

New Archaeological Finds at Jackfield Tile Museum, Ironbridge Gorge Museums

Remarkable discoveries have been made at the Jackfield Tile Museum, one of the ten Ironbridge Gorge Museums, as restoration work has revealed previously unknown rooms and large quantities of rare plaster tile moulds, thought to have been destroyed when production ceased in the factory.

These historically important finds have been made in the former factory's Mill Building, where flint and mineral ores were once ground up to make glazes. They will help historians gain a greater understanding of the factory and the techniques that were used there from the 1870s until the 1940s.

Jackfield Tile Museums Curator Michael Vanns commented: As we started removing tonnes of spoil from the base of the building, it became apparent that previously undiscovered rooms were being revealed. To our amazement these rooms contained the original grinding mill. Whilst I was aware of the original use of the Mill Building, I had always thought that all the machinery had been lost when production ceased in the 1940s and was unsure of the layout of the building. Tireless work by Assistant Curator Tim Jenkins, elsewhere in the enormous industrial complex, revealed even more exciting discoveries. Amongst the rubble being removed, large quantities of delicate and rare plaster moulds were found.

Michael Vanns explains: The significance of these finds can not be over-estimated. The Museum already holds the National Collection of Plaster Tile Moulds; however the collection mainly originates from the Maw & Co factory that was situated just a mile down river. The new discoveries represent an internationally important selection of Victorian tile moulds from the Craven Dunnill factory. Many of these moulds were used to make prestigious tiles, such as those on display in the main museum galleries. We were particularly pleased to find the mould for the encaustic tiles made for Palace Chambers in Westminster. I cannot believe that builders had previously used these magnificent objects as hardcore in the 1960s. This round of restoration is the final phase of a massive programme to preserve the country's last remaining fully intact Victorian tile factory and has been funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, European Regional Development Fund, the Edward Cadbury Trust, the Commission for the 1851 Exhibition, the MLA's 'Renaissance in the Regions' project, Advantage West Midlands and The Walker Trust.

Earlier phases opened last year and depict a vivid picture of the British tile industry. Visitors walk through a variety of magnificently tiled room sets, such as a section of a tube station, a children's hospital ward, an elaborately tiled bar and a corner of a country church. Other galleries house hundreds of tiles representing both the major manufacturers and styles of production. Depending on the day of a visit, it is also possible to look around sections of the Craven Dunnill factory, where tiles are still made today or even have a go at tile decorating during drop-in workshops.