition
- 1911 Scottish Exhibition of National History, Art and Industry Glasgow
- 1913 Arts & Crafts Society Exhibition
- 1913 Ghent Exhibition
- 1914 Arts Decoratifs Grande Bretagne et Irlande
- 1915 Manchester Exhibition
- 1920 Modern Pottery Manchester
- 1924 British Empire Exhibition
- 1925 Arts Decoratifs Paris
- 1930 International Exhibition Antwerp Belgium
- 1930 1938 British industries fair Olympia London

Burton's evidence is interesting on many levels. He has strong views on how exhibitions should be run and how the quality of exhibitions should be maintained. Some of his comments might best be described as 'imperial and Empire' - the Germans had no appreciation of refinement, the French reduced their exhibitions to a display of shop windows etc. He takes many swipes at British officials whom, though he finds always amiable, were invariably useless and not in the least a match for the Americans. It is well worth a read but sadly, time doesn't permit us to consider anything more than his key points.

In his evidence to the commission, Burton explains that manufacturers would be notified of an exhibition by receipt of a circular from an agent for the exhibition. We also know that advertisements were placed in journals - for example the Journal of the Society of Arts. In the early stages of his evidence, Burton becomes side tracked into a very heartfelt criticism of the British authorities at the Paris exhibition and his brush with the French organisers. However, this leads him to make a significant statement in terms of how he would

exhibit. He says to make a good exhibit it is necessary to secure the 'assistance of a well-known architect' one who would ensure a good exhibit and would *treat their space as a whole*. This was something he made happened only a year after this evidence when he secured the services of Edgar Wood and Henry Sellers at the Franco-British exhibition. Burton was asked what he felt about the giving of awards at exhibitions. After some prevarication, he said that 'from a commercial point of view' it was an expectation in 'our trade'. More importantly, he ties exhibitions to the setting up of agencies. He confirms that after Liege in 1905 Pilkington's had been able to open up contacts in Belgium. This implies that contacts or what we might term to day networking was an important part of an exhibitor's aim. Some consideration must have been given to this potential to make contacts because he says that the firm did not exhibit at St Louis in 1904 because it wasn't considered enough business could be got but he now regretted that and thought he had been wrong. However, he would have exhibited at Chicago, Toronto, Boston or New York precisely because he felt business could be got there.

This prompted the committee to ask him which was more important awards or business. His answer was emphatic

"getting orders certainly, especially if, as any businessman would, he followed his orders up by trying to develop them into a steady trade.

Exhibitions were a form of advertisement for Burton. He said in respect of the exhibitions at Milan (1905) the firm got business from Nice, Florence, Rome, and Naples and said some-

firms we might have spent years in trying to get at - in towns where we might have sent a traveller and even then never discovered them. [but] because people are seeing the exhibitions and because the firm had been awarded a prize and they like our stuff .. we have been able through that, to open important agencies in all these places"

Burton also pointed out the differences between the success of a single traveller and an exhibition. Surprisingly he discloses that sometimes he would act as a traveller or agent for the company. He noticed that when he personally went out to secure business he would get to see what he termed the 'principle' of the enterprise he was visiting. His ordinary travellers might be fobbed off with a buyer and achieve nothing. At an exhibition, there was an advantage in that goods were brought before the dealer i.e. the retailer and the consumer at the same time. In effect, both creating a demand and the means to satisfy it. In a moment of reflection he also conceded - citing St Louis as an example - that by not being represented at an exhibition he may have lost trade to others.

Finally, Burton confirmed that exhibitions were very useful from a competition viewpoint. They enabled him to see what his competitors were doing and they spurred him on to do something new. In fact, from this viewpoint he said he encouraged his own staff both workers and artist to attend exhibitions and had sent 20 or 30 workmen to Paris in 1900.

The use of 'a good architect' to help design an exhibition was something international exhibitions each required and each sort to outdo their predecessors. For Pilkington's the use of internationally known designers before WW1 would also serve to get them noticed.

The cost of these exhibitions must have been considerable. Unfortunately, Pilkington's accounts do not separate out all the costs of exhibitions. We know Paris costs considerably affected their profits for that year and forced a revaluation of their prices. But the initial costs were no doubt worth it for the reputation that had been built.

In those pre-war years costs arose from the reputation of the tile designers as much as the cost of work involved in these shows. For example at Paris 1900 they dedicated their tile displays as 'walls' they had a Voysey wall, a Lewis Day Wall, in effect a Walter Crane Wall. They ensured Cranes tile panels 'The Senses' were sent to Turin in 1902 even though they did not stand there, their stand at Glasgow - which styled itself an international exhibition in 1901 had a series of panels by Alphonse Mucha.

In 1908 at the Franco-British Exhibition Pilkington's stand was designed by Edgar Wood and Henry Sellers and won awards for its tiles in which were a combination of an exterior modernist chevron pattern in Pilkington's Parian ware and an interior in Persian lustre tiles designed by Day... Time does not permit us to discuss the finer details of how this progressed.

Examples of illustrated newspaper advertisements are almost unknown. This one on the left after Turin is the only one we have seen other than for the Franco-British Exhibition. Its design is typically pre-war. At Wembley in 1924, Oliver Hill designed Pilkington's pavilion shown here on the right. By then all the pavilions or porticos as they were called were designed as architectural statements and Pilkington's along with their tiles had lost individuality.

This use of a specialist architect was no longer a novelty. It was the same with designers. Whilst before the war Pilkington's had almost exclusively pushed a variety of international known designers after the war they stopped doing this. Their tiles became more of a massed produced line. They took part in almost all the British Industries fairs of the 1930s yet no signature style emerges as it did before the 1st WW. For Pilkington's trade in the 1930s was in in fireplace designs and mottled walls and sadly little to differentiate it from other companies.

A company that in 1920 accounted for 20% of tile sales had dwindled down to less than 10% in 1938. None the less, I hope this short talk has shown clearly the link between exhibitions and trade.